

Poetic Justice: A Few Reflections on the Interplay of Poetry and Justice*

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Poetic justice is one of the most contentious literary issues. On the one hand, it has been seen as a fulfilment of the demand that literature should be ethical, useful and instructive, and, on the other hand, it is said to show the inappropriateness of such a demand. Salman Rushdie aligns himself with the latter school when he, in his acceptance speech of the Hans Christian Andersen Award on August 17, 2014, says about storytelling:

The good can lose, and fables can have anti-heroes instead of heroes. In the Indian animal fables of the Panchatantra, the two jackals at the heart of the stories are anything but good. One of them is devious, even Machiavellian, and the other, much more devious. Right does not always triumph. In fact, in these stories, it rarely does. [...] The story's amorality makes it more attractive to us than a clear moral message would.

But poetic justice still has its defenders, too, especially when it is not restricted to awarding virtue but comprises the influence of literature on concepts and practices of justice. Martha Nussbaum, for example, in her reflections on *Poetic Justice* and the proposed "ethical turn"¹ refers to the classical concept of *prodesse* and *docere*.² Accordingly, literary texts are supposed to expose and present moral concepts in a manner that enables the reader to engage with the events presented.

These first observations lead to the question whether poetic justice and aesthetic quality can go together. Does the success of a literary work perhaps even depend on the fact that it does (not) cater to our

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debzirker0252.htm>>.

feeling of justice? These questions are answered in different ways when the claim is made that literary texts contribute to “judicial thinking” (Kertzer 2)³ or when poetic justice is called unpoetical, even trivial.⁴ They are moreover linked to literary genres: Zach, for instance, argues that a poetically just ending is incompatible with tragedy (4-5), while Ebbs regards poetic justice as a concept that allows for a didactically effective ending only in tragedy (65).⁵ Nussbaum, conversely, does not consider drama at all in her study and regards the novel as the most apt paradigm of ethical reflection because of its “interest in the ordinary” (9).⁶ Another question concerns literary periods: are there times in which the concept of poetic justice is prevalent? Rushdie seems to think so when he refers to the “modernity” of relinquishing justice in literary texts⁷; Kaul and Zach in their monographs on poetic justice also seem to show this view when they link its rise and fall to religion and secularization and claim that the poet’s ideal of justice is based on a concept of divine order (see Zach 436; Kaul 12).⁸ But then evidence for its ongoing relevance is found, for example, in the fact that the summer season 2015 at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London was titled “Justice and Mercy,”⁹ two concepts which are intricately linked to the topic of poetic justice.

Given these reflections, it does not appear to make sense to simply argue either in favour of or against poetic justice as such but rather aim at gaining a more sophisticated understanding of the concept. How can it contribute to the poetics and aesthetics of a literary text and, at the same time, to its relation to reality?

1. A Short Historical Overview

If we look at the history of the term and the concept of poetic justice we find that, although Rymer coined the term as late as in 1677/78, the idea is much older. We find first reflections in Plato’s *Republic*, where he complains

[...] that what the poets and prose-writers [orators] tell us about the most important matters concerning human beings is bad. They say that many unjust people are happy and many just ones are wretched, that injustice is profitable if it escapes detection, and that justice is another's good but one's own loss. I think we'll prohibit these stories and order the poets to compose the opposite kind of poetry and tell the opposite kind of tales. (392b)

Plato bemoans the tendency of "stories about human beings" (392a) to present "unjust people" as happy and hence to not treat them according to their merit and deserts. In a similar vein, Aristotle in his *Poetics* demands that a tragic action must not show "the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity" (1452b),¹⁰ because this would evoke neither pity nor fear in the audience. The emphasis is on virtue here, which is closely connected to justice¹¹: a virtuous man should be rewarded accordingly, as much as "a bad man [should not be] passing from adversity to prosperity" (1452b-53a). A well-constructed plot, *mythos*, according to Aristotle, is based on the character's frailty, his *hamartia*, leading to a change in fortune.¹² But Aristotle does not speak in favour of either a poetically just nor unjust plot¹³: a tragic plot accordingly goes beyond the concept of poetic justice, which brings the whole topic back to complex questions of genre.

It is by way of the French reception of Aristotle, especially by Jules de la Mesnardière und Abbé d'Aubignac in the first half of the seventeenth century,¹⁴ that poetic justice entered English poetics. Rymer conceptualized it in the relationship of "history" and "tragedy": in his view, literary texts are different from "history" in that they are supposed to bring about the justice whose realization in reality is impossible:

And, finding in History, the same *end* happen to the *righteous* and to the *unjust*, *virtue* often opprest, and *wickedness* on the Throne: they saw these particular *yesterday-truths* were imperfect and improper to illustrate the *universal* and *eternal truths* by them intended. Finding also that this *unequal* distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the *wisest*, and by the *Atheist* was made a scandal to the *Divine Providence*. They concluded, that a

Poet must of necessity see *justice* exactly administered if he intended to please. [...] *Poetry* discover'd crimes, the *Law* could never find out; and punish'd those the *Law* had acquitted. (22; 27)

Rymer recognizes the problem of justice being brought about as a poetic one, i.e. as one that belongs in the realm of poetry. Literature creates a "golden world," an idea reminiscent of Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology* (see 85).¹⁵ At the same time, Rymer's coinage shows us that the concept of poetic justice has become particularly effective in English literature: despite the fact that he originally borrowed the idea from continental poetics, his definition and coinage influenced eighteenth-century poetics in Europe.¹⁶ Against this background it is quite surprising that, to my knowledge, no comprehensive study on poetic justice in English literature exists.¹⁷

2. Questions, Perspectives, and Two Examples

The term "poetic justice" may be interpreted in two different ways which reflect on the interplay of its two components: firstly, what is the role of justice with regard to poetry and poetics? And, secondly, how does poetry (i.e. a literary text) affect and even influence concepts and realizations of justice?

If we follow Rymer and try to answer the first question, then justice lends poetry a higher degree of agreement on the part of the reader or audience and has a didactic impact. If we follow Nussbaum and try to answer the second question, then our reading of "just" literature results in a new form of "public reasoning" (Nussbaum 8) which, in itself, brings about a transition of justice from the fictional realm into reality. And yet, I would like to claim that things are slightly more complicated than both Rymer and Nussbaum would like to have us believe once we begin to consider actual texts and, thus, realizations of the concept of poetic justice.

2.1 The Role of Justice in Poetry and Poetics: John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728)

One possible function of justice with regard to poetics is to bring about closure: at the end of a story, we see the virtuous characters rewarded, and the vicious punished, and the action is hence brought to a morally satisfactory conclusion. Poetic justice as the realization of an ideal concerning aesthetic aptness—as part of the *decorum* of a text—hence also foregrounds the rhetorical and psychological component of poetic justice: it is not to be considered merely in terms of morality or theology but also with regard to coherence and audience reaction, its ability “to please” (see Rymer 22). However, this very point of poetic justice as the realization of *decorum* has been questioned and remains a point of contention.¹⁸

One example of such a questioning is John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which was first performed at Lincoln's Inn Theatre in 1728, fifty years after the publication of Rymer's *The Tragedies of the Last Age*. Towards the conclusion, the hero of the play, Macheath, is sentenced to be hanged, a resolution of the plot that is then discussed between Player and Beggar-author:

Player. But, honest friend, I hope you don't intend that Macheath shall really be executed.

Beggar. Most certainly, sir. To make the piece perfect, I was for doing strict poetical justice. Macheath is to be hanged; and for the other personages of the drama, the audience must have supposed they were all either hanged or transported.

Player. Why then, friend, this is a downright deep tragedy. The catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an opera must end happily.

Beggar. Your objection, sir, is very just; and is easily removed. For you must allow, that in this kind of drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about. So—you rabble there—run and cry a reprieve—let the prisoner be brought back to his wives in triumph.

Player. All this we must do, to comply with the taste of the town.

Beggar. Through the whole piece you may observe such a similitude of manners in high and low life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable vices) the fine gentlemen imitate the gentlemen of the road, or the gentlemen of the road the fine gentlemen. Had the play remained, as I at first intended, it would have carried a most excellent moral. 'Twould have

shown that the lower sort of people have their vices in a degree as well as the rich: and that they are punished for them. (Act 3, Sc. 16)

The Beggar-author, at the end of the play, wants to bring his opera to perfection by “doing strict poetical justice.” The player’s reaction famously refers to the “taste of the town” that will not allow for an opera not to end happily: “The Catastrophe is manifestly wrong.” The beggar has to dispense with a morally and legally just ending: Macheath, *because* he is the hero of the play, is not to be hanged. The Beggar ends on an ambiguous note: a moral ending that caters to the principle of poetic justice would have shown either that those high in society are as much punished as the “lower sort of people”—or that punishment only hits the latter and is, therefore, unjust.¹⁹

With regard to aesthetics, the ending of *The Beggar’s Opera* with its demand for realizing the morally inapt is uncovered as being based on genre conventions and popular taste. Aesthetics takes precedent over the morally appropriate; in fact, the aesthetic option is the only one as a credible moral solution is impossible.²⁰ Accordingly, the principle of *delectare*, of entertainment, is prevalent. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde would evoke the classicist doctrine of *decorum* again in his comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), only to have it ironized in the utterance of Miss Prism: “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means” (Act 2). The problem of poetic justice is hence regarded as a question concerning the aesthetically (rather than morally) apt ending; in other words, to come back to our initial question (What is the role of justice with regard to poetry and poetics?): the role of justice, in this case, it is determined by rather than determines aesthetic considerations. Justice thus influences the literary work in a negative way: the very evocation and subsequent rejection of the principle of poetic justice serves to show that in a world without justice not even a poetical one can be achieved. The (non)existence of poetic justice hence determines the ending of a literary work and has generic implications.

2.2 The Influence of Poetry and Poetics on Justice: Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848)

The question how justice—or that which is regarded as just—ought to be defined became a topic in literary history a long time before Rymer's coinage of the term. Any answer is not only related to aesthetics but also has ethical implications, which leads us to the second perspective introduced above, the influence of poetry and poetics on justice and legal discourses. Are literary texts able to widen the range of forms of justice, and even to change established views on and interpretations of justice?²¹ This question is certainly a pertinent one with regard to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848).²² The ending of this novel proposes a resolution that tries to fulfil the demand for justice. The justice achieved eventually is not based on well-doing and perhaps not even "deserved" if we think of Mary's behaviour in some parts of the novel (e.g. her flirting with Harry Carson, which causes a lot of trouble), let alone her aunt Esther's (who lives in the streets, is an alcoholic and a prostitute) and her father's (who turns out to be a murderer). The novel reflects on justice as it addresses legal issues as well as questions of social justice. It is not concerned with the concept of poetic justice in the sense of Rymer's definition, as the reward of virtue and the punishment of evil; rather, it presents us with an example of justice that is based on mercy. In Gaskell, this presentation is linked to a well-defined understanding of Christianity that results in a social-utopian vision.

After the murder of Harry Carson, John Barton disappears, and Jem Wilson is accused of his murder but eventually acquitted as Mary provides his alibi and thus is able to save him. Following their return to Manchester, John Barton asks for a meeting with Jem and Mary; when they arrive at the Barton home, Mr. Carson and Job Legh are also present, and John admits to having killed Mr. Carson's son. Mr. Carson's reaction is one of "hatred" (35.351); he is not willing to "show pity" (350). When he is on the point of leaving the house, John appeals to him:

"Sir, one word! My hairs are grey with suffering, and yours with years."

"And have I had no suffering?" asked Mr. Carson, as if appealing for sympathy, even to the murderer of his child. [...]

The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom, in years so long gone by, that they seemed like another life!

The mourner before him was no longer the employer; a being of another race, eternally placed in an antagonistic attitude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no sorrow but through the accidents of Trade; no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor and desolate old man.

The sympathy for suffering, formerly so prevalent a feeling with him, again filled John Barton's heart, and almost impelled him to speak (as best he could) some earnest tender words to the stern man, shaking in his agony.

But who was he, that he should utter sympathy or consolation? The cause of all this woe. (35.352-53)

John Barton is now able to recognize a fellow sufferer in John Carson, and he acknowledges their similarity in this ability to suffer: it is the notion of "sympathy" that is being foregrounded in this passage. John Barton realizes that they are no longer antagonists, and he no longer sees in Carson a hated employer but a man. This capability for human feeling is the turning point in the history of John Barton, which results in his asking for forgiveness:

"I did not know what I was doing, Job Legh; God knows I didn't! Oh, sir!" said he, wildly, almost throwing himself at Mr. Carson's feet, "say you forgive me the anguish I now see I have caused you. I care not for pain, or death, you know I don't; but oh, man! forgive me the trespass I have done!" (354)

It is this anagnorisis that brings about not only his redemption but, eventually, also the act of forgiveness on John Carson's part.

When John Carson is on his way home, bent on revenge and determined to go to the police in the morning, he witnesses an incident that makes him change his mind. He sees how an errand-boy knocks down a little girl on the pavement, and how the nurse threatens him with calling the police. The little girl, however, stops her and says: "*He did*

not know what he was doing" (355; emphasis added). She thus not only echoes the earlier utterance by John Barton—but the sentence also reminds John Carson of something else:

Years ago, the Gospel had been his task-book in learning to read. So many years ago, that he had become familiar with the events before he could comprehend the Spirit that made the Life.

He fell to the narrative now afresh, with all the interest of a little child. He began at the beginning, and read on almost greedily, understanding for the first time the full meaning of the story. He came to the end; the awful End. And there were the haunting words of pleading.

He shut the book and thought deeply. (35.357)

The words are those spoken by Jesus on the cross in Lk 23:34. They make Carson think and understand "for the first time the full meaning of the story." His thinking and understanding results in his going back to Barton's house, where he holds Barton in his arms when he dies, and when "the tragedy of a poor man's life" ends (359). The notion of tragedy here implies that this poor man's life is not about poetic justice nor about an evil man who arrives at a deserved end, but that John Barton failed because of the circumstances and because of his own weakness to recognize fellow human beings in the masters. His anagnorisis in the final encounter with John Carson saves him: the prevalent notion of and emphasis on sympathy suggests that the reader ought to feel this towards him as well because he is made to understand the motivation behind John Barton's deeds.

It is the ultimate act of forgiveness that terminates the antagonism between workers and employers. The novel ends with a glimpse at the changes towards social justice brought about by Mr. Carson as he, too, has understood the wrongs done to the workers in the past.

[...] Mr. Carson was considered hard and cold by those who only casually saw him, or superficially knew him. But those who were admitted into his confidence were aware, that the wish that lay nearest to his heart was that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered; that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognized that the interests of one

were the interests of all, and, as such, required the consideration and deliberation of all [...].

Many improvements now in practice in the system of employment in Manchester, owe their origin to short earnest sentences spoken by Mr. Carson. Many and many yet to be carried into execution, take their birth from that stern, thoughtful mind, which submitted to be taught by suffering. (37.374)

Suffering has been the teacher of Barton and Carson alike, and this suffering, along with forgiveness and mercy, brings about change and improvement in the living and working conditions in an industrial city. Gaskell thus presents us with a vision of life "as it should be," perhaps not a golden but at least a better world.

But this is not the whole story. The last chapter brings together the remaining threads of the events: Esther is found, and she dies, weak and ill, in the arms of her family. She is laid in the same grave as John Barton, "[a]nd there they lay, without name, or initial, or date. Only this verse is inscribed upon the stone [...]. Psalm ciii.v.9.—'For he will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever'" (38.378). The prospect of divine mercy ends the story of John Barton and his sister-in-law, the "fallen" Esther, which means that there is an element of poetic justice presented in the novel but it is not simply a distribution of rewards and punishments. The deaths of Esther and John Barton are expressly not presented as punishment.

The focus then shifts to Mary and Jem, and a vision of their happiness in Canada, the place where they emigrated after getting married:

I see a long low wooden house, with room enough and to spare. [...] At the door of the house, looking towards the town, stands Mary, watching the return of her husband from his daily work; and while she watches, she listens, smiling [...]. Then comes a crow of delight from Johnnie. Then his grandmother carries him to the door, and glories in seeing him resist his mother's blandishments to cling to her. (38.378)

As much as Gaskell is trying to bring about a change in views by substituting the concept of poetic justice, a mere juxtaposition of good and evil, with that of sympathy and mercy as well as with that of individual recognition of wrongdoing and subsequent forgiveness,

she also shows that a wider and more encompassing change has not yet set in: although Jem is proven innocent of the murder of Harry Carson, his name is tainted, he loses his job, and emigration is the only way out of their miserable and poor Manchester life. With this ending, Gaskell still attempts to provide a positive outcome for the protagonists. Not only have they found utter happiness in Canada, with Jem's mother living in their house after her reconciliation with Mary, but the ending even brings a letter announcing that their friend Margaret has been cured of her blindness and will get married to Jem's cousin Will. The happy ending of the novel is complete: the words "smiling," "delight" "and "glories" in the paragraph quoted above as well as the last sentence of the novel—"Dear Job Legh!" said Mary, softly and seriously" (379) suggest as much. But the question remains whether this ending does not evoke the impression that it is somewhat forced, that Gaskell might have toned down the happiness slightly in an acknowledgement of the misery presented in the preceding 378 pages? In short, whether Gaskell pays the price of aesthetic quality in the final paragraphs of the novel in order to present an ethical principle?

3. Poetic Justice in Literary Works: More Questions than Answers?

The two examples, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, have served to show how the two perspectives on the relationship of poetry/poetics and justice may interact. But this interplay does not necessarily provide any answers with regard to the legal, ethical, and aesthetic judgment in literary texts. A lot of questions remain unanswered; for instance, whether the literary and aesthetic negotiation of poetic justice is indeed concerned with justice—or if this is merely a reflection of the need for *decorum*? This question is, in turn, related to the closure of literary texts and how it can be achieved, and whether this closure is based on or linked to ethical or aesthetic effects. In *The Beggar's Opera* the method of closure is

illustrated very clearly because it is ironized – but this is not necessarily and always the case. In *Mary Barton*, closure is brought about, but it appears to be rather artificial and full of verbal clichés.

When reading the critical literature on the topic of poetic justice, one gets the impression that these problems concerning the definition and the understanding of poetic justice have only been addressed partly and in individual contributions. The reflection on the various perspectives on poetic justice—legal, ethical, aesthetic, and perhaps other—in the realm of English literature may bring about some notion and concept of the term that is satisfactory both with regard to theory and an improved understanding of specific texts. This approach embraces questions about the relationship of legal trespasses, punishment, justice and mimesis in the sense of an imitation of life in literature as much as the suggestion that literature is able to create another, maybe even “golden,” world. But it also leaves quite a few questions unanswered: How is the aesthetic quality of justice defined in terms of stylistic and semantic properties of texts? How can we, if at all, describe the connection of law and justice in relation to a literary text and the action it represents? And has, as some critics have claimed (cf. Kaul; Zach), poetic justice become obsolete with modernity? Or does it live on, but in a transformed way, as Gaskell’s novel seems to suggest? And if so, does this transformation consist merely in an asymmetry: whereas Rymer’s definition was based on a symmetrical relationship, namely the reward of the good and punishment of evil, in modern times, the insecurity as to what is good prevails as much as the demand for the punishment of evil? Are these general tendencies? These questions show that the concept of poetic justice, despite its origin in antiquity, still requires rather a lot of answers that a single reader of literature cannot even attempt to provide.

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NOTES

¹Cf. Rancière; see also Donat, Lüdeke, Packard and Richter 21-25.

²Nussbaum writes: “the literary imagination [...] seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (Nussbaum xvi). A few pages later, she refers to Aristotle and his distinction between history and literary art: “Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves. Aristotle is correct. Unlike most historical works, literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences. In their very mode of address to their imagined reader, they convey the sense that there are links of possibility [...]. The reader’s emotions and imagination are highly active as a result” (5).

³Kertzer writes: “An underlying assumption in this study will be that literature both informs and displaces judicial thinking by rendering it vivid yet problematic, by displaying its rhetorical and fictional structures, and by engaging the reader, judiciously or injudiciously, in its operations” (2).

⁴See, e.g., Quinlan 21; and Ahrens, who claims that, especially nowadays, poetic justice can mostly be found in films, comedies and novels of little quality (see 379); see also Zach 4.

⁵See also the contributions by Charney, Fishelov, Kullmann, and Niederhoff in this volume.

⁶Nussbaum links ethical judgement and (poetic) justice: to her, the “reader’s experience [...] develops moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent [...] novel-reading will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision” (12). This short excerpt from Nussbaum’s book exemplifies one of the problems in her approach: the concept of “poetic justice” is left rather vague, which leads to confusion and its exchangeability with all kinds and forms of justice (social, economic, etc.). For a similar notion of “interest in the ordinary,” see Browne in this volume.

⁷In the acceptance speech quoted above, Rushdie elaborates on the difference between ancient and modern storytellers: “Modern writers who have drawn on the fable and folktale for inspiration have on the whole eschewed the simple morality of, for example, Aesop. [...] Separate the fable from its moral and you get what has come to be known, a little irritatingly, as magic realism, a thing of which I have been guilty myself. What interests me about Hans Christian Andersen’s stories, about where they stand in this literary journey from the past to the present, is that they look in both directions, backwards to the religious, strict, good-and-evil morality of the past—the collective wisdom of the tribe, if you like—and forwards to the flawed ambiguities of the modern, individualist sensibility: what Benjamin called the sensibility of the novelist” (n.p.).

⁸See also Kaul's claim that justice has lost prestige in modern literature ("Prestigeverlust der Gerechtigkeit" 9). The claim is surprising in so far as one would expect poetic justice to belong to a secular age.

⁹Performances included Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Measure for Measure*, *Richard II* and *King John* as well as *The Heresy of Love*, a contemporary adaptation of *The Oresteia*.

¹⁰Aristotle writes: "A perfect tragedy should, as we have seen, be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible" (1452b).

¹¹See also Kaul (10) on the link between virtue and justice.

¹²On *hamartia* in the context of poetic justice, see Donat, Lüdeke, Packard and Richter 17-18. Fuhrmann, in the notes to his translation of the *Poetics*, argues that Aristotle directs this passage at the general human attitude that strives for a correspondence between virtuous behaviour and personal happiness, i.e. that the morally good are happy, and the bad unhappy (see 177-18); see also Lobsien 314n8.

¹³"It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear" (*Poetics* 53a).

¹⁴Jules de la Mesnardière, for instance, speaks of the obligation [obligé] to recompense virtue and chastise vice [de récompenser les vertus, & de châtier les vices; 107], on the basis of reason [raisonnables; 109]; Abbé d'Aubignac writes: "La principale regle du Poëme Dramatique, est que les vertus y soient toujours récompensées, ou pour le moins toujours louées, malgré les outrages de la Fortune, & que les vices y soient toujours punis, ou pour le moins toujours en horreur, quand même ils y triomphent" (5). See also Ebbs 33-39; Zach 25-36; Zimansky xxix.

¹⁵Lobsien likewise refers to Sidney and his concept of "as it should be" rather than "as it was" (315).

¹⁶See Lobsien 313; and Zach 25-36.

¹⁷Comprehensive here means addressing various genres and literary periods. There are individual studies and contributions on individual periods and genres (see Ebbs; Lobsien; Zach). The volume by Donat et al. contains only two articles on anglophone literature.

¹⁸See, for instance, Schiller on the relationship of aesthetics and morality and their interaction in his essay "Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen."

¹⁹On Gay's allusions to Walpole and the implied satire, see, e.g., Roberts (xx); and McIntosh.

²⁰The "excellent moral" mentioned by the Beggar exists only as a sarcastic statement.

²¹On the controversy arising from literary texts that present justice, see, for example, Niederhoff in this volume on readings of *The Merchant of Venice*; see also Lobsien; Kaul 90-103; Eibl. They share the view that justice is brought about by a wrong understanding of mercy. Kaul, for instance, claims that justice is made absurd in the court scene and speaks of 'Mercy as a sleight of hand' (see also Niederhoff, this volume 29). What rather seems to be at stake here is that justice as a mere tit-for-tat is shown to be absurd. The debate seems to be about the question whether a higher and more meaningful form of justice, which is informed by mercy, may still be called justice—or if mercy is radically different from justice.

²²The line of reasoning here goes slightly against that offered by Zach, who documents the decline of poetic justice in the nineteenth century (see 387-434), in claiming that the nineteenth century shows not so much a decline rather than a replacement or rethinking of the concept.

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