

# “When Mercy Seasons Justice”: Poetic Justice in Comedy\*

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## 1. Introduction

Thomas Rymer coined the term *poetic(al) justice* in his *Tragedies of the Last Age*, first published in 1677. In this work, he attacks the plays of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher for a number of reasons, including their violation of poetic justice. A later work in the same vein, *A Short View of Tragedy*, contains a similar attack on Shakespeare’s *Othello*:

Rather may we ask here what unnatural crime *Desdemona*, or her Parents had committed, to bring this Judgment down upon her; to Wed a Black-moor, and innocent to be thus cruelly murder’d by him. What instruction can we make out of this Catastrophe? Or whither must our reflection lead us? Is not this to envenome and sour our spirits, to make us repine and grumble at Providence; and the government of the World? If this be our end, what boots it to be Vertuous? (161)

Rymer’s fear that Shakespeare’s audience might be misled into grumbling at Providence indicates the philosophical or theological motivation underlying the concept of poetic justice. It is no coincidence that the term was coined in the late seventeenth century. At a time when philosophers like Leibniz saw the need for a theodicy, i.e. a justification of God, critics and poets felt that literature should also contribute to the project of vindicating the ways of God to man.<sup>1</sup>

While Rymer focuses on tragedy, some of his contemporaries discuss poetic justice in comedy (without using the precise term). In the

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff0252.htm>>.

preface to *An Evening's Love*, first published in 1671, John Dryden refers to objections that some critics, whom he does not name, have raised against his play: "'Tis charg'd upon me that I make debauch'd persons (such as they say my Astrologer and Gamester are) my Protagonists, or the chief persons of the Drama; and that I make them happy in the conclusion of my Play; against the Law of Comedy, which is to reward virtue and punish vice" (10: 208). Dryden's reply to these objections, which I will discuss in some detail below, is the most sophisticated statement on poetic justice from the Restoration period as far as the genre of comedy is concerned. A less sophisticated statement is made by Jeremy Collier in *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698). Collier is just as single-minded and relentless as Rymer in his insistence on poetic justice; in a scathing attack on William Congreve's *Love for Love*, he argues that the happy ending experienced by the protagonist of this play is an example of vice rewarded:

*Valentine* in *Love for Love* [...] is altogether compounded of Vice. He is a prodigal Debauchee, unnatural, and Profane, Obscene, Sawcy, and undutiful, And yet this Libertine is crown'd for the Man of Merit, has his Wishes thrown into his Lap, and makes the Happy *Exit*. [...] And what can be the Meaning of this wretched Distribution of Honour? Is it not to give Credit and Countenance to Vice, and to shame young People out of all pretences to Conscience, and Regularity? (142-44)

It is important to note that Collier, Rymer, and the anonymous critics who objected to *An Evening's Love* respond to a *lack* of poetic justice in the English plays of the Renaissance and the Restoration. Poetic justice is not an inductive principle, a concept inferred from observation of the evidence; it is a deductive demand, perhaps even an imposition on the plays. When Dryden's critics invoke a "*Law of Comedy*" that requires a just distribution of punishments and rewards, they refer to a law more honoured in the breach than in the observance. In my view, it makes more sense to take poetic *injustice* as a point of departure in discussions of comedy than to assume that the genre is or ought to be governed by poetic justice.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, second part of this essay I will explain why there is a tendency towards poetic injustice in comedy; this explanation will be based on two major traditions in the theory of the genre. In part 3, I will present five solutions of, or responses to, the problem of poetic injustice, the last of which is associated with the idea of mercy. In part 4, I will elaborate on the role of mercy in comedy by giving a reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, the play from which the title of this essay is borrowed. In the final part, I will comment on the nineteenth-century dismissal of poetic justice, juxtaposing a historical perspective with the genre perspective of the present essay.

## 2. Poetic Injustice in Comedy: The Gap between Characters and Outcome

One of the most influential statements on comedy is the following passage from Aristotle's *Poetics*; it contains a distinction between comedy and tragedy that is based primarily on the differences between their characters:

Since mimetic artists represent people in action, and the latter should be either elevated or base (for characters almost always align with just these types, as it is through vice and virtue that the characters of all men vary), they can represent people better than our normal level, worse than it, or much the same. [...] This very distinction separates tragedy from comedy: the latter tends to represent people inferior, the former superior, to existing humans. (33-35)

Aristotle's distinction, which is primarily a moral one,<sup>3</sup> has been reinterpreted in social or aesthetic terms by later theorists—in fact, one way of writing a history of the theory of tragedy and comedy would be to trace the changing interpretations of the distinction between the “superior” characters of the former and the “inferior” characters of the latter.

The original, moral focus of the distinction remains prominent in theories that view comedy as closely allied to satire. These theories dominate the discussion of the genre from the sixteenth to the eight-

teenth century. In his *Defence of Poetry*, Philip Sidney writes that “comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he [the poet] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one” (128-29). A century later, Thomas Shadwell describes the intention of his comedy *The Humourists* in very similar terms: “My design was [...] to reprehend some of the Vices and Follies of the Age, which I take to be the most proper, and most useful way of writing Comedy” (1: 183). In the early eighteenth century, John Dennis reiterates the satiric commonplace when he argues that “Laughter is the Life and the very Soul of Comedy. ’Tis its proper Business to expose Persons to our View, whose Views we may shun, and whose Follies we may despise” (2: 245).

There is a very different tradition in the theory of comedy that focuses not so much on the status of the characters as on the action, in particular its fortunate outcome.<sup>4</sup> This theory is prevalent in the rare medieval references to comedy. When, in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the Monk tells his audience “in manere of tragedie” (241) about the downfall of illustrious men, he is eventually interrupted by the Knight, who prefers comic to tragic plots:

I seye for me, it is a greet disese,  
Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,  
To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!  
And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,  
As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,  
And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,  
And there abideth in prosperitee.  
Swich thyng is gladsom, as it thynketh me,  
And of swich thyng were goodly for to telle. (252)

In dramatic comedy, the ending in prosperity that the Knight prefers so much to the sudden fall of tragic characters usually takes the form of marriage. As Lord Byron puts it succinctly in *Don Juan*, “All tragedies are finish’d by a death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage; / The future states of both are left to faith” (476).

Both the character- and the plot-centred views describe important elements of comedy; both are valid, if one-sided, accounts of it. A theory that is meant to do justice to the complexity of the genre will need to integrate one as well as the other.<sup>5</sup> However, if we combine the vices and follies of the first view with the fortunate outcome of the second, we are faced with a discrepancy. Comedy, it would appear, provides bad characters with a happy ending; it has a tendency towards poetic injustice (incidentally, this tendency also exists in tragedy, which, in a similarly perverse fashion, seems bent on plunging good characters into misery). Of course, the tendency towards poetic injustice should not be seen as the last word about comedy. It should rather be seen as a problem which, in the history of the genre and the debates revolving around it, has led to a number of responses and developments. As we have seen above, the problem has been exploited by enemies of comedy and the theatre such as Collier. It is also noted, however, by poets and critics who are favourably disposed to the genre and thus look for ways of solving or mitigating the problem. These poets and critics qualify the tendency towards injustice by pointing out opposite tendencies towards justice or by invoking other principles that make the absence of justice acceptable. In the following part of this essay, I will point out five of these solutions that, in one way or another, bridge or diminish the gap between unworthy characters and fortunate outcome.

### 3. Five Ways of Bridging the Gap between Character and Outcome

One solution of the problem has already been mentioned. It consists in the reinterpretation of Aristotle's distinction between the good characters of tragedy and the bad characters of comedy, especially a reinterpretation that shifts the meaning of "good" and "bad" from moral worth to social rank. A case in point is the following passage from the pen of Oliver Goldsmith, for whom the social reinterpretation has become so commonplace that he attributes it to Aristotle himself:

Comedy is defined by Aristotle to be a picture of the Frailties of *the lower part of Mankind*, to distinguish it from Tragedy, which is an exhibition of the Misfortunes of *the Great*. When Comedy therefore ascends to produce the Characters of *Princes or Generals* upon the Stage, it is out of its walk, since *Low Life and Middle Life* are entirely its object. (3: 210; my emphasis)

The social reinterpretation solves the problem to a certain extent. If a prince ends in misery and a tradesman in happiness, we need not “repine and grumble at Providence”—after all, the prince may have been vicious and the tradesman virtuous. However, the passage from Goldsmith’s essay shows that the problem is not entirely solved. For Goldsmith, social rank is closely tied to moral worth. Characteristically, he associates “the lower part of Mankind” with “Frailties”; in the next paragraph he talks about “the *Follies* of the Lower Part of Mankind” (3: 210; my emphasis). Thus the problem remains that inferior or unworthy characters are rewarded with a prosperity that seems gratuitous.

A second solution is suggested by Bernhard Asmuth. It is based on a distinction between two sorts of characters: the young lovers who wish to marry, and the blocking characters who stand in their way. Asmuth argues that the young lovers, who are good, are rewarded with a happy ending, while the blocking characters, who are bad, are punished for their opposition to the course of true love (see 31-32).<sup>6</sup> This solution is certainly very neat—too neat, I am tempted to say. While it has some validity, it cannot explain away the problem entirely. Northrop Frye points out that in many comedies the blocking characters are not punished but reconciled with the lovers and included in the happy ending (see 165). In addition, the lovers are by no means unambiguously good, as we will see in the following pages.

A third solution is given by William Congreve, one of the writers attacked by Jeremy Collier. As we have seen, Collier argues that Valentine in *Love for Love*, like many another libertine in Restoration comedy, is an example of vice rewarded. In his response to Collier, Congreve first has recourse to the orthodox seventeenth-century view that comedy is a form of satire. Invoking the authority of Aristotle, he

insists that comedy represents “the worse sort of People,” whose vices and follies are exposed (*Works* 3: 173). Later in the same work, however, he qualifies the orthodox view in his defence of Valentine, the protagonist of *Love for Love*:

In short, the Character is a mix'd Character; his Faults are fewer than his good Qualities; and, as the World goes, he may pass well enough for the best Character in a Comedy; where even the best must be shewn to have Faults, that the best Spectators may be warn'd not to think too well of themselves. (*Works* 3: 200)

If Congreve is to be believed, characters in comedy are not bad but mixed; they have virtues as well as vices and, sometimes, as in the case of Valentine, even more of the former than the latter. The distance between character and outcome is diminished; a morally mixed character ending in prosperity causes less concern than a vicious character rewarded in the like manner.

Congreve's qualification of the orthodox view does for comedy what Aristotle's concept of *hamartia* does for tragedy. In both cases the initial, one-dimensional description of the characters is abandoned in favour of a more complex account. After first describing the characters of tragedy as good, Aristotle later on qualifies this view considerably. He rejects protagonists that are either entirely virtuous or wholly evil and goes on to argue: “This leaves, then, the person in-between these cases. Such a person is someone not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error [*hamartia*]” (71). The middling moral status and the related concept of *hamartia* lower the tragic character just as Congreve's attribution of virtue to Valentine raises the comic character.<sup>7</sup> In both cases, the gap between character and outcome does not disappear entirely, but it is considerably reduced.

When playwrights like Congreve create mixed characters in comedy, they often combine this with an additional device which also contributes to making the happy ending acceptable. They make the characters go through a development from bad to good; initially, the

characters’ bad traits are more prominent, or at least appear so, while towards the end of the play their good qualities come to the fore. Occasionally this development is associated with a test or trial. In *Love for Love*, for instance, Angelica tests Valentine by leaving him in the dark about her feelings for him. Only when she has ascertained that his courtship is not motivated by her riches does she finally admit her love for him: “Here’s my Hand, my Heart was always yours, and struggl’d very hard to make this utmost Tryal of your Virtue” (*Plays* 5.1.562-64).<sup>8</sup>

A fourth way of dealing with the gap between characters and outcome is suggested by Dryden in the preface to *An Evening’s Love*. Dryden argues that the laws of justice only apply to tragedy, which is serious, important and designed to instruct; comedy, which is more lightweight and made to entertain, requires no such laws:

*this being, then, establish’d, that the first end of Comedie is delight, and instruction only the second; it may reasonably be inferr’d that Comedy is not so much oblig’d to the punishment of the faults which it represents, as Tragedy. For the persons in Comedy are of a lower quality, the action is little, and the faults and vices are but the sallies of youth, and the frailties of humane nature, and not premeditated crimes.*  
(10: 209)

Dryden’s view that poetic justice does not rule in comedy follows from his low estimate of the genre, an estimate that was not shared by all of his contemporaries. Thomas Shadwell, with whom he conducted a debate about comedy (of which the preface to *An Evening’s Love* is a part), thought much more highly of the genre. That Dryden himself is not entirely certain about his solution of the problem is shown by the fact that he adds another argument immediately after the passage just quoted, an argument which concedes that the faults committed in comedy may not be quite as insignificant as the preceding passage suggests:

*[A]nd the faults and vices are but the sallies of youth, and the frailties of humane nature [...] such as move pity and commiseration; not detestation and horror: such in short as may be forgiven, not such as must of necessity be punish’d. But,*



*lest any man should think that I write this to make libertinism amiable; or that I car'd not to debase the end and institution of Comedy, so I might thereby maintain my own errors, and those of better Poets; I must farther declare, both for them and for my self, that we make not vicious persons happy, but only as heaven makes sinners so: that is by reclaiming them first from vice.* (10: 209-10; my emphasis)

This passage suggests a fifth solution to the problem posed by the gap between characters and outcome, a solution that shifts the argument away from the concept of justice. Faults and frailties are not punished. Instead, they move “pity and commiseration,” are “forgiven” and dealt with as heaven deals with sinners—in short, justice is replaced or complemented by mercy.

A first example of how mercy functions in comedy is provided by the play that follows Dryden’s preface. *An Evening’s Love* is set in Madrid on the last day of the carnival season; it represents two English gallants, Wildblood and Bellamy, who court two local gentlewomen, Donna Jacinta and Donna Theodosia, and succeed, at the end of a fast-paced and turbulent plot, in securing their hands. I will focus here on the relationship between Jacinta and Wildblood, the “*Gamester*” referred to in Dryden’s preface. Jacinta repeatedly tests Wildblood’s fidelity by assuming a different identity and approaching him in disguise. Wildblood twice fails this test by immediately courting the other women impersonated by Jacinta. He also gambles away the money she entrusts him with. In the following dialogue Jacinta and her attendant Beatrice discuss two attitudes to Wildblood, one of which is based on justice and retribution, the other on mercy and forgiveness:

*Jac.* [...] [L]et me make this one more triall, when he has money  
whether he will give it me, and then if he fails—  
*Beat.* You’ll forgive him agen.  
*Jac.* He’s already in Purgatory; but the next offence shall put him in the pit  
past all redemption [...]. (10: 4.1.37-42)

Beatrice is right in her assessment of the attitude that Jacinta takes to Wildblood’s faults. Jacinta is only too eager to pardon him. After his first infidelity, she assures him, in a rhyming couplet that marks her

exit from the stage, “Adieu; for this time I wipe off your score, / Till you’re caught tripping in some new amour” (3.1.614-15). When she later admonishes Wildblood that “Heaven [...] sees all things,” he replies, “Heaven that sees all things will say nothing” (4.1.113-14)—in other words, Heaven will be lenient. On another occasion, she announces, “I shall be glad to find him [Wildblood] innocent” (4.1.620), and during their final quarrel, which ends in a reconciliation, she asserts that she will pardon him out of spite:

*Wild.* But if I should play the fool and ask you pardon, you would refuse it.  
*Jac.* No, never submit, for I should spoil you again with pardoning you.  
 (4.1.769-72)

Evidently, the religious vocabulary that Dryden and his characters employ in connection with mercy and forgiveness should not be taken too seriously. When the playwright asserts in his preface that he makes his protagonist happy “as heaven makes sinners so,” and when Wildblood and Jacinta invoke heaven, purgatory and the pit, they do so in the spirit of playful and risqué irony in which the characters of Restoration comedy generally apply religious metaphors to sexual relationships. In Dryden’s play, mercy is a more or less secular and somewhat perfunctory principle driven by the libido of the characters and the mechanics of the plot. Yet, mercy in comedy may also be much more complex and serious as I will attempt to show in the final part of this essay.

#### 4. Mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*

Mercy is explicitly discussed in the trial scene of Shakespeare’s play. It is Portia who, in her disguise as a young lawyer, presents it from a Christian point of view, with an allusion to the Lord’s Prayer:

The quality of mercy is not strained:  
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

[...]

It is an attribute to God himself,  
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this:  
 That in the course of justice none of us  
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,  
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
 The deeds of mercy. (4.1.180-98)

By this point, I imagine that some eyebrows have been raised on the part of my readers. Mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*? Surely not. Recent readings of the play tend to argue that the way Shylock is dealt with in the trial scene is neither characterised by mercy nor by justice. Susanne Kaul, for instance, entitles her reading of the play as “Rechtsrigorismus und fauler Gnadenzauber” (90; “Rigidity of the Law and Mercy as a Sleight of Hand”); elsewhere she dismisses mercy as an arrogant subspecies of justice (9).<sup>9</sup>

I agree with Kaul to a certain extent. In the trial scene, mercy fails. Shylock explicitly rejects it in his reply to Portia's plea: “My deeds upon my head, I crave the law, / The penalty and forfeit of my bond” (4.1.202-03). The Christian characters take him at his word. Having been consistently hostile to him before the trial, they do not change their minds now. The upshot of the scene is that Shylock is deprived of his religion, half or more of his wealth, and the right to make his will. Shylock does not receive mercy—or only a somewhat mechanical version of it. The Duke and Antonio do not inflict the maximum punishment on Shylock, but in steering a more lenient course they seem primarily interested in demonstrating their moral superiority to him—“That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,” as the Duke says (4.1.364). The quality of their mercy is strained and thus remote from the faculty so eloquently evoked by Portia.<sup>10</sup>

However, the retreat of mercy in the trial scene does not invalidate the present argument. On the contrary, it confirms my claim about the role of mercy in comedy. After all, *The Merchant of Venice* is not a comedy pure and simple. It could also be considered a tragicomedy—

and not just from today’s point of view. Shakespeare’s colleague John Fletcher defines tragicomedy as a genre that “wants deaths [...] yet brings some neere it” (3: 497). According to this definition, *The Merchant of Venice* is a tragicomedy; it brings Antonio painfully close to death, and Shylock also faces capital punishment for a brief moment. If mercy, as one of the standard ways of closing the gap between character and outcome, plays a significant part in comedy, then the retreat of mercy in the trial scene provides additional proof of the tragicomic nature of the play. Mercy is weakened to the same extent to which comedy is weakened; in the trial scene, we are no longer in the realm of comedy but on the borderline to tragedy.

Elsewhere in the play, mercy emerges more strongly. Its primary beneficiary is Bassanio. Like Wildblood in *An Evening’s Love* and Valentine in *Love for Love*, he wants to marry an attractive and wealthy woman, and like Wildblood and Valentine, he has a problem with managing his finances. As he admits to his friend in the opening scene,

’Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,  
 How much I have disabled mine estate  
 By something showing a more swelling port  
 Than my faint means would grant continuance.  
 Nor do I now make moan to be abridged  
 From such a noble rate, but my chief care  
 Is to come fairly off from the great debts  
 Wherein my time, something too prodigal,  
 Hath left me gaged. To you, Antonio,  
 I owe the most in money and in love,  
 And from your love I have a warranty  
 To unburden all my plots and purposes  
 How to get clear of all the debts I owe. (1.1.122-34)

Bassanio’s remedy for his indebtedness consists in more of the same. To repay his loans, he asks for another loan from his friend. In doing so, he tells Antonio about a strategy of retrieving arrows which he used as a boy—a rather complicated analogy that does not bear much scrutiny. “You [...] spend but time / To wind about my love with circumstance” (1.1.153-54), is Antonio’s apt comment on Bassanio’s

convoluted rhetoric, a rhetoric that primarily indicates the speaker's well-deserved embarrassment. Bassanio also cuts a poor figure in this dialogue in that he introduces his courtship of Portia as a way of solving his financial problems. When he eventually mentions Portia herself, he notoriously begins his enumeration of her qualities with her wealth: "In Belmont is a lady richly left" (1.1.161). Bassanio is a mixed character, and in the first scene his negative traits are more evident than his redeeming features. He is self-indulgent and exploitative in his relationship with his friend Antonio, and in his courtship of Portia he seems to be motivated by fortune hunting more than by true love.

Bassanio describes his wasteful behaviour as "prodigal" (1.1.129), a term that also recurs later in the play, either in connection with Bassanio or his friends. Shylock describes him as "[t]he prodigal Christian" (2.5.15) and disparages Antonio as "another bad match: a bankrupt, a prodigal" (3.1.39-40). When, before the elopement of Lorenzo and Jessica, Gratiano and Salerio while away the time by expatiating on the contrast between desire and satiety in love, they compare it to the difference between the eagerness of the prodigal's departure and the exhaustion of his return (2.6.15-20). All of these references recall the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 16.11-32, one of the most memorable representations of divine mercy in the Bible.<sup>11</sup> In the parable, the younger of two sons demands his inheritance, squanders it in a far country, is reduced to starvation and eventually returns to his father to ask for a job as a servant. Yet, the father welcomes him with joy, treats him as his son, and celebrates his return with a feast. The elder brother of the prodigal is taken aback by this preferential treatment. He complains that there has never been a feast in his own honour although he has stayed at home, obeying all of his father's commands. While listening to this complaint with patience, the father insists that the feast is the appropriate response to the prodigal's return. In other words, the gifts of mercy do not follow the equations of justice. Bassanio is like the prodigal in that he squanders wealth that he has not earned himself and in that his debts are forgiven, both

by Antonio, who is willing to provide him with yet another loan in the initial scene, and by Portia, who similarly treats him with mercy, as we will see below.

The choice of the three caskets that Portia's suitors have to make also has a bearing on the contrast between justice and mercy, especially when it comes to the second and third casket. The first, which is made of gold and bears the inscription, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire" (2.7.5), is related to neither. It is an image of greed, of wishing to take without being prepared to give. The skull contained inside indicates that it takes more than this to win Portia. The second casket bears the inscription, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" (2.7.7), which is the principle underlying distributive justice. It is no coincidence that this casket is made of silver, which Bassanio, in his assessment of the three caskets, apostrophises as "thou pale and common drudge / 'Tween man and man" (3.2.103-04). Silver is money, a means of exchange that we use when we need to give equivalent value for goods or services. It is a way of creating commutative justice.<sup>12</sup> The Prince of Aragon, who chooses the silver casket, is rewarded with a fool's head when he opens it. In the genre of comedy, opting for justice is not a wise choice.

The third casket is associated with mercy in various ways. It consists of lead but contains a picture of Portia. Inside and outside are as incommensurable as the gifts of mercy and the merits of its recipient. The inscription, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.9), indicates the element of risk that characterises mercy. In its full sense, mercy has something incalculable about it. The recipient cannot count on it, and the donor gives it without the certainty of receiving anything in return. The aspect of risk in the third inscription also has a self-reflexive dimension; it describes one element of the situation that Portia's suitors find themselves in when they submit themselves to the trial of the caskets. After all, they must "give and hazard" their right to marry; those who choose wrongly will have to remain celibate for the rest of their lives. Like the two princes before him, Bassanio is willing to take this risk; but unlike the two princes, he chooses in the

right spirit, in the full awareness of the risk involved. Bassanio is willing to give without the certainty of return, to leave the calculable exchanges of distributive or commutative justice behind and to enter the realm of mercy, whose gifts are incalculable.

What I have just said about the incalculability of mercy needs to be qualified in one respect. Mercy is by definition undeserved and out of proportion with the merits of its recipient. However, in most conceptualisations of mercy it is not an entirely one-sided affair; it responds to, or causes, a change for the better in the recipient. Often, this is merely a change of mind or attitude. The prodigal son, for instance, repents; seeing himself as a sinner, he no longer claims the status of a son and only hopes to be a servant. One of the homilies of the Church of England, "Of Repentance and of True Reconciliation unto God," similarly maintains that "the true preachers of the Gospel of the kingdom of heaven, and of the glad and joyful tidings of salvation, have always in their godly sermons and preachings unto the people joined these two together, I mean repentance and forgiveness of sins" (525). Dryden also points out a change of mind in his characters, who abandon their libertine promiscuity in favour of the discipline of monogamy: "[W]e make not vicious persons happy, but only as heaven makes sinners so: that is by reclaiming them first from vice. For so 'tis to be suppos'd they are, when they resolve to marry; for then enjoying what they desire in one, they cease to pursue the love of many" (10: 210).<sup>13</sup> Bassanio shows that he is more than a self-seeking wastrel when he submits himself to the choice of the caskets, thus risking a life of celibacy, and when, unlike the other suitors, he makes this choice in the right spirit, hoping but not assuming that he will find Portia's picture in the casket.

The trial in Venice is, as I have stated above, not a good example of mercy. There is another trial, however, in which justice *is* seasoned with mercy. This trial occurs in the final scene at Belmont when Portia challenges Bassanio about the ring which he received from her. She gave it to him as a symbol of their mutual fidelity after Bassanio passed the test of the caskets:

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours  
 Is now converted. But now, I was the lord  
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
 Queen o’er myself; and even now, but now,  
 This house, these servants and this same myself,  
 Are yours, my lord’s. I give them with this ring  
 Which, when you part from, lose or give away,  
 Let it presage the ruin of your love,  
 And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (3.2.166-74)

Portia consigns herself and her wealth into Bassanio’s possession on the sole condition that he keep the ring—in other words, she will give him her love and her fidelity as long as he does the same for her.

It is precisely this ring which Portia demands from Bassanio as a payment for her legal services when she has saved Antonio’s life in her disguise as a lawyer at the trial in Venice. Bassanio is, of course, reluctant to give the ring away, but at Antonio’s insistence he complies with the lawyer’s wish. When he returns to Belmont, Portia takes him to task about the missing ring:

*Portia.* What ring gave you, my lord?  
 Not that, I hope, which you received of me.  
*Bassanio.* If I could add a lie unto a fault,  
 I would deny it: but you see my finger  
     [*holding up his hand*]  
 Hath not the ring upon it: it is gone.  
*Portia.* Even so void is your false heart of truth.  
 By heaven, I will ne’er come in your bed  
 Until I see the ring. (5.1.184-91)

Bassanio is now placed in a position which resembles that of Antonio earlier in the play. While Antonio could not meet a financial obligation when he was unable to repay Shylock’s loan in time, Bassanio cannot meet a social and emotional obligation when he is unable to produce the ring. The ring here plays the same role that the bond played in the trial scene. It is a symbol of a mutual obligation, and Portia uses it to obtain what is due to her just as Shylock used his bond. She even repeats the word “ring” just as doggedly as Shylock insisted on his “bond” at the trial.<sup>14</sup> When Bassanio confesses that he



cannot show the ring to Portia, she claims that he has been unfaithful and given the ring away to another woman for sexual favours. To top it all, she even pretends that she was similarly unfaithful to him and slept with the lawyer when he showed her the ring, thus claiming a husband's right to her body (see 5.1.257-59).

Of course, the trial at Belmont is ultimately only a mock trial, as Inge Leimberg points out (233). It revolves, however, around the central topics of the play, emotional and financial exchanges and the obligations and commitments that come with them. The defendant at this second trial in Belmont has quite a lot to answer for. In a way, Bassanio's debts catch up with him at this point. Because of his prodigality, he first took his friend's wealth to court his wife, and then he took his wife's gift to pay the lawyer who saved his bankrupt friend. The debt to Antonio has been transformed into a debt to Portia. In a world ruled by the law of commutative justice, Bassanio would now be at a loss, both literally and figuratively, and Portia would have every right to cancel her relationship with him. Fortunately, Bassanio inhabits a world in which justice is seasoned with mercy. As the lawyer and Portia were one and the same person, the payment for his friend was at the same time a payment to his wife. Bassanio's debts are forgiven, and the symbolic expression of this is the return of the ring, which is made in a significantly joint gesture by both Portia and Antonio, the principal agents of mercy in this play:

*Antonio.* I once did lend my body for his wealth,  
Which, but for him that had your husband's ring,  
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again:  
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord  
Will never more break faith advisedly.

*Portia.* Then you shall be his surety. Give him this,  
And bid him keep it better than the other. (5.1.249-55)

## 5. A Final Observation

As I pointed out in the opening paragraph, the term *poetic justice* was coined at the beginning of the long eighteenth century. It was not

endorsed by everyone and in every respect (Dryden, for instance, restricts it to tragedy), but it commanded widespread support throughout this period. In the nineteenth century, however, poetic justice went into decline. While it survived in popular fiction and melodrama, it disappeared from highbrow literature.<sup>15</sup> Poetic justice was incompatible with the pessimism and atheism of philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It also clashed with the realist agenda of serious novelists. George Eliot, for instance, dismisses poetic justice in sarcastic terms as a regime “in which rewards and punishments are distributed according to those notions of justice on which the novel-writer would have recommended that the world should be governed if he had been consulted at the creation” (308). From a historical point of view, the departure from poetic justice amounts to a move from optimism to pessimism: from the providential cosmos of Rymer and Leibniz to the bleak and godless universe of Eliot and Schopenhauer.<sup>16</sup>

This historical view is valid as far as it goes, but the present argument with its focus on genre allows us to qualify it in one respect. Mercy, which I have discussed as a typical feature of comedy, also constitutes a departure from poetic justice. Yet, this departure differs from the nineteenth-century dismissal of poetic justice in that its direction is optimistic rather than pessimistic. Compared with chance or with the blind will that Schopenhauer discerns at the heart of the universe, justice may appear attractive and benign. Compared with the gentle rain of mercy, it is arid and severe. When justice is seasoned with mercy, as it is in *An Evening's Love*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and many another comedy, the characters enter a realm that is ultimately more hospitable and appealing than the world envisaged by Thomas Rymer.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For an account of the history of poetic justice, see Wolfgang Zach, who focuses on the long eighteenth century but also discusses the origins of the concept in earlier writers, including Plato and Aristotle, as well as its decline in the nineteenth century. Zach also discusses comedy, but his approach is primarily historical, while I try to offer a systematic argument from the point of view of genre. In an essay on the eighteenth-century reception of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, George Geckle provides a footnote, as it were, to Zach's book; Geckle shows that, because of their belief in poetic justice, writers like Charles Gildon, Charlotte Lennox and Samuel Johnson took a dim view of the play, in particular of its lenient treatment of the duplicitous Angelo.

<sup>2</sup>In their contributions to the present issue of *Connotations*, David Fishelov and Thomas Kullmann similarly observe a tendency towards poetic injustice in the plays they discuss. Fishelov, who focuses on comedy, infers that the genre has a specific, libido-driven morality whose supreme value is the sexual union of two young lovers. Kullmann, who discusses *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, argues that these two plays have open endings that invite the audience to provide the missing closure in terms of their Christian faith. I would like to thank David Fishelov and Thomas Kullmann as well as the other participants of the 2015 *Connotations* Symposium in Tübingen for their comments on my talk, the initial version of the present essay. The essay has also profited from the comments and criticisms of Maik Goth, Anton Kurenbach, Lena Linne, Jennifer Peters, and the readers who reviewed it for *Connotations*. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Angelika Zirker and Matthias Bauer for organising the symposium.

<sup>3</sup>See Stephen Halliwell 266-76.

<sup>4</sup>For an account of this tradition, see Nevill Coghill.

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, Northrop Frye's influential theory of comedy in *Anatomy of Criticism* (163-86); the present writer likewise combines the character- and the plot-centred view in his theory of the genre, while also taking into account additional views that focus on features such as wit or the carnivalesque suspension of law and order (Niederhoff 15-48).

<sup>6</sup>While Asmuth's remarks on poetic injustice in comedy are very brief, his discussion of the same topic in tragedy is comparatively extensive (31-36). As usual, the more noble of the two genres claims the lion's share of the critical attention.

<sup>7</sup>Manfred Fuhrmann argues that there is a connection between the middle status of the tragic protagonist as described in this passage and his proneness to *hamartia* (43).

<sup>8</sup>For an overview of this motif in the genre of comedy, see Kenneth Muir's essay "Comic Tradition and the European Context: The Testing of Love."

<sup>9</sup>Verena Olejniczak Lobsien similarly argues that *The Merchant of Venice* amounts to a fundamental critique of justice and of the related principle of equity. For the opposite view, see David Beauregard, who insists that justice is done in the trial scene and that the play as a whole is informed by an Aristotelian theory

of justice. For a general treatment of mercy in (some of) Shakespeare’s comedies and in medieval and early Renaissance drama, see Robert Grams Hunter’s *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*. Surprisingly, Hunter mentions *The Merchant of Venice* only in passing, claiming that “the structure of the play is not that of a comedy of forgiveness” (87). Presumably he comes to this conclusion because he focuses exclusively on Shylock and neglects other characters such as Bassanio.

<sup>10</sup>Inge Leimberg sees the trial scene as a successful enactment of a Judaeo-Christian theology embracing both justice and mercy (161-207); thus she differs from Kaul and Lobsien. While I see no need to quarrel with Leimberg’s claim about justice, I cannot agree with her view that the trial scene is an enactment of mercy. One of the stumbling blocks of this reading is Shylock’s compulsory conversion at the end of the trial. Like most modern critics, Leimberg finds this hard to swallow and considers it incompatible with mercy. She removes the problem by blaming the conversion on Antonio, whom she considers a flawed character who is going too far in demanding that Shylock become a Christian (202-03). However, the conversion is explicitly endorsed by the Duke and implicitly approved of by Portia, the two main agents of mercy in the scene according to Leimberg. The conversion is part and parcel of the defeat of Shylock; it cannot be separated from the other measures taken against him at the end of the trial scene. A further problem in Leimberg’s reading is the elevated status of Portia. Leimberg characterises her as a superhuman, saviour-like figure who is committed to rescuing Shylock’s soul from the beginning of the scene to the very end. To my mind, Portia is benevolent but human. Initially, she is quite sincere and perhaps even hopeful in offering the option of mercy to Shylock. After he has repeatedly rejected this option, she abandons mercy and switches to a different strategy, which she pursues relentlessly: defeating Shylock with his own weapon, the insistence on the letter of the law.

<sup>11</sup>See the *Connotations* debate on the prodigal son motif in *The Merchant of Venice* (Rosen; Rosenheim) at [www.connotations.uni-tuebingen.de/debrosen00802.htm](http://www.connotations.uni-tuebingen.de/debrosen00802.htm)

<sup>12</sup>The distinction between distributive and commutative justice is made by Aristotle in the fifth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first type of justice concerns the distribution of wealth by one agent (e.g. the state) to a number of persons (e.g. the citizens of the state); the second type of justice concerns mutual exchanges between two agents.

<sup>13</sup>In making heaven the agent that brings about the change of mind in the sinner, Dryden hints at a problem that Christian theologians struggle with in their accounts of mercy. On the one hand, they feel the need to include the human contribution to mercy, the change of mind on the part of the sinner. On the other, they wish to safeguard God’s omnipotence and the absolute, unconditional quality of mercy. The somewhat contradictory solution of this problem is to point out the importance of repentance in the first place and to state afterwards that this repentance, just like mercy, is a gift from God. See, for instance, the final paragraph in the first part of the homily on repentance (534-35).

<sup>14</sup>Several critics have pointed out that the bond and the ring are variations on the same theme, and that the commercial world of Venice and the romantic world of Belmont are linked through a series of financial and emotional exchanges. See, for instance, Sigurd Burckhardt, Jan Lawson Hinely, and Natasha Korda.

<sup>15</sup>See the contribution by Angelika Zirker in this issue on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*.

<sup>16</sup>The decline of poetic justice in the nineteenth century is documented by Zach (387-434). A number of recent studies take a different view, claiming that the concept of poetic justice continues to be relevant in and after the nineteenth century. However, they define the concept in terms that are very different from those of Rymer and Dryden. See, for instance, Karl Eibl and Günther Höfler, who locate the concept not in the relation between character and plot, but in the attitude or expectations of the audience. Sebastian Donat, Stephan Packard, Roger Lüdeke, and Virginia Richter discuss a very broad range of problems under the label *poetic justice*, including the question how just a representation can be to the object that it represents.

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