

# Connotations

*A Journal for Critical Debate*



Volume 25 (2015/2016) Number 2

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## Editors' Note

When, more than 25 years ago, Inge Leimberg and I talked about the idea of a journal in our field that would be different from others because it would encourage scholars to relate their findings to each other and would promote critical debate by publishing responses, it soon became clear to us that such a journal could and should not exist on the printed page alone. It was to assume the faster, cheaper, and more flexible form of an electronic set of files as well. Back then, this meant floppy discs, but when the internet came up, *Connotations* was among the first journals to put a selection of articles and responses online. Debates that were dispersed among several volumes of the journal could thus easily be followed in their entirety. With the help of a grant by the German Research Foundation (DFG), in the years 2008-2011 all the content of *Connotations* became electronically available, free of charge. Until now, the printed version has appeared alongside with the electronic one but readers have, at long last, fully adopted the electronic medium for the retrieval and use of scholarly articles, and the hardcopies of *Connotations* have mainly been restricted to the purpose of giving the journal a visible presence at academic conferences and similar events. Thus, while my co-editors, Burkhard Niederhoff and Angelika Zirker, and I still believe that the printed medium has its very own qualities, it simply does not make sense, economically and otherwise, to go on producing hardcopies on a regular basis. Accordingly, this will be the last regular printed issue of *Connotations*, and we would like to thank our publishers, Waxmann Verlag, for 25 years of excellent cooperation. The journal, published at [www.connotations.de](http://www.connotations.de), is livelier than ever, and will count on the unflinching support of its contributors and readers, who are invited to join the *Connotations Society*.

Remembering the beginnings of *Connotations* also means commemorating those who are no longer there to help us with their advice. John Russell Brown (1923-2015), who with great enthusiasm supported *Connotations* from the first, and for many years, sadly passed away on August 26, 2015. He had joined us for what was to become the first of the *Connotations* symposia in 1990, "The Idea of Tolerance in Pre-Revolutionary England," and, through his scholarship, sympathy and fervour, embodied the spirit of *Connotations* as a journal and society for critical debate like few others. Readers will sense this when perusing his short note on "Revisiting Halberstadt, July 1997" in volume 7.2 of our journal (<http://www.connotations.uni-tuebingen.de/brown00702.htm>). To my co-editors and myself, he will stay "Full character'd with lasting memory." On June 14, A. C. Hamilton (1921-2016) and on July 24, Dale B. J. Randall (1929-2016) passed away. Both were members of our editorial board. Their expertise and encouragement, especially in the early years of *Connotations*, will never be forgotten.

Matthias Bauer

For the Editors of *Connotations*

# *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*

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## **EDITORIAL ADDRESS**

Professor Matthias Bauer, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen,  
Department of English, Wilhelmstr. 50, 72074 Tübingen, Germany  
Email: [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de) <http://www.connotations.de>

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*Connotations* wants to encourage scholarly communication in the field of English Literature (from the Middle English period to the present), as well as American and other Literatures in English. It focuses on the semantic and stylistic energy of the language of literature in a historical perspective and aims to represent different approaches.

Each issue consists of articles and a forum for discussion. The forum presents, for instance, research in progress, critical hypotheses, responses to articles published in *Connotations* and elsewhere, as well as to recent books. As a rule, contributions will be published within six months after submission so that discussion can begin without delay.

Articles and responses should be forwarded to the editors. Articles should not exceed 12,000 words and follow the MLA Handbook. Responses should be limited to 4,000 words. All contributions should be submitted by e-mail; they should be in English and must be proofread before submission.

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# Connotations

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

ANGELIKA ZIRKER

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"<sup>1</sup> refers to the classical concept of *prodesse* and *docere*.<sup>2</sup> 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

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\*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)<sup>3</sup> or when poetic justice is called unpoetical, even trivial.<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup> 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 texts<sup>7</sup>; 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).<sup>8</sup> 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,”<sup>9</sup> 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),<sup>10</sup> because this would evoke neither pity nor fear in the audience. The emphasis is on virtue here, which is closely connected to justice<sup>11</sup>: 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.<sup>12</sup> But Aristotle does not speak in favour of either a poetically just nor unjust plot<sup>13</sup>: 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,<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Against this background it is quite surprising that, to my knowledge, no comprehensive study on poetic justice in English literature exists.<sup>17</sup>

## 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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?<sup>21</sup> This question is certainly a pertinent one with regard to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848).<sup>22</sup> 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.

Eberhard Karls Universität  
Tübingen

## NOTES

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

<sup>2</sup>Nussbaum 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).

<sup>3</sup>Kertzer 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).

<sup>4</sup>See, 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.

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

<sup>6</sup>Nussbaum 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.

<sup>7</sup>In 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.).

<sup>8</sup>See 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.

<sup>9</sup>Performances 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*.

<sup>10</sup>Aristotle 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).

<sup>11</sup>See also Kaul (10) on the link between virtue and justice.

<sup>12</sup>On *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.

<sup>13</sup>"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).

<sup>14</sup>Jules de la Mesnardière, for instance, speaks of the obligation [obligé] to recompense virtue and chastise vice [de récompenser les vertus, & de chastier 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.

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

<sup>16</sup>See Lobsien 313; and Zach 25-36.

<sup>17</sup>Comprehensive 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.

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

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

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

<sup>21</sup>On 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.

<sup>22</sup>The 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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# “When Mercy Seasons Justice”: Poetic Justice in Comedy\*

BURKHARD NIEDERHOFF

## 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:



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.

Ruhr-Universität  
Bochum

## 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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## Poetic (In-)Justice in Comedy<sup>\*1</sup>

DAVID FISHELOV

### 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,<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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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\*For debates inspired by this article please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfishelov0252.htm>>.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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).<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 authors<sup>12</sup>:

## Maxims of General Morality vs. Comedy's Morality

	<b>General Morality</b>	<b>Comedy's Morality</b>
(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.<sup>13</sup>

(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).<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

The Hebrew University  
Jerusalem

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Burkhard Niederhoff for sharing with me his essay on poetic justice in comedy. His broad knowledge and valuable insights enriched my own perspective on the subject. I am also indebted to participants at the *Connotations* Symposium on Poetic Justice, who raised useful questions in the discussion that followed my presentation. Last but not least, Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker, organizers of the symposium and editors of *Connotations*, read with eagle-eye my article and offered a series of perceptive and critical comments, spurring me to improve many formulations and clarify my arguments.

<sup>2</sup>The 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).

<sup>3</sup>To 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*.

<sup>4</sup>Rymer’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*.

<sup>5</sup>Whereas 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*.

<sup>6</sup>For 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.

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

<sup>8</sup>Wit 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*).

<sup>9</sup>On 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*.

<sup>10</sup>For 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*.

<sup>11</sup>As 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.

<sup>12</sup>This 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.

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

<sup>14</sup>The 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*).

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

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

<sup>17</sup>The 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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## Poetic Justice and the Disguises of Edgar in *King Lear*\*

MAURICE CHARNEY

We do not need to be reminded how inadequate Thomas Rymer's idea of poetic justice is to our conception of tragedy. It is hardly tragic at all that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished at the end of a tragedy. This goes contrary to everything postulated in Aristotle's *Poetics*. But I think it is useful to examine one outrageous claim for poetic justice by Edgar in the final scene (5.3) of *King Lear* because it impinges so strongly on our interpretation of the play.

In this scene Edgar suddenly appears "armed" (in the Folio stage direction at line 116).<sup>1</sup> This is his fourth disguise in the play, but it is not specified exactly how he is dressed. He is here to challenge his brother Edmund to single combat. At this point he is an anonymous figure, but the audience is most likely to recognize him as Edgar:

O know my name is lost,  
By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit;  
Yet am I noble as the adversary  
I come to cope withal. (119-22)

Although Edgar refuses to give his name, Edmund agrees to the match because his opponent's "outside looks so fair and warlike" (140).

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney0252.htm>>. See also Thomas Kullmann, "Poetic Injustice in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*," *Connotations* 25.2 (2015/2016): 209-24. <<http://www.connotations.de/debkullmann0252.htm>>.

After Edmund has been mortally wounded, Edgar reveals himself in a moralizing speech that makes great claims for the working of poetic justice in the play:

My name is Edgar and thy father's son.  
 The gods are just and of our pleasant vices  
 Make instruments to plague us:  
 The dark and vicious place where thee he got  
 Cost him his eyes. (167-71)

It is difficult to give much credence to Edgar's sententious and very Stoic (and by implication Christian) assertion that "[t]he gods are just" and operate in a simplified way to distribute rewards and punishments. How can Gloucester's incredibly cruel blinding be justified by his lechery in conceiving his bastard son Edmund in what Edgar wildly imagines to be a "dark and vicious place"? We hear nothing about this "dark and vicious place" anywhere else in the play. It was traditionally thought in the Renaissance that blindness was an appropriate punishment for fornication.<sup>2</sup> But Gloucester's blinding in the play is an extraordinarily cruel and deliberate act on the part of Cornwall, who cannot conceivably be punishing Gloucester for the "good sport" (1.1.22) he experienced at Edmund's begetting. Even if he is acting as God's instrument, Cornwall does not even vaguely hint at Gloucester's lechery.

Bridget Gellert Lyons offers an explanation of this in her persuasive and eloquent essay called "The Subplot as Simplification in *King Lear*": she emphasizes the fact that Edgar's didacticism owes a debt to "old-fashioned literary forms, like the morality play and the chivalric romance, through which it represents experience" (25). This is totally unlike the main action, which shows us Lear's sufferings as "heroic because they cannot be accommodated by traditional formulas, moral or literary" (25). We have no doubt that Lear is "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.59-60). After Lear and Cordelia become prisoners, her first words assert the lack of any poetic justice in this world: "We are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred

the worst" (5.3.3-4). From the point of view of the main action of the play, there is no way we can claim that "[t]he gods are just." Edgar's moralistic formulations stand in sharp contrast with the experience of Lear and Cordelia, which hardly justifies any redemptive view of the play.

As Lyons concludes her essay:

Lear's experience is truly tragic and heroic not merely because he suffers—Gloucester suffers too—but because the literary forms that avoid tragedy are so clearly inadequate to express what he goes through. (37)

This expresses an idea of tragedy far beyond poetic justice. Lear's death is more related to Aristotle's notion of a tragic flaw, but Cordelia's death seems unmotivated and a product of a malicious fate. It clearly has no relation at all to Edgar's conviction that "[t]he gods are just." The gods are not just and they do not distribute rewards and punishments as Rymer imagines.<sup>3</sup>

The next point we need to consider is: what do Edgar's many disguises have to do with his assertion of poetic justice? I think they undercut and make ambiguous Edgar's moralistic stance. We are encouraged to think of him as a trickster figure, a little like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There is always a certain ambivalence about disguise in Shakespeare. We think of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who disguises himself as a friar to examine the state of his kingdom, but the corruption he discovers is beyond his anticipated expectations. The unsavory bed trick he proposes and oversees resembles Edgar's trick on his father. Gloucester's "life's a miracle" (4.6.55) in Edgar's avid imagination because he is made to believe that he has survived his mock-fall down the cliffs of Dover. The plot of *Measure for Measure* is like the many medieval tests of Griselda's chastity—the husband in disguise who probes his wife's faithfulness always ends up badly in a denouement he never anticipated.

There is a very explicit condemnation of disguise in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.<sup>4</sup> Viola, disguised as Cesario and a messenger from Duke Orsino, is convinced that Olivia has fallen in love with her:

Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness  
 Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.  
 How easy is it for the proper false  
 In women's waxen hearts to set their forms! (2.2.27-30)

Satan, the "pregnant enemy," delights in disguise. Viola ends the scene utterly baffled, as we may see in her final couplet:

O Time, thou must untangle this, not I;  
 It is too hard a knot for me t' untie. (40-41)

Edgar in his four disguises nowhere expresses his bafflement, but disguise nevertheless undercuts his role as a spokesman for moralistic values.

He is painfully aware of his role-playing when he first encounters his blinded father. After declaring "Poor Tom's a-cold," he says aside, "I cannot daub it further" (4.1.55) but he knows that, in order to survive, he must continue his disguise, as he concludes in another aside: "And yet I must" (57). We see in what follows his immense compassion for his father: "Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed" (57). This does not sound like the mad imprecations of Poor Tom.

Act 4, scene six is Edgar's most important scene. Dressed as a peasant, he is now leading the blind Gloucester. As his father notices, Edgar seems different from Poor Tom:

Methinks thy voice is altered and thou speak'st  
 In better phrase and matter than thou didst. (7-8)

But Edgar must continue as the Bedlam beggar in order to enact his well-conceived plot.

He attempts to convince his father that they are climbing a steep hill and that they can hear the sound of the sea. Edgar goes to great lengths to describe an imaginary scene looking down the cliffs of Dover:

Come on, sir, here's the place. Stand still: how fearful  
 And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low.  
 The crows and choughs that wing the midway air

Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half-way down  
 Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade;  
 Methinks he seems no bigger than his head. (11-16)

In his deception of his father, Edgar proceeds as if he were directing an actor: "Give me your hand: you are now within a foot / Of th' extreme verge" (25-26). Gloucester is represented as completely convinced of the scene Edgar conjures up, and he bids adieu to his peasant companion. In the Arden edition, Foakes sees Edgar's deception as "grotesque, comic, absurd, tragic, or a combination of these" (329n 33-34), echoing the judgment of G. Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire* about Gloucester's supposed fall: "The grotesque merged into the ridiculous reaches a consummation in this bathos of tragedy" (194). Both critics are painfully aware of how histrionic and unconvincing Edgar's trick seems to the audience or reader. I think the implication is how desperate the blinded father must be to believe in Poor Tom's shallow scheme.

At this point there occurs the first of Edgar's moralizing and sententious asides: "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (33-34). He wants the audience to know exactly what he is doing and to approve of his actions. But the audience is surely as skeptical of Edgar's assuming the role of spiritual doctor as it is of the Duke's blandly asserted bed trick in *Measure for Measure*. Edgar is playing a carefully prepared trick on his father, who sincerely hopes that his fall will bring on his devoutly sought death:

O you mighty gods,  
 This world I do renounce and in your sights  
 Shake patiently my great affliction off. (34-36)

After he seems to fall, Gloucester is intent to end his life: "Away, and let me die" (48), but Edgar has other ideas, and he elaborates on the spiritual significance of the imaginary scene:

Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,  
 So many fathom down precipitating,

Thou'dst shivered like an egg; but thou dost breathe,  
 Hast heavy substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.  
 Ten masts at each make not the altitude  
 Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.  
 Thy life's a miracle. (49-55)

But Gloucester still is not fully convinced; he longs for a noble, Roman suicide:

'Twas yet some comfort  
 When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage  
 And frustrate his proud will. (62-64)

Edgar is eager to convince his father that what he thought was a peasant was actually a fiend, a devil who tried to persuade him to commit suicide by jumping off the cliffs of Dover. His father is "happy," in the sense of fortunate (having good "hap") in escaping:

Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours  
 Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee. (73-74)

Gloucester now seems to be won over by Edgar's strenuous arguments:

Henceforth I'll bear  
 Affliction till it do cry out itself  
 'Enough, enough' and die. (75-76)

Even though Edgar concludes: "Bear free and patient thoughts" (80), we are not thoroughly persuaded that he has freed his father from his incipient despair; and he is indeed soon having black thoughts again.

Why does Edgar not reveal himself to his father? In an essay called "The Avoidance of Love," Stanley Cavell claims that a cruel Edgar is deliberately avoiding recognition. He faults Edgar for not letting his father know that he is alive and well, which Gloucester wishes for intensely, as in his speech before he falls: "If Edgar live, O, bless him!" (40). But I think Cavell is wrong to put such a strong emphasis on this point. He ignores Edgar's fervent purpose to prevent his father from

despairing, which seems like a very Christian intention, since despair signifies a loss of belief in God's providence. Despair is a kind of atheism. Edgar's spiritual quest overrides every other consideration.

As Michael Mooney points out, Edgar is a choric and symbolic figure who should not be interpreted psychologically. He is determined to rescue his father: "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (33-34). Edgar is certainly aware that he is playing a dangerous game with his father, as is expressed in his use of the surprising word "trifle." I think he is painfully conscious of the fact that he cannot openly reveal his identity and also pursue his spiritual quest. Once he revealed himself this quest would most likely end.

At the end of Act 4, scene six, after the moving encounter of the mad Lear and the blind Gloucester, Edgar appears again in another peasant disguise. Gloucester reaffirms his freedom from despair: "Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you ['you ever gentle gods'] please" (4.6.213-15). Edgar explains, in neutral terms, his new persona: he is

A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows,  
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,  
Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand;  
I'll lead you to some biding [dwelling]. (217-20)

When Oswald enters and is ready to slay Gloucester, Edgar shifts into a heavy, West Country dialect: "Ch'ill pick your teeth, zir. Come, no matter for your foins [thrusts]" (240-41). He not only kills Oswald but he also shifts back into standard English. Edgar seems to delight in displaying his histrionic talents. Note that he addresses Gloucester as "father" (250, 281) without specifically acknowledging that he is his son. The scene ends with Edgar vowing to bestow his father "with a friend" (281).

In Act 5, scene two Edgar is still dressed as a peasant as he leads his father away from the battlefield. Now that Lear has lost the battle, Gloucester is despairing again: "a man may rot even here" (8), but Edgar insists on cheering him up:

What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure  
 Their going hence even as their coming hither.  
 Ripeness is all. Come on. (9-11)

Gloucester's answer lacks any passionate conviction: "And that's true too" (11). It is not part of Edgar's role to explain why "Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither," but it sounds like a Christian (or possibly Stoic) commonplace.

In the Arden edition, Foakes explains in a note why this passage is so out of place in this context: "Edgar's moralizing seems hardly adequate to the nature of the action, and is undercut by the next scene" (364n11). Edgar is here, as elsewhere, too intent on offering moral commentaries on the action that do not help the audience understand what is actually happening. We feel that throughout the play the role of Edgar presents us with difficulties. For all his seemingly good intentions, he still seems to us a trickster, like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, whom we cannot take literally. Why "ripeness," as if the blinding of Gloucester was necessary in order to him to become fully mature? Elton in *King Lear and the Gods* cites Jaques's speech about Touchstone, whom he quotes: "And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe, / And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot" (*As You Like It* 2.7.26-27). This sounds faintly ridiculous rather than philosophical and anticipates the cynical humor of Jaques's Seven Ages of Man speech shortly after in this scene.

We have already discussed Edgar's last disguise in the final scene of the play (5.3) when he moralizes on how "The gods are just" (5.3.168). In an eloquent new book called *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (2014), Simon Palfrey presents an apocalyptic view of Edgar, especially in his disguise as Poor Tom. He asserts unequivocally: "The Edgar-role bears the burden of the play" (251). In a series of philosophical, theological, and political interludes (see 6), Palfrey expatiates on the centrality of Poor Tom to our understanding of the play. His approach is primarily philosophical in the sense that the author is not concerned with the events of the action. He proceeds at a very high level of generalization about the play with Edgar in his various guises as a

projection of Shakespeare himself.<sup>5</sup> As he explains in the Afterword, his book is a personal matter with him: "The true sources of *Poor Tom* are not really scholarly or theatrical. The book has grown from somewhere inside, from fears and fascinations that I still don't fully understand" (257). That is perhaps why Palfrey has so very little to say about King Lear or any of the other characters in the play.

Not being as philosophically inclined as Palfrey, I feel hesitant to ask why he almost completely ignores the fact that Poor Tom is a role that Edgar, spurred on mercilessly by Edmund's concocted letter, assumes in order to save himself from the wrath of his father and his own probable death. We know, of course, that there is no character named Poor Tom in the play. Edgar ingeniously invents the role of Poor Tom from abundant hints in Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603),<sup>6</sup> a role which Edgar enacts with great histrionic vigor, perhaps even overacts. We need to be reminded that, in the course of the action, Edgar also plays three other roles: the peasant who leads Gloucester to Dover Cliffs, the rustic (with a rich West Country/Somersetshire-accent) who leads Gloucester away from Dover Cliffs and kills Oswald, and, finally, the poor, unrecognizable, armed Edgar who challenges his brother to single combat and eventually kills him.

Palfrey's book is so eloquent and wide-ranging that it is hard to argue with its assumptions. But it is also difficult to see how Edgar as a character can be at the heart of the play. Palfrey is so enamored with Edgar as Poor Tom that Lear and Cordelia and Kent are almost made to disappear. Basically, I think we have two actions in *King Lear* that are very different from each other. As Lyons so well observes, the subplot of the play is moralistic and didactic, with a strong resemblance to morality plays and medieval romances. Here poetic justice has an important function in arguing against Gloucester's despair. As Edgar reports it, his father's end is a happy and fortunate one:

I asked his blessing and from first to last  
Told him our pilgrimage. But his flawed heart,  
Alack, too weak the conflict to support,

'Twi'xt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,  
Burst smilingly. (5.3.194-98)

But the hearts of Lear and Cordelia do not burst smilingly. The main action of the play has no relation to morality plays or medieval romances. There is no easy resolution in Lear's "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" (255) nor in his "Never, never, never, never, never" (307) to mark the death of Cordelia. His life is not a miracle as Edgar claims that Gloucester's is. The main and the subplot are set against each other with no possibility of reconciliation. Perhaps this intense duality of the two actions defines the essential ambiguity of *King Lear*.

Rutgers University  
New Brunswick, NJ

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*King Lear* is quoted from the Arden edition, third series, ed. by R. A. Foakes. All other quotations from Shakespeare are from the individual volumes of *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. by Sylvan Barnet.

<sup>2</sup>See many passing references in William R. Elton's *King Lear and the Gods*.

<sup>3</sup>See Samuel Johnson's comment on the ending of the play: "A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or, that if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue" (704).

<sup>4</sup>In *Twelfth Night*, the condemnation is, however, comical and includes a metareflection on play acting: Viola, acted by a boy, is a young woman on stage, who "disguises" as a young man. Disguise, in this comedy, leads to confusion which is eventually happily resolved.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Palfrey's claim that Edgar is "deeply inward with Shakespeare's imagination" (10).

<sup>6</sup>See Brownlow; Elton (89-93); Skura (134-41 and n20); and Greenblatt (esp. ch. 4).

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## Poetic Injustice in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*\*

THOMAS KULLMANN

Shakespeare does not consider it imperative to distribute earthly rewards and punishments to the characters in proportion to their respective merits. In fact, so little does he observe “poetic justice” that Samuel Johnson in the “Preface” to his Shakespeare edition expressed his bewilderment by stating that “he seems to write without any moral purpose” (71). While some “good” characters, like the youthful lovers in most of the comedies, are rewarded by a happy ending, and villains like Richard III and Macbeth clearly receive the punishment they deserve, there are quite a few striking instances in which the outcome does not correspond to the characters’ merits. In this article I propose to investigate two prime instances of this lack of correspondence, which occur in *King Lear* and *The Tempest*.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The Death of Cordelia

To most spectators and critics, Cordelia’s death in *King Lear* does not just violate their sense of justice but appears to be devoid of any ulterior meaning.<sup>2</sup> The violent end of this epitome of virtue and filial affection can be considered an obvious instance of what Bradley called the “waste of good”, which in the tragedies precedes the restoration of the natural order (28). The fact that her father is still alive to witness his daughter’s meaningless death renders her fate, and his, all the more terrible. Actually, the play, unlike *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*,

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkullmann0252.htm>>.

does not even attempt to dramatize the restoration of a natural order. When Albany, the heir to the kingdom, pronounces that “all friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue and all foes / The cup of their deservings” (5.3.303-05) his words are rendered absurd by the subsequent entrance of Lear with Cordelia’s dead body. As Jonathan Kertzer points out, “poetic justice [...] is exposed within the play as a feeble etiquette—a mere poetical decency” (12). After Lear’s and Cordelia’s deaths the only consolation Albany and Edgar can provide is that their own lives will be shorter than Lear’s, i.e. less exposed to the extremities of grief which inescapably beset this valley of tears which is life or, as Kent will put it, “the rack of this tough world” (5.3.315)<sup>3</sup>:

The oldest hath borne most; we that are young  
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (5.3.526-27)

After Lear has gone through the process of repentance, atonement and reconciliation with Cordelia, and Cordelia has demonstrated her moral perfection by absolving her father from blame, the ensuing tragedy is bound to violate any human sense of justice. The injustice of the play’s ending strikes the spectator all the more forcefully as he or she has been alerted to the notion of poetic justice before: Edgar’s speech to the effect that “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us” (5.3.171-72) certainly serves to establish the pattern of poetic justice as a foil to the injustice which will follow, and so does Albany’s reference to Goneril’s and Regan’s deaths as “this judgment of the heavens” (5.3.232). In the pagan universe of *King Lear*, Edgar and Albany consider it the gods’ job to dispense justice<sup>4</sup>: If we follow Stephen Greenblatt’s argumentation (see 119-28), the play’s manifold instances of injustice, which take place in spite of the characters’ theatrical expressions of hope or pleadings with the gods, clearly demonstrate that these gods do not exist, and that it is man’s responsibility alone to bring about a just world.<sup>5</sup> This ties in with the statement, made by Kenneth Muir in a discussion at

the World Shakespeare Congress at Berlin in 1986, that the message of *King Lear* is that "the gods have to learn from men."

This line of interpretation, however, fails to take into account a certain spiritual dimension which, to an audience steeped in Biblical texts and Christian doctrine, will have been inescapable. In 4.6, a gentleman addresses Lear, who is still suffering from insanity, reminding him of his daughter Cordelia:

Thou hast one daughter  
Who redeems nature from the general curse  
Which twain have brought her to. (4.6.205-07)

Virtuous Cordelia is set against her two vicious sisters. In accordance with the concept of analogies prevalent in what used to be called the Elizabethan World Picture, what happened to Lear in some sense also happened to nature as a whole, and Cordelia in restoring Lear also sets right nature. So far so good. But if you speak of a general curse brought about by two people, can you possibly avoid thinking of the two people who in the Bible are held responsible for all our misfortunes? Twentieth-century literary criticism, informed by the doctrine of concentrating on texts rather than contexts, often stated that you can and should. In his Arden edition of 1952 Kenneth Muir provides the following footnote:

*twain* not Adam and Eve, as Danby fancifully suggests (*op. cit.*, p. 125), but Goneril and Regan. (*King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir, 5.3.204n)

The reader's fancy which may have strayed from the text at hand is redirected to this text as the only thing which counts in interpretation. I would like to suggest that Muir's note is indicative of a fanciful disregard of those contexts which must have been immediately present to the Jacobean theatre-goer. Reginald Foakes's note in the Arden 3 edition is certainly more pertinent:

202-3 **general ... to** The universal curse of original sin was brought on human nature by Adam and Eve, the first twain, who lie behind the more immediate pair, Goneril and Regan. (*King Lear*, ed. Reginald Foakes, 4.6.202-03n)

The gentleman's choice of words reveals a spiritual analogy, in the tradition of Christian historiography: Goneril and Regan reenact the Fall of Man.

But if this is so, who is Cordelia? On this question John Danby, who made the "fanciful" suggestion concerning Adam and Eve in his book on *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (1949), actually appears to be blind to the obvious. Danby quotes from Dante, Chaucer, Malory, Hooker, and the marriage service to point out:

Cordelia is the other Nature Edmund, Goneril, and Regan ignore. In our view she is a figure comparable with that of Griselde or Beatrice: literally a woman; allegorically the root of individual and social sanity; tropologically Charity "that suffereth long and is kind"; anagogically the redemptive principle itself. (124-25)

First and foremost, according to Danby, Cordelia is "Nature" (125). For all his learning, however, Danby leaves out the central text of western culture, the New Testament, and becomes guilty of inaccurate reading: Cordelia *is* not Nature, she *redeems* Nature. According to St. Paul, the only Redeemer of the fallen world is, of course, Jesus Christ; so inasmuch as Goneril and Regan are Adam and Eve, Cordelia is Christ<sup>6</sup>: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22). In this context her death actually makes sense, as it repeats Christ's crucifixion. This analogy ties in with Helen Gardner's comparison of Lear carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms with the Pietà setting, i.e. the Virgin Mary carrying Christ's dead body (see 27-28).

But does any redemption take place in *King Lear*? Are we not to believe in Lear's agonizing exclamation that Cordelia will "come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never" (5.3.308-09)? In the Quarto version, Lear then passes away upon a conventional dying groan. The revised version provided by the Folio, however, adds two lines:

Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips,  
Look there, look there! *He dies.* (5.3.311-12)

As Bradley noted (see 241), Lear dies of joy, believing Cordelia to be alive. To the bystanders, as well as to modern spectators, this delusion of Lear's only adds to the pain they feel. Cordelia's death has been compared to the "promis'd end" (5.3.264), i.e. doomsday, or at least an "image of that horror" (5.3.265) by Kent and Edgar, and now Kent exclaims: "Break, heart, I prithee, break" (5.3.313). Actually, it is left to Lear to express hope: Lear had called for a looking-glass to trace Cordelia's breathing (5.3.262-64) and applied a feather to her mouth and nose:

This feather stirs, she lives! If it be so,  
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows  
That ever I have felt. (5.3.266-68)

If Cordelia were alive, she could, according to Lear, fulfil the role of redeemer, just as Christ by his resurrection redeems the world. In connection with the previous reference to Cordelia as the one who redeems nature from the general curse, the analogy established by Lear's (inadvertent) religious phraseology seems to me inescapable. As St. Paul points out in 1 Cor 15, Christian salvation solely depends on whether Christ has risen from the dead or not. If he has, it is indeed a chance which does redeem all sorrows that we, as human beings, have ever felt.

But is there a chance for Cordelia to be alive? Commentators, almost unanimously,<sup>7</sup> agree with Kent, Edgar, and Albany that there is not (e.g. Greenblatt 123-25; Holloway 90-95; Lennard 57), in spite of some contradictory evidence. The actor whose body Lear carries on stage was alive, and spectators standing close enough to the stage might actually have noticed the stain on the looking glass or the stirring of the feather. Another consideration, however, may carry more weight: Jacobean audiences, I would like to suggest, were not in the habit of relegating the world of the theatre to a plane completely remote from "real life," and the notions of real life entertained by the majority of the audience would have included the basic Christian tenets. It would thus seem strange that spectators who every Sunday professed their faith in life everlasting should unquestioningly have accepted the

bleak ending of this tragedy. This does not mean that contemporary audiences could not distinguish between fiction and real life, or between churchgoing and theatre-going and the respective “discourses”. My suggestion is simply that they were not used to switching off their Christian world view when leaving the church or switching on the tragic world view of pagan antiquity when entering the theatre as automatically as eighteenth- or nineteenth-century audiences might have done, but would naturally be looking for a connection between the fictional play on stage and the discourses and practices prevalent outside the theatre.<sup>8</sup>

The plot, to be sure, is set in pre-Christian times, at about 800 BC. if we follow the chronology of the British kings established by Geoffrey of Monmouth. The characters cannot be expected to believe in Christ and salvation, although Kent and Edgar are (anachronistically) aware of the end “promised” in *Revelation*. No wonder their attitude with regard to the tragic events is one of despair. Intellectual audiences from the late seventeenth century onwards have unquestioningly accepted and shared this attitude, so much so, indeed, that Nahum Tate in 1681 felt bound to rewrite the play’s ending to provide Cordelia and Edgar with the “earthly” rewards they deserve. A Jacobean spectator, however, will have wondered if Cordelia should not have had a chance to be alive, in heaven (like Christ, whom she typifies), and if Kent’s and Edgar’s despair is at all warranted. The extent of this wondering will have been dependent on the strength of this spectator’s Christian faith.

My suggestion is that Shakespeare, by making Lear believe that Cordelia is alive, reaches out of the boundaries of theatrical discourse. Those spectators who firmly believe in the resurrection of Christ and life everlasting are invited to share Lear’s hope and trust in Cordelia’s survival. By contrast, those who are beginning to doubt these tenets of faith may find confirmation of their attitude in Cordelia’s tragic and gratuitous death: If Lear is deluded in the belief that Cordelia is not dead, one option open to the audience is to construe that eternal life is also a delusion.<sup>9</sup>

My argument thus does not imply that *King Lear* is a Christian play; I should rather like to suggest that the play dramatizes agnosticism. In this the play could be compared to a poem by Thomas Hardy in which an old thrush in the midst of winter bursts out into song:

So little cause for carolings  
 Of such ecstatic sound  
 Was written on terrestrial things  
 Afar or nigh around  
 That I could think there trembled through  
 His happy good night air  
 Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
 And I was unaware.  
 ("The Darkling Thrush," st. 4; Hardy 219)

Like the unwarranted bird-song, Lear's belief that Cordelia is alive may—or may not—indicate a spiritual knowledge out of reach of the bystanders.

## 2. Forgiveness in *The Tempest*

A similar reaching-out to extra-theatrical Christian discourse can be observed at the end of *The Tempest*. While Prospero receives poetic justice when he returns to Italy and is reinvested as Duke of Milan, and Miranda's and Ferdinand's innocent devotion to one another logically results in their happiness ever after, many spectators are bewildered by the fact that a happy ending is also accorded to characters who, by any ethical or judicial standard, clearly do not deserve it. If Prospero can return to his former dignities, so can Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, in spite of the fact that Antonio is unrepentant, and that he and Sebastian attempted murdering Alonso just an hour before (2.1.199-296 and 3.3.11-17). The Italian villains who ousted Prospero from his dukedom and, as far as we know, are prepared to continue their villainous careers are allowed to go home scot-free.

The plot, in fact, precludes an ending in which justice is done to the Italian courtly villains. To leave his island and return to Milan, Pros-

pero has to be reconciled to his enemies, and the only man fit for Miranda's hand in marriage happens to be the son of one of them. The plot thus allows Prospero to demonstrate first his humanity and then his moral superiority over those who deprived him of his dukedom by force. Informed by Ariel he pities the villains who are now in his power:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling  
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,  
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,  
Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd than thou art? (5.1.21-24)

Prospero then refers to his own superior mind: "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (5.1.27-28). Virtue and Prospero's "nobler reason" (5.1.26) suggest forgiveness, as opposed to his "fury" (5.1.26) which would suggest vengeance. To the audience, the reference to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness will have been evident, the more so as Prospero proclaims that he is satisfied of his enemies' penitence (see 5.1.28). Prospero later on also promises his pardon to Caliban, who, in turn, announces his intention to "be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace" (295-96), a statement which, in its blunt simplicity, may remind us of promises made by misbehaving children and thus almost amounts to a parody of the Christian nexus of penitence and forgiveness.

The injustice implied in the happy ending accorded to the villains goes even further. As has often been noted, Antonio, the chief of them, does not express any regret as to what he has done (e. g. Kermode, Introduction lxii; Willis 328-29; Griffiths 78)<sup>10</sup>; Prospero has no means to be sure of his penitence, even less so as he is aware of Antonio's and Sebastian's recent plot against Alonso; still he expresses forgiveness:

For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother  
Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive  
Thy rankest fault—all of them; and require  
My dukedom of thee, which perforce, I know  
Thou must restore. (5.1.130-34).

Commenting on Antonio's failure to be "moved" by Prospero's forgiveness, Frank Kermode (quoted from Graff and Phelan 223) states that "Shakespeare is not here interested in a high harmony such as he renders in *Pericles* [...]." I should like to contend that Shakespeare deliberately leaves the issue of the forgiveness accorded to Antonio unresolved (cf. Orgel 26). Audiences are invited to go on wondering about the efficacy of Prospero's forgiveness and the likelihood of Antonio's reformation, and to compare Prospero's words with their own attitudes with regard to forgiveness and reconciliation, attitudes which are bound to be related to the nature and quality of their Christian faith.

Another degree of forgiveness is reached with regard to Alonso: When the King of Naples, after discovering his son's love for Miranda, asks Ferdinand forgiveness for having conspired to banish his future father-in-law, Prospero cuts him short by suggesting not to "burthen our remembrance with / A heaviness that's gone" (5.1.199-200). The past is swept away to render the present and the future less heavy; penitence need not be given expression.

It is left to Miranda, however, to top the injustice implied in the villainous courtiers' undeserved happy ending. Her amazement at seeing the courtiers can well be quoted as an instance of utter naivety (cf. e.g., Griffiths 81; Lyne 110):

O wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world  
That has such people in't! (5.1.181-84)

Actually, it is her attitude which provides the most explicit hope for a happy future. Miranda's undeserved admiration not only allows the courtiers to continue life with a clean slate but even provides a store of goodwill given in advance. The villains' faults are not only forgiven and forgotten, but, from the point of view of the future Queen of Naples, are considered never to have taken place. While, on the one hand, Miranda's words may indeed testify to the naivety of an adoles-

cent girl, she, on the other hand, becomes the instrument of the supreme form of forgiveness.

We are also alerted to the notion that the happy ending is part of a providential plan: The seas are “merciful” (5.1.178), and Ferdinand can call Miranda his own “by immortal Providence” (5.1.189), just as Prospero himself ascribes his and Miranda’s salvation to “Providence divine” (1.2.159). It should be noted that, while the Christian term of providence is used, it clearly does not refer to the Calvinist doctrine of salvation and damnation but to the restoration of the natural order: Prospero and Miranda do not enjoy the status of being among the “elect” but will (like the others) resume their proper positions in the universe, divinely ordered as it is. Within this framework, the villainy done to Prospero becomes a “fortunate fall,” as Gonzalo discovers:

Was Milan thrust from Milan, that his issue  
Should become kings of Naples? (5.1.205-06)

We should also note that the ending of *The Tempest* would have been rather gruesome if everybody got what he deserved: “[...] use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?,” as Hamlet points out (2.2.529-30), or, as Isabella remarks in *Measure for Measure*:

Could great men thunder  
As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet,  
For every pelting, petty officer  
Would use his heaven for thunder,  
Nothing but thunder! (2.2.110-14)

In *The Tempest*, at any rate, poetic justice could only amount to an orgy of whipping or thundering. We may note that if we accept the Christian doctrine that “in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation” (*Merchant of Venice* 4.1.196-97) any poetic justice which involves a happy ending can only be a temporal illusion.

The forgiveness accorded to the characters of *The Tempest* does not imply, though, that they will indeed, like Caliban, “be wise hereafter” and partake of temporal and eternal happiness. Whether we should

share Gonzalo's assessment that "all of us [have found] ourselves" (5.1.212), i.e. our proper places in the framework of society and the natural order, is entirely up to the spectator's faith, both his faith in Gonzalo's and Prospero's prognostications and his Christian faith in the efficacy of penitence and forgiveness.<sup>11</sup> We may be as doubtful of this issue as the actor of Prospero is about getting the audience's applause, now that his "charms are all o'erthrown" (Epilogue 1). The epilogue rather bluntly couches a conventional appeal for applause in Christian terminology, thus reaching out from the world of the theatre to that of the audience<sup>12</sup>:

As you from crimes will pardon'd be,  
Let your indulgence set me free. (19-20)

"And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt 6:12; cf. 6:14-15). It is up to us, to the individual spectator, if he or she will follow this appeal.

Summing up we should note that the Christian concepts of grace and forgiveness are embedded in a series of explanations by which the concept of justice is transcended:

First of all, forgiveness and reconciliation are expedient to Prospero, because without a reconciliation he could not leave the island. Justice is bypassed in favour of utility and expediency.

Secondly, forgiveness is the result of pity, based on a sense of shared humanity.

Thirdly, justice is relegated to the concept of vengeance, which is introduced as the opposite of virtue. It is human virtue or perfection which makes Prospero forgo the justice implied in being avenged on his enemies.

Fourthly, forgiveness is the result of "reason," the "nobler" part of man's mind as opposed to basic passions or, as we would say, instincts, such as "fury."

Fifthly, Miranda's innocence appears to embody a spiritual and redemptive dimension.

The plot and the words chosen by Prospero thus deconstruct the concept of justice, and, on the level of *The Tempest* as a literary composition, of poetic justice, from various angles, relating to a wide range of fields of Renaissance *episteme*. Like the conclusions of many other plays, the ending of *The Tempest* appears indicative of the natural (and divine) order of things, but, while in a play like *Cymbeline* pagan deities make sure that justice is done,<sup>13</sup> *The Tempest* transcends justice by foregrounding the Christian concepts of mercy and forgiveness. Poetic justice has been superseded by poetic faith, poetic hope and poetic charity: rather than having the good end happily, the bad unhappily ("That is what Fiction means," as Miss Prism points out in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* 275), Shakespeare invites us to put faith in the reformation of the Italian villains, to hope for Miranda and Ferdinand (and, on the political level, Milan and Naples) to live happily ever after, and to share Prospero's and Miranda's charitable feelings with regard to their erring compatriots.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

In both *King Lear* and *The Tempest* central issues are left unresolved. While Lear's belief in Cordelia's survival can easily be ascribed to his despair and his senility, it could also be traced to some transcendental knowledge of which Kent and Edgar are not aware. Similarly, Miranda's praise of the Italian courtiers can be accounted for by her juvenile innocence and naivety, but, on another level, to some kind of faith in human potential of which more experienced people are no longer capable. Both senility and innocence may—or may not—be the containers of some spiritual truth.

I should like to argue that the endings of *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, "unsatisfactory" from the point of view of poetic justice, are in fact open endings: audiences are warned not to have done with the play but to go on looking for some other kind of justice which cannot be found in the theatre and in the worlds it represents, be it the pagan

world of pre-Christian Britain or the godless world of Italian courtly intrigue, or indeed any other environment which is marked by meaningless suffering and undeserved prosperity. Spectators are invited to continue speculating on the issue of justice on the basis of extra-theatrical, Christian discourse. The plays' endings thus reach out to the discursive world outside the theatre; in *The Tempest* this process of reaching-out is made explicit in the epilogue, which directly reminds the spectator of his or her Christian faith ("As you from crimes would pardon'd be [...]"). If the tenets of Christianity are true, maybe there *is* a chance for Cordelia to be alive and partake of the felicity of the Christian heaven, and maybe Christian mercy *can* extend to Italian courtly villains even before they openly announce their repentance.

These interpretations go beyond the kind of justice a human judge, a poet or a pagan god can dispense. Shakespeare follows theatrical conventions in avoiding preaching, but he does not fit his plays into any closed or conventional system of dispensing poetic justice. He rather establishes links to other fields of discursive experience which may or may not be followed by the individual spectator or reader. The knowledge of these links, however, appears indispensable not just to cultural historians but to all those who wish to appreciate Shakespeare's dramatic achievement.

Universität Osnabrück

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See also the article by Maurice Charney on "Poetic Justice and the Disguises of Edgar in *King Lear*" in this issue.

<sup>2</sup>Cf., e.g., Bradley 269-73; Grene 188-89; Johnson, "Notes" 2-3; Knight 204; Levin 162; Stampfer 205-09.

<sup>3</sup>Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

<sup>4</sup>"Edgar's assessment of the gods' justice is breathtakingly harsh in the way it understands Gloucester's story [...] and as theology it emphasizes judgment where Cordelia emphasizes grace" (Cox 91).

<sup>5</sup>Greenblatt's implication that in *King Lear* not only pagan but also Christian rituals and beliefs are "emptied out" (119) was countered by Gary Taylor (see 21).

<sup>6</sup>On the specifically Christian character of Cordelia's virtues and on the various Biblical echoes in lines spoken by, or referring to, Cordelia, cf. Cox 88-89.

<sup>7</sup>The exception to the rule appears to be Matthews: "[...] Lear dies in joy because of the faith that his treasure by its very nature transcends mortality. In this world, or in another, he believes Cordelia lives. On the words 'Look there, look there', his eyes are not necessarily on her face. Perhaps it is outside her body that he sees her waiting for him" (160).

<sup>8</sup>On the theatre as a place of "mental experiments, explorations and boundary-crossings"; cf. Kullmann "Pagan Mysteries and Metaphysical Ironies" (2013).

<sup>9</sup>I thank one of the anonymous readers of this paper for emphasizing this point.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. also W. H. Auden's poem, "The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" (1944), esp. 136-37.

<sup>11</sup>In emphasizing the doctrines of penitence, forgiveness, and charity, Shakespeare assumes an anti-Puritan stance and firmly positions himself on the Catholic or Church of England side of the theological debates of his time. The official Homily "Of Charity" as published in 1547 to be read in churches (First Book of the Homilies, Homily 6) sets particular store on Christ's command to love one's enemies; cf. also the Homily "Of Repentance and True Reconciliation unto God" (Second Book, Homily 21), *The Two Books of the Homilies* 66-72 and 525-49. Cf. also Kullmann, "Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*" (328-29); and Kullmann, *William Shakespeare* (114-23).

<sup>12</sup>Cf., e.g., Kermode's note on the Epilogue in his Arden edition of *The Tempest* (134); and Zimbardo's assessment: "Only in a world of art, an enchanted island, or the play itself, does order arrest mutability and control disaster; but art must at last be abandoned, and then nothing is left mankind but to sue for grace" (243).

<sup>13</sup>On Shakespeare's dramatization of paganism in *Cymbeline*; cf. Kullmann, "Pagan Mysteries" (44-46).

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## Participatory Grace: Calvinism, Pragmatism, and the Ethics of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*\*

NEIL BROWNE

The centre of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights. To shift the emphasis in this way means that philosophic questions will fall to be treated by minds of a less abstractionist type than heretofore, minds more scientific and individualistic in their tone yet not irreligious either. It will be an alteration in "the seat of authority" that reminds one almost of the protestant reformation. And as, to papal minds, protestantism has often seemed a mere mess of anarchy and confusion, such no doubt, will pragmatism often seem to ultrarationalist minds in philosophy. It will seem so much sheer trash, philosophically. But life wags on, all the same, and compasses its ends, in protestant countries. I venture to think that philosophic protestantism will compass a not dissimilar prosperity.

William James, *Pragmatism* (47-48)

Grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways.

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (240)

William James insists that everyday things, long eclipsed by philosophical engagement with the ether, be awarded precedence in philosophy. He likens this pragmatist turn in philosophy to the Protestant Reformation. Following along this linkage, we approach an intersection of Pragmatism, Religion, and Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, in which (as in James's argument for philosophy) Robinson redirects the power of grace from the cosmic to the everyday. The figurative language in *Gilead*, grounded in memory and the moments of its recovery through writing, reveals the extraordinary presence of grace in the ordinary. In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "In

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbrowne0252.htm>>.

him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (NRSV 1:7). John Ames, the protagonist of the novel and an aged Congregationalist preacher, would certainly be familiar with the Biblical warrant to align forgiveness with grace; Robinson, through shifting the emphasis of grace from the ether to the everyday, implies that forgiveness, and even perhaps redemption, can be perceived in the ordinary events of an ordinary life. Throughout the novel, Ames struggles with both his inability to forgive and his urge to judge the trespasses of his godson Jack Boughton. Through the perception of grace rooted in quotidian experience, Ames approaches redemption as he becomes able to defer judgment, thereby suppressing the call for justice and eliciting instead forgiveness.

We yearn for satisfaction—demand justice. In *Gilead*, however, the immediate urge toward justice—to judge—shades *via* grace into the enduring need to forgive. The call for justice often implies a resort to a higher entity, either secular or religious. The *OED* defines justice as the "maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment" ("justice, *n.*" 1.) and poetic justice is the idealized version of this justice expressed through fiction, poetry and drama—ideal because its judgment is beyond appeal, is certain. In *Gilead*, we find an "alteration" in this "seat of authority" (James 48). According to Thomas Rymer, poetic justice takes up where justice leaves off, leaving little room for forgiveness—even God's. Rymer, who coined the phrase "poetical justice," writes: "For though historical Justice might rest there; yet poetical Justice could not be so content. It would require that the satisfaction be compleat and full, e're the Malefactor goes off the Stage and nothing left to God Almighty and another world" (Rymer 27). On the other hand, the concept of grace, especially when rerouted from the divine to everyday places and people, opens a door to forgiveness. Robinson largely refuses to allow the novel to pass judgment, just as in Calvinist theology judgment is reserved for God. Of course, Ames's role as a Calvinist divine has led to an extraordinary amount of

sermon writing, through which Ames has internalized the practice of pondering concepts such as grace and forgiveness: "My father always preached from notes, and I wrote my sermons out word for word. There are boxes of them in the attic, a few recent years of them in stacks in the closet. [...] Pretty nearly my whole life's work is in those boxes, which is an amazing thing to reflect on" (18). The typical Protestant sermon structure is based on a laying open of the text, doctrine, reason, and application. In other words, the preacher begins with a text, breaks it down into its constituent parts, derives meaning from this process, supports that meaning, relates it to the public and suggests its use in everyday application. Through long habit, this process of interpretation has become second nature to Ames, who often draws on Calvin's *Institutes* for guidance, "where it says the image of the Lord in anyone is much more than reason enough to love him, and that the Lord stands waiting to take our enemies' sins upon Himself" (189). Like a sermon, the novel often moves between Ames' statement of a religious tenet and his individual interpretation of it, and his exposition of the above passage reads, "it is a rejection of the reality of grace to hold your enemy at fault" (189). However, in the case of the secular audience, we seem to yearn for satisfaction—to demand poetic justice.

## 1

A profoundly fallible and honorable parson in a profoundly ordinary town in Iowa, John Ames in 1956 is at death's door. The son and grandson of preachers, Ames has married late in life and has a seven-year-old son. *Gilead* unfolds as a testimony, in the form of a series of letters, written by the father to the son to explain the father's life, to be read when the son is an adult and the father long dead. The aesthetic challenge Robinson has set for herself is formidable—she is writing as an old, male preacher, who himself is writing to an adult male, whom he can never know, and whom he knew only as a child. Perceiving

and teasing out this relation is part of the pleasure of reading this novel. The essay that follows, while acknowledging that pleasure, will first establish the precedence of religious experience over religion in both pragmatist thought and Robinson's work. Recently, Joan Richardson has expanded the pragmatist genealogy to include Jonathan Edwards, and the essay wishes to illuminate the connection between Robinson's novel and Edwards, especially how images of light lead to the perception of grace. Finally, it examines the idea of prevenient grace in *Gilead*.

Theologically, prevenient grace is a much debated concept, understood primarily as "the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible" (Olson 35). While prevenient grace comes from God, it restores to human beings the free will they supposedly lost through Adam's sin, and in this sense leaves human beings with the agency needed to pursue belief in the Gospel or not. God draws the potential believer toward Him and "on our part there must be positive reciprocation if this secret drawing of God is to eventuate in identifiable experience of the Divine" (Tozer 12). While the extent of free will and its relation to grace is a contested point among Calvinists, Calvin himself writes, "grace, as Augustine teaches, precedes every good work, the will following grace, not leading it, being its companion, not its guide" (*Instit.* 2.3.7). In *Gilead*, prevenient grace, wherever it ultimately comes from, is perceived in the everyday world and in the memory of ordinary events, shifting the location of grace from the ether to the earth of things. Grace and will are companionable, and prevenient grace is understood to signify the presence of the grace that allows one, if one so wills, to perceive, accept, and attain to a posture of grace—of forgiveness and redemption. Throughout the novel, John Ames struggles to grant precedence to grace over judgment and justice, poetic or otherwise.

Robinson's rerouting of grace in *Gilead* can be illuminated through John Dewey's ideas about religious experience. Dewey was deeply influenced by his Congregationalist upbringing, and there remains a

Calvinist resonance in his work. In his autobiographical essay, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," Dewey, usually reticent about his personal life, reveals: "I was brought up in a conventionally evangelical atmosphere of the more 'liberal' sort; and the struggles that later arose between acceptance of that faith and the discarding of traditional and institutional creeds came from personal experience and not from the effects of philosophical teaching" (*Later Works* 5: 150). Dewey completed his undergraduate education in philosophy at the University of Vermont, and that institution in the late nineteenth century "retained pride in its pioneer work, and its atmosphere was for those days theologically 'liberal'—of the Congregationalist type" (LW 5: 149). His thought eventually moved away from its early tethering in New England Congregationalism and toward a fervid belief in social progress—especially in democracy. When Dewey left his post at the University of Michigan for the University of Chicago in 1894, he left his direct connection with the Congregationalist Church behind.

That said, because he eschewed religion does not mean that he renounced the religious. In "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," Dewey asserts the difference between the two, and in *A Common Faith* he explores the distinction more fully: "it seems to me that the great solicitude of many persons, professing belief in the universality of the need for religion, about the present and future of religion proves that in fact they are moved more by partisan interest in a particular religion than by interest in religious experience" (LW 9: 154). As Dewey's thought evolved from the practice of religion to religious experience, he came to understand that "The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole" (*A Common Faith*, LW 9: 18). Just as James insists, awe and reverence, traditionally reserved for God in his heaven, is rerouted to "human nature." (*Pragmatism* 42) It is easy to make an argument that Dewey's early religious commitments simply migrated from the practice of institutional religion to the worship of democracy

or social progress, but this is an oversimplification of Dewey's position. One root meaning of *religion* is "that which ties believers to God" (*OED etym.*); Dewey shifts the emphasis from God and belief to the idea of the ties themselves. For Dewey did not sense that democracy or progress itself warranted religious feeling, but the coming together of human beings in specific environments to make meaning in a participatory way resonates with him as religious, and is in fact prevenient, a precondition of democracy conceived as a way of life, not merely as a form of government.<sup>1</sup>

This gathering together to make meaning holds much in common with religious feeling in Robinson's *Gilead* as well. While the thematic creation of collective meaning is obviously not unique to *Gilead*, the relation between religious feeling and democracy is a powerful strain in Robinson's work. She says as much in a conversation with President Obama published in the *New York Review of Books*. They speak of their understanding of a historical American rejection of exclusive structures of religion and government in favor of a more expansive community, and Robinson comments:

Well, I believe that people are images of God. There's no alternative that is theologically respectable to treating people in terms of that understanding. What can I say? It seems to me as if democracy is the logical, the inevitable consequence of this kind of religious humanism at its highest level. And it [applies] to everyone. It's the human image. It is not any loyalty or tradition or anything else; it's being human that enlists the respect, the love of God being implied in it. (4)

In *Gilead*, John Ames insists, "the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object" (139), and as Robinson claims above, the sacrality of the human being grounds both religious and democratic communities. Dewey in his turn claims that "democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" (*The Public and Its Problems*, LW 2: 328), just as Ames declares that "Christianity is a life, not a doctrine" (179). As the pastor of a religious community, he perceives a great dignity inherent in its members:

When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the "I" whose predicate can be "love" or "fear" or "want," and whose object can be "someone" or "nothing" and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. (*Gilead* 44-45)

The grammar of light permeates *Gilead*. The parallel structure of the passage, its elevated diction, "incandescence," and the image of lighted candles together induce a weighty religious feeling, which, like democracy, is rooted in the everyday individual human being—in "the dignity of human nature," as Dewey claims above. As is well known, Robinson is a Calvinist believer; however, the religious feeling created in her work is less about religion and more about what Dewey understands as religious experience. Robinson is quite clear on this: "it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion" (*Gilead* 145), and "doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief" (*Gilead* 239). This uncoupling of the religious experience from religion then frees up ideas such as grace—grace can wander around among human beings, arriving in a myriad of ways.

## 2

Joan Richardson's study *A Natural History of Pragmatism* extends the line of writers in the generally accepted genealogy of American pragmatism (Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein) backwards in time to include the protestant divine Jonathan Edwards. Her lodging of pragmatist philosophy in a Congregationalist theologian and preacher's words is provocative, convincing, and very productive when considering the force of Congregationalist thought in American culture in general and in *Gilead* in particular.<sup>2</sup> On one level, Ames is clearly and easily aligned with Jonathan Edwards. Ames is a Congregationalist minister in a tradition put in motion by Edwards, who, as Robinson points out in a 2007 essay "Onward, Christian Liberals," led a movement that

“departed in the mid-eighteenth century from the Calvinism its forbears had brought from England” (211). Edwards and his followers preached a belief in a conversion experience, sometimes manifest in visions of God that left one with an unambiguous conviction of one’s election. Robinson traces a split in American Protestantism rooted in the partial rejection of his version of Calvinism, especially “the idea that one could be securely persuaded of one’s own salvation and could even apply a fairly objective standard to the state of others’ souls.” This rejection “was in fact a return to Calvinism and its insistence on the utter freedom of God” (212)—to a theology in which one can never be certain of one’s own election. To claim certainty of God’s intent demonstrates arrogance of the highest degree, is an affront to God. John Ames is lodged in this return: “Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can’t claim to understand that saying, as many times as I’ve heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it” (7). Robinson lives in the same strain: “There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian. Instances of this are only too numerous and familiar. Therefore, because I would be a good Christian, I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence” (“Credo” 22). If one cultivates uncertainty, then it follows that human judgment is best deferred, “if,” as Ames says, “I am any judge. Which I am not, or ought not to be, according to Scripture” (122). Mystery and uncertainty temper the urge to judgment.

Richardson also makes a very convincing case for the influence of Newton’s *Opticks* on Edwards. The relation between light and grace is an essential element for both Edwards and Robinson. Manifestations of light were to be “understood as the most immensely complex relation of degrees of interactivity on a spectrum extending to the infinite, scintillant degree of God, light, as described by Newton, actualized each and every element of God’s creation” (Richardson 45). Richardson claims that Edwards understood God’s grace “as actual

light" (44). Again, images of light permeate *Gilead*, and Ames's perception of them often prefigures his conscious participation in religious experience, a key component of which is the reality of grace. The images are markers for prevenient grace. For Ames, the realization of grace evoked by images of light consistently transitions from the abstract to the concrete, everyday object—a lawn sprinkler, for instance, which can bring the grace inherent in light into contact with water, the substance of baptism: "The sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine. That does occur in nature, but it is rare" (63). Ordinary encounters with other people, nature, and things hence provide "the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me" (124).

For John Dewey, "to *perceive* is to acknowledge unattained possibilities; it is to refer the present to consequences, apparition to issue, and thereby to behave in deference to the *connections* of events" (*Experience and Nature*, LW 1: 143; Dewey's emphasis). To perceive, to acknowledge, to refer, to behave, to defer are degrees of participation in the world. For the Calvinist, one's eye must also be raised to God, perhaps an apparition, but to function in this world, one must pay close attention to it and to the connections that abound in it. Even Calvin himself seems to suggest a like connection:

As the perfection of a happy life consists in the knowledge of God, that no man might be precluded from attaining felicity, God hath not only sown in the minds of men the seed of religion, already mentioned, but hath manifested himself in the formation of every part of the world, and daily presents himself to public view, in such a manner, that they cannot open their eyes without being constrained to behold him" (*Instit.* 1.5.1).

Grace is a relation between the human and the deity, but perception of that grace is made possible by the immanence of God's beauty in the physical environment and in other human beings—in other words, by prevenient grace. In *Gilead*, this process is often surrounded by images of light. In her "Preface" to a recent collection of John Calvin's writings, Robinson writes that Calvin insists "on the aesthetic character of perception. The beauty of what we see is burdened with truth. It

signifies the power of God and his constant grace toward the human creature” (Preface xxii-xxiii).

## 3

The crux of Robinson’s narrative is John Ames’s troubled relation to his godson, John Ames Boughton, known as Jack, the son of his closest friend. Ames as a young man lost his first wife and child in childbirth. Jack Boughton fathered a child with a young local girl and abandoned them. The child later died. While Ames knows that Jack in this instance did not harm him directly, Ames harbors a deep, rather un-Christian, resentment toward Jack for his cavalier disavowal of his fatherhood. Jack Boughton has returned to Gilead, and Ames feels further threatened when his wife and son take an obvious liking to him. As it turns out, Jack Boughton has come home to ask John Ames’s help, which Ames feels difficult offering—even though he realizes that his resentments run counter to everything he professes to believe. Toward the end of the narrative Robinson acknowledges the idea of prevenient grace, which Ames understands as a form of grace that “precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it” (246). In his typical way, Ames then elaborates on the theological point:

I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us [...] to make ourselves useful. (246)

In the course of the novel Robinson constructs scenes that function in this sense of prevenient grace—in effect preparing Ames to accept the grace needed for him to forgive Jack Boughton—to make himself useful. They prepare the reader as well. At this point it is important to reiterate that the novel is a series of letters, so the scenes reveal not necessarily what happened, but how Ames remembers and reinterprets what occurred as he writes them down to explain his life to his

son. So the reworking of these scenes, even though they appear relatively chronologically in the narrative, is concurrent with Ames's struggle to make sense of his life and his struggle with Jack Boughton through writing.<sup>3</sup> Not only light, but also the act of writing signals prevenient grace.

As do Calvin and Dewey, John Ames perceives grace in the everyday—again contemplating water and light:

There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. (27-28)

Just as the image of the lawn sprinkler joined rain and sunlight, in this scene rain and sun create "luminous water," an image of grace and of blessing—"grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways" (240). The exuberance of the young becomes a baptism on the streets of town, and the everyday is transformed into myth and blessedness, shot through with grace in Ames's perception and in his writing. Ames revisits these scenes in his mind, rewrites them figuratively, and thereby perceives grace in the world, not in the upper ether, as he prepares the ground, perhaps unwittingly, for an act of forgiveness. The scenes embody prevenient grace.

In one of the most beautiful passages in a beautiful book, the young John Ames and his father have searched out the grandfather's grave in an isolated, weed-infested plot on the Kansas prairie. In this passage, the whole world seems a sacrament. As his father prays, Ames looks about himself:

Every prayer seemed long to me at that age, and I was truly bone tired. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but after a while I had to look around a little. And this is something I remember very well. At first I thought I saw the sun

setting in the east; I knew where east was, because the sun was just over the horizon when we got there that morning. Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. I wanted my father to see it, but I knew I'd have to startle him out of his prayer, and I wanted to do it the best way, so I took his hand and kissed it. And then I said, "Look at the moon." And he did. We just stood there until the sun was down and the moon was up. They seemed to float on the horizon for quite a long time, I suppose because they were both so bright you couldn't get a clear look at them. And that grave, and my father and I, were exactly between them, which seemed amazing to me at the time, since I hadn't given much thought to the nature of the horizon.

My father said, "I would never have thought this place could be beautiful. I'm glad to know that. (14-15)

Here arises in Ames's memory a stunning relation between the physical world, atmosphere, light, prayer, and love among three generations of sons and fathers all embraced by the beauty of the prairie. The repetition of "light" and its cognate metaphors infuses the passage with the sense of grace. That the most unlikely place can be beautiful is a source of joy for Ames's father, and the implication is that any place can be full of grace. In a later passage Ames raises his eyes to the sky:

The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light. [...] It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love (119).

Light is metaphorically linked to love, love for both the human community and the individual human being, and "Love is holy because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters" (209). The scene in the Kansas graveyard is permeated by light, the love between father and son is palpable, and grace is realized through the conjoined metaphors of light and love. Ames's recollection and rewriting of the scene serves as a form of prevenient

grace. Of course, moon and sun inhabiting the horizon is literally a function of optics and perception, and the physical reality of the act of perception lends weight to the beauty of the relation between father and son, a benediction by kiss in the strange and beautiful light of a prairie sunset. Ames takes the images of his past, and in the act of rewriting them employs figurative language that leads him to the perception of grace, preparing him for his most gracious act, the blessing of Jack Boughton, his godson.

These moments of perceived grace all involve the beauty inherent in everyday human relation and connection, the same kind of connection that Dewey felt prevenient to a democratic way of life. "Democracy," writes Dewey, "must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (*The Public and Its Problems*, LW 2: 368). But Ames still struggles mightily with his relation to Jack Boughton:

It is not for me to forgive Jack Boughton. Any harm he did to me personally was indirect, and really very minor. Or say at least that harm to me was probably never a primary object in any of the things he got up to. That one man should lose his child and the next man should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing—well, that does not mean that the second man has transgressed against the first.

I don't forgive him. I wouldn't know where to begin. (164)

As a child, Jack played malicious pranks on Ames, and Ames struggles to forgive him, his struggle marked by the word "probably." However, the larger injury is one to which Ames has no direct relation—Jack's squandering of his fatherhood. Ames looks up from the page and out the window at his own son playing with a cat, and then, as usual, looking around at the world, he writes, again invoking the light that signifies grace: "I was trying to remember what birds did before there were telephone wires. It would have been much harder for them to roost in the sunlight, which is a thing they clearly enjoy doing" (165). God's grace is manifest in light and love, in the birds' love of light, in the telephone wires. It is found in the most mundane of sights, birds perched on a wire, but this is the precise

reason for its power to transform—it inheres right outside our windows.

Ames then notes his difficulty baptizing Jack Boughton as a child. Upon christening the infant, Ames asks his friend Boughton how the child is to be called, and Boughton takes him unawares with his reply: “John Ames.” The congregation weeps with deep feeling, yet Ames recalls: “If I had had even an hour to reflect, I believe my feelings would have been quite different. As it was, my heart froze in me and I thought, This [*sic*] is *not* my child—which I had truly never thought of any child before” (188; Robinson’s emphasis). But in the moment of recasting this memory in writing, he concludes: “And I do feel a burden of guilt toward the child, that man, my namesake. I have never been able to warm to him, never. I am glad I said that. I am glad to see it in my own words, in my own hand. Because now I realize it isn’t true. And that is a great relief to me” (188-89). His greatest revelation has been prepared for him by his own evocation of grace in the remembered and rewritten interactions between fathers and sons, the touching of the father’s hand during his prayer in Kansas, the very act of the father seeking out the grandfather’s grave, and at least four images of a father offering communion to a son. Ames finally acknowledges that “John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also. By ‘my son’ I mean another self, a more cherished self. That language isn’t sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do” (189). Written images of grace in the common interactions of the world, among people, among the living and the dead, among the light, the rain, the trees, the lawn sprinkler, and the wires overhead, allow Ames to forgive and finally offer a blessing to the one he once felt was unforgivable, the one he judged. In the novel following *Gilead*, *Home*, told from Jack’s sister Glory’s point of view, Robinson writes: “If you forgive [...] you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace” (45). After Ames recalls blessing Jack on the train siding, he writes: “In fact, I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment”

(242)—the graceful moment in which he turns from judgment to forgiveness. Ames knows that “the grace of God is sufficient to any transgression, and that to judge is wrong, the origin and essence of much error and cruelty” (155). Grace inheres in the physical and spiritual relation between people, and, finally, it has nothing at all to do with justice, but with the dignity inherent in human coexistence. It has everything to do with forgiveness.

## 4

Robinson explicitly places herself in the pragmatist tradition when she writes in a recent collection of essays: “I take the Jamesian view, that what we know about anything is determined by the way we encounter it, and therefore we should never assume that our knowledge of anything is more than partial” (*The Givenness of Things* 229). We can include Robinson in the line of American pragmatist artists and thinkers, and we can also extend Richardson's line back beyond the thinking of Jonathan Edwards. In fact, maybe we should stop thinking of this genealogy as a line and think of it as a circle that includes a twenty-first century novelist and a sixteenth century theologian. John Dewey's aesthetics seems as essential to this enterprise as the prairie is to John Ames's turn toward grace and to the aesthetic of *Gilead*. At the close of the book, Ames says:

I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, that word “good” so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing. There may have been a more wonderful first moment “when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy,” but for all I know to the contrary, they still do sing and shout, and they certainly might well. Here on the prairie there is nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to delay. Mountains would seem an impertinence from that point of view. (246)

The image is again shot through with light. Ames, at the end of his life, would fully comprehend Dewey's insistence on the continuity of experience, "the process of living is continuous; it possesses continuity because it is an everlastingly renewed process of acting upon the environment and being acted upon by it" (*Art as Experience*, LW 10: 109). The perception of this process initiates an aesthetic experience in which "[t]he moments when the creature is most alive and most composed and concentrated are those of fullest intercourse with the environment" (*Art as Experience*, LW 10: 109)—an environment that encompasses the physical and the cultural and the religious. This intercourse is where Robinson locates grace. The aesthetic experience has its Calvinist valance as well; John Ames writes, "Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. The metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense" (124). Perhaps once relieved of the burden of impending judgment, human beings could enjoy performing the dignity of their own nature in conjoint activity, upon which both Dewey and Robinson stake awe and reverence, not upon a meting out of rewards and punishments, poetic or otherwise. Perhaps we will possess the prevenient courage to perceive grace in the people who surround us and in the places we inhabit. Perhaps we will realize that our lives in a community of others could be carefully tended to as the highest of arts. Perhaps, perhaps we will learn to be graceful.

Oregon State University  
Cascades, OR

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Giles Gunn, in his essay "Religion and the Recent Revival of Pragmatism," points out that Pragmatism is best understood "not only as a philosophical theory in need of defense but also as an intellectual method capable of keeping open departments of the intellectual life" (405). This includes, of course, the religious life. This notion of "keeping open" lines up in my mind with the pragmatist effort to focus on transitions themselves as not only connections between thoughts but also as essential elements of thought—they keep thought open. John E. Smith in *The Spirit of American Philosophy* concludes that Dewey replaced religious feeling with aesthetic feeling, and while this seems at first evident in a book like *Art as Experience*, Dewey insists that aesthetic experience when cultivated permeates, or can permeate, every aspect of our lives, from the spectator at a baseball game to politics, religion, culture, and even business. Aesthetic experience, then, is not substituted for religion; it is what drives religious feeling, again, as distinct from religion. Inflected a bit differently, Gordon D. Kaufman in *An Essay on Theological Method* integrates pragmatist principles into his theological argument; sounding much like Dewey, he writes: "The finished product of the theologian's constructive work is not, like many works of art, essentially something external to the artist, an optional object available in the public arena to be viewed or heard. Rather this work of art is to be lived in: it is the very form and meaning of human life which is here being constructed and reconstructed" (33). What is being kept open here is the connection between lived experience and religious thought. Kaufman writes that theological categories and concepts "have been created in the efforts of men and women to grasp and comprehend their developing experience, and they have meaning in so far as they succeed in forming and interpreting experience. Their ability to deal with experience—including especially experience of the new, the unexpected, the startling—is thus the ultimate test of their viability and significance" (7-8). Again, in a very pragmatist way, the test of theology is in lived experience. As early as 1892, Dewey writes: "An organization may loudly proclaim its loyalty to Christianity and to Christ; but if, in asserting its loyalty, it assumes a certain guardianship of Christian truth, a certain prerogative in laying down what is this truth, a certain exclusiveness in the administration of religious conduct, if in short the organization attempts to preach a fixity in a moving world and to claim a monopoly in a common world—all this is a sign that the real Christianity is now working outside of and beyond the organization, that the revelation is going on in wider and freer channels" ("Christianity and Democracy" 5). Again, channels must be kept free and open. There must exist in all thought, religious or otherwise, a relation to a common world. On Dewey and religion, see also Steven C. Rockefeller and Bruce Kuklick. Alan Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* is essential. On Charles Sanders Peirce and William James see M. Gail Hammer.

<sup>2</sup>Dawn Coleman in her book *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* makes a compelling case for the wide influence of Protestant preaching on American letters.

<sup>3</sup>John Ames is a prolific writer, though quite a harsh critic of his own oeuvre: "I think every day about going through those old sermons of mine to see if there are one or two I might want you to read sometime, but there are so many, and I'm afraid, first of all, that most of them might seem foolish or dull to me. [...] It's humiliating to have written as much as Augustine, and then to have to find a way to dispose of it" (40).

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## Harmonious Remembrance: A Response to Sarah Powrie, Ryan Netzley, and Michael Ursell\*

DAVID AINSWORTH

In responding to Powrie, Netzley, and Ursell's essays (in that and not an alphabetical order, for reasons which will become clear), I am concerned less with criticism than with augmentation, complication, and expansion. I direct readers to Judith Anderson's overview of the three papers rather than providing one of my own here.

1

Powrie's consideration of Augustinian interiority in the poem engages with the dialogic complexity so common in Donne's poetry, the interlocking yet conflicting associations between the physical and fallen world and the interior world linked to the spiritual reality of Heaven. The conflict between interiority and exteriority she examines in *The Second Anniversarie* must necessarily remain unresolved as a condition of its occasion. I see that lack of resolution as a triumph, not a problem, for Donne has no honest or unforced resolution available to him. Any resolution in this context undermines Donne's desire to situate Drury in the afterlife, which exists for the dead as a literal place but which, to the living, can only be conceptualized through spiritual interiority.

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\*References: Michael Ursell, "The Pneumatics of Inspiration in the *Anniversary Poems*," *Connotations* 25.1 (2015/2016): 46-59; Sarah Powrie, "Speculative Tensions: The Blurring of Augustinian Interiority in *The Second Anniversarie*," *Connotations* 25.1 (2015/2016): 1-18; Ryan Netzley, "Learning from Anniversaries: Progress, Particularity, and Radical Empiricism in John Donne's *The Second Anniversarie*," *Connotations* 25.1 (2015/2016): 19-45. For the original articles as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debanniversaries0251.htm>>.

I am not convinced that the struggle Donne experiences between blocking out exterior things to seek inner memory and the continual intrusion of those external objects reflects any form of ultimate failure. Powrie suggests that the poem does not manage "to access these inexpressible mysteries" (14) of interior wisdom, but perhaps a poem which does not express the inexpressible can nevertheless succeed through the way in which it traces out the boundaries of that which cannot be spoken. If the dead Drury embodies wisdom in this poem, then her body no longer contains the wisdom expressed through her spirit, and access to her spirit thus promises direct access to the inner thought of the soul. And yet, the kind of remembering Powrie discusses in her article cannot peacefully coexist with memorialization; *The Second Anniversarie* makes multiple distinct attempts to establish that coexistence, including that of the watchtower which Powrie so cleverly relates to the ambiguity of *specula* (see 9-12). But despite asserting that Drury, or the idealized representation Donne substitutes for her, can inspire the soul to achieve the kind of recollection of Heaven which Augustine writes about, the poem cannot sustain the dualistic separation of Drury's soul from its body despite her death presumably requiring it.

In the simplest sense, a memorial poem necessarily assumes the existence of an exterior being who has died, unless the poem's composer and subject are one and the same. In this regard, at least, Augustinian *anamnesis* can at best be triggered by this external prompt; in effect, Donne's poem would have to turn away from its initial external object in order to figure forth the recollection which Augustine and also Powrie describe.<sup>1</sup> In other words, if Drury represents the external object whose recognition triggers a recollection of forgotten knowledge, the need to memorialize her renders her an absent object. Drury herself must be recollected in order to trigger *anamnesis*, in effect requiring a remembering of someone who in turn will trigger a remembering. To the extent that Drury herself is not the actual subject of the memorial, that turning away can happen: Donne can substitute for Drury-as-dead-woman a Drury-as-soul whose existence owes

more to his internal landscape of imagination than to his worldly experience. And, arguably, that substitution happens in both *Anniversary* poems, as Donne extracts from them any specific description of Elizabeth Drury which would allow someone who knew her to independently realize that she is being memorialized. Pursued as a memorial to an idealized soul, *The Second Anniversary* could potentially perform the Augustinian recollection Powrie discusses, but only if Donne did not insist on disrupting his abstraction of Drury-as-soul by repeatedly incorporating material terms into his poetry.

In imagining the soul's progress from body to Heaven, for instance, Donne finds himself returning to imagery: "Heauen is as neare, and present to her face, / As colours are, and obiects, in a roome / Where darknesse was before, when Tapers come" (216-18). As with the watchtower, the metaphor tries to rise above the material world but reinforces materiality. Following this imagined excursion of the soul from out of the prison of its body, Donne returns to Drury and disrupts the dichotomy he has just established:

[...] remember then, that shee  
 Shee, whose faire body no such prison was,  
 But that a soule might well be pleas'd to passe  
 An Age in her [...] (220-23)

The act of memory thus becomes entangled with the memorial to Drury, whose body did not fit the model of the prison the poem previously established. The conclusion to this poetic injunction to "remember" finds itself deferred across twenty-seven lines which repeatedly compare her body to worldly, geographic, and temporal things. Finally, the poem completes its thought: "Shee, shee, thus richly, and largely hous'd, is gone: / And chides vs slow-pac'd snailles, who crawle vpon / Our prisons prison, earth [...]" (247-49). Remembering Drury, then, entails remembering both her immortal soul and her mortal, dead body. The dilemma for Donne is not simply a conflict between radical interiority and worldly pleasures, but a conflict between remembering Drury and remembering himself.

The matter becomes further complicated because the call of Drury's soul constitutes the sustaining metaphor of the poem: recovering Heaven, remembering himself as soul free from bodily prison, requires following the example of Drury's perfected soul and pursuing that soul itself from earth to Heaven. And yet, remembering Drury means memorializing her death, and her death was a bodily phenomenon. Her absence both causes the poem and affords Donne's soul a path, a beacon to follow to Heaven: "[She] is gone, / As well t'enioy, as get perfectione. / And calls vs after her [...]" (317-19). But her absence, and the poem that commemorates it, produces much of the frustration of spiritual progress. Powrie's discussion of this frustration focuses on the temporal and worldly character of Donne's distractions; considering Drury herself as both beacon and distraction further complicates her analysis and suggests both the richness and the necessity of the problem (see Powrie 6-8). Donne cannot write this poem without frustrating one or another of his ends; that frustration, I suggest, may become a third end. Instead of finding a path to internal insight or offering a worldly memorial to a woman, *The Second Anniversarie* instead binds together this world and the next through the central Christian paradox that, with grace's help, pure souls can emerge from corrupted bodies and a corrupt world. In that regard, the poem reconciles itself to death as the means through which remembering, in a purely spiritual sense, becomes possible.

## 2

Netzley's essay takes up *The Second Anniversarie* as a commemorative poem which challenges the impulse to universalize from particulars. I am delighted by the optimism of Netzley's reading but wonder whether Donne unreservedly shares it. The particular and temporal characteristics of the corruption, rot, and decay which cycle in and out of the poem do indeed threaten the temporal model of emergence and arrival which Netzley details. But the universalizing Heaven where

souls reside also poses a threat. For if Drury's death, commemorated, constitutes a particular moment which enables Donne to enact her as particular and to insist upon her particularity, the inevitability of Donne's own death, and that of his readers, reinforces and challenges that particularity at once. If we all die, what is it that renders Drury's death exceptional, worthy of commemoration over that of some other citizen of England who died upon the same day? Answering that Drury's character, her nature when alive, distinguishes her in death means grounding her particularity in the past, which reinforces the notion of a golden age departing, a world diminished, and not the kind of progressive regularity that permits learning of the kind Netzley describes. Conversely, if her death matters because it constitutes a model for our own, not in the sense of being a universal instance or a metaphor but in the sense of being a moment, a distinct event in time, then this signification does indeed afford the hope that our own deaths fit into a repeating pattern of decay leading to grace and eternal life. But that reading threatens to substitute the pattern itself for the universals or the governors which Netzley argues that the poem rejects.

Netzley (and Deleuze, whom he refers to) offer instead the idea of a radical empiricism which refuses to enscribe that pattern of decay and grace upon the particular event of Drury's death; the signification of her death does not stem from Nature but must be generated or imposed. Netzley concludes that Donne's particularization functions by insisting upon the particular and by using that particularity to examine the patterns and universals which the poem challenges. That examination ends with arrivals, with the notion of an imminence grounded within repeated particularity. I am not convinced that this point of conclusion offers quite as much hope or beauty as Netzley wants, in part because when death arrives, it represents not a repetition but an ending.

The specific moment in the poem which Netzley reads is the metaphor of the soul's third birth as a realization of Heaven in "colours [...] and objects, in a roome / Where darknesse was before, when

Tapers come" (217-18). Netzley's interpretation of this difficult passage is an acute one, but he does not ask what it means for tapers to come into this room or, more specifically, who may be carrying them. The poem earlier uses a similar metaphor:

Thinke then, My soule, that death is but a Groome,  
Which brings a Taper to the outward romme,  
Whence thou spiest first a little glimmering light,  
And after brings it nearer to thy sight [...] (85-88)

The approaching and particular source of that light, then, the carrier of the taper who arrives, is neither Donne nor the reader, but death, the "Groome." While I think it a mistake to set the soul's birth and death's arrival against one another as clearly dichotomous, I am unsure that the full optimism and humanity of Netzley's interpretation remains available if the kind of particularized progress, the radical empirical arriving, begins with each particular act of dying. Instead, the poem brings a series of associated but conflicted terms into close proximity, refusing either reconciliation between them or the triumph of one over another. When the poem asks us to think division to be "thy happiest Harmonee" (92), it invites us to reconcile brokenness and health, life and death, but it does so in terms which permit such reconciliation as a consequence of death, an event subsequent. Asserting death as a precondition to particular or empirical understanding may be a radical maneuver, but doing so rather problematizes any subsequent application of radical empiricism by the deceased. I do not mean to imply that my reading is not optimistic along the lines that Netzley's is, but just that it is less so.

I wonder instead whether *The Second Anniversarie* draws out absence as the central element of its reworkings of empiricism. The presence, perhaps even the direct and particular observation, of that which is missing can substitute for death and open up the possibility of an arrival prior to one's final departure. In that regard, Drury's particular absence, the repeated though increasingly deferred refrain that "she's gone" which Netzley discusses (see 9), becomes a means through

which one can learn of, about, and from death without needing first to go through it oneself. In that regard, I concur wholeheartedly with Netzley that the universal and universalizing aspects of Drury's death and her departed soul's example become subordinated by the poem. It is Drury's absence, the repetition of that absence, and the ways in which it leaves us with something instead of nothing which generate Donne's radical empiricism.

The poem opens with a challenge to the world's temporality which remains steeped in time: "Nothing could make mee sooner to confesse / That this world had an euerlastingnesse, / Then to consider, that a yeare is runne [since Drury's death]" (1-3). Take Donne at his first word: "Nothing" makes him confess, the particular absence which makes material everything else, especially the rest of the poem. And yet, by the end of the poem, Donne writes: "[Drury is] the Proclamation; and I ame / The Trumpet, at whose voice the people came" (527-28). In that formulation, Donne facilitates the arrival Netzley describes, but those "people" who arrive come to hear the proclamation, not the summons to it. They come, in short, to hear Drury, and she is gone. That offers readers some hope, for, despite her absence, the commemoration of her which Donne writes remains present to us. Nevertheless, given that Donne has just claimed that commemoration merely summons us to receive the real message, our hope must be deflected either outward or inward, either to the particulars around us which also proclaim, or to the particular-universal within us.

## 3

That voiced trumpet blast allows for a lovely transition into Ursell's paper, especially as the particular-universal I am thinking of in my last paragraph is the Holy Spirit: particular in the sense that it exists as an independent entity and universal in the sense that it can dwell within the hearts of all believers at once. My own study of the Spirit concentrates on John Milton's monist understanding of it; Ursell argues in the direction of a monist *pneuma* in *The Second Anniversarie*,

but my discussion here will not rely on reading Donne as monist.<sup>2</sup> I do want to suggest, however, that the dance between a substantial Spirit in a materialistic sense and a substantial Spirit in an intangible and invisible sense plays well with how this poem functions. The outward deflection I have just discussed can as easily be seen as a deflection to the powerful Stoic *pneuma* Ursell describes, an external impetus sufficient to make music upon a lute merely sitting in the open air. And the inward deflection can potentially aim at the same entity in another form, the Holy Spirit within the hearts of Christian believers which guides them to grace. *Pneuma* may have us both coming and going.

Whether Donne's understanding of *pneuma* quite matched the Stoic model is a question too large for this response. I do want to gesture at a definitional tangle, however, both in the general sense of the substance and the specific sense of the Holy Spirit. Stoic *pneuma* and Catholic and Protestant *spiritus* become enmeshed in an ongoing debate over the ways in which spirit and matter exist and interact; alchemy, in particular, operates in ways which can conflict and complement both ancient and contemporary understandings of the air, the Spirit and the animating breath of life.<sup>3</sup> Despite the Spirit's role as authorizing agent in the Protestant doctrine of the inner scripture, pneumatology in England found itself locked in a fundamental debate about the role of the Spirit in interpretation, the degree to which it facilitates reason or bypasses it entirely, and even the precise manner in which the Spirit dwells in believers' hearts.<sup>4</sup> The Spirit's own position as the least defined of the elements of the Trinity further complicates matters: where the Father cannot be named and Jesus Christ saves through his incarnated name, the Holy Spirit has no name except in relation to the first two. I suggest that this tangled set of indefinite definitions associates the Spirit with Donne's larger exploration of the relationship between body and soul; much of the complexity of his poems stems from the same basic ambiguities and problems which make the Spirit so hard to define.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning, then, with the assumption that Stoic *pneuma* operates within *The Second Anniversarie*, what strikes me most about the poem

is how little it relies upon direct reference to the Holy Spirit. The sole mention of the Holy Ghost comes in describing virgins who decline sex so that they can preserve the sanctity of the Spirit's temple within themselves (see 353-55). The larger context for the reference is the exhortation to Donne's "drowsy soul," called to go up to "where thy new eare / Shall in the Angels songs no discord heare [...]" (339-40). In an expansion of Ursell's discussion of music and *pneuma*, I suggest that the Spirit's presence can best be registered in the poem in moments of music generally and harmony specifically.<sup>6</sup> The soul called to rise to Heaven, then, will indeed be wafted up by the inspirational powers of the Holy Spirit, along with and in parallel to the inspired poetry which lifts readers in a figural sense to the Heaven where Drury's soul now dwells.

One of the poem's two references to breath invites readers to imagine themselves dying:

Thinke thy selfe laboring now with broken breath,  
And thinke those broken and soft Notes to bee  
Diuisiion, and thy happiest Harmonee. (90-92)

Again, music and *pneuma* appear in proximity and association, which reinforces Ursell's discussion of Orpheus in relation to *pneuma*. More specifically, the "broken [...] Notes" of dying breath produce "division" that is "happiest Harmonee." Setting aside the figural reading which, in this context, may be most obvious—harmony with God means dying first—I want to instead emphasize the actual conditions of music in the period. Harmony relies upon the blending of multiple voices, a concord like that between the angels in Heaven, and, by extension, the angels and Drury's soul. Part-singing involves breaking musical unison and replacing it with divided voices, and that division in turn produces harmony when it happens in proper proportion. Donne is not just describing a meditation upon death; he is trying to enact harmony through division, through separations. Those separations include soul from body, one year from another, Heaven from Earth, perfection from corruption, immortality from illness and death.

Donne's poem registers that, as in part-singing, breaking these other things apart can produce harmony rather than disrupting it, and that harmony relies upon division.

I wonder, though, if the Holy Spirit is in some way displaced in its function by the perfect soul commemorated by the poem. If Elizabeth Drury herself, "in that squadron" (356) of virgins who lay with the Holy Spirit alone, held herself in perfect union with it, and if that perfect soul now holds the power to lift others to Heaven, then Drury's soul becomes at the least a type of the Holy Spirit and may potentially act in its stead. There is an argument to be made, I think, drawing in part upon the language of alchemy and the "essential" joy (470) Donne associates with Drury, for Drury's soul as a substantial (though not precisely material) means of grace; in effect, it is a version of the Holy Spirit which can be named and invoked by name, a substantial substitute for a Catholic Saint (see 511-22) or even (with Jonson's comment in mind) for the Virgin Mary herself.<sup>7</sup> As evidence, I would point to the shift from air to joy as the poem proceeds, a shift which concludes as Donne describes Drury:

[...] two soules,  
Or like to full, on both sides written Rols,  
Where eies might read vpon the outward skin,  
As strong Records for God, as minds within [...] (503-06)

Might Donne here render Drury's double soul as scripture, the "strong Records for God" of his word? When Donne insists that "[t]he purpose, and th'Authority is his [God's]" (526), he directly situates Drury as "the Proclamation" (527); does scripture not proclaim God's goodness and his kingdom? *Pneuma* may not simply sustain and draw together Donne's poem, it even may directly represent Drury's soul, the substantial expression of who and what she was returning to Earth on the anniversary of her death in order to draw others up to Heaven with her.

But enough of these airy heights and speculations. Descending again to the level of the text, I conclude by suggesting that the vi-

brancy of *The Second Anniversarie*, like that of many of Donne's poems, involves the ways in which poetic substitution and figuration work hand-in-hand with two kinds of differentiation and division: harmonious and discordant. A pneumatic harmony generated through the division between Drury's soul and our still-embodied selves presumably requires the strict governance of the God whose order produces harmony, working along the lines laid down by Ursell's essay. And yet, as Netzley argues, Donne's poem complicates the very notion of governance; harmony as universal concept must be set against particular harmony, the product of a specific moment in time which repeats without necessarily advancing. Think of a piece of choral music, performed again and again, enacting at each moment a harmony built upon the abstracted structures of musical notes and the physical and literal breaths of the singers. And yet, while the beauty of such music, like Drury's beauty, can indeed draw the listener into alignment with the divine proportion underlying harmony, it also risks substituting the aesthetic pleasure of the experience for the experience's ends, as Powrie's examination describes.<sup>8</sup> In any event, as with any singer who blends his voices with others to produce harmony, I find myself deeply gratified at the richness of the music formed by these three lead singers and our responsive descants.

University of Alabama  
Tuscaloosa

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For Plato's original concept of *anamnesis*, see *Meno* 81c2-d4. Ables argues that Augustine replaces *anamnesis* with illumination, substituting the illuminating force of divine insight for the prior existence of the soul. See Ables 284-86; and Dobbell 37-40.

<sup>2</sup>See Ainsworth, *Milton and the Spiritual Reader* 78-79, and "Milton's Holy Spirit in *De Doctrina Christiana*" 17-18.

<sup>3</sup>This question of the soul's materiality or lack thereof can also be seen in broader debates about the soul and body. See Sugg's discussion of how Donne insists on a skeptical approach to the soul's nature, driven in part by advances in the field of medicine (see 140-46). For a quick overview of the linkage between alchemy and vitalism in the period, see Chang, esp. 324-25.

<sup>4</sup>I am unaware of a comprehensive study of early modern pneumatology in England, but Nuttall provides a good sense of the debates taking place within Puritan communities during the period.

<sup>5</sup>Examples include "The Ecstasy," which explores the blurring boundaries between bodies and souls in ways which problematize a dualistic understanding of them, and "Good-Friday, 1613 Riding Westward," which worries at the linkages between soul and Christ's blood. Donne's poems on sick bodies also work on the problem of bodies and souls.

<sup>6</sup>For a general overview of harmony and its connection to Christianity generally and the Spirit specifically, see Hollander and Spitzer. McColley looks closely at music in Donne (94-133) but does not consider the Spirit in her discussion.

<sup>7</sup>See Jonson 133: "he [Jonson] told Mr Donne, if it had been written of ye Virgin Marie it had been something to which he [Donne] had answered that he described the Idea of a Woman and not as she was" (133).

<sup>8</sup>Anderson (68) suggests eros redeems memory in this poem problematic in itself. I agree but see that redemption.

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## Trumpet, Watchtower, and Refrain in Donne's *Second Anniversarie*: A Response to Michael Ursell, Sarah Powrie, and Ryan Netzley\*

THERESA M. DIPASQUALE

Michael Ursell, Sarah Powrie, and Ryan Netzley all comment on both *The First Anniversarie: An Anatomie of the World* and *The Second Anniversarie: Of the Progres of the Soule*; Ursell touches upon "A Funerall Elegie" as well. But their essays focus with particular energy on the *Progres*, casting light on "what one learns inside the poem" (Netzley 4). Each essay provides opportunities for textual explication that its author does not fully exploit. My response, then, takes the form of three interlocking close readings.

### 1. Michael Ursell's "Pneumatics of Inspiration"

Michael Ursell establishes that, in the *Anniversaries*, Elizabeth Drury "embodies an indeterminate, non-Aristotelean connection between spirit and matter" (Ursell 46). More problematic is Ursell's claim that, in the trumpet image at the end of *The Second Anniversarie*, "a divinity" is "breathing through" the poet (48). Noting the degree to which both the *First Anniversarie* and the *Second* blend contempt for the physical world with apparently contradictory images in which body

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\*References: Michael Ursell, "The Pneumatics of Inspiration in the *Anniversary Poems*," *Connotations* 25.1 (2015/2016): 46-59; Sarah Powrie, "Speculative Tensions: The Blurring of Augustinian Interiority in *The Second Anniversarie*," *Connotations* 25.1 (2015/2016): 1-18; Ryan Netzley, "Learning from Anniversaries: Progress, Particularity, and Radical Empiricism in John Donne's *The Second Anniversarie*," *Connotations* 25.1 (2015/2016): 19-45. For the original articles as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debanniversaries0251.htm>>.

and soul are intimately connected, Ursell finds the key to understanding Donne's poem in the Stoic concept of *pneuma*—"a substance conceived in Aristotelean thought and then reshaped in Stoic philosophy, which straddles the conceptual boundary between material and immaterial" (Ursell 47). This is an excellent insight, but Ursell's claim that "*pneuma* shows up in [Donne's] poems and sermons in the Latinate form 'spirit'" (47) is imprecise, for Donne in fact uses the plural term "spirits" to convey that concept.<sup>1</sup> The distinction is important because the most common definitions of "spirit" in the singular all emphasize its immateriality: it is the "vital principle" that "gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements," "incorporeal or immaterial being, as opposed to body or matter; being or intelligence conceived as distinct from, or independent of, anything physical or material," "the disembodied soul," and "[a] supernatural, incorporeal [...] being" (OED "spirit, *n.*," 1.a. and d; 2.b.; 3.a.; my emphases). And while the singular "spirit" was also used in early English texts to refer to *pneuma*, that is, to "one or other of certain subtle highly-refined substances or fluids [...] formerly supposed to permeate the blood and chief organs of the body," this definition was applied "in later use only [to the] *pl.*" form of the word (OED "spirit, *n.*," 16.a.). By the sixteenth century, the pneumatic "vital spirit" that is central to Ursell's argument was almost always referred to by the plural term "vital spirits" (see OED "vital, *adj.*," 2.a.).<sup>2</sup>

Even more to the point, the plural—as Ursell's quotation from "A Funerall Elegie" demonstrates—is Donne's preferred term for the vital substance that mediates between the material and the immaterial. Donne uses it, for example, in "The Extasie": "[O]ur blood labours to beget / Spirits, as like soules as it can, / Because such fingers need to knit / That subtile knot, which makes us man" (61-64; Donne, *Complete Poetry* 132). These lines provide a better point of departure for exploring *pneuma* in the *Anniversaries* than does Giorgio Agamben's account of Stoic pneumatology (qtd. in Ursell 48). For as the lines from "The Extasie" show, Donne associates "spirits" less with the macrocosmic elements of air and fire than with the blood, a

microcosmic humor that—like air—is hot and moist. In “labour[ing] to beget,” the blood unites the male and female principles and paradoxically reverses the sequence of their actions in sexual reproduction, where the act of begetting leads to the labor of childbirth, rather than vice versa. The blood’s work involves knitting, yet another kind of female labor. But as the antecedent of “such fingers” is not clear, the lines are ambiguous: are the spirits themselves the busily working digits that “knit” together body and soul? Or are they the “subtile knot” knit by the fingers of the blood, imagined as a branching network of vessels? The ambiguity mimics the spirits’ subtlety, their liminal status as a corporeal/non-corporeal substance that flows across the threshold between material and immaterial, feminine and masculine.

In *The Anniversaries*, too, Donne uses the word “spirits”—in its pneumatic sense—in association with blood and sexual reproduction. The word occurs twice in the poems: once in line 13 of the *Anatomy* (in which the world’s corpse is drained of *pneuma*, having “bled” at length—like a Roman suicide in a tub of warm water—“in a common Bath of teares [...] / Which drew the strongest vitall spirits out” [12-13]) and once in the lines Ursell quotes from “A Funerall Elegie”: “those fine spirits, which doe tune and set / This Organ, are those peeces which beget / Wonder and loue” (27-29).<sup>3</sup> Both passages suggest that Elizabeth Drury was the world’s *pneuma* and that her departure has unraveled “the subtile knot” between the macrocosm and its soul.

But do Donne’s *Anniversaries* themselves also function pneumatically? The conclusion of *The First Anniversarie* defines poetry as having a “middle nature” between “heauen,” which “keeps soules,” and “The graue,” which “keepes bodies” (473, 474). It does not follow, however, that “Donne’s poem is itself like” the “spirits” that sublime physical matter into spiritual substance (Ursell 48-49). Quoting lines 27-29 of *A Funerall Elegie* out of context, Ursell claims that the “poem [...] describes itself as an ‘Organ’ played by ‘spirits’” (47); but this is a problematic paraphrase. The preceding lines describe the “world” (21)

as a macrocosm containing all of the parts of a human body; it has “armes, [...] braines, [...] tongues, [...] hearts, [...] stomachs, [...] backes, [...] hands, [...] [and] feet” (each of these parts being supplied by a certain class of human beings, specifically “Princes, [...] Counsailors, [...] Lawyers, [...] Diuines, [...] The Rich, [...] the Pore, [...] Officers, [...] and Merchants”) (22-25). “But,” lines 27-30 explain, “those fine spirits, which doe tune and set / This Organ, are those peeces which beget / Wonder and loue; And these were shee; and shee / Being spent, the world must needes decrepit bee.” “This Organ” is, then, the body of the world, which was “tune[d] and set” by the spirits that “were shee”; her pneumatic action made the world’s *corpus* an instrument capable of harmonious sound. And, given the catalogue of body parts in lines 22-25, the speaker’s statement in lines 27-30 subtly implies that what is missing from a world deprived of “those fine spirits” are gonads: either female reproductive organs (implied by their being identified as “shee”), without which the world is barren, or testes and the semen they produce (implied by their ability to “beget”), without which the world is impotent. Without “those peeces”—those parts (or “distinct portions of which something is composed” [OED “piece, *n.*,” 2.a.]), the world’s body is stripped of fecundity. When Elizabeth passes out of the world, “shee / Being spent,” the “fine spirits” are depleted, leaving the *corpus mundi* “decrepit”—“completely exhausted” (OED “decrepit, *adj.*,” 3.a.) like the sexually drained males of *The First Anniversary*, who pour out their spirit in sexual activity and thus “kill [themselves] to propagate [their] kind” (110).<sup>4</sup> I stress the sexual and gendered charge of Donne’s language in describing the world’s loss of *pneuma* to highlight a key aspect of the *Anniversaries* that is neglected by Powrie and Netzley as well as Ursell: these poems constitute what I have elsewhere called “Donne’s monumental tribute to the sacred feminine” (DiPasquale, *Refiguring* 8).

The word “peeces” can also mean “item[s] of artistic composition” (OED “piece, *n.*,” 1.c.), so Ursell is right to read “A Funerall Elegie” meta-poetically; but the poem stresses its own limits rather than its powers. The speaker asks, “Can these memorials, ragges of paper,

giue / Life to that name, by which name they must liue?" and answers, quickly and near-despairingly, "Sickly, alas, short-liu'd, aborted bee / Those Carkas verses, whose soule is not shee" (11-14). He then goes on to draw a clear analogy between "Carkas verses" and the mortally "wounded [...] world" (21) that now lacks its "fine spirits" (27). Indeed, the effect of the poem as a whole is to lament its own lack of *pneuma*, to underscore that "an Elegie" cannot be the dwelling place of the "spirits" that could render it full of and one with the soul it celebrates.<sup>5</sup>

The word "spirits" does not appear in *The Second Anniversarie*, though its opening passage does feature an image—that of "a be-headed man"—in which the outflowing blood takes the soul along with it: "at those two Red seas, which freely ran, / One from the Trunke, another from the Head / His soule" has sailed away (9-12). Ursell claims that the related image of the "Lute, which in moist weather, rings / Her knell alone, by cracking of her strings" (19-20)—which is grouped with the image of the executed man—evokes *pneuma*; but in fact the eerily ringing lute, along with the twitching of the beheaded corpse (9-17), the ship that continues to move forward even after it has struck sail (7-8), and the "Ice, which crackles at a thaw" (18), all denote "motion in corruption" (22), which arises from residual energy—the "force of that force which" previously made it "runne" (8, 7)—and is thus a mere simulacrum of active mobility.

By comparison with the "Carkas verses" of "A Funerall Elegie" and the melancholy "knell" of the self-playing lute in *The Second Anniversarie* 19-20, the trumpet metaphor with which *The Second Anniversarie* concludes is undeniably positive and does—like Donne's analogy between *The First Anniversarie* and Moses' song (461-66)—imply a divine mandate. But the image does not evoke "divinity breathing through" the poet or imply that "the poet turned trumpet recomposes [...] as poetry" the vital spirits lost in Elizabeth's death "and blows them back into the world by the end of" the poem (Ursell 48). These descriptions misrepresent the extreme modesty and restraint of Donne's metaphor, which distances the poet from the divine authority

that empowers him and makes clear that his poem operates very differently from the vital spirits animating a living body.

The poet/speaker notes that, since he is writing in France, he could claim religio-poetic license and invoke the name of the saint his poem praises. But he nevertheless comes down firmly on the side of Reformed practice. Elizabeth herself, he says, would not “be content, / To take” the poem for the poet’s “second yeeres true Rent, / Did this Coine beare any other stampe, then his, / That gaue [her] power to do, [him] to say this” (519-22). The coinage metaphor, with its refreshingly frank reference to a patron-commissioned poem as paying the artist’s “Rent,” is very far from evoking *pneuma*. It does assert that the poem bears God’s imprint, but a piece of gold or silver bearing the divine seal is not a living body into which the divine breath has been infused; rather, it is legitimate currency in the exchange between heaven and earth. Donne’s metaphor here thus points less to divine inspiration than to the poet’s concern that readers will think his poem “true” (520) and that those readers (including the bereaved Robert and Anne Drury on earth and their daughter Elizabeth Drury in heaven) will respond positively to it.<sup>6</sup> As long as he refrains from idolatrous counterfeiting, he is empowered by God to “say” what Elizabeth “do[es]” and thus to keep producing legitimate coinage, but God does not speak through “this Coine.”

Having called his poem a form of current money, the poet moves on to another metallic metaphor that has been read as pointing to his priestly or prophetic vocation:

Since his [God’s] will is, that to posteritee,  
Thou [Elizabeth Drury] shouldest for life, & death, a patterne bee,  
And that the world should notice haue of this,  
The purpose, and th’ Authority is his;  
Thou art the Proclamation, and I ame  
The Trumpet, at whose voice the people came. (523-28)

Ursell cites Barbara Lewalski’s influential interpretation of these concluding lines as alluding “generally to the biblical metaphor of the

prophet as trumpet of the Lord, blasted by inspiration and proclaiming God's will to the people (Judges 6:34, Ezekiel 33:3-5, 32)" and "more specifically to the special responsibility and privilege of the priests under the Law to blow trumpets to assemble the congregation for war and for various civic functions, and also to solemnize feasts and celebrations" (Lewalski 277-78).<sup>7</sup> But Lewalski's terms "generally" and "more specifically" are problematic, for the specific example does not fit the category. The trumpet-blowing priests of Numbers 10 (which Lewalski quotes at some length) are not examples of the trumpet-blowing prophets in Ezekiel.<sup>8</sup> In Numbers, God instructs Moses to "Make [...] two trumpets of silver [...] that thou mayest use them *for the assembling of the Congregation* [...] And the sons of Aaron the Priest shall blow the trumpets" (Numbers 10:2, 10:8; emphasis mine). It is this use of the trumpet for summoning that Donne evokes with the past-tense construction "at whose voice the people came."

In his sermons, Donne would explore the metaphor of the prophet and minister as God's trumpet, associating both the priestly and the prophetic functions of ordained ministers with the trumpet warning-blast that the prophet Ezekiel, as watchman, was to sound.<sup>9</sup> In the conclusion of the *Second Anniversarie*, however, the trumpet sounds a call to assemble rather than a warning. The two kinds of trumpet sound are different, as is clear from the passage in Numbers (10: 3-10) immediately following the Lord's instructions to Moses for making the silver trumpets; God here sets up an elaborate system of different kinds of blowing: one a signal summoning the Israelite leaders, another calling the entire congregation to assemble, and others functioning as alarms, calls to battle, and ceremonial blasts solemnizing the liturgy of sacrifice. As "the Trumpet, at whose voice the people came," the poet/speaker of *The Second Anniversarie* is like one of the trumpets that the sons of Aaron blow to summon the people. Elizabeth, not Donne or his poem, embodies prophetic "Proclamation" (527), the official declaration of God's "will" (523). God is her Maker, the Author whose "purpose" and "Authority" are made manifest through her. It is thus she, God's Proclamation, who speaks

with a divine breath or is imprinted by divine authority, a proclamation being “a formal order issued by a monarch or other legal authority, and made public” (*OED* “proclamation, *n.*,” 1.a.) not only orally, by the voice of a herald, but in writing.<sup>10</sup> The trumpet-voice of the poet/speaker—even though it is not produced by divine breath—has also done its part to serve the divine will; “the people” who “came” in obedience to its call have—if they have read through to line 528 of *The Second Anniversarie* and taken in this past tense description of themselves—seen in print what God proclaims through Elizabeth Drury.

## 2. Sarah Powrie’s “Augustinian Interiority”

While Ursell over-states Donne’s claim to divine inspiration, Sarah Powrie argues that *The Second Anniversarie* succeeds as a work of art only insofar as its speaker—whose self-proclaimed identity as the maker of the poem she does not acknowledge—“fail[s] to access” the “inexpressible mysteries” that would be revealed to him through Augustinian meditation on “the wordless language of the soul’s inner thought” (13).

Powrie brings to bear on her interpretation a compelling analysis of a passage from *De Trinitate* in which Augustine carefully distinguishes between the *speculum* or glass through which human beings may read the truths written in our own souls, and a *specula* or “watchtower, from the height of which we see something at a greater distance” (Powrie 10; quoting Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.8). She notes that Augustine’s interior dialogues stress inward orientation as the only reliable means to attain wisdom and that, in *On the Trinity*, Augustine draws on 1 Corinthians 13:12—“we see now through a glass darkly, but then face to face”—“transform[ing] Paul’s ‘dark glass into a metaphor for illuminative contemplation” in order to suggest “that the soul’s self-reflection on its interior sacredness represents a powerful foretaste of the beatific vision” (Powrie 4). “It is thus unusual, and perhaps even perverse,” Powrie concludes, that in *The Second Anniversarie*,

Donne would place the image of a watchtower in the midst of his reflection on the soul's knowledge, since it seems to defy Augustine's exhortations. Nonetheless, the image's external orientation accurately captures the speaker's recurrent preoccupation with the world's curiosities and attractions. (11)

But is this the only conclusion one might draw? Might not one grant Powrie's thesis—that the poem “both engages and resists techniques of Augustinian interiority” (1)—and yet describe that resistance as spiritually fruitful? Might one judge it, that is, in Donnean rather than Augustinian terms?

The passage that includes the “watch-towre” image is the fourth of the poem's seven meditations: the one focusing on the soul's “ignorance in this life and knowledge in the next” (marginal annotation). Within this passage, the image of seeing from the watch-tower—as contrasted with seeing through spectacles—is the transition between the first part of the meditation and the second:

When wilt thou shake of this Pedantry,  
Of being taught by sense, and Fantasy?  
Thou look'st through spectacles; small things seem great,  
Below; But vp into the watch-towre get,  
And see all things despoiled of fallacies. (291-95)

In these lines, the speaker does not, like Augustine, stress “withdrawing from the physical senses and engaging the interior senses which are capable of interpreting the interior text of memory” (Powrie 5). Instead, he insists that the only way to move from “ignorance” to “knowledge” is to leave this world altogether, to ascend to heaven—or to engage in the highest levels of contemplation, which provide a limited foretaste of heavenly vision.

As the speaker continues, he blends present and future tense, describing the soul's heavenly knowledge in terms that evoke a contrast, not between outward and inward sense, but between spatially- and temporally-bound earthly senses and a celestial perspective neither limited by restrictive spatial configurations nor drawn out in the laborious processes of time:

And see all things despoild of fallacies:  
 Thou shalt not peepe through lattices of eies,  
 Nor heare through Laberinth of eares, nor learne  
 By circuit, or collections to discerne.  
 In Heauen thou straight know'st all, concerning it,  
 And what concerns it not, shall straight forget. (295-300)

What thou "shalt not" do and "shall straight forget" (future, lines 296 and 300) when one obeys the command "vp vnto the watch-towre get / And see" (imperatives that, like all second person imperatives in English, use what sounds like present tense to urge future action) is here blended with what "thou straight know'st" (present, line 299) there. The watch-towre here is thus "Heauen" itself or the height of contemplation, which Richard of St. Victor refers to variously as "the intellectual sense," "the intellectual heaven" and "the intellectual watchtower" (*Mystical Ark* III.ix-x).<sup>11</sup>

In *The Second Anniversarie* 291-300, Donne's speaker specifically distinguishes the kind of vision possible from the "watch-towre" with the distorted perspective provided by "spectacles." Surely these are the *speculum* of 1 Corinthians, understood as a trope for our limited earthly knowledge of God as compared to the "face to face" knowledge to be experienced in heaven. Donne takes a similar approach to St. Paul's *speculum* in an Easter 1628 sermon that Powrie cites in an endnote: "While the dark glass signifies the partial, fragmented, and mediated nature of human knowledge, the latter denotes its completion and 'perfection.' [...] In earthly life, we see 'obscurely in respect of that knowledge of God, which we shall have in heaven'" (Powrie 16n29; quoting Donne, *Sermons* 8: 219, 229). In the sermon, Donne quotes from Augustine repeatedly but also asserts a doctrine that contrasts with Augustine's emphasis on interiority as Powrie describes it; far from insisting upon the soul's "withdrawing from materiality and engaging its interior rational powers" (Powrie 3), the preacher urges that

our sight of God here, our Theatre, the place where we sit and see him, is the whole world, the whole house and frame of nature, and our *medium*, our *glasse*, is the Booke of Creatures, and our light, by which we see him, is the

light of Naturall Reason. [...] [S]ee God in every thing, and then thou needst not take off thine eye from Beauty, from Riches, from Honour, from any thing. [...] The naturall man sees Beauty, and Riches, and Honour, but yet it is a question whether he sees them or no, because he sees them, but as a snare. But he that sees God in them, sees them to be beames and evidences of that Beauty, that Wealth, that Honour, that is in God, that is God himselfe. [...] There is not so poore a creature but may be thy glasse to see God in. (*Sermons* 8: 220, 221, 224).

By comparison with Donne in this sermon, the speaker of *The Second Anniversarie* is actually quite wary of the distractions that the wonders of nature may afford. But when read in light of the sermon and the over-arching contrast between earthly and heavenly knowledge that is the point of *The Second Anniversarie's* fourth meditation, the image of the "watch-towre" does not demonstrate "the speaker's recurrent preoccupation with the world's curiosities and attractions" (Powrie 11). Rather, it suggests an image of the afterlife that the fifth and seventh meditations elaborate: a state which, though the beatific vision (the subject of the sixth meditation) constitutes its "essential ioie" (443), nevertheless includes "accidentall ioies" (382) arising from saintly company and from the temporal yet permanent joy of "arriual" that "neere decaies" (489) but instead grows "euery day," since there, "ioies strength is neuer spent; / And accidentall things are permanent" (487-88).<sup>12</sup>

Donne does not use a watch-tower image in his sermon on 1 Corinthians 13:12, but he does muse upon Paul's declaration that, in heaven, God will "be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28):

What shall we see, by seeing him so, *face to face*? not to inlarge ourselves into *Gregories* wild speculation, *Qui videt videntem omnia, omnia videt*, because we shall see him that sees all things, we shall see all things in him, [...] rest we in the testimony of a safer witness, a Councill, *In speculo Divinitatis quicquid eorum itersit illucescet*; In that glasse we shall see, whatsoever we can be the better for seeing. (*Sermons* 8: 234).<sup>13</sup>

The speaker of *The Second Anniversarie* comes close to "*Gregories* wild speculation" when he says that one can see "all things" from the

vantage point of the watch-tower but pulls back by specifying “all things despoild of fallacies” (*The Second Anniversarie* 295). Again, Richard of St. Victor provides a helpful gloss:

Thinking is from imagination; meditation, from reason; contemplation, from understanding. [...] Understanding occupies the highest place; imagination, the lowest; reason, the middle. Everything that is subject to the lower sense is also necessarily subject to the higher sense. Thus, it is evident that [...] those things which imagination and reason grasp, as well as things which they are not able to grasp, are perceived by the understanding. Thus, see how widely a ray of contemplation that illuminates everything expands itself. [...] These things have been said for the sake of those people who consider [...] inferior things unworthy either to be perceived by the understanding or to pertain everywhere to contemplation. [...] [C]ontemplation is always concerned with things, whether manifest in their nature, known intimately by means of study, or perceived from a divine showing. (*The Mystical Ark* I.iii; trans. Zinn 156-57).<sup>14</sup>

Like Richard, Donne’s speaker believes that ascending “the intellectual watchtower” (*Mystical Ark* 235) does not mean leaving behind all concern with “inferior things” (*Mystical Ark* 156); on the contrary, that ascent brings the mind to a height from which it can “see all things despoild of fallacies” (*The Second Anniversarie* 92).

### 3. Ryan Netzley’s “Radical Empiricism”

For Ryan Netzley, perception is a key theme of *The Second Anniversarie*; he argues that it “is interested in [...] expanding the parameters of what can be seen” and reads the contemplative watchtower of lines 293-98 as facilitating such expansion: it “rectifies the lack of proportion inherent in the inductive reasoning that attends empirical perception, not any fundamental weakness in empiricism itself” (Netzley 36).

Netzley’s thesis—that Donne’s *Second Anniversarie* “advanc[es] a radical empiricism in which particularity is not subject to an abstract universal conceived as its governor” (19)<sup>15</sup>—has strong implications

for poetics and for religion that do not fall within the purview of his essay but that are central to Donne's project in the poem. Specifically, such empiricism constitutes a liberating alternative to Sidney's Neo-Platonic poetics, which relies upon the poet's ability to provide particulars answerable to an abstract ideal and elevates the poet above the philosopher and the historian because the "knowledge" of the former "standeth so vpon the abstract and generall, that happie is that man who may vnderstand him, and more happie, that can apply what he doth vnderstand," whereas, "the *Historian* wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should bee, but to what is, to the particular truth of things, and not to the generall reason of things, that his example draweth no necessarie consequence, and therefore a lesse fruitfull doctrine" (Defence, D1r-D1v). The particulars of the Sidneyan poet's language, then, remain—despite Sidney's exalted claims for poesy—very much subject to philosophical abstractions; "for whatsoever the *Philosopher* saith should be done, [the poet] giues a perfect picture of it by some one, by who[m] he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the generall notion with the particuler example" (D1v). For Sidney, the particulars of the poet's "words set in delightfull proportion" (E2r) thus remain in service to a governing universal: virtue, defined in Christian and specifically Protestant terms. Donne's "radical empiricism" as Netzley defines it, which involves not so much the elimination of universals and categories as the elevation of individual examples to the status of universals, worthy of examination for their own sake, anticipates imagism in ways that help to explain Donne's popularity among the Modernist poets and grounds itself in a sacramental poetics that unites sign and signified more seamlessly than Sidney's poetics will allow.<sup>16</sup>

That said, Netzley's argument could be strengthened if he were to dig more deeply into the prosodic particulars of Donne's poem, especially the fascinatingly irregular refrain that delineates its structure and helps to teach the reader that "we learn directly [...] from time, especially the experience of temporal arrivals," that one acquires "knowledge" not through "category recognition," but via

“the repetition and modification of particular instances” (Netzley 29). A close reading of the poem’s refrain lines demonstrates that, “if we are going to learn from a poem or an occasion,” we must do so by “perceiving its pattern of regularity (not rule) as an event in the present, as opposed to recognizing it after the fact, as a result of various deductive procedures” (Netzley 29). Netzley himself begins such a reading. Noting that the repetition of the refrain in *The First Anniversarie* “is almost identically stated throughout,” while “*The Second Anniversarie* is a much more multifarious affair,” he claims that the first refrain of the *Progres* is modeled on the refrain of the *Anatomy* but that “subsequent iterations [...] dilate” the “compact formula” thus established, and that these dilated refrains “occur with increasing frequency” (35).

Netzley’s outline of the refrains is, however, incomplete and only partially accurate. As Louis L. Martz first argued in 1947, and as most critics have agreed (with slight disagreements about the lines of demarcation between sections), the poem is structured into an introduction, seven sections including seven meditations and their attendant eulogies, and a conclusion.<sup>17</sup> Demarcating this structure are, I would argue, seven iterations of the refrain rather than the five recorded by Netzley; and while these iterations occur at intervals that vary from as few as 40 to as many as 100 lines, the intervals do not steadily decrease, but fluctuate in a manner that confirms Netzley’s thesis—that is, in an empirically observable manner, but in a way that no formula, not even one of “increasing frequency,” can predict.<sup>18</sup>

The first refrain, which Netzley correctly describes as mirroring and modifying that of *The First Anniversarie*, occurs at line 81: “Shee, shee is gone; shee is gone; when though knowest this [...].” But the second refrain is not, as Netzley asserts, line 247; it is line 147: “Shee, shee embrac’d a sicknesse, gaue it meat.” While this line echoes line 81 only by anaphora—beginning, as line 81 does, with the repetition of “Shee, shee”—it becomes recognizable as a refrain line in the way that Netzley argues it should: not by conforming to an established rule, but by emerging as a line of demarcation between the second section

of the poem's body and the third. The first section (lines 45-84), as Donne's marginal annotation explains, is "*A iust disestimation of this world*" concluding with a eulogy of Elizabeth Drury as "Shee, shee" whose being "gone" from the world has confirmed its status as "fragmentary rubbidge" (81, 82). The second section (lines 85-156) contemplates "*our state in our death-bed*" (marginal annotation) and eulogizes Elizabeth Drury as "Shee, shee" who willingly surrendered her perfect body to sickness and death and thereby taught that death is the only gateway to heaven. The third section meditates on the "*Incommodities of the Soule in the Body*" (marginal annotation), concluding with a eulogy of Elizabeth as "Shee, shee," who—though "richly, and largely hous'd" in a body as soul-like as a body can be, "is gone" from that dwelling and from the world (247).

In each case, as in *The First Anniversarie*, the refrain line's double "Shee" follows a series of the female pronoun in the preceding lines that are extensively modified by dependent clauses and various illustrative phrases but that lack a predicate and thus thrust the reader forward toward the refrain line in which, at last, the long-deferred predicate is to be found. In the first meditation, the "Shee" of this sort surfaces in lines 67, 75, and 77. In the second meditation, they occur at lines 122-23 and 143; and in the third, at lines 220-21, 226, 235, and 241. Several features of Donne's poem make the distinction between the anticipatory "shee" and the "shee" of a refrain line hard to maintain, however. One such feature is the variability of the verb used in the refrain: the first refrain's intransitive present tense verb "is" and its predicate adjective "gone" are replaced in the second refrain with the transitive past tense verbs "embrac'd" and "gaue"; "is gone" returns for the third and fourth refrains, but the fourth (which Netzley lists as the third) is nevertheless different from the first and third because, as Netzley shows, it is dilated to three lines and does include modifying phrases and dependent clauses of the sort that the reader has come to think of as signaling further deferral of the refrain and its long-delayed predicate: "Shee, shee, not satisfied with all this waite, / (For so much knowledge, as would ouer-fraite / Another, did but Ballast

her) is gone" (315-17). The "waite" of line 315 is particularly witty, for while in context it means "weight," it puns on "wait" even as the reader is being made to "wait" until line 317 for the subject's predicate.

The pattern that emerges verifies Netzley's thesis; for it is one of unpredictable variation rather than of rule, one that requires constant empirical observation and a willingness to follow where the language leads rather than to hunt down established characteristics. Observing Donne's technique, Edward Taylor notes that

"Donne's structural repetends [...] gathering momentum as we read, constitute the main source of the expectations the poet arouses in the course of the work. [...] Meaning resides in the perception of difference, and while in theory we must concede that the meanings are in an absolute sense endlessly deferred, in practice we extract meanings, and artistic satisfactions, as we proceed. [...] Of course, if we do not see the structural norms that the poet has established through his repetends, we cannot see the variations." (105)

Donne's challenging pattern of variation continues with the fifth refrain, which Netzley also omits from his list. The fifth section of the poem's body, which extends from line 321 to line 382, meditates on "*our company in this life and in the next*" (marginal annotation) and eulogizes Elizabeth as one who, in her earthly life, constituted in herself both a sovereign state and a Church—thus embodying these macrocosmic communal entities within her microcosm and modeling what Netzley identifies as "the conflation of particular and universal, or rather the treating of universals as particulars" (41). The anticipatory "shee"s of this section occur at lines 357, 359, and 376 and are intermingled (in a way that again supports Netzley's thesis by violating what might otherwise seem to have been an established rule) with grammatically complete clauses in which "Shee" has a predicate ("shee made wars, and triumph'd," "shee made peace," "Shee did high iustice; [...] shee crucified"; shee gaue pardons"; "shee pardond all"; Shee coynd"; Shee gaue protections" [361, 363, 365, 367, 368, 369, 370]). When the refrain at last occurs in lines 379-80, moreover, it has morphed from the expected "Shee, shee is gone" of

the first and third refrains to "Shee, shee doth leaue it [i.e., the world], and by Death, suruive / All this." In replacing the intransitive "is gone" and the transitive past tense "embraced" with the transitive present tense verbs "doth leaue" and "suruiue," the poet points to Elizabeth as an active agent who maintains her God-given "power to do" (522).

The sixth iteration of the refrain is also a category-challenging specific: while it features the usual intransitive verb phrase "is gone," it lacks the double "Shee" that has signaled the first three refrains. Indeed, in identifying lines 448-50 and line 467 as an iteration of the refrain, Netzley treats what I would think of as the fourth section's anticipatory "shee" passage as the beginning of the fourth refrain. How lovely is this disagreement, which arises from the poem's own openness! For while line 448 baits readers with a refrain-like construction (a complete clause with the subject "Shee" and the predicate "is gone before"), they must then make their way through eighteen and two fifths lines of dependent "who" clauses of the same kind that have delayed the refrain in earlier meditations—before they encounter the next grammatically altered refrain in the final three feet of line 467: "shee to Heauen is gone." Here, "gone," used with "to," functions (despite the present tense "is") as the past participle of the verb "to go," in the sense "To move, travel, or proceed to or towards a specified place" (*OED* "go, v.," 29.a.) rather than in its adjectival senses "left or departed; no longer present" and "departed from life; dead" (*OED* "gone, adj." 1.a. and b.). In the end, whether one perceives the sixth refrain as altered, dilated, contracted, or bifurcated, the radical empiricism Netzley sees in the poem urges us not to classify it but to experience it in its quirky uniqueness.

The seventh and final refrain spans lines 507-09 and repeats and expands the active, participial "to Heauen is gone" construction of the sixth: "Shee, who by making full perfection grow, / Peeces a Circle, and still keeps it so, / Long'd for, and longing for'it, to heauen is gone." These lines deepen the sixth refrain's emphasis on the celestial destination of Elizabeth's "go[ing]" by including as adverbial modifi-

ers the active and passive versions of the verb phrase “long for,” thus conflating her status as the subject and the object of desire. This “long’d for” and “longing” movement allows her to accomplish a mathematical miracle: she “Peeces”—that is “mend[s], make[s] whole, or complete[s] by adding a piece or pieces” (*OED* “piece,” *v.* 1.a.)—“a Circle,” the geometrical symbol of perfection that can be altered and remain perfect, only through the expansion of its entire circumference to match the expansion of its radius. This process of “making full perfection grow” is yet another way of asserting that “universals”—such as the idea of a “Circle” and the abstract ideal of “perfection”—are “more than the additive product of particular parts or the imposition of a governing structure onto disorderly phenomena” (Netzley 29). Every positive real number—including all positive irrational numbers, though such numbers cannot be exactly represented by a finite number of integers—can be represented by a corresponding circle with a radius that is the length of that number. Donne’s radical empiricism frees the mind to take the (perfect) measure of every single one.

Whitman College  
Walla Walla, WA

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For examples of Donne’s use of the term “spirits” in this sense, see—in addition to the passages from the *Anniversaries* and “The Extasie” discussed below—*Metempsychosis*, l. 500 (Donne, *Complete Poetry* 328); the first of Donne’s sermons preached to the Prince and Princess Palatine, 16 June 1619; and his sermon preached for Whitsunday in 1622 (Donne, *Sermons* 2: 261-62 and 5: 65).

<sup>2</sup>Especially relevant, given Ursell’s emphasis on pneuma’s blend of fire and air, is the *OED*’s illustrative quotation from Bacon’s *Sylva Sylvarum* §30: “As for liuing creatures it is certaine, their Vital Spiritts are a Substaunce Compounded of an Airy and Flamy Matter” (“vital, *adj.*” def. 2.a.).

<sup>3</sup>All quotations from the *Anniversaries* are taken from Volume 6 of the *Variorum* and quoted parenthetically by line number.

<sup>4</sup>On “spirit” as a euphemism for semen and on its relationship in ancient and early modern medical and philosophical discourse to blood, marrow, brain, and soul, see Norman.

<sup>5</sup>For a more detailed argument to this effect, see DiPasquale, *Refiguring* 8, 88-95.

<sup>6</sup>For the poet/speaker’s answer to readers who may object to his conceit, and for his concern with the response of the “new world” comprised of his readers, see especially *The First Anniversarie* 63-88 and 455-70; for his hope that “These Hymns may worke on future wits” and thus inspire ongoing praise of Elizabeth, see *The Second Anniversarie* 37-40. See also Donne’s 1612 letters to his friends George Garrard and Henry Goodyer responding to rumors that some readers think he has “said too much” in praise of the dead girl (qtd. in full in the *Variorum* 6: 239-40). On Donne’s concern with readers’ construal of his poetry both in the poems themselves and in the letter to Goodyer, see DiPasquale, *Refiguring* 64-78, 88-95, and 103-04. While Donne’s poems do not directly address the bereaved parents, they are explicitly mentioned in line 46 of Joseph Hall’s “To the Praise of the Dead, and the Anatomy,” which precedes the *The First Anniversarie* in both the 1611 and 1612 editions. On Sir Robert Drury’s patronage of Donne, which eventually included lodgings in London, see Bald 237-67. See also the summary of critical commentary on “The Poet and His Audience” in Donne, *Variorum* 6: 317-25.

<sup>7</sup>The most fully developed reading of *The Second Anniversarie* as prophetic is Frontain’s. While I acknowledge that the poet/speaker of the *Anniversaries* at times aspires to prophecy, my own reading of these works as “sacramental poems” takes its cue from Donne’s emphasis on the poet’s priestly function and from his insisting, in “A Funerall Elegie” and *The Second Anniversarie*, upon “the limitations of a sacramental poetics” (DiPasquale, *Refiguring* 94, 8). On “sacramental poetics” in Donne’s other secular and sacred poems, see my *Literature and Sacrament*.

<sup>8</sup>Nor, for that matter, is the warrior judge Gideon in Judges 6:34, the other text Lewalski cites; the office of judge, like that of priest, differs from that of prophet.

<sup>9</sup>Particularly vivid is his Lenten sermon on Ezekiel 33:32, preached at Whitehall on 12 February 1618 (Donne, *Oxford Sermons* 1: 113-23); it is this sermon that Lewalski attempts to use as a gloss for the trumpet image in *The Second Anniversarie*.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. the *OED* definition of the late 16th- and early 17th-century compound “proclamation-print”—“the typeface used in a printed proclamation” (“proclamation-print, *n.*” in “proclamation, *n.*”).

<sup>11</sup>I quote Zinn’s English translation, 234-35; in Richard’s Latin (ed. Migne, col. 118-19), Chapter IX is entitled “*De sensu intellectuali, quo solu possunt invisibili videri*”; in it, he distinguishes between the two highest levels of contemplation (the fifth and sixth), both of which ascend above the reach of the rational faculty to see what is invisible, but the first of which reveals “inferior things” (“*inferiorum*”) and the second of which reveals “invisible divine things” (“*invisibilia divina*”). Richard insists that “both of these pertain to the intellectual heaven” (“*utrumque*

horum ad intellectuale coelum pertinere"). Chapter X, which further explains these highest levels of contemplation, is entitled "Concerning the intellectual watchtower and its superior height" (*"De intellectuali specula, ejusque supereminetia"*). St. Thomas Aquinas refers to Richard in his discussion of contemplation (see note 14 below); and in Dante's *Paradiso*, Aquinas points out to Dante the soul of "Riccardo, / che a considerar fu più che viro" [Richard, / [...] in contemplation more than human" (*Paradiso* X.131-32). Richard's conception of knowledge is very much in keeping with what Edward W. Tayler identifies as Donne's "Thomistic epistemology," which begins "with 'Sense and Fantasy,'" proceeds to "intelligible ideas and finally moves toward union with the mind of God" (Tayler 16).

<sup>12</sup>On the blend of the temporal and the eternal in Donne's portrayal of heaven, both in the *Anniversaries* and in a sermon on 2 Peter 3:13, see DiPasquale, "From Here to Aeviternity" 232-36.

<sup>13</sup>I have been unable to trace the consiliar document Donne is quoting here.

<sup>14</sup>"Ex imaginatione cogitatio, ex ratione meditatio, ex intelligentia contemplatio. [...] Intelligentia obtinet sumpremum locum, imaginatio infimum, ratio medium. Omnia quae subjacent sensui inferiori, necesse est ea etiam subjacere sensui superiori. Unde constat quia [...] ea quae imaginatio vel ratio comprehendunt, sub intelligentia cadunt, et ea etiam quae illae comprehendere non possunt. [...] Vide ergo contemplationis radius, quam late se expandat, qui omnia lustrat. [...] Haec propter illos dicta sunt, qui ista inferiora sub intelligentiae aspectum cadere, vel ad contemplationem usquequaque pertinere, indignum ducunt. [...] Semper [...] contemplatio est in rebus, vel per sui naturam manifestis, vel per studium familiariter notis, vel ex divina revelatione perspicuis" (Migne, ed., col. 67). Within contemplation itself, Richard sees the first two levels as "in the imagination, because they direct attention toward sensible things only," whereas the third and fourth "are in reason, because they apply themselves to intelligible things only," and the fifth and sixth "direct attention toward intellectible things only." He goes on to clarify, however, that "these kinds of contemplations that we have separated are accustomed sometimes to be mixed together, and this mode of proper natures that we have assigned is accustomed to be mingled by being mixed one with the other" (*The Mystical Ark* I.ix; trans. Zinn 167-68). As Aquinas also confirms, citing Augustine and noting the six steps of contemplation as delineated by Richard, "the contemplation of the divine effects also belongs to the contemplative life, inasmuch as man is guided thereby to the knowledge of God" ["etiam contemplatio divinorum effectuum secundario ad vitam contemplativam pertinet, prout scilicet ex hoc manuducitur homo in Dei cognitionem"] (*Summa Theologica* II.ii.Q.180.Art.4). Donne's speaker seems especially concerned with the process of moving beyond the first three levels of contemplation (each of which Richard links in different ways to sense and imagination) when he urges his soul to "shake of this Pedantry, / Of being taught by sense, and Fantasy" in order to "see all things despoild of fallacies" (*The Second Anniversarie*, 291-92). As Richard explains, "Souls that are suspended in the watchtower of this [fourth-level] contemplation" will advance by "forget[ting] the phantasies of corporeal things" in order to "examine the hidden things of supermundane essences." Thus,

whoever wishes to ascend to this level must “purify his intellect of every incursion of phantasies.” Indeed, addressing the worldly philosopher, Richard says, “You are deceived, deceived, o philosopher; the appearances of things deceives you and concupiscence overturns your heart”; the antidote for such deception is, he says, first to look inward—using the very same form of introspection that Augustine practices—but also, in so doing, to “learn to know how you ought to estimate the worth of other spirits. [...] This is the ascent. [...] By this we are raised up to the highest. This is the way to the summit of this speculation” (*The Mystical Ark* III.i, iii; trans. Zinn 220, 225). On Richard’s use of the term “watchtower” for even the highest levels of contemplation, see n11 above.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. again Richard of St. Victor: at the highest levels of contemplation, beyond the reach of the reason, “the part is not less than its whole, nor the whole more universal than its individual parts; indeed, where the part is not lessening the whole, and the whole is not made up from parts, since that is simple which is set forth universally, and that is universal which is brought forth in the particular” (*The Mystical Ark* IV.iv; trans. Zinn 263-64).

<sup>16</sup>On “Modern and Postmodern poetics” as rooted in the theological debates of “the Reformation era” and particularly in “Reformation efforts to reimagine the Eucharist,” see Johnson 163-64.

<sup>17</sup>The *Variorum*’s “General Commentary” on the *Anniversaries* devotes an entire sub-section to “Structure” (Donne, *Variorum* 6: 335-45). Martz’s division of *SecAn* into nine sections (an introduction, seven sections in the main body of the poem, and a conclusion) is discussed below; these are the divisions he observed in 1947 and included in his 1954 *Poetry of Meditation*. In later publications on the *Anniversaries* (*The Anchor Anthology* and “Donne’s *Anniversaries* Revisited”), Martz slightly refined his original analysis, retaining the line numbers of his original divisions but revising his assessment of the sub-structures of each section. Later critics who concur with Martz’s assessment of *The Second Anniversarie* nine-part structure include Hardison (180-81), who gives the sections identified by Martz new labels but retains Martz’s nine-part division of the poem into an introduction, seven main-body sections, and a conclusion, agreeing precisely with Martz on which lines constitute each section; Hughes (310-11, 324); Mahony (407n3, 411); Miner (who confusingly mentions “six main sections” between the introduction and the conclusion [59] but also endorses “the sections distinguished by Martz” [70] and discusses the first three of these); and Belette (84, 88-92). Lewalski (284-85) argues that *The Second Anniversarie* introductory passage extends through line 84, but her division of the remaining seven sections is identical to Martz’s. One critic proposing a substantially different schema is Lebars (550-51), who stresses the ways in which the *Anniversaries*’ structure reflects the traditional components of elegy, and thus divides *The Second Anniversarie* into only four parts (lines 1-48, 49-84, 85-510, and 511-28).

<sup>18</sup>Martz acknowledges as a refrain only line 81, which precisely echoes the structure of the refrain in *The First Anniversary*. In arguing for a repeated and fluctuating refrain, I nevertheless take as my point of departure Martz’s outline of

the seven sections in the body of the poem; the outline is reproduced in the Commentary section of the *Variorum* 6: 336.

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## The Poet's Generosity in *Timon of Athens* and *Pale Fire*: A Response to Maurice Charney and Thomas Kullmann\*

KREG SEGALL

In his discussion of the relationship between Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and *Timon of Athens*, Maurice Charney centers his reading on the "pale fire" passage from *Timon*, the passage from which John Shade takes his title. Charney concludes that the passage from Shakespeare suggests a "general pattern of thievery that pervades the cosmos," an amenable image for a narrative in which we ask whether Kinbote is trying "to steal Shade's poem" (Charney 28). Furthermore, Charney argues that Kinbote reflects the character of Timon, who he says "deals in excess" and "hates all of mankind except a chosen few" (29). Thomas Kullmann, in his response to Charney, offers a useful corrective, not only questioning the aptness of Charney's characterization of Timon but also suggesting that "theft" might not be the only way to read the "pale fire" image. Kullmann notes: "Within the confines of life as it is they [artists] repeat the process of creation on an inferior level. This makes them resemble the gods, although, obviously, they are just their imperfect copies, or shades" (224). If Shade's work is a copy, then, in this Platonic reading Kinbote's paratext is a copy of a copy, and thus Kinbote should be rejected in favor of treating "the poem as a literary work in its own right" (228).

The primary point of contention between Charney and Kullmann is the question of the relationship between text and paratext, unsurpris-

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\*References: Maurice Charney, "Adopting Styles, Inserting Selves: Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Connotations* 24.1 (2014/2015): 27-40; Thomas Kullmann, "Some Moondrop Title: A Response to Maurice Charney," *Connotations* 24.2 (2014/2015): 217-30. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney0241.htm>>.

ingly, as this is the primary question that *Pale Fire* poses for the reader. Charney argues that “[t]he more one rereads *Pale Fire* [...] the more one is caught up in the seemingly absurd idea that the relationship of the poem and the commentary is quite close” (34); Kullmann replies, “the more I reread Shade’s poem, the less I am inclined to believe that Kinbote’s commentary has anything to do with it, or that Shade is ‘indebted’ (Charney 34) to Kinbote in any way” (221). It is hard for me to hear a discussion about artistic indebtedness and not want to refer the aesthetic question back to *Timon of Athens*, a play so engaged with art and debt. I argue here that we ought to consider how *Timon of Athens* deals with issues of artistic purity, debt, corruption, and aesthetics as a possible route to understanding *Pale Fire*; at the very least, I would like to identify some thematic connections between *Timon of Athens* and *Pale Fire* as a way to offer additional context to this productive debate.

One of Shade’s most salient images as he tries to imagine a poetic response to death is the “empty emerald case” of a cicada on “a pine’s bark” next to “a gum-logged ant” (ll. 236-40). Shade observes the leavings of the cicada and the gum-logged ant, thinking of their respective fates as a sign of the passing of the body (the workaday ant) and the escape of art (the song of the cicada).<sup>1</sup> He concludes this image with the summative, “And so I pare my nails, and muse [...]” (245) which yokes together both the mundane and the poetic; Shade’s cicada and ant, nails and muse, suggest the impossibility of differentiating the poetic from the non-poetic. In fact, Shade’s observation in the end is that everything, rightly seen, partakes of poetry in this “Richly rhymed life” (970).

The Poet of *Timon of Athens* makes an analogous connection between the everyday and the transcendent, lines which also, coincidentally, involve gum:

Our poesy is as a gum which oozes  
From whence ’tis nourished. The fire I’ th’ flint  
Shows not till it be struck, our gentle flame  
Provokes itself (I.i.22-25)<sup>2</sup>

In these lines, the Poet offers metaphors for himself: the tree (or whatever the nourishing source of the gum is) and the flint, and for his poetry, the oozing gum and the fire.<sup>3</sup> His poetry abides within him, and emerges without the need for external stimulus. The overall impression he gives is of artistic creation as completely *sui generis*, a claim that is immediately undercut by the Poet's response to the Painter's question, "When comes your book forth?": "Upon the heels of my presentment, sir" (27-28); that is, right after he completes the paratextual dedication to Timon that ensures his financial reward. It seems the gentle flame does not *entirely* strike itself. Prosaic reality must intrude.

Both Shade's poem *Pale Fire* and the novel as a whole ask the reader to maintain two perspectives at the same time: prosaic reality and poetic transcendence. The most salient image of those two perspectives is the waxwing slain, which is also the bird flying on into the azure of the glass. Similarly, we are offered Shade's mind (as perceived by Kinbote) "perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart" (27) as contrasted with his "misshapen body, that gray mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers" which serves as "his own cancellation" (26). Shade is compared to a "conjurer" whom Kinbote observed as a child, who was "quietly consuming a vanilla ice" after his show (27). Kinbote, here, picks up on Shade's own thoughts about his body and mind as expressed in the poem: Shade has "a brain, five senses (one unique), / But otherwise [...] was a cloutish freak" (ll. 133-34). In short, what does it mean to be embodied, to have to satisfy the demands of the physical, including hunger, decay, and death, when one contains an element of transcendence as well?

Shade's solution to this terrible question is his perception of an artistic structure in the universe, of artistic coherence, even if it can only be apprehended dimly, and even if that artistic coherence ends up serving as both a prison and a picture frame for our limited lives. From this perspective, even a terrible mistake on the micro-level—an assassination gone wrong, say—may end up participating as a small

piece of something beautiful on a macro-level: "the verse of galaxies divine" (l. 975). Only after encountering the terrible disappointment of the mountain/fountain misprint (see l. 802) that shatters his hope that there may be a perceptible afterlife does Shade come to the realization that, while mountain/fountain is not evidence of afterlife, evidence of authorial patterning, the link-and-bobolink that transcends textual and bodily corruption. The novel as a whole asks us to make a similar leap of understanding towards the exploitation and corruption of Shade's poem in the hands of Kinbote. While the commentary is a travesty of scholarship, it somehow, as Shade says, makes "ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities" (ll. 828-29). Together, the poem and the commentary make an extraordinary work of art that is more than the sum of its parts, transcending the physical realities of index cards and papers, poet and commentator. Instead, the aesthetic bliss of the work of fiction points outwards to the "aloof and mute" (l. 818) fairy chess players who create its symmetry.

This feature of *Pale Fire's* aesthetic cosmology reverberates fascinatingly with *Timon of Athens*, especially as embodied in the character of the Poet and his artistic companion, the Painter. The Poet and the Painter are not treated sympathetically in the play. They both clearly acknowledge their naked desire for patronage and recognition; they both participate in an economy of exploitation and corruption as part of the process of artistic creation. The Poet and the Painter want Timon's gold and are willing to offer promises of art that are "a satire against the softness of prosperity, with a discovery of the infinite flatteries that follow youth and opulency" (V.i.32-34) which Timon recognizes would be self-portraits on the part of the Poet and the Painter: "Must thou needs stand for a villain in thine own work?" (35-36)

Yet, at the same time, the play suggests that the result of this flattery and self-delusion may be something of value: art can be produced almost surprisingly as the result of delusion, as if by accident. The Poet may be merely bragging when he claims that the "free drift" (I.i.46) of his poetry

Halts not particularly, but moves itself  
 In a wide sea of wax; no levelled malice  
 Infects one comma in the course I hold,  
 But flies an eagle flight, bold and forth on,  
 Leaving no tract behind. (I.i.47-51)

The image he offers is attractive and powerful; it does not obviously seem to be a piece of verse to be made fun of. The bird flying straight ahead, vanishing into pure poetry with no “tract,” no link to the physical left behind, offers an intriguing analogy to the waxwing who “lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky” (l. 4) without having to heed physical realities.<sup>4</sup> But the Poet’s point here is a practical one: he claims that his poetry is universal rather than “particular”; that no personal animus has changed his poetry to the extent of affecting a single piece of punctuation.

Even though the Poet suspects that his self-interested motive may damage poetry in general (“When we for recompense have praised the vile, / It stains the glory in that happy verse / Which aptly sings the good,” [I.i.16-18]) his poetry proves to have surprising insight, perhaps precisely because of the Poet’s participation in the cycle of flattery that he observes. The Poet’s verse about Timon’s flatterers who “On the moment / Follow his strides, his lobbies fill with tendance, / Rain sacrificial whisperings in his ear, / Make sacred even his stirrup and through him / Drink the free air” (I.i.81-85) is both perceptive and prophetic in its apprehension of Timon’s fall even though it is offered by one of the “glass-faced flatterer[s]” that the poem itself portrays (60). In short, the Poet’s base motive does not detract from his vision, and I would suggest that this, once recognized creates an additional shiver of aesthetic bliss.

It is in this context of the strange value of theft that I offer a suggestion for how we may deepen our understanding of the lines from *Timon of Athens* that give *Pale Fire* its name: “The sun’s a thief and with his great attraction / Robs the vast sea; the moon’s an arrant thief / And her pale fire she snatches from the sun” (IV.iii.431-33). Charney reads the lines as demonstrating universal theft, a relationship that the

overall novel *Pale Fire* participates in.<sup>5</sup> This reading, however, while certainly true from the point of view of Timon at this moment, omits the larger perspective which the play offers about the nature of theft and corruption.<sup>6</sup> The natural relationships here may be couched in terms of theft, but the result of that theft is moonlight, the tide ("liquid surge," 434) that is both pulled by the moon and reflects the image of the moon, and the generosity of the earth by taking nutrients from "general excrement" (437). In other words, the fact of theft offers the possibility of tremendous aesthetic generosity on the part of the world, and this double-edged response to theft seems essential in understanding why Nabokov found *Timon of Athens* so provocative. Timon's own overwhelming generosity is rooted in a perverse and corrupted world. His generosity could not, in other words, manifest in the absence of that corruption (see II.i.1-10).

Timon's perception of the world's generosity is rooted in his equally strong sense of its perversion and corruption: the two are intermingled. "[N]othing brings me all things," he says at last (V.ii.73). In the end, Timon sees his life, his death, as meaningful only as it participates in a larger aesthetic structure that he imagines. He pictures how "the light foam of the sea may beat / Thy gravestone daily; make thine epitaph, / That death in me at others' lives may laugh" (IV.iii.374-76).<sup>7</sup> That sea foam, of course, is that same "liquid surge" that robs, here serving an aesthetic function in the image of his grave. I am not arguing that *Timon of Athens* offers the reader a sense of aesthetic bliss in the end: the laughter Timon imagines is mostly bitter, and his anger and cynicism go hand-in-hand with the play's treatment of aesthetics. I do, however, want to point to a significant theme in the play's sense of aesthetic generosity that I believe Nabokov picks up on: Kinbote, in his Index, offers Hazel a very Timonesque epitaph, saying that she "deserves great respect, having preferred the beauty of death to the ugliness of life" (312). We might take this as a terribly depressed, misanthropic thing to say, but it is analogous to Shade's own project, to reimagine senseless death as part of a percepride artistic pattern.<sup>8</sup>

Shade's vision, then, is one of universal generosity—the generosity of small things that participate in the “vital rhythm” (l. 952) of life like the “dark Vanessa with a crimson band” (l. 993), who, as the poem closes, creates symmetry with the waxwing of the first line. Whether the aesthetically or cosmically fortuitous appearance of that dark Vanessa can offer consolation for a dead child remains unclear.<sup>9</sup> Timon and the Poet would offer a sharper, but similar observation. The ground offers gold when Timon requires food; Timon suffers, but the play he is in gains in beauty from that perfect moment of suffering—and that is a type of generosity. In the end, as Shade says, we are “most artistically caged” (l. 114).

Regis College  
Weston, MA

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Morris, esp. 340.

<sup>2</sup>The Folio reading of “Gowne which vses” rather than “gum which oozes”; I here use Johnson's emendation of the line. “Vses” may simply be an early modern spelling of “oozes.” All quotations from *Timon of Athens* are from the Arden edition, Third Series, ed. Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton.

<sup>3</sup>Dawson and Minton call the oozing gum a “grotesque image” (I.i.22n22). Aunt Maud, who is herself a “poet and a painter,” also seems to partake of this hybrid, accidental way of creating beauty—“realistic objects interlaced / with grotesque growths and images of doom” (ll. 87-89).

<sup>4</sup>“Tract” = “trace (?); delay or deferral (?)” according to the Arden edition (I.i.51n51); “protraction of time, deferring.”

<sup>5</sup>Kullman makes an analogous point: “Kinbote, like many other self-appointed literary *experts*, appropriates a poetic text for the purpose of parading himself and his own *expertise*, thus diverting to himself the glory due to the poet” (218).

<sup>6</sup>Timon earlier in this scene compares himself to the moon, having fallen into poverty “As the moon does, by wanting light to give; / But then renew I could not like the moon— / There were no suns to borrow of” (IV.iii.68-70); his comparison, unlike the latter speech, softens the relationship between sun and moon. This is a relationship of borrowing and lending, not theft, and he assumes that the relationship will lead to renewal rather than dissolving into nothingness.

<sup>7</sup>Timon later imagines the same surge over his grave: “[O]nce a day with his embossed froth / The turbulent surge shall cover; thither come, / And let my gravestone be your oracle” (V.ii.102-04). Timon here also sees his (senseless) death serving a prophetic, remedial function on those who come after him.

<sup>8</sup>Shade’s poem also offers a way to imagine a kind of communication with the dead, although unclear and perplexing; *Timon of Athens* has its own take on post-death communication, the baffling multiple epitaphs that both preserve Timon’s voice and name post-death, and erase them; see Thatcher.

<sup>9</sup>See Boyd on the *Vanessa* and its various reflections and symmetries in the novel.

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## Book-eating Book: Tom Phillips's *A Humument* (1966-)\*

TAMMY LAI-MING HO

The history of the world, my sweet— [...]—  
—is who gets eaten and who get to eat. (Sondheim 105)

In *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001), Christian Gutleben notes that it was “in the 1980s and 1990s that many British novelists [...] unearthed and resuscitated the great Victorian tradition” (5-6). Gutleben’s quote speaks to the rapid rise of the neo-Victorian genre which occurred in the last two decades of the twentieth century. With the publication of Peter Carey’s and A. S. Byatt’s bestselling and Booker Prize-winning *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *Possession* (1990) respectively, the genre entered the literary mainstream and has remained there ever since. The neo-Victorian phenomenon has also been evident in other forms of entertainment and in scholarly research. Production companies regularly offer television and film adaptations and modernisations of Victorian classics; the Booker Prize shortlist has featured novels with at least some nineteenth-century elements almost every year for the past fifteen years; the study of neo-Victorian fiction has become an established academic discipline, manifested in the founding of the journal of *Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008 as well as in the publication of an increasing number of articles and book-length studies (see Stetz 345).<sup>1</sup>

Despite its growth in the late twentieth century, many scholars trace the birth of the neo-Victorian genre back to 1966. Academics choose this date as the starting point for the genre as it was in this year that

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debho0252.htm>>.

Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a part revision and part pre-quel to Charlotte Brontë's canonical *Jane Eyre* (1847). In Rhys's work, some of the tropes and genre elements that make up the neo-Victorian were established, such as re-appropriating a Victorian story for revisionist perspectives and imagining an embodied existence for historically marginalised characters, and as a result, *Wide Sargasso Sea* has become for many the foundational text of the neo-Victorian genre.

1966 proves a fitting start date for the neo-Victorian genre for another reason: it was the year Tom Phillips began his long-running literary and artistic project *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*.<sup>2</sup> In

this work, which Phillips is still continuing (the fifth and latest edition was published in 2012),<sup>3</sup> he treats every page of W. H. Mallock's relatively unknown novel *A Human Document* (1892) by hand, through cutting, painting, pasting, circling, pencilling, collaging, typing and covering over, so that only a handful of words from the source text remain on each page. For example, Phillips crosses "an Doc" out of the original *A Human Document* to form the new title *A Humument* (Figure 1, fourth

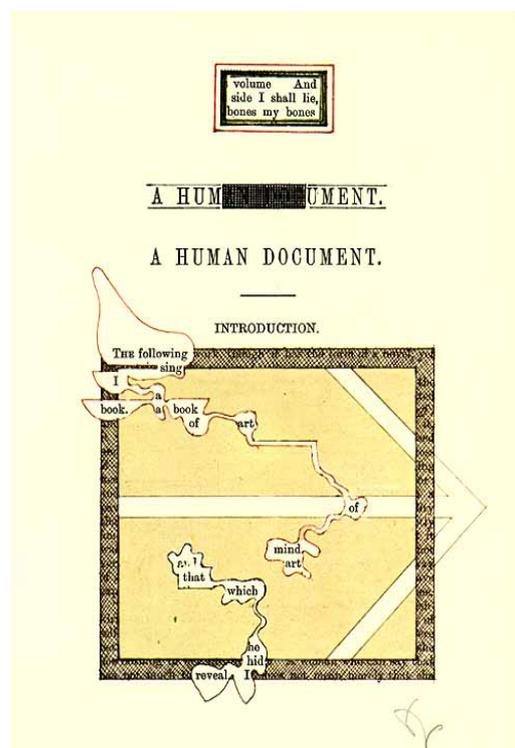


Figure 1

edition). His texts may seem random, and indeed occasionally the words have been selected by chance, through such procedures as tossing coins ("Notes on *A Humument*," hereafter Notes 2005), but for the most part, they are deliberately chosen and the result is that *A Humument* tells the adventure of a modern-day protagonist called Bill Toge. That the new story entirely derives from material and words used in the Victorian novel and is changing with each new edition not only calls to mind Frankenstein's patchwork creature but also suggests the malleability of texts and postmodernist deconstruction—

Phillips is literally deconstructing and reconstructing the Victorian source novel.

At first glance, some may consider *A Humument* an “unlikely” neo-Victorian novel. To begin with, it is in many ways not a novel at all but a piece of visual art. It is also constantly being revised by Phillips, which puts it at odds with the typical notion of a novel, a form that is largely set when published. Also, even at its most novelistic, *A Humument* does not demonstrate the *purposeful* return to the Victorian which characterises other texts in the genre. Neo-Victorian novels, according to Dana Shiller,

adopt a postmodern approach to history and [...] are set at least partially in the nineteenth century. This capacious umbrella includes texts that revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and “new” Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions. (558)

Shiller’s definition highlights the neo-Victorian novels’ deliberate return to the Victorian.<sup>4</sup> This consciousness is explicit in the writers’ choice of revisiting existing and often well-known Victorian novels, historical personae and fictional characters as well as their attempt to replicate Victorian literary styles. None of this is found in *A Humument*. True, the book has received some attention in the neo-Victorian field,<sup>5</sup> but its neo-Victorianness needs closer scrutiny, especially in relation to the sense of purpose mentioned above. Phillips’s narrative is set in the modern-day and does not (re)tell a Victorian story. Unlike other neo-Victorian writers, Phillips is not intentionally trying to evoke a sense of the past. He writes in the Notes (2005) that he bought Mallock’s book for his project simply because it fit the rules he had set: “the first (coherent) book I could find for threepence.” It is purely by chance, then, that Phillips chose Mallock’s novel as the source text for his artistic experiment. It may thus be somewhat reductive to regard *A Humument* as a neo-Victorian work just because its source material is Victorian. Phillips did not purposefully seek inspiration from a Victorian novel (his technique could reasonably be

applied to any book from any period) nor does he have anything substantial to say about nineteenth-century history or literature.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, even though Phillips's return to the Victorian was initiated by chance, I consider *A Humument* to be a "representative" neo-Victorian novel. The fact that Phillips's book is crafted from the Victorian source (in its most literal and material sense) is a physical manifestation of contemporary nostalgia for the materiality, form and texture of Victorian books. This nostalgia pervades much of neo-Victorian fiction, especially in terms of cover designs, maps, epigraphs, and other paratextual elements borrowed from the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Also, just like most neo-Victorian novels, *A Humument* responds to and teases out the underlying themes and elements of its Victorian source. Phillips remarks in an interview that some elements in Mallock's text are "waiting to be discovered, but not in an active sense. In a passive or innocent sense. Innocent of what is done to them. What is done to them might enrich them" (Interview).<sup>8</sup> His description can equally be applied to many neo-Victorian novels' treatment of their nineteenth-century sources. Additionally, as Daniel Traister points out, the artistic methods that Phillips adopts aptly correspond to the manuscripts which make up Mallock's work. The story of the Victorian novel has ostensibly been pieced together by the narrator out of different written materials characterised by "baffled and crippled sentences" (9), "abrupt transitions" and "odd lapses of grammar." According to Traister, *A Humument* is thus "a literal reconstruction of *A Human Document* which Mallock (or his narrator) has allegedly constructed in much the same way, using materials just as refractory—and just as malleable."

More importantly, *A Humument's* relationship with its Victorian source can be configured as that between eater and eaten, a relationship that embodies some of the fundamental characteristics of the neo-Victorian genre. Phillips himself considers Mallock's novel as food, asserting that for his purposes, the Victorian text is "a feast" (Notes) and that he has "eaten 11 or 12 copies of *The Human Document*" (Interview). With this in mind, the word "Treated" in the book's subtitle

takes on gastronomic connotations: the Victorian novel is like premium cured meat or a delightful treat to be savoured. But what has *A Human Document* to do with food? Jason Scott-Warren believes that “we habitually use images associated with eating to describe the processes of reading and writing.” What does regarding *A Human Document* as edible usefully say about the relationship between the contemporary and the Victorian?

Understanding *A Human Document* as food suggests that the contemporary work relies on the Victorian text as material nourishment, which it uses to sustain its own individual body. For Phillips, Mallock’s *A Human Document* has been an indispensable source of artistic nourishment for his own project for almost five decades. In fact, *A Human Document* is almost the *only* source of material for Phillips, as one of his rules in the creation of *A Humument* is that “no extraneous material should be imported in the work” (Interview).<sup>9</sup> The contemporary text is thus produced through the intertextual consumption of the body of the Victorian work in its entirety. If *A Human Document* provides a nourishing and extravagant meal for *A Humument*, it is also a banquet that has not yet come to an end. In Mallock’s novel, Phillips has been able to find a constant source for new inspiration.<sup>10</sup> As he said in Notes, he has “extracted from it over one thousand texts, and [has] yet to find a situation, statement or thought which its words cannot be adapted to cover” (Notes 2005). And the number of variations has only increased since. Some have taken in contemporary events. For example, in the Humument App (released in 2010), which shows the project embracing the latest technology, one page reads: “pasted on to the present / see, it is nine eleven / the time singular / which broke down illusion” (4). In newer editions, Phillips has also used himself—his biography—in the project, saying that “I’ll never write an autobiography, so I have an autobiography that appears in this form” (Interview). This suggests that he has incorporated his own life into the work, demonstrating a communion between the Victorian, neo-Victorian, and himself. Phillips comments, “[Mallock] might desist from turning in his undiscovered grave at the thought that he

has been in some way perpetuated through me as I through him" (Introduction).

If the relationship between the contemporary and the Victorian can be understood as that between eater and eaten, the relationship is also characterised by a sense of aggressive ambivalence. The eater desires food, but because of his reliance on it for nourishment, he has become vulnerable. Moreover, he must destroy the food in order to absorb its substances for sustenance. In an ideal situation, the distinction between the eater and food eventually collapses, and there is total identity between the two as the food becomes part of the eater's body. In Phillips's treatment of Mallock's novel, we see this interplay between aggression, ambivalence, and communion. *A Humument* must rely on the material body of the source text for its artistic expression. In each edition of *A Humument*, Mallock's novel is consumed by Phillips's contemporary text. The result is that the Victorian work is digested and used to create a new textual body. In this new formation, only a distorted and stripped-down version of the Victorian original (in the form of slivers of texts) remains clearly evident. Importantly, even though the Victorian text is incorporated, it is not completely destroyed; otherwise Phillips's project can no longer be continued. The appropriation of the Victorian by the contemporary, in the case of *A Humument*, transubstantiates the body of the Victorian book into the body of the contemporary work.

That the contemporary and the Victorian texts literally and physically share the same space—in fact, co-exist in *one body*—speaks to the sense of one text cannibalising another.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the "body" is a recurrent visual motif and metaphor which appears in much of Phillips's work—a constant reminder of *text as body* (as in the idiomatic expression "the body of the text"). The process of textual cannibalism is perhaps self-reflexively depicted in some of the pages from *A Humument* itself. In Figure 2, from the fourth and fifth edition, for example, we can see that Phillips has painted the entire page from Mallock's work in red, black and white to form a grotesque female figure, sitting in profile, apparently turned inside out.

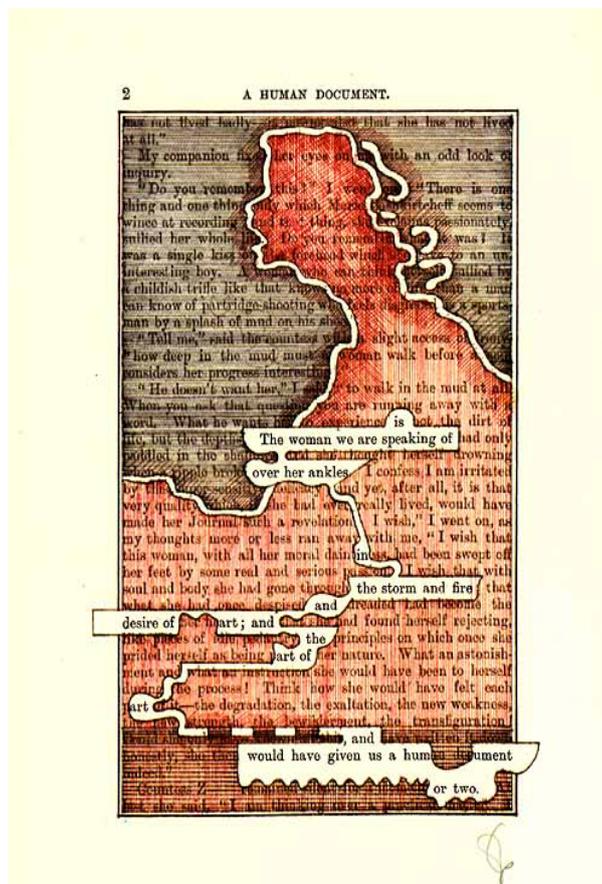


Figure 2

This female, mouth slightly ajar, appears to be eating the black text, which hovers around her. The bulk of her red form is reminiscent of the inside of a human with connected white parts, suggesting intestines, within which words in black are in the process of being digested and absorbed. In this image, Phillips has her feed off the very text she is made from. In this interaction between text and image, we witness an explicit, unambiguous illustration of the process of textual cannibalism and communion at work. It might also be considered a visual representation of Phillips's treatment of Mallock's work as a whole: one book eating and living off another for its own existence and expression. The result is a kind of deformed textual body, in which different layers of the work are evident and reveal the transformation that has been undertaken. The book has in a sense metamorphosed from the natural "Human" document to the deformed "Humument."

On this page, Mallock's original Victorian text is still visible and readable underneath Phillips's contemporary layer of paint, suggesting the spectral and lingering indelibility of the nineteenth-century source. More importantly, a new image—that of a female textual body—emerges from the commingling of past and present material. This image, which has no counterpart in Mallock's work, is emblematic of the neo-Victorian's creative consumption of the Victorian. By creating something new, the contemporary redeems itself from simple parasitic feeding on the original and secures *A Humument's* own unique identity. There are, then, two strands evident in Phillips's use of the Victorian text: communion and identity-formation. On the one hand, *A Humument's* cannibalism of *A Human Document* leads to communion between the two in the physical sense, as the works share one textual body. In fact, even Phillips's choice of name for his protagonist, Toge, which can only be derived from the words "together" and "altogether" in the original, speaks to the *togetherness* of the source material and the new work. On the other hand, Toge is also an entirely new character created from old material, a primary example of how the contemporary novel fashions a new separate identity through cannibalism. *A Humument* transforms the Victorian text into a distinctive contemporary product which, according to Marvin Sackner, "encompass[es] all of contemporary and modern art history." Such contemporary elements set the work firmly apart from its Victorian source. Indeed, in his use of *A Human Document*, Phillips may have created a new genre in *A Humument*, which has the reputation of being the first "treated" book that covers up a complete novel.<sup>12</sup>

The neo-Victorian as a whole can be seen as an extension of *A Humument* and the idea of the book-eating book: it is a cannibalistic genre that consumes the literary past for its own existence. The notion of cannibalism I have used to analyse Phillips's work can be applied to the understanding of the neo-Victorian genre as a whole: in the same way that *A Humument* has been living off *A Human Document*, neo-Victorian fiction generally can be seen as having been consuming and revising the same finite stock of nineteenth-century texts (or authors-

as-texts) since (and even before) the release of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This cannibalistic relationship is *fundamental* to the genre—it is not an option for neo-Victorian writers *not* to be cannibalistic.

Neo-Victorian works are carnivorous in their incorporation of past elements, and their authors have primarily looked to Victorian texts for sources of inspiration and expression. Their works are in one way or other “extracted” from the older novels. On the most basic level, neo-Victorian cannibalism takes the form of swallowing parts of nineteenth-century works more or less intact. One obvious example is the use of Victorian texts on the inside front and back covers and flyleaves, chapter epigraphs or, more integrally to the body of the novel, as quotations in the main text. The Victorian words, either as epigraphs or in-text citations, have been exhumed from their “natural” nineteenth-century body and incorporated into a “foreign” neo-Victorian one. More crucially, these contemporary novels incorporate the substance (as opposed to style) of nineteenth-century works, reusing and appropriating their authors, themes, plots, characters, and spatio-temporal settings.

And just like Phillips, who adapts and consumes *A Human Document* to describe “a situation, statement or thought” (Notes 2005), neo-Victorian writers rework earlier texts to articulate contemporary and sometimes personal concerns and anxieties. Neo-Victorian fiction also treats the Victorian in an ambivalent and aggressive manner similar to Phillips's treatment of *A Human Document*. These novels rely on the substance of their literary ancestors for nourishment and demonstrate a desire to emulate the accomplishments of their forebears. But this reliance and reverence is mediated by a desire for *original* expression and to form an identity separate from the *original* Victorian authors and texts (note the double meaning of “original”). Thus, the neo-Victorian evinces an on-going fascination with the Victorian age by openly appropriating its literary styles, plots, and techniques, while simultaneously seeking to express new and revisionist ideas by reconsidering Victorian traditions and ideologies through feminist, post-colonial, and social criticism and by presenting the stories of histori-

cally marginalised subjects: lesbians, madwomen, spiritualists, and those from the lower classes (such as prostitutes and convicts).

Hong Kong Baptist University  
Hong Kong

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Margaret D. Stetz writes: "Many of these volumes, it seems, are being issued by the firm of Palgrave Macmillan, though Rodopi has just inaugurated its own 'Neo-Victorian Series,' under the editorship of Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben. Perhaps the coming years will see the major university presses—Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and others—welcoming this new area of study just as warmly" (345).

<sup>2</sup>In his introduction to in the fifth edition of the book, published in 2012, Phillips writes, "*A Humument* started life around noon on the 5th of November 1966; at a propitious place."

<sup>3</sup>According to Phillips, *A Humument* is a project that "last[s] a lifetime" (Introduction).

<sup>4</sup>Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's definition of the genre in *Neo-Victorianism* also stresses self-consciousness: "To be part of the neo-Victorianism we discuss in this book, texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (4; emphasis original). Heilmann and Llewellyn believe that not "all fictions post-1901 that happen to have a Victorian setting or re-write a Victorian text or a Victorian character" are neo-Victorian. Instead, only "texts about the metahistoric and metacultural ramifications of such historical engagement" deserve the label (6). This definition is likely informed by the notion of "historiographic metafiction," a term coined by Linda Hutcheon to refer to fiction that consciously questions "the grounding of historical knowledge in the past" (92).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, the "links" section on the website of the journal of *Neo-Victorian Studies* <<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/links.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup>Although he did not purposefully start out to revisit a Victorian text, Phillips does use the original story in his novel. He writes: "[*A Humument*] includes poems, music scores, parodies, notes on aesthetics, autobiography, concrete texts, romance, mild erotica, as well as the undertext of Mallock's original story" (Notes 2005). Phillips also reuses two characters from the Victorian book.

<sup>7</sup>See Gutleben.

<sup>8</sup>The interview with Tom Phillips was conducted by Gillian Partington and Adam Smyth (both of Birkbeck, University of London) on 16 September 2011 at a café in the South London Gallery. Partington and Smyth kindly shared with me the interview, and quotes from it are used here with permission from the interviewers.

<sup>9</sup>Phillips further explains: "I'm not supposed to cart in loads of stuff from other sources. [...] Sometimes I use postcards. They belong to me. Anything that belongs to me or that I have done I can reuse" (Interview). This admission that he only includes his belongings and creations in *A Humument* suggests a kind of communion between his text and Mallock's.

<sup>10</sup>For example, Phillips has also used Mallock's text for other artistic expressions, including an opera (see Notes 2005).

<sup>11</sup>In the interview, Partington asks Phillips, "I was at a conference about book eating, in Cambridge. One of the speakers was talking about cannibalism and your work: she thought that *The Humument* was a kind of cannibalism." Phillips responds: "Yes, it [is] cannibalising something. That's true." (In this exchange, Partington is referring to a paper I presented entitled "Book-eating Books: Tom Phillips's *A Humument* and Neo-Victorian Fiction" at the "Eating Words: Text, Image, Food" conference on 13 September 2011.)

<sup>12</sup>However, *A Humument* does have predecessors, even though Phillips was unaware of them when he began his project. For example, the Biblical Harmonies produced at Little Gidding in the 1630s and 1640s, which are "lavish folio books constructed by cutting up printed texts of the four Gospels, and gluing the fragmented texts back into a new order" (Smyth), share striking similarities with Phillips's work. That said, Phillips's book is the most well-known contemporary example of such "treatment" of past texts and has even become the model for others, notably Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), which Foer created by cutting out portions of words from Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934). That Foer was inspired by *A Humument* seems clear as he visited Phillips to discuss *The Humument*. On the subsequent publication of *Tree of Codes*, Phillips expressed disappointment: "It's a bit painful because [...] he didn't half borrow from me!" (Interview).

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## Beyond the “Chorus Line”: A Response to Susanne Jung\*

CHRISTINE EVAIN

Expanding from the 1974 poem about Penelope and from the 1981 “True Stories” poem, *The Penelopiad*, like many of Atwood’s texts, provides an opportunity to explore the nature of stories in general. In her article “‘A Chorus Line’: Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* at the Crossroads of Narrative, Poetic and Dramatic Genres,” Susanne Jung points out how the reader of *The Penelopiad* “is offered a myriad of stories, theories, points of view of what might have happened, but knowledge of the ‘truth’ of what happened is forever deferred” (Jung 52). While *The Penelopiad* allows Atwood to weave in many of the recurrent themes of her work from iconic representations to metafiction, the main focus of Susanne Jung’s article is on trying to perpetrate or uncover “the true story” by giving a voice to silenced voices. The technique that Atwood adopts here is what Reingard Nischik calls “her technique of gender-oriented revisioning” (156), which, in this case, undermines Homer’s Penelope and subverts the “icon of wifely fidelity” (Howells 57). Penelope’s voice is “irreverent and skeptical as [she] mocks the posturing of male heroes” (Howells 59), and her emancipation is reminiscent of many of Atwood’s female figures, including the witty Gertrude (Hamlet’s mother) in “Gertrude Talks Back” in *Good Bones* (15-18), and Circe in *You Are Happy* (45-70). Furthermore, Atwood’s *Penelopiad* foregrounds previously marginal-

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\*Reference: Susanne Jung, “‘A Chorus Line’: Margaret Atwood’s *Penelopiad* at the Crossroads of Narrative, Poetic and Dramatic Genres,” *Connotations* 24.1 (2014/2015): 41-62.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debjung0241.htm>>.

ized characters and untold storylines, allowing Penelope and the maids-as-chorus-line to take center stage. Susanne Jung highlights the form chosen by Atwood in her particular rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey* and investigates the construction and function of the poetic insertions within Atwood's narrative which are reminiscent of "[b]oth ancient Greek chorus and modern musical number" and which "employ a range of poetic genres, from nursery rhyme to sea shanty to ballad and idyll, thus giving the maids voice as a collective" (Jung 42). Jung seeks to demonstrate the importance of the Maids' interludes in the narrative, all the while underlining the social privilege of the masters, clearly showing how the masters are blind to these privileges and how they are equally blind to the sufferings they cause.<sup>1</sup>

My comments concerning this article will simply serve to further highlight the unusual form chosen for the subject matter—a mixture of genres finely analyzed by Susanne Jung. This will lead me to comment on how Atwood offers a new brand of narrative that I will describe as a "metafictional and mythical cabaret-style confession" which works within an ethical framework serving the purpose of denouncing social privileges. I will also point to ur-material in Atwood's work, including her poetic work which I will consider as the seeds planted for *The Penelopiad*—in terms of exploring both recurrent themes and forms. Finally, having scrutinized Penelope's voice more closely, I will explore another possible interpretation of the ending of *The Penelopiad* that differs from the one suggested by Susanne Jung but does not exclude alternative interpretations.

Atwood's most recent work has been produced "in what has been described as a cabaret style" (Hengen 50), and it is the mixture of this cabaret style with several other ingredients such as the confessional voice, the posthumous voice, intertextuality, metafiction and not to mention ethical comments (in the form of a denunciation of social privileges) that gives *The Penelopiad* both a typical Atwoodian feel to the text and an unprecedented originality. The metafictional component, frequently to be observed in Atwood's work, is mainly present, as underlined by Susanne Jung, in the obsession with the true story. It

is interesting to note that the conflicting stories are clearly highlighted by textual markers such as “said some,” “No, [...] said others. [...] No, said another” (*Penelopiad* 91), thus finger-pointing the agents of the many Odysseus stories and providing the reader with the following implicit metafictional comment: stories are subjective, and different versions can be spun out by different people.

Much more could be said about the metafictional and intertextual components of the narrative as well as the interweaving of genres, but suffice it to say that Atwood’s “modern-day musical theatre” (Jung 44) or “cabaret style [fiction]” (Hengen 50) is tightly connected to post-modern writing. By revealing the origins of the narrative and giving us a glimpse of how stories are fabricated, the reader is encouraged to appreciate the narrative on different levels, all the while adopting a sensible critical distance. Thus, Atwood offers her own brand of metafictional cabaret-style creations, which includes the victim voices of the maidens as well as an ethical framework defined by the chorus.

Defining the ethical framework is only one of the many functions of the chorus; a point which serves as another element of response to Jung’s article. When comparing Atwood’s novel to Greek drama, she argues that the main function of the maids’ chorus in *The Penelopiad* is “setting up an ‘ethical [...] framework’” (44). Quoting Brockett and Hildy (see 19-20), she lists the other key functions of the chorus in Greek drama which she does not dwell on in relation to *The Penelopiad*: “setting ‘the mood for the play,’ adding ‘dynamic energy,’ ‘giving advice’ to the characters or even serving as an ‘antagonist’” (Jung 44). I would argue that these functions are equally important in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*. As a matter of fact, they are inseparable from the novel’s ethical framework. Indeed, the tongue-in-cheek humour serves to reinforce Atwood’s comment about unethical social privileges, providing entertainment, contrasts, and adding “dynamic energy” to the narrative, thus “[setting] the mood” (Brockett and Hildy 19-20) for the novel, in a cabaret-like rewriting of the Greek drama chorus. The comic aspect of the novel is all the more forceful

because, combined with the multi-faceted chorus line, it serves the ethical argument, much like in the Shakespearian tradition, where comedy is never far from tragedy, and vice versa—both forms converging in a message which challenges the audience/the reader to question the established order or social conventions.

With regard to Penelope's voice—which is both a posthumous and confessional voice of *The Penelopiad*—, it makes sense to highlight how the choices concerning the narrative voice unsettle the reader and challenge him/her further. Atwood's poem "Siren Song" (*You Are Happy* 38-39) reveals the power of the confessional voice and highlights "the self-reflective and ironical dynamics of a confession addressed to the reader" (Evain 99). The poem "emphasiz[es] the reader's cheap infatuation with any voice which speaks of his uniqueness: 'you [my reader] are unique / at last' (YAH 39)" (Evain 99). The form of a posthumous memoir chosen by Atwood is reminiscent of many Atwoodian voices speaking to us from beyond the grave. The originality here lies in Atwood's ability to mix different genres as she "give[s] the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xv). Susanne Jung thus describes the very structure of the novel:

The novel consists of two intertwined narratives: in the main narrative, Penelope, speaking from the Underworld, relates her life from birth to the end of the Trojan War and, finally, Odysseus' return to Ithaca. Both her own and her husband Odysseus' afterlife in the Greek Underworld are also described. This main narrative, a prose monologue, or as Penelope herself has it, a "tale" (*Penelopiad* 4), is shadowed by the narrative of the maids, who relate their side of the story in lyrical segments interspersed throughout the main narrative. The maids speak mostly as one collective voice, mostly in verse. (43)

Indeed, Atwood's Penelope belongs to the category of posthumous narrators, spinning her tale about her life and her husband, all the while inhabiting the world of the dead and interacting with other "dead" characters such as Helen of Troy. The maids' voices in *The Penelopiad* are also posthumous. As Niederhoff points out, "[a] cursory perusal of her writings yields a long list of people returning from the

underworld" (61)—from *The Animals in that Country* (1968), to *The Tent* (2006) including the full sequence of *Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970).<sup>2</sup>

These strange voices show as Atwood's Susanna Moodie would put it, that the dead have their "ways of getting through" (*Journals of Susanna Moodie* 60) and that they have something to tell us—one could go as far as to say that the dead have something that they *absolutely need* to tell us. Indeed, as Niederhoff suggests, the dead protagonist-narrators cannot find peace unless they communicate with the living, and it is only when they are heard by the living that they can be restored to death. Niederhoff illustrates this point by giving us several examples in Atwood's work and linking these examples to Greek mythology. His comment concerning Patroclus is enlightening:

In his encounter with Achilles, Patroclus is temporarily restored from death, but what he is negotiating for is a restoration to death. Caught in the no-man's-land between the dead and the living, he is waiting to be buried in the proper fashion, which will allow him to pass the gates of the underworld and to find his place in the "hall of Death," never to "fare [...] from the dark again." (Niederhoff 62-63)

Both the chorus and Penelope return from the dead. The maids' angry voices want justice and therefore haunt Penelope's narrative. As Atwood herself puts it: "The maids in *The Penelopiad* [are] angry, as they still feel they have been wrongfully hanged" (*The Penelopiad: The Play* vi). But what is Penelope's specific request as she speaks to us from the dead? Do the anger and denunciation that underpin the maids' chorus line apply to her discourse, or is she merely playing with storytelling, avoiding the serious issues and condemnations of the chorus line? As the main "revenant" protagonist of the novel, is she in quest of peace or justice in the same way the maids are? Does she resemble the other Atwoodian "revenants"? While Penelope's narrative is haunted by the chorus line, her discourse would certainly not have the same effect on the reader if it were stand-alone. It is because of the strong connection between Penelope's and the maids' versions, that the reader feels the haunting power of the ensemble. Questions concerning this power of Penelope's narrative are not only connected

to the chorus line, but they also tie in with her position in relation to the maids' hanging. Is Penelope a victim of Odysseus' infidelities, or is she to some extent his accomplice? As often with Atwood, the so-called victim—in this case Penelope—is shown to share the guilt of her victimizer because she consents to what is being done to her and to other victims.

This comment leads me to further scrutinize the main protagonist of *The Penelopiad*, especially in relation to possible interpretations of the ending. Let me start by emphasizing Susanne Jung's point about the balance between Penelope's voice in relation to the maids'. Although most of the narrative is articulated in Penelope's voice, the maids do take center stage, thus reversing the 1975 musical tradition highlighted by Marvin Hamlisch, "turn[ing] the chorus line into protagonists, foregrounding what is usually backgrounded in musical theatre" (Jung 44). It is thanks to the voice of the maids that the novel carries its ethical dimension. The poetic form of their chorus reinforces their capacity to haunt the narrative. As Jung further comments:

[T]he maids' subjectivities, which have been denied agency in the main narrative, haunt this same narrative. (Lyric) poetry lacks the temporality that (narrative) prose possesses. The failure to reintegrate the narrative voice of the maids within the main (i.e. Penelope's) narrative is presented—appropriately—as an ever present haunting of that narrative in the form of poetic insertions. The insertions might thus be argued to serve, structurally, also as representations of intrusions produced by the trauma of exclusion of these voices. And as such they remain, appropriately, forever severed from the temporality of the main narrative. (57)

The temporality of Penelope's main narrative is indeed fecundated with the timeless poetry of the maids which serves to reinforce the haunting power of the novel. At the end of the last chapter, the question remains: have the ghosts of the maids been laid to rest, or will they continue to haunt us? Penelope, for her part, does not appear very concerned about the haunting maids. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, she is staged as someone seeking some sort of distraction, in her capacity as a revenant. She continues to communicate with the reader, after the trial of Odysseus, in the same light-hearted manner:

taking advantage of a dead person's trance, she "jumps in" and connects with the world of the living: "When there's an opening, I frequently jump in to fill it. I don't get out as often as I'd like" (*Penelopiad* 185).

If Penelope remains immune to the maids' suffering, she is however a little annoyed that the same cannot be said of Odysseus, who is now being tortured by his victims. Penelope cries out to the maids in anger: "Why can't you leave him alone?" (*Penelopiad* 190), and she does, indirectly, concede that both Odysseus' guilt and the maids refusing to be dismissed affect her more than she would care to admit: "By this time I'm crying" (*Penelopiad* 190), she says, although she then describes the departure of the maids from the scene in a grotesque and mocking way. As for us, the readers, we are the maids' best allies. We are the only hope that they have of being heard. This communication from the world of the dead to the world of the living gives a gothic quality to the text that is underlined by Susanne Jung and also by Coral Ann Howells. Howells claims that "*The Penelopiad* might be seen as Atwood's Gothic version of *The Odyssey*" (58): "[the maids' voices] celebrate the return of the repressed" (69), and "their fates represent [...] the dark underside of heroic epic" (69). This comment serves to underline the originality of *The Penelopiad*, which could be described as a mythical gothic cabaret-style confession—an unprecedented Atwoodian cocktail with nevertheless very typical Atwoodian ingredients.

The gothic element in *The Penelopiad* is further foregrounded by the importance given to transformation. Susanne Jung compares the play to the novel, claiming that, in the play, different from the novel, the maids are denied transformation. I would argue that in both cases the haunting continues; the transformation does not occur in the play, and it is, at the most, incomplete in the novel. Susanne Jung thus describes the maids' transformation:

In simple, nursery rhyme-like verse the maids take their exit, "sprout[ing] feathers, and fly[ing] away as owls" (*Penelopiad* 196). Their transformation into birds of wisdom at the novel's close allows for the possibility of release

for the maids. Telling their tale, presenting their side of the story, a shadow narrative to both the *Odyssey* and Penelope's tale, might serve in this reading as a kind of redemption for the maids, who have released not just their physical human form but also their negative affect, with the implied twenty-first century reader serving as witness to their trauma. The transformation of anger into art, into poetry and song, releases their negative affect and its hold over them. (48-49)

My interpretation is that, to a certain degree, the transformation is mocked and is therefore perhaps not to be taken at face value. While the maids do not remain stuck in their chorus selves and indeed "*sprout feathers, and fly away as owls*" (*Penelopiad* 196), their discourse remains both haunting and mocking:

and now we follow  
 you, we find you  
 now, we call  
 to you to you (*Penelopiad* 195)

Because the maids will "follow" and "call to" the "you" of the poem (that is to both Penelope and Odysseus and to the reader him/herself), their disappearance is not to be trusted. Their call and exit from the scene is accompanied by a self-mocking: "to wit too woo / to wit too woo / too woo" (196). This can be read, not as a form of closure or of release, but rather as the possibility of further transformations and retellings of the story. Whether the maids as personae are released of their negativity is probably irrelevant. I would suggest that it is the possibility of never-ending transformations of the story that matters. Atwood's wry humour, combined with her capacity to revisit ancient myths, offers a retelling of the story which encourages the reader to think of other retellings and to possibly offer his/her own.

Atwood's brand of writing in *The Penelopiad* weaves in many poetic forms many of which are songs—"the nursery rhyme, the popular tune, the sea shanty, the ballad, the love song" (Jung 44). In the same way, many of the poems in *You Are Happy*—the volume that contains the ur-figure of Penelope—are songs. The "Circe/Mud Poems" sequence (*You Are Happy* 45-70) is composed of songs and different

types of poems which vary in form, from free verse poems to prose poems. They point to a Penelope who is not unlike the one in *The Penelopiad* but seen through the lens of Circe. She is described as “sit[ting] in her chair / waxing and waning / like an inner tube or a mother, / breathing out, breathing in” (*You Are Happy* 65). The reader is led to think that Penelope is up to something. She is very different to the “icon of fidelity” of Homer’s myth:

surrounded by bowls, bowls, bowls,  
tributes from the suitors  
who are having a good time in the kitchen

waiting for her to decide  
on the dialogue for this evening  
which will be in perfect taste  
and will include tea and sex  
dispensed graciously both at once. (*You Are Happy* 65)

This ur-figure of the Atwoodian Penelope is a teasing figure, who likes to have a good time and enjoys being surrounded by suitors. She gets to decide on “the dialogue for th[e] evening,” dispensing both “tea and sex”—all in “perfect taste.” She is in a position of control and has no intention of relinquishing this control. The Penelope figure fully comes into her own in the last stanzas of the poem when Atwood gives her own version of Penelope’s weaving:

She’s up to something, she’s weaving  
histories, they are never right,  
she has to do them over,  
she is weaving her version,

the one you will believe in,  
the only one you will hear. (*You Are Happy* 65)

Through the persona of Circe, Atwood gives us a glimpse of Penelope. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood’s Penelope is finally given a chance to weave her full story. It is as if Atwood had thought, after writing the “Circe/Mud Poems” sequence, “I’m not quite done with Penelope yet.” Atwood’s second version of Penelope has many points in com-

mon with the first; but the two Penelopes differ in that the second hears the chorus line of the maids. The reader is given to understand that this second Penelope is perhaps more affected by the maids' chorus than she would like to be. Atwood's first Penelope does not mention the maids at all—they simply do not exist in the "Circe/Mud Poems"—and therefore the first Penelope cannot comment on their version of the story nor can she lead the reader to reflect on their position as voiceless victims.

Thus, returning to Homer's text again, thirty-one years after the "Circe/Mud Poems" sequence in *You Are Happy*, Atwood manages not only to expand on the poetic image she created of Penelope weaving stories and entertaining suitors, but also to make her second Penelope a more complex figure than the first. It must also be underlined that her movement from poetry to prose, which is not unusual in Atwood's work, proves to be valuable: poetic ur-figures are revisited and enriched, and this highlights the fecundity of poetry. Indeed, the resurfacing of one of the "Circe/Mud Poems" into a full-blown novel—*The Penelopiad*—is simply yet another illustration of Atwood's poetry as the "seed planted for the next novel" (Evain and Khandpur 107). It shows once more how Atwood's personae, images and leitmotifs can resonate from the poetry to the novels—the poetic quality of writing thereby spanning from one form to another.

Ecole Centrale de Nantes  
France

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For Jung's distinction between the social privileges of the masters and the epistemic privileges of the maids, see esp. 58 and 61.

<sup>2</sup>The list also includes short stories and novels—stating mainly the peculiar uncanny accents in the narrators' voices in *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Cat's Eye* (1988), and *Alias Grace* (1996).

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# Connotations

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