

Poetic (In-)Justice in Comedy^{*1}

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Tragedy, Comedy, and Poetic Justice

The term poetic justice (or poetical justice) was first introduced in Thomas Rymer's *The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider'd* in 1677,² summed up by Abrams as "the distribution, at the end of a literary work, of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the virtue or vice of the various characters" (Abrams 299-300). While discussing the history of ancient tragedy, partly based on Aristotle's *Poetics*, and before moving on to discuss the tragedies of the last age, Rymer declares that the "*unequal* distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the *wisest*," and that "a *Poet* must of necessity see *justice* exactly administred, if he intended to please" (Rymer 22).³ Rymer's statement that the principle of poetic justice is of necessity for tragedy is highly questionable; he regards the outcome of ancient tragedy as "rewards" and "punishments"—which they were never meant to be. Tragedy's plot arouses in its audience, among other things, pity for the fate of the tragic hero, and such pity arises because the tragic hero is punished *beyond* what he or she deserves. Hence, tragedy illustrates, almost as a rule, a *disproportionate* distribution of punishment. In Abrams's apt formulation, Rymer's insistence on poetic justice would "destroy the possibility of tragic suffering, which exceeds what the protagonist has deserved because of his or her tragic flaw, or error of judgment" (Abrams 300). Rymer was not interested in *describing* tragic heroes or the actual emotional effects of tragedy. Rather, he was inter-

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ested, first and foremost, in advocating tragedy's didactic, or theological-didactic, value and in expressing his disappointment when he could not find this didactic function fulfilled.⁴ This is the motivation behind his complex (and ultimately unconvincing) arguments about the place of poetic justice in tragedy.

Notwithstanding Rymer's arguments, the literary genre that seems to illustrate the principle of poetic justice most clearly is not tragedy but, rather, comedy.⁵ In comedy's happy ending the "good guys" (comprised of the loving couple and their party) are rewarded, and the "bad guys" (comprised of all those who had stood in their way) are punished. While we side with the loving couple, their desired union acquires a positive moral dimension: we like them not only because they are young and beautiful but also because their union is perceived as "the right thing to do," i.e. as morally justifiable. The pleasure that the audience takes in the happy ending of comedy, the reason why we leave the theatre smiling, is closely associated with the *impression* that justice has been served: the good guys and the bad guys both get what they deserve. If at a comedy's ending the loving couple were not rewarded (i.e. united with society's approval), or if a character who had threatened the lovers' union was rewarded instead, the very application of the title "comedy" to such a play will be put into question.⁶

A closer look at comedy's characters, however, reveals a more complicated picture regarding the relationship between virtue, vice, and a happy ending: comedy's good guys are often not entirely virtuous; and sometimes the only sin committed by comedy's bad guys is that they have been planted in a comic plot. Contrary to an audience's possible impression, comedy's happy ending is not based on solid moral grounds ("they got what they deserved") but on a powerful emotion, morally neutral, that drives us to side with the loving couple. Thus, my main argument is that comedy's happy ending often bestows on different characters rewards and punishments *disproportionate* to their actual virtues or sins.

Rewarding Flawed Characters: Shakespeare's Sir Toby and Bassanio

Suppose that we are given the following short descriptions of two characters: (1) a drunk who is also a conniving, egotistic leech; and (2) an irresponsible squanderer who puts at risk his loving friend and benefactor. Most of us will not hesitate to label, in accordance with common moral principles, these two characters as bad guys who should be punished. When we encounter them in comedy, however, just the opposite happens: the leech and the squanderer are rewarded, because they belong to the party of the loving couple. Let me now attach names to these two characters: the conniving drunk is Sir Toby Belch in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and the irresponsible squanderer is Bassanio as he first appears in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

How and why are characters that should be censured according to general moral principles, embraced and rewarded in comedy? The answer lies in the comic plot, which makes us side with the loving couple and desire their happy union, and makes us ignore some of their moral flaws. Let us examine Sir Toby and Bassanio, and see how these two gain the audience's approval. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby Belch spends his days and nights with drinking in the house of his affluent niece, Olivia. In order to finance his outrageous drinking habits he lures the ridiculous Sir Andrew Aguecheek to play the role of a suitor to Olivia. From a strictly moral viewpoint we can sum up Sir Toby as a parasitic drunk. These morally questionable traits are evident when he makes his first entry (1.3). In plays, just like in life, first appearance is highly important in creating a strong and enduring impression. Sir Toby's conversation with Maria, Olivia's gentlewoman (who will become his wife at the play's happy ending), immediately reveals his questionable moral traits:

SIR TOBY What a plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life.

MARIA By my troth, Sir Toby, you must come in earlier o' nights. Your cousin, my lady, takes great exceptions to your ill hours.

SIR TOBY Why, let her except, before excepted.

MARIA Ay, but you must confine yourself within the modest limits of order.

SIR TOBY Confine? I'll confine myself no finer than I am: these clothes are good enough to drink in, and so be these boots too; and they be not, let them hang themselves in their own straps.

MARIA That quaffing and drinking will undo you. I heard my lady talk of it yesterday; and of a foolish knight that you brought in one night here to be her wooer.

SIR TOBY Who, Sir Andrew Aguecheek?

MARIA Ay, he.

SIR TOBY He's as tall a man as any's in Illyria.

MARIA What's that to th' purpose?

SIR TOBY Why, he has three thousand ducats a year.

MARIA Ay, but he'll have but a year in all these ducats. He's a very fool and a prodigal.

SIR TOBY Fie, that you'll say so! He plays o'th' viol-de-gamboys, and speaks three or four languages word for word without book, and hath all the good gifts of nature.

MARIA He hath indeed all, most natural: for besides that he's a fool, he's a great quarreler; and but that he hath the gift of a coward to allay the gust he hath in quarrelling, 'tis thought among the prudent he would quickly have the gift of a grave.

SIR TOBY By this hand, they are scoundrels and substractors that say so of him. Who are they?

MARIA They that add, moreover, he's drunk nightly in your company.

SIR TOBY With drinking healths to my niece! I'll drink to her as long as there is a passage in my throat and drink in Illyria; he's a coward and a coistrill that will not drink to my niece till his brains turn o'th'toe like a parish-top. What, wench! *Castiliano vulgo*: for here comes Sir Andrew Agueface (1.3.1-35).⁷

Despite the fact that Sir Toby does not score highly on moral grounds, he is rewarded at the happy ending because he belongs to the play's good guys. In addition to his basic allegiance with the party of the good guys (i.e. the lovers), other factors too help us to overlook Sir Toby's highly dubious moral traits. Firstly, even in this entry scene, Sir Toby's questionable moral traits are softened by his contagious merriment, vitality, and word-play (e.g. "let her except, before excepted"; "Confine [...] no finer"). As a rule, these qualities are welcome in comedy.⁸ Compared to the pale character of Orsino, absorbed in affected love (1.1), Sir Toby's vitality reaches the audience as a refresh-

ing breeze. An exuberant gaiety full of word-play is, after all, much more attractive to watch and hear than the self-centered ruminations of a self-declared lover.

Secondly, despite the fact that it is Sir Toby who has brought Sir Andrew Aguecheek to woo Olivia, the ridiculous fop does not pose any real threat to the desired union of Olivia and Sebastian to which the play ultimately leads. Nobody can take Sir Andrew Aguecheek seriously as a true contender for Olivia's heart. If he were to be perceived as a suitor who poses a real threat to the desired union, then Sir Toby would instead be associated with the play's bad guys. Since it is clear to everybody (the only exception being Sir Aguecheek himself) that Sir Toby is merely using Sir Aguecheek as his source of cash flow, rather than trying to actually marry him off to Olivia, Sir Toby is not perceived as blocking the desired romantic union.

Thirdly, as the play moves on, we watch as Sir Toby joins Maria (2.5) in the scheme to expose Malvolio, the play's major bad guy and a pompous pretender, and to punish him; and by doing so he wins our support and sympathy. It is no accident that Sir Toby makes his entrance (1.3) together with Maria, the woman with whom he feels most comfortable. Despite the differences in their social status, Maria feels free to scold Sir Toby for his drinking habits, but also does not make a great scene out of his problematic behavior. In that respect, she may be giving the cue to the audience: we may criticize Sir Toby for his drinking habits, but together with Maria we easily forgive his flaws because he belongs (together with Maria) to the party of the good guys.

Fourthly, the play further suppresses our potential moral reservations and builds up sympathy for Sir Toby when he gets "a slap on the wrist" (5.1) in the form of a beating at the hands of the hot-tempered Sebastian. This loveable rascal deserves a beating, we may say to ourselves, but not too severe a one; after all, without Sir Toby the play would be much duller.

Last but not least, Maria is not only Sir Toby's co-conspirator in the scheme to expose Malvolio, but he values her cunning so much that "I

could marry this wench for this device" (2.5.150). From words to deeds: as we learn in the final act from Fabian's report, Sir Toby meant what he said—and has married her: "Maria writ / The letter, at Sir Toby's great importance, / In recompense whereof he hath married her" (5.1.341-43). By marrying Maria, Sir Toby joins Orsino and Viola as well as Olivia and Sebastian in the "wedding epidemic" of the play's happy ending, thus taking part in the most cherished act of a comic plot—namely, the wedding.

Let us now take a closer look at another good guy in comedy, this time in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: Bassanio. When we first meet him (1.1), his actions raise serious questions about his morality. When Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan, he is fully aware of the huge risk Antonio is taking on his behalf. Antonio's unconditional willingness to help highlights not only his naivety but also Bassanio's recklessness. When Bassanio's speech is stripped of its rhetoric we are left with the brutal fact that he did not return the first loan and asks now for another loan with no guarantee about its return. To support his request for a further loan, Bassanio offers the following story:

BASSANIO. In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft,
 I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight
 The selfsame way, with more advised watch
 To find the other forth; and by adventuring both
 I oft found both. I urge this childhood proof
 Because what follows is pure innocence.
 I owe you much, and like a wilful youth
 That which I owe is lost; but if you please
 To shoot another arrow that self way
 Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
 As I will watch the aim, or to find both
 Or bring your latter hazard back again
 And thankfully rest debtor for the first. (1.1.139-51)

This dubious story about lost arrows, a "childhood proof" according to Bassanio's own admission, offers no real guarantee that the fate of the present loan will be any different from that of the previous one. For a moment, we may even have reason to suspect that Bassanio's

real motive for pursuing Portia is not her famed beauty or good character, but her money. Here is how Bassanio describes Portia to Antonio: “In Belmont is a lady richly left, / And she is fair, and—fairer than that word—/ Of wondrous virtues” (1.1.160-62). The first thing that Bassanio mentions, “a lady richly left,” either reflects the first thing that had caught his own attention, or perhaps it is the attribute that he believes Antonio is mostly interested in. Thus, we can get the impression that he is either a gold digger and the prospective bride is for him, first and foremost, a business opportunity, or else he is a manipulative salesperson, who persuades Antonio to give him a highly risky loan by foregrounding Portia’s wealth. Even when we accept that he is truly in love with Portia (and in comedy we usually do not question declarations of love), Bassanio does reveal in scene 1.1 certain flaws in character: he is a spendthrift who is willing to put at risk the money of Antonio—his naïve, loving, and generous friend.

Despite certain flaws in Bassanio’s character, he is one of the play’s good guys and is lavishly rewarded at the happy ending: he gets the girl, and the money, and even keeps his special relationship (whatever this may be) with Antonio. The fact that Bassanio is one of the play’s good guys has nothing to do with his morality. Rather, it stems directly from his role in the comic plot: namely, that of a lover in a loving couple. The moment we identify him as such, I contend that a powerful emotion is set in motion, and we wish him all the best in the world, especially a happy union with his beloved Portia. While we hold our breath when the happy union is threatened, we tend to overlook or even entirely forget Bassanio’s weaknesses.

In addition to the fact that Bassanio has the role of a young lover in a comic plot, other elements too help us to ignore his flaws. Firstly, Bassanio succeeds where the other suitors fail and correctly chooses the lead casket. In an ironic twist, the passionate young man that we met in the first scene bets now on the casket that represents moderation and *gravitas*:

in a word,
The seeming truth which cunning times put on

To entrap the wisest. Therefore thou gaudy gold,
 Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee,
 Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge
 'Tween man and man. But thou, thou meagre lead
 Which rather threaten'st than dost promise aught,
 Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence:
 And here choose I. Joy be the consequence! (3.2.99-107)

Secondly, towards the end of the fourth act, when Bassanio gives Portia's ring to the "Doctor of Law," i.e. the disguised Portia (4.1.445), we witness how he agonizes before giving in to the demand: not only does he try to divert the attention of the "doctor" by denying the value of the ring (see 4.1.426-27) but then he tells his true reason, namely the vow he has made to his wife to treasure the ring (see 4.1.437-39). Bassanio is facing a true dilemma because he must choose between two equally justifiable actions: the obligation to keep his promise to his wife (see 3.2.171-74), and the obligation to repay Antonio's savior (the disguised Portia). The fact that there is no simple solution to this dilemma, and the fact that Bassanio acknowledges the difficulty, help us to sympathize with him, especially when he chooses to repay the person who has saved Antonio; which is a nobler and more commendable moral course of action than retaining the ring.

Finally, just as in the case of Sir Toby in *Twelfth Night*, here too the flawed good guy receives "a slap on the wrist" towards the play's end: Portia reproaches Bassanio for parting "so slightly with your wife's first gift" (5.1.167). When we celebrate the play's happy ending, however, Bassanio's questionable moral traits are forgotten (or almost forgotten), and the fact that he parted "so slightly" with Portia's ring is forgiven, both by Portia and by the audience; after all, he did what he did for an honorable reason.

If certain of the actions by Sir Toby or Bassanio were to be severed from the comic plots in which they are embedded, we would probably censure those responsible for such actions. However, since these actions are part of a comic plot, the two characters are absolved. To conclude this section, I would like to offer a paraphrase of *Isaiah* 1:18: If you are a character in comedy, though your sins be as scarlet, they

shall be as white as snow—provided that you belong to the loving couple or play a part in advancing their cause, and provided that your sins or crimes are not too serious and irrevocable (e.g. murder); whereas moral flaws are part and parcel of the world of comedy, grave sins and crimes shall not pass.

Excessive Punishment: Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*), Knemon (Menander's *Dyskolos*)

Sir Toby and Bassanio both represent characters with certain moral flaws who are nonetheless rewarded at the comedy's happy ending. Can we find a mirror-like case in which a relatively decent character is punished at the happy ending? It is difficult to find such a case, and the reason for this is simple: as Aristotle has already pointed out, the world of comedy is populated by flawed characters; while these characters are usually not grave sinners or, in Aristotle's terms, they are "of a lower type,—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad" (*Poetics* 1449a; e.g. they are not murderers), they are, nevertheless, definitely flawed.⁹ Thus it is no surprise to meet in comedies every variation of misers, hypocrites, pretenders, egocentrics, misanthropes, and their like. When we acknowledge the fact that most characters in comedy are flawed, it becomes clear why the decent ones are not punished at the comedy's happy ending: a decent character, let alone a morally flawless one, is simply a very rare commodity in the world of comedy. The fact that we cannot find a decent character being punished does not mean that the punishments applied to certain other characters are indeed in proportion to their "crime." When we scrutinize more closely some of the characters who *are* punished at comedy's happy ending, we find that, from a strictly moral point of view, their punishment exceeds the "crime."

Let us take, for example, a familiar situation in many comedies, from Menander and Terence through Shakespeare and Molière to the latest comedy on Broadway: a father who wants to secure for his

daughter an affluent bridegroom, but she falls in love with a fellow that she met on the street and now wants to marry. How should we judge the father's position in such a situation? From a purely moral viewpoint, such a father may score highly. He may be motivated by the wish to secure a good life for his daughter, suspecting the ephemeral nature of a romantic crush. In the world of comedy, however, such a father has no chance of gaining our sympathy, and since he stands as an obstacle to the desired union of the loving couple, he will be punished at the comedy's happy ending (e.g. ridiculed, beaten, fined, etc.). Furthermore, the audience will cheer his downfall and celebrate the lovers' union, oblivious to the moral ground of this emotional reaction. If we were to disconnect the actions and intentions of such a father from the specific dynamics of a comic plot—something that we are not expected to do—his punishment would definitely seem disproportionate when weighed against his alleged "crime."

To illustrate the dynamics of a comic plot that makes us suspend pure moral consideration, let us look, for example, at the fate of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. There is no doubt that Malvolio is a conceited, pompous character (or in Maria's words "an affectioned ass" 2.3.125) who deludes himself that Olivia is in love with him. When we examine Malvolio's character and conduct from a moral viewpoint, however, we should note that he does not commit any crime or cause any real harm to Olivia or to anybody else. Furthermore, when Malvolio, as part of his fantasy about being married to Olivia, imagines how he addresses Sir Toby and rebukes him for his drunkenness ("You must amend your drunkenness" 2.5.60), he expresses a morally justifiable position: after all, Sir Toby's drunkenness is indeed reproachable. To fantasize that you are loved by the mistress of the household in which you are employed may be ridiculous, but is it a grave sin that deserves the severe punishment of psychological torture?

Malvolio's fantasy to be married to Olivia and become the master of the household may of course offend a particular social decorum and pose a threat to class boundaries. Thus, Malvolio's punishment can be

described as appropriate for his presumptuous aspirations to transgress social boundaries and destabilize the very foundations of the political structure.¹⁰ Yet, the idea of a cross-class marriage is not totally strange to *Twelfth Night*. For one, as mentioned earlier, Sir Toby and Maria, the gentlewoman, eventually wed, and the play sanctions their marriage despite the fact that Sir Toby is above her on the social ladder. There may be a difference in kind between a master who marries a maid and a steward who marries the mistress of the household: the former may be a more socially acceptable act than the latter. Note that at one point the idea of a cross-class marriage of a steward to a lady is introduced; it is Malvolio who mentions that there is a “precedent” for his aspirations to marry Olivia: “There is example for’t: the Lady of the Strachy married the yeoman of the wardrobe” (2.5.34-35). It is instructive to note that nobody from the (hostile) party of eavesdroppers, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian, challenges Malvolio on this particular piece of information. Thus, we are made to believe that such cross-class marriage is perhaps possible in the world of *Twelfth Night*, but Shakespeare shows us that Malvolio wants to marry Olivia for the wrong reason: he loves himself, not her. Thus, Malvolio is definitely guilty of being a conceited, stiff, and pompous fool, but he is not a criminal, and his punishment exceeds his crimes.¹¹

Do Malvolio’s flaws of character justify his bitter punishment, when, towards the end of the play, he is beaten, fallen, humiliated, and incarcerated “in hideous darkness” (4.2.25), while the cheerful party responsible for his downfall continue to mock him? At one point Malvolio desperately addresses Feste the fool:

MALVOLIO Good fool, as ever thou wilt deserve well at my hand, help me to a candle and pen, ink, and paper. As I am a gentleman, I will live to be thankful to thee for’t.

FESTE Master Malvolio?

MALVOLIO Ay, good fool.

FESTE Alas, sir, how fell you besides your five wits?

MALVOLIO Fool, there was never man so notoriously abused. I am as well in my wits, fool, as thou art.

FESTE But as well? Then you are mad indeed, if you be no better in

your wits than a fool.

MALVOLIO They have here propertied me: keep me in darkness, send ministers to me, asses, and do all they can to face me out of my wits.

(4.2.67-79)

We may be laughing at Malvolio's expense, we may celebrate his downfall, we may enjoy the game Feste (disguised as Sir Topas) and the others are playing, but we have to admit that what Malvolio says in the above quote is quite accurate. In suggesting that there is something excessive and disproportionate in the punishment of Malvolio, I am in very good company: Olivia, the person who is supposed to be most offended by Malvolio's romantic fantasies, nonetheless speaks on his behalf. After Fabian recounts the practical joke that they have played at Malvolio's expense, her reaction is sympathetic: "Alas, poor fool, how have they baffled thee!" (5.1.348); and after Malvolio pronounces his intention to be revenged, she categorically declares that he "hath been most notoriously abused" (5.1.356), thus echoing verbatim Malvolio's own protest (see 3.2.73). Olivia's sympathy for Malvolio highlights the fact that while we might enjoy the cruel practical joke played at his expense, Malvolio's punishment, which may *seem* like poetic justice, is in fact disproportionate and not based on true moral grounds.

While Orsino seeks to contain Malvolio's rage and return him to society ("Pursue him, and entreat him to a peace" 5.1.357), nobody suggests punishing those responsible for Malvolio's excessive, disproportionate punishment, nor does the fact that Malvolio "hath been most notoriously abused" spoil the pleasure that we take in the play's happy ending. Malvolio is, after all, a typical kill-joy in the world of comedy, who should thus be punished, and if his punishment has gone a bit too far, so be it.

To better understand comedy's tendency to disproportionately punish characters for their flaws, it would be instructive to go back to the roots of romantic comedy: *Dyskolos* (*The Grouch*) by Menander (342/41-290 BCE), the only Ancient Greek New Comedy that has survived. The fate of the major character of the play, Knemon, can illustrate the tendency of comedy to inflict on the play's "bad guy,"

i.e. the character who tries to block the lovers' union, a punishment disproportionate to his alleged sin or crime. Since Roman comedy (Plautus, Terence) took its cue from Greek New Comedy, and since almost all modern comedies have taken their cue from Roman comedy, Menander's *Dyskolos* can tell us something important not only about the origins of a comic plot—a story about a loving couple and the way they overcome the obstacles that stand in their way—but also about the element of poetic *injustice* ingrained in comedy's happy ending.

First, a short reminder of the play's plot: young Sostratos falls in love with a peasant girl he has glimpsed. Her father is Knemon, a misanthropic farmer who wants his daughter to marry someone like himself. Sostratos meets Knemon's stepson, Gorgias, and enlists his assistance in getting Knemon to allow Sostratos to wed his daughter. Knemon then accidentally falls down his own well, and Gorgias jumps in to rescue him. Believing himself about to die, Knemon sees the error of his ways, bequeaths all his property to Gorgias, and tells him to find a husband for his daughter. Gorgias introduces Sostratos to Knemon, who gives his approval. Sostratos tells his own father, Kallippides, of the wedding plan and suggests a second marriage between Gorgias and Sostratos's sister. After raising some objections, Kallippides yields and a celebration of the two weddings takes place. Does the play end here? Not just yet.

Everybody is engaged in the wedding celebration, except Knemon who is lying down, tired, injured, and helpless. Geta and Sikon, a slave and a cook, start to torment him, and after playing several cruel practical jokes at his expense, they try to drag him by force to participate in the dancing at the celebration. During this scene, Knemon asks them to leave him alone but they continue to tease him. At one point, Sikon addresses Knemon and pronounces a list of his alleged crimes that supposedly justify the cruel treatment that he is now receiving from them:

Sit still, and don't so much as murmur!

You shrink from crowds, you loathe the ladies, you won't let us take you

To join the sacrifices. You must bear with all these torments—

Do Knemon's shrinking from crowds and his wish to be left alone justify the cruel practical jokes his tormentors play at his expense? From a strictly moral viewpoint, the answer should be—No! Even his tormentors do not argue that he had committed any serious crime. It seems that Knemon is being punished first and foremost for committing the ultimate crime in the world of comedy: isolating oneself from society. The audience is expected to enjoy watching the torments inflicted on Knemon, to feel that his punishers are doing the right thing, and that he gets what he deserves. Assuming that this is what the audience indeed experiences in the concluding scene, it is the result of an activated set of moral principles that slightly differ from our usual set of moral values.

Morality and the Happy Ending of Comedy

According to comedy's morality (but not general morality), a recluse is a sinner, and a person who does not want to be part of society should be punished. We can recall in this context Bergson's analysis of laughter, and its emphasis on the social, punitive function of laughter. According to Bergson, laughter is a form of social censure applied to people who depart from the dynamic vital force (*Élan vital*) of life and of social life; people who become instead subject to what Bergson describes as "mechanical inelasticity" (Bergson 10). We laugh at a person who performs robot-like movements (physical mechanism) or at a person who behaves or speaks in a repetitive, mechanical way, i.e. who does not respond appropriately to changing circumstances (psychological mechanism), thus manifesting "inelasticity of character" (Bergson 19). When Orgon in Molière's *Tartuffe*, for example, returns home and asks Dorine, the servant, "How is everyone?" Dorine tells him in detail that his wife does not feel well. Instead of responding to her by inquiring about his wife's well-being he keeps asking "And Tartuffe?" (Molière 249). Orgon's repetitive retorts reveal his *idée-fixe*

about Tartuffe and the fact that he has lost the ability to respond appropriately to specific, changing circumstances.

According to Bergson, as noted, laughter has a social function: "To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one" (Bergson 7-8). We, as social creatures, exercise the whip of laughter in order to censure and punish Orgon-like modes of behavior because they subjugate psychological and social life to mechanical inelasticity, not necessarily because they are *morally* wrong. In one of Molière's comedies, *The Misanthrope*, partly inspired by Menander's *Dyskolos*, the protagonist, Alceste, is so fond of telling the truth (a commendable moral trait in and of itself!) that he is punished and finds himself isolated from society. In comedy, asocial, inelastic characters are ridiculed and punished. This punishment *seems* to be based on moral grounds and hence to offer poetic justice, but in fact it is based on different grounds, namely on the rejection of mechanical attitude. Whereas comedy censures through laughter the retreat from social life, it celebrates, in a complementary manner, participating in social rituals and communal bonds. It is no accident that comedy's prototypical happy ending constitutes a wedding and/or a banquet.

Based on the above cases—Sir Toby in *Twelfth Night* and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, the morally flawed characters who are nonetheless rewarded, and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* and Knemon in *Dyskolos* as characters who receive disproportionate punishments at the comedy's happy ending—we can compare comedy's morality with that of general morality, I already had in mind the world of comedy, and I focused on several. The following table offers a comparison of various maxims in general morality set against comedy's morality. In formulating the maxims of general morality, I focused on several basic, intuitive principles of moral attitude that are shared by different specific moral systems; and in formulating the corresponding maxims of comedy's morality, I focused on basic features that are shared by comedies of different times and authors¹²:

Maxims of General Morality vs. Comedy's Morality

	General Morality	Comedy's Morality
(a)	Promote the general good	Promote the loving couple
(b)	Lovers' union is good, but is subject to higher values	Lovers' union is the ultimate good, the highest value
(c)	Impartiality: the same principles apply to all	Partiality: the loving couple get special treatment
(d)	The end should not be tainted by the means	The union of the lovers justifies almost every means
(e)	<i>Primum non nocere</i>	<i>Primum nocere</i> to comedy's bad guys
(f)	Be serious and truthful	Be merry and cunning
(g)	Be independent and autonomous	Be cooperative and social

A few clarifications:

(a) General morality favors the promotion of the general good. If one action can promote the good of the whole community and another action can promote the good of part of that community only, the former will be favored over the latter (provided of course that the principle of all things being equal is maintained). In comedy, on the other hand, we are invited to favor first and foremost the loving couple: their good, their well-being, and of course their union, are worth much more than the good and the well-being of others.

(b) A lovers' union may be sanctioned by general morality, but it is by no means its highest value. If a lover lies and cheats in order to be united with his/her beloved, it may be considered mitigating circumstances, but it will not totally exonerate him/her from bearing the consequences of being a liar and a cheat. In the world of comedy, conversely, almost any action that promotes the lovers' union is approved, including cheating, lying, and deception. Instead, all these *immoral* modes of behavior are hailed in comedy when they are at the service of the lovers' union.

(c) One of the cornerstones of general morality is impartiality. If thieving is bad, then it is bad for everybody: if I condemn and punish Mister X for stealing, I should also condemn and punish my own son if he is caught stealing. To show partiality is to lose moral ground. In the world of comedy, however, we apply different moral standards—one for the loving couple and their company and another for those who oppose them. The loving couple and their company can get away with almost anything they do, while those who oppose them are judged most severely for almost everything they do.

(d) In general morality, the end should not be tainted by the means. If in order to promote honesty you lie, then your morally sound end may become tainted; the bigger the lie, the bigger the stain becomes, until at some point the stain will entirely cover what may initially have been a justifiable end. In the world of comedy the path to the desired end—i.e. the union of the loving couple—may be paved with various kinds of dishonesties, lies, and wrongdoings, but as long as such actions help the lovers and bring them closer, this will not stain the desired happy ending.

(e) The first thing that students of medicine are told in their first class (or so goes the urban legend) is—*primum non nocere* (first do not harm), i.e. if a certain course of action might bring good results but could also bring harm, it is recommended to refrain from taking this course of action. Whereas this maxim is usually presented as the cornerstone of bioethics, it seems appropriate also to general morality. The world of comedy favors doing harm (though not serious, irreversible harm) to comedy's bad guys, i.e. to anyone who opposes the loving couple and their union; a real or metaphorical beating to a bad guy is a source of merriment to the audience.¹³

(f) To be serious and truthful seems to be a standard expectation from moral agents. When you appear in a court of justice, for example, you are not expected to tell jokes. If you do, the judge may hold you in contempt. In the world of comedy you will gain points with the audience if you are merry and cunning. In general morality seriousness and honesty are approved and merriment and deceit are

censured, but in the world of comedy the scales tilt or gravitate in the opposite direction.

(g) A moral agent is expected to be independent and autonomous: if your friends, for example, try to convince you to participate in a robbery, you should be able to withstand social pressure even at the risk of losing your friends' respect or even friendship. A person who stands by his/her moral conviction against society will earn our respect. In the world of comedy you are expected to play along and cooperate with others, notably when they are comedy's good guys. If you stand alone, the chances are that you will be depicted as a misanthrope, a kill-joy, and will eventually be punished.

Although comedy's morality does not always *contradict* general morality, the table highlights possible situations in which the principles of general morality are suspended and other principles appear in their stead. When Lady Justice enters the hall of comedy, she suspends certain norms and activates others so that her scales tilt in favor of the loving couple and their party. In other words, Lady Justice usually wears a blindfold, but when she enters into the world of comedy she peeks beneath the blindfold, constantly absolving the loving couple and criticizing those who oppose them.

Thus, despite the fact that we often express our response to comedy in the language of morality ("he gets what he deserves"), there must be another factor responsible for shaping our judgement and evoking our enjoyment. I would like to suggest that this other factor, the source of our tilted moral judgements, as well as the source of the pleasure that we take in comedy's happy ending, is that of a deep, archetypal emotion that favors lovers' union and reproduction, or in Frye's words: "We may call it the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land" (182); and the roots of this archetypal emotion lie in the Phallic songs and rituals from which comedy was born as a literary genre (see Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a).¹⁴

When we take this archetypal emotion into consideration, we can explain not only the adjustments of our moral judgements while

responding to comic plots but also the fact that romantic comedy seems to be the best survivor of all literary genres. Frye has neatly described comedy's unusual endurance:

Dramatic comedy, from which fictional comedy is mainly descended, has been remarkably tenacious of its structural principles and character types. Bernard Shaw remarked that a comic dramatist could get a reputation for daring originality by stealing his method from Molière and his characters from Dickens: if we were to read Menander and Aristophanes for Molière and Dickens the statement would be hardly less true, at least as a general principle. (163)

Comedy's uncommon endurance as a productive genre, the fact that this literary "dinosaur" is still alive and kicking among us, is probably related to the fact that its plot chimes nicely with the deeply-rooted human need to celebrate a lovers' union.

The fact that comedy's happy ending creates the *impression* that it is based on poetic justice despite the fact that it is not can be viewed, from a broader perspective, as part of a general tendency in literature to avoid blatant cases of poetic *injustice*. It is worthwhile noting in this context that there is only a relatively small number of fictional works that end in conspicuous poetic *injustice*, i.e. works that leave us with the impression that the good guys are punished and the bad guys rewarded.¹⁵ If such cases are indeed scarce, then this is an important indication of our deep and continuing emotional need for endings that do not directly contradict our sense of poetic justice. From this broad perspective, Rymer's didactic and questionable attempt to apply the principle of poetic justice to tragedy can tell us something important about the need of critics and of readers (or an audience in the theater and the movie theater) to add a moral dimension to what is basically an aesthetic experience of closure.¹⁶ It seems that we would like the ending of a story to be not just an aesthetically rewarding experience, leaving us with a sense of a restored equilibrium, but also a morally gratifying experience that eases our deep fears that evil may sometimes triumph. In order to reach this joint satisfaction we are sometimes willing to bend certain norms of common morality (as the table

above illustrates in the case of comedy), or to turn a blind eye to certain flaws of the characters, or to accentuate the good qualities of others, or to add a happy ending to a story that could otherwise be read as a grim story about meaningless, arbitrary, or even evil forces that rule the world—like the happy (“comic”) ending of the Book of Job.¹⁷

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NOTES

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²The date on the title page of this work is 1678, but the book was probably published a year earlier as explained by Zimansky, the editor of the critical edition (see Rymer 193).

³To understand Rymer’s concept of poetic justice against the backdrop of Plato’s position on the issue as well as of several French and English critics of the seventeenth-century, see Zimansky’s notes in Rymer 201-02; for the importance of Rymer’s neo-classical perspective on tragedy, see Steiner 34-38; for an in-depth analysis of Dryden’s position regarding poetic justice, see Niederhoff’s essay in this issue of *Connotations*.

⁴Rymer’s didactic or theological-didactic agenda can also be found in his *A Short View of Tragedy* (Rymer 82-175), in which he criticizes Shakespeare for not observing the principle of poetic justice in *Othello*.

⁵Whereas Rymer criticizes authors of tragedy for not complying with the principle of poetic justice, other late seventeenth-century critics referred to what was probably a common expectation of audience and critics alike, namely to encounter poetic justice in comedy. Indirect evidence of this expectation can be found in Dryden’s preface to *An Evening’s Love*, where he refers to “the law of comedy, which is to reward virtue and punish vice” (Dryden 225). For Dryden’s discussion of the place of poetic justice in comedy, see Niederhoff’s contribution to this issue of *Connotations*.

⁶For the constitutive elements of comedy, see the seminal study by Frye 163-76; for variations on the basic roles in a comic plot, see Fishelov 99-117; for an interesting discussion of comedy's happy ending as the reconciliation of two basic forces of the comic plot—"deadlock" and "riot," see Jagendorf.

⁷References to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* are taken from The New Cambridge Shakespeare.

⁸Wit is usually associated with comedy's good guys, especially with those who help to achieve the lovers' union (e.g. tricksters, servants). When a character is witty and is part of comedy's good guys, we freely enjoy his/her witticism. Still, cleverness as such is not automatically embraced in comedy: sometimes, when it belongs to a blocking figure, it may become a source of fear, not enjoyment (e.g. Arnolphe in Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes*).

⁹On the problem of providing bad characters with a happy ending and different ways of solving this problem, see the discussion by Niederhoff in this issue of *Connotations*.

¹⁰For an illuminating and erudite discussion of Malvolio's "Machiavellian" aspects, see Bauer. Bauer highlights Malvolio's Machiavellian political ambition, a telling analogy between their names, and intriguing analogies between Malvolio and the sinister epitome of Machiavellian politics in Shakespeare, Richard III (e.g. they both share false smiles and a self-love that leads to solipsistic melancholy). Notwithstanding these potentially ominous aspects in the character of Malvolio, he does not seem to pose any real threat to the political order in *Twelfth Night*; from beginning to end he is presented as a comic, parodic figure of *amor sui*.

¹¹As Dean convincingly comments (see 207-08), Malvolio's flaws chime nicely with many similar flaws of other characters in *Twelfth Night*, including some of its good guys.

¹²This ahistorical list of maxims inevitably misses important variations of moral and poetical schools but it enables us to better perceive certain basic, enduring features of our moral attitude and of the genre of comedy.

¹³Cf. the literal beating of Géronte by Scapin in Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (*Scapin's Deceits*) 3.2.

¹⁴The fact that we can detect this archetypal principle in complex comedies such as *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* does not mean that they can or should be reduced to this principle. Part of Shakespeare's ingenuity lies in the subtle, sometimes unpredictable ways in which he complies with this principle as well as with other basic conventions of comedy (e.g. placing the blocking element not in an external figure but, rather, in the psyche of the lovers like the "enamored" Orsino or the "mourning" Olivia in *Twelfth Night*).

¹⁵Unfortunately, this relative rarity cannot be explained by simple realism, i.e. by the lack of such cases in real life.

¹⁶For a classical study of the cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic aspects of poetic closure, see Smith.

¹⁷The Book of Job is not only the closest book in the Bible to being a play (i.e. its greatest part consists of dialogues between characters), but it is also closest to a comic story with a happy ending, achieved through the classical device of *deus ex machina*, i.e. divine intervention that secures justice. In the concluding chapter (Job 42:10-17), Job's friends ("blocking figures") are reprimanded, Job is re-united with God ("lovers' reunion"), and Job is lavishly rewarded; otherwise, the book would have ended with a blatant poetic injustice in which cruel punishments befell an exemplary good guy ("and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil"; Job 1:1). Steiner's well-known comment attributes the book ending's "claims of justice" (4) to the Judaic tradition, as opposed to the Hellenic, tragic perspective. I propose that it also be seen as part of a general tendency in literature to avoid blatant poetic injustice.

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