Introduction

Traditionally in the field of aesthetics the genres of comedy and tragedy have been depicted in opposition to one another. Within the resulting hierarchy of dramatic forms comedy had been relegated to an inferior position, the reason for this being a paternalistic preoccupation with the identification and validation of particular objects considered suitable for intellectual scrutiny. If tragedy is regarded as the philosophically superior of the two genres, and an implicitly masculine form in this dialectic, then comedy, because of its 'popular' historical identification with social mores, is relegated to an inferior position. This thesis seeks to reconsider the place of comedy as an object of serious intellectual enquiry, and will argue that its historical importance traces a dialectical movement that informs both the aesthetic form itself, and the passage of history. Indeed, the dialectic of desire that informs comedy, and that always poses a threat to the existing order, may be said to resemble the dialectical movement of history itself as a process whereby existing social tensions are identified and negotiated. It will be argued that Shakespeare's comedies represent these conflicts in particular ways, and that the conclusions that they reach leave a residue of unresolved tensions that remain to threaten even the revisionary order that the plays posit.

The dialectic of comedy that this thesis identifies exposes the inherent tension that is present in all antitheses, and the argument proceeds by making the contradictions inherent in the form explicit. Comedy is concerned primarily with the categories of the explicitly sexual and the implicitly political, and in the case of Shakespeare, the interest is in patriarchal law: the patriarchal law sanctioned by the state, but also what is presumed to be natural law. Thus although the substance of

comedy may be said to emphasise the libidinal energies that seek to challenge that law, its manner of dealing with this potentially disruptive force is anything but irrational or inconsequential since it attempts to resolve tensions and dilemmas through forms of *rational* discussion. In fact, it will be argued that the initial hypotheses of Shakespearean comedy lead directly to the exposure of contradictions that mount challenges to their claims to represent the source of truth. These hypotheses, often involving the assertions of patriarchal law, function as obstacles that require resolution. But that resolution involves more than simply a capitulation to the extant power; indeed, what we might call the idiom of patriarchy requires to be expanded and transformed in order to accommodate those energies that it seeks initially to neutralise. To this extent comedy is frequently involved in a process of cross-examination, deploying as it does a Socratic method whose momentum simulates that of the progress of a law-suit. In its inclusivity, comedy resembles the Hegelian dialectic insofar as it is concerned ultimately with epistemological questions that inform the business of living in society.

Some recourse to a Hegelian historicism will be an important component of the following arguments because it indicates that all human societies, and, indeed, human activity generally, are defined by their histories, to the point where their essences can only be understood through history as the operation of a temporal dialectic. The relationship between Shakespearean comedy and the canonical law of literary genre will be explored within this context. But close scrutiny will reveal that far from *resolving* contradiction, the diacritical method that the following arguments identify disclose, often involuntarily, an ontological undecidability that offers momentary glimpses of other possibilities. In this way Shakespeare's comic art

interrogates both the existing order, and the commonplace by occasionally (and temporarily) propelling its audiences towards visions of alternative futures.

The social specificity of comedy acts as a counter to any claims to universalism. Humour and laughter, the phenomenological effects of comedy, are notoriously poor travellers as indicated by the nature of regional and geographically specific jokes. The same might be said of the temporal dimension of comedy since topicality is a constant trigger for humour. Moreover, the appearance of jokes and comic interludes immediately following traumatic events, validate the process as a means of ameliorating, if not purging, social anxiety. Elizabethan and Jacobean culture and the comedies that they produced are of particular interest precisely because of the traumatic and often perplexing paradigm shifts that were taking place at the time. The anxieties that these shifts produced are recorded in historical documents, but they are also theatrically represented in stage-plays, that, as historical artefacts themselves encode at a domestic level these intense social concerns.

In Chapter 1 the choice of genre will be introduced as a source of historical evaluation: that is to say, initial emphasis will be placed upon the dramatist's conscious endeavour to represent aesthetically intense socio-political upheaval from within a particular frame of consciousness. A dramatist may enter into a form of contract with an audience by declaring that a play belongs to one particular genre, but the conventions of generic nomenclature are rarely as stable as this suggests, as evidenced in the titular changes in the Comedies themselves. For example, the interchangeability of the genres of 'comedy' and 'history' during the Elizabethan period require some degree of articulation since both forms represent renewals of social harmony that follow on from the disorder of a diseased body politic. In focussing on the awareness that comedy is a kind of festive form of history, it is

necessary to trace initially the outline of Renaissance definitions of comedy that emphasise the festive nature of the theatre as an institution.

C.L.Barber's definition of comedy as "a kind of history"[1] privileges an historicist methodology that asserts an understanding of the original context of reception. Barber's view of comic history as "the kind that frames the mind to mirth"[2] recalls Hayden White's identification of comedy as an historical mode of 'emplotment' that uses the trope of synecdoche to integrate parts into a larger historical whole where "struggle, strife, and conflict are dissolved in the realisation of perfect harmony."[3] Although the following arguments make little explicit use of Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959) they do owe a debt of gratitude to his study of the historical nature of Shakespearean comedy. His description of the fusing together of Classical, Medieval and Renaissance theatrical traditions with early modern forms of holiday festivity points towards the significance of ritual as "a paradoxical human need, problem and resource."[4] Barber's work has subsequently been taken up and developed by scholars such as Francois Laroque, and Naomi Conn Liebler,[5] but he does not elaborate on the politics of race and gender that contemporary criticism now recognises as an important element in Elizabethan and Jacobean comedy.

The politics of comedy can be viewed with greater clarity as a result of the juxtaposing of law and low culture, the sacred and the profane, or indeed the tragic and comic elements of everyday experience. This is theorised and applied in Chapter

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[1] C.L.Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, (Princeton, 1959), p.12
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in CulturalCriticism*, (Baltimore and London, 1985), pp.67-8
[4] *Op.cit.*, p.15
[5] Francois Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, (Cambridge, 1991), and Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre*, (New York and London,1995).

2 of this thesis through an analytical exploration of representative Shakespearean comedies that betray a self-consciousness of their own generic classifications. Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1597) and *Measure for Measure* (1604) are two plays that exemplify the conflict between comic and tragic modes. Identifying moments of potential tragedy in these 'dark' comedies serves as a means of positioning generic conflict as a structural principle that proves to be as important as the plays' comic themes of the conflict between genders. The process of resolution with which both these plays are preoccupied, and their preoccupation with a quasi-legalistic staging of conflict suggest an analogue with Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of the *differend*. Lyotard argues that the *differend* is a term he uses to identify "the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim," but he goes on to suggest that:

> A case of differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.[6]

Lyotard goes on to argue that the *differend* "is signalled by this inability to prove. The one who lodges a complaint is heard, but the one who is a victim, and who is perhaps the same one, is reduced to silence."[7]

The incompatibility of idioms, and the need to arbitrate cases, along with the resultant negotiations that are brought into play, render the concept of the *differend* more serviceable that Northrop Frye's definition of the action of comedy as being one that resembles a 'law-suit',[8] since it can be argued that in this case aesthetic form

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[6] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Manchester, 1988), p.9
[7] *Ibid.*, p.10
[8] Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays,* (Princeton, 1957), p.166

constitutes a mode of intellectual enquiry that is capable of formulating alternatives to any ideological imperative. This is not to say that art is a substitute for the epistemological objectives of a philosophy, but rather to suggest that it can furnish a knowledge that philosophy itself cannot. In short, it is the underside of philosophy in just the same way that alternative meanings escape the straitjacket of ideological form. What the dramatist does is to clarify the opposition between repression and subversion and in doing so articulates what cannot be expressed. The discovery of the means within critical discourse to articulate radical alternatives despite the constraints imposed by a dominant 'idiom' replete with its linguistic, epistemological and political prohibitions, is the motivation that lies behind the dialectical drive of this thesis.

The proximity of the categories of the philosophical, the ethical and the political to that of the aesthetic narrows, but does not obliterate entirely, the gap between the philosophy of the human subject in law, and the dramatic persona subject to the law that regulates genre. Each subject is subjected to a series of rules and prohibitions; but the capacity of comedy to interrogate epistemological categories, to cross-examine 'reality' results in a challenge to ontological certainty, producing a radical undecidability that aggravates and disturbs notions of boundary and authority. Such aggravations are generally relegated to the level of the cultural unconscious, but the logic of the *differend* implies a source outside signification that can be identified as a proximate origin of human creativity, and the starting point for a radical politics.

In his essay 'Before the Law' Derrida's identification of the philosophy of law as the means of generating moral, juridical and natural law is regarded as a fiction whose main purpose is the narration of the prohibition of desire.[9] In another essay,

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[9] Jacques Derrida, 'Before the Law', *Acts of Literature,* ed. Derek Attridge, (New York and London, 1992), p.190

'The Law of Genre' the historicity of the law and the regulation of literary forms in terms of the prohibitions placed upon the mixing of genres, are regarded as forms of miscegenation. The second chapter of this thesis attempts to explore the Derridean conception of the ascription of gender to genre, and pays particular attention to the phallogocentric nature of the policing of boundaries. The hierarchical imbalance that is involved in the process of governing, and carrying out surveillance on the boundaries of the genre/gender divide, testifies to an anxiety generated by the fear of monstrous or hybrid progeny. This fear is exorcised at a psychological level through the taboo on incest, but it is also present in an analogous form in the critical disapproval of the miscegenation of genres.

Chapter 2 tests the theoretical preference for a purity of aesthetic form in the face of the *differend* that is performed in every comedy when comedy and tragedy are forced to appear together on the Comic stage, and where one 'idiom' is enjoined to accept the conditions of articulation of the other. Beneath the exclusions that both proffer as a discursive restriction imposed upon the other lies a mutual dependency that each denies the other but that they both need to accept. The refusal of each to submit to the law of the other makes for the irresolution that Lyotard locates as the matter of 'dispute', but in the comic resolution of conflict, say between different generations who ostensibly speak different languages, there is an awareness of the need to control the dominant discourse of the tragic in order to provide a resolution that keeps the main characters alive and morally exemplary. The law of genre demands that comedy must end happily, but because the *differend* can never be completely resolved, the discriminations that it initiates resist synthesis, so that the dialectic will always be imperfect. The negative term is always expelled from the

solution, or dealing with it is postponed, but it always returns as the excess that escapes full signification.

In Shakespearean comedy the institution of marriage becomes a central trope, and Chapter 3 engages with this as central to the thesis. Comedy and tragedy are presented as culturally specific projections of human consciousness capable of entertaining both forms as alternative representations. Within the ritual of marital union psychology merges into symbol, and events frequently take on the logic of dream, departing from the appearance of the everyday in order to articulate its inner truth. Central to this symbolism is the figure of woman, who is simultaneously the heart of life but who is also, within the Christian tradition, radically destructive, *and* ultimately a path to redemption. This may be the reason why no masculine villain is as evil as Goneril in *King Lear* or why no hero is as good as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. What renders Shakespeare's comic heroines so interesting is their capacity to re-order society almost single-handedly. In such cases woman is the antithesis of a male consciousness that is forced to move out of itself in order to confront a force with which it must come to terms if the social order is to survive. This dialectic that is played out between genders in the Comedies achieves a provisional resolution that is an analogue of the Hegelian synthesis pressed into the service of a patriarchal model of society in its returning of the potentially anarchic force of 'woman' to a predominantly phallogocentric hierarchy.

Hegel demonstrates philosophically, and Shakespeare dramatically, that at the heart of Christian doctrine lies the assertion that human life does not begin until consciousness divides, and that this division and its articulation are the motor for history itself and are what comprises the motion of existence. For Hegel human and divine rationality are identical, and in accordance with the dictates of Enlightenment it

is assumed that Man's reason is infinite in its capacity to contemplate, and control existence. What for Hegel is a primary separation of Man from God, becomes for Shakespeare the consequence of the creation of Eve. Woman becomes that which is taken from Man and that causes his fall. She is wife and mother and threat: she is forever ambiguous, untrustworthy, fecund, and ultimately redemptive. Viewed in this way, then the tension between Man and Woman is articulated as a division of Man from himself that can only be repaired at the end of Comedy through the institutional ritual of marriage. This is the reason why Chapter 3 regards nuptial rites as the focal point of any theoretical analysis of comedy. Here the importance of the Derridean philosopheme of the *hymen* in addition to conceptualising the notions of union, boundary and disruptive force[10] also glosses the term as a symbol of female purity. The questions of female purity and the fear of its violation are of direct relevance to issues of propriety and authority. A consideration of the historicity of these concepts is essential to an understanding of early modern comedy just as the Christian distinction between woman as corrupter and redeemer, whore and virgin, are central to an understanding of the identity of early modern woman.

The responsibility imposed upon the female gender as custodian both of male sexual desire *and* the harmony of the entire social order is what troubles the superficially happy resolutions of comedy. The all-male mode of production upon the early modern stage may represent an important social ritual whereby division is rendered whole, where a union of opposites, or the reconciliation of differences can reasonably be anticipated. But the inversion of femininity by transvestite male actors

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[10] Throughout *Spurs/Éperons*, trans. Allan Bass, (Chicago, 1978), and the *Double Session*, Derrida figures the aporetic or the indeterminate vulvically as the *hymen*, as that which characterises "The general law of textual effect" (*écriture*), in direct opposition to the law of the phallus, or the desire for the apodictive or the determinate. These explicit gender identifications of the apodictic with the masculine and the aporetic with the feminine appear throughout *Spurs* as "That which will not be pinned down by truth is in truth – *feminine*", p.55.

has been questioned as a male projection of how women should behave, even if these were men imitating women imitating men. I will therefore argue that the double negation of this theatrical practice helps to destabilise gender identity through an explicit disclosure of the artificiality and performativity of gender construction; an exposition that is as beneficial to men as it is to women.

Using Foucault's analyses of the 'technologies of sexuality', the gender identities represented in Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605) and Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* (1611) disclose an early modern preoccupation with the cultural construction of gendered subjectivity, through descriptions of identity which are formulated differentially in and through a range of social institutions, such as marriage and the family. Comedies rarely end in actual marriage, however, as *anticipating* marriage, progressing towards the 'medicine of marriage', describes more accurately the teleological thrust of this dramatic form. This chapter therefore interrogates C.L. Barber's structuralist assumption that comedy performs 'dramatic epithalamia' where "the power of love" is expressed "as a compelling rhythm in man and nature".[11] The trope of marriage undoubtedly represents the inevitable and irresistible force of an essentialist cosmic order where the regulation of libido functions as a panacea for social disorder, and although the design of this prescriptive force is concealed behind the appearance of social and cultural forms, its *ideal* reality is destabilised by the 'realist mimesis' of comedy which ascribes to the symbolic form of marriage a *material* existence. Applied specifically to the realm of early modern comedy the implicitly sexual and the explicitly political investments made by the social ritual of marriage can be effectively repositioned within the poetic sub-genre of

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[11] Barber, *op. cit.*, p.9

the *prothalamion* where a new and stable future is evoked through the symbolic economy of courtship.

This central chapter rotates the thesis on the axis of gender politics, as the dialectic of desire further preoccupies those institutions designed to secure domination and subjection. Proposing that the dramatic prothalamion of comic art has the capacity to produce alternatives through which *representation* of the conflicts between these complex forces is effected recalls Catherine Belsey's description of the early modern theatre's capacity to disclose "meaning and the contests for meaning" within particular institutions, such as marriage.[12] This unremitting concern with the regulation of human libido permits a liminal view of Renaissance society in which its phallogocentrism is threatened by energies that undermine social order. Thus the centrifugal force of moral politics can be felt throughout this thesis as a crucial analogue for the maintenance of social power and control which is nonetheless challenged by an equally potent centripetal force of *desire*. Scrutinizing Shakespeare's Comedies from their early inceptions in the late sixteenth century, to the 'dark' comedies of the early seventeenth century, to the romances of his late career discloses the interrelations of early legal history, drama and desire and although the marketing of flesh may be more conspicuous in the comedies of his contemporaries, Shakespeare also explores the commodification of the female body within the domestic domain, in a conscious decision to make drama out of the socially symbolic rituals of courtship and marriage.

Implied within hymeneal rites, the necessity of *self*-sacrifice which is affected by the ceremony of marriage is also the symbolic articulation of a particular kind of ritual activity. The social anthropologist Rene Girard defines sacrifice as a ritual of

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[12] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, (London, 1985), p.4

containment, a means of "prevention in the struggle against violence"[13] through a form of *mis*-identification which isolates an individual within whom the dis-ease of an entire community can be located. Thus far, the argument has been concerned with the *experience* of comedy as a means of coming to terms with human identity within a larger state sanctioned social order. However, in addition to revealing the resilience and potential of the human animal comedy also discloses the extent to which that potential is necessarily contained. Framing a selection of interrelated scenes from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594)*, Love's Labours Lost* (1595)*,* and *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) with contemporaneous hymeneal comedies discloses the extent to which the moral ambiguity of the wider community is represented stereotypically through the characterisation of promiscuous men and women, prostitutes, usurers, or simply braggarts. Regardless of their social identity, these 'blocking' characters or *alazons* fulfil the communal demand for the containment and purgation of social ills and are disclosed in comedy as a sophisticated and displaced form of the ritual sacrifice of the scapegoat or *pharmakos*.

Chapter 4 better seeks to engage theoretically with the problematic and necessary solemnity of comic sacrifice and the immanence of ritual becoming drama. The argument deals with the historical materialisation of the early modern theatre as a crucible for the hopes and fears of society, as a space where anxieties could be exorcized and alternatives imagined. This historical pragmatism is deeply rooted in primitive religious rites and the Derridean concept of theatre as *pharmakon* will be deployed to analyse this phenomenon since it addresses the realm of the aesthetic as the last remaining remnant of ancient sacred ritual, albeit in a cultivated and decorous form. Derrida's tracing of the chain of signification between the theatre of

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[13] Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, (Baltimore and London), p,17

representation that expels unconscious anomalies from conscious thought and the degrading scapegoat or *pharmakos* ritual, which was used in ancient Greece to purge ailing communities, offers a means of supporting the claims that division demands wholeness, and that dialectic conflict demands resolution. As the trope of the scapegoat displays, throughout early modern comedy, social order demands harmony at any price, even if the restoration of balance is of the most perfunctory kind.

In his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida observes that the *pharmakon* is a double-edged remedy which "can never be simply beneficial"[14] Indeed, when Mark Antony turns to his attendant Eros, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and demands that "with a wound I must be cured" (IV.xiv.93), the logic of the *pharmakon* is present: the wound is essential to the cure, and the dialectic includes both in its redeeming motion. What Derrida and Girard provide for this chapter is a structural account of the tragic conflict inhabiting comic form which is invaluable to a semiotic account of the conflict between the 'inside' and 'outside' of metaphysically sanctioned order, and those materialist historical forces which challenge hierarchical structures. Evidence of the rite of the *pharmakos* in early modern comedies demonstrates the destabilising but necessary effects of the negative dialectic upon the positive, inclusive form of comedy. It also indicates that tragedy is present in the margins of every comic play. In their similar presentation of the identification and subsequent punishment of moral ambiguity Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night* (1600) and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600) are useful in augmenting accounts of the place and function of the early modern theatre as the performance of the *pharmakon* itself is shown to be an indispensable part of the

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[14] Jacques Derrida, *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson, (London, 1982), p.99

dialectical production of meaning through a variety of proposed fictional solutions to cultural tensions.

The location of the theatre outside the jurisdiction of the City of London allows us to survey the early modern stage[15] as the reification of a ritualised form of drama that believed in transformation, transition, in trance, just as so-called primitive ritual did. The construction of the theatre out-with the walls of the city proper produced a permissive irreverence which interrogated existing structures of power at a point in history when state surveillance and censorship were intensifying their grip upon everyday experience. The necessity of challenging increasingly repressive state mechanisms from 'ground-level' thus positions the genre choices made by early modern dramatists as means of organising and understanding the sources of, and potential solutions for, a number of persistent anxieties. It can also now be argued that 'power' was being displayed upon the early modern stage as a social and material phenomenon rather than a metaphysical force through the medium of the comic form. It is still a matter of enthusiastic debate as to whether the Elizabethan and Jacobean public theatre simply consolidated the dominant order through its representations, or whether it fulfilled a more subversive function, but to move through and beyond this dialectic is to embrace the utopian idealism of comedy and admit the liberating effects of ambiguity, incoherence, and a certain (temporary) loss of control.

Comedy is in this case a unique and privileged type of cultural and psychic material capable of producing both pleasure and power; this locates comic play as both emancipator and as meaningless abstract negativity, or excess. In Chapter 5, comedy is presented as societal *semblance,* as a necessary illusion capable of dispelling illusions. The double bind of this stance, however, does not negate its logic

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[15] Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play and Power in Renaissance England*, (Chicago, 1988), pp.26ff

because a third position is located within every comic resolution. Theodore Adorno's formulation of dramatic art as societal *semblance*[16] therefore becomes important for a coherent understanding of the aesthetic as mimesis, as the *best* art, and politically the most effective, so thoroughly works out its own internal conflicts that the hidden contradictions in society can no longer be ignored. Dramatic comedy is therefore recognisable as social or political unconscious, disclosing itself as the default sphere for failed dreams of human emancipation. Re-enacted upon the stage these dreams can be kept alive in a volatile space that not only decentres the strong constitutive subject through a dismantling of notions of self as a cultural construction but *produces* meanings and values, which propose fictional solutions, for a society that is riven with fundamental antagonisms. According to Adorno, the only way to expose these, and thereby point towards their possible resolution, is to think against thought, in other words, to think in contradictions as "to proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions. A contradiction in reality, [dialectics] is a contradiction against reality".[17] The point of thinking in contradictions is not simply negative, however. It has a fragile, transformative horizon, namely, a society that would no longer be torn apart by fundamental antagonisms.

Again, functioning at the level of the Hegelian dialectic, comedy oscillates between two opposite poles of thought, mediating the space between what is accepted traditionally and what can be imagined as possible. Hegel's concept of the *Aufhebung*, as outlined by Derrida,[18] depicts a dialectic of confrontation at work which simultaneously negates and conserves. This diametric formulation explores the oppressed position of the 'under-dog' and produces idealist propaganda, a duality that

[16] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.132
[17] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, (New York, 1973), p.144-5
[18] Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy A Hegelianism without Reserve', in *Writing and Difference.*, (London, 1978), p.135, n.13

demands a diacritical reading of the comic genre. Thus, comedy's construction of

what Derrida names the *u-topia*, or, non-place, can be usefully explored as a liberating

play space which perpetuates the principle of the excluded middle.[19] Illuminated in

this way, comic discourse is identified as a form of deconstruction as close to the

ludic postmodernism of Derridean philosophy as is possible.

The use of both deconstruction and psychoanalytical terms within this chapter

assists in the formulation of a postmodernism of resistance which could be traced

back to the Renaissance texts under analysis, through a critique of high-rationalist

theory that resists a descent into relativism. Thus, Chapter 5 is an attempt to escape

the relativism of historical context whilst simultaneously maintaining a contextual

link. Such critical judgements need to grasp both the artwork's complex internal

dynamics and the dynamics of the socio-historical totality to which it belongs. Such

content is not a metaphysical idea, or essence hovering outside the text, but neither is

it a merely human construct. It is historical but not arbitrary; non-propositional, yet

calling for propositional claims to be made about it; utopian in its reach, Comedy is

firmly tied to specific societal conditions. Therefore, in contradistinction to the

Derridean *hymen*[20], that ubiquitous symbol of boundary, historical emblem of purity,

and post-modern figure for the division between 'inside' and 'outside', the Lacanian

phallus is employed to double as not only the symbol of logocentric desire but also as

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[19] Derrida's use of the *u-topos*, *u-topia*, or non-place in 'Deconstruction and the Other', in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, (Manchester, 1984), pp.108-12 and *Positions*, p.43 is his most explicit critique of the Law of the Excluded middle that is a basic tenant of Aristotelian logic, hence at the foundations of Western philosophical thought. Equivalent to the principle of bivalent logic the Law of the Excluded Middle proposes a binary opposition between truth and falsity with nothing in between. The *u-topos* of deconstruction rejects this dialogic and passes out of its binary plenitude and into excess.Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* explicates this concept in her appropriation of the Platonic *Chora* as the excluded middle, the third position, or third gender, pp.25-6.
[20] Derrida, 'The First Session', *Acts of Literature*, p.128

the priapic totem[21] of comedy. This permits the double entendres and shifts of signification that slip constantly out of the cultural unconscious to reveal themselves, recharged, within the psychosexual dynamics of those early modern comedies which have been selectively analysed throughout this thesis.

Slippages of signification perform a dialectical exchange between the realms of the imaginary and the symbolic which perpetually attempts to reveal the 'real', a movement which can be identified as a form of philosophical scepticism. The very fact that Comedy's production of pleasure, or *jouissance*, rushes off and escapes signification, therefore demands interrogation through a number of different methodologies. Both John Marston's *The Malcontent* (1605) and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594) disclose the aporetic structure of comedy by demonstrating a practical pessimism that stands in dialectical tension with a certain variant of philosophical utopianism. This tension cannot be denied in the performance and reception of these dramatic comedies. The apparent linking of semantic determinateness with the phallocratic privileging of the male in early modern drama is destabilised by the *semblance* of subjectivity in comedies which rewrite traditionally proscribed gendered positions.

In comedy humanity's unwitting collusion with the patriarchal appropriation of the symbolic as the field of full human subjectivity is forever called into question; comedy breaches the boundary between the imaginary and this logocentric order both to release its tension and reinscribe it, always however, in a different location. This permits a celebration of our humanity, providing not only the pleasure of

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[21] See Chapter 5, p.260 ff. in 'Comedy's Privie Parts', especially p.209 for a fuller explication of the fescinine aspects of the 'feminine' form of Comedy. See also Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, pp.1302-1310 for a psychoanalytical definition of the phallus as totemic.

entertainment but also a sense of power, by demonstrating that relationships and subjectivities can exist beyond the restraints of patriarchy. The libidinized economy of comedy is that bio-power of history which is inscribed upon the once living bodies of that which we may vicariously refer to as the masculine and the feminine. Beyond the binary distinction of Western metaphysics, a third position or radical infinity is divulged in the non-positive affirmative of the comic form. The laughter, or *jouissance*, comedy produces, is therefore an affirmation without reserve; it does not conceal itself behind irony. In being repulsed or disturbed by the grotesque elements of comedy, by the awful spectacle of the scapegoat ritual, we are forced to experience our negative relationship with the other, to interrogate our assumptions sceptically, whether they relate to the ways in which we ascribe generic assumptions to gender, or to the ways in which we subscribe to notions of genre as gendered.

Chapter 1

Shakespeare and the Law of Genre

'Genre' as a descriptive term of classification and demarcation can be understood in various ways: as a means for writers to streamline production, as a way for critics to impose some semblance of order on the ceaseless profusion of cultural texts, and as a source of pleasure or identification for audiences and consumers. But how and by whom are genres defined? And what role does gender play in those definitions? Throughout this chapter gender is used as a central category of analysis as introducing the gender differentiation between comedy and tragedy raises some important questions about contrasting male and female principles. The male principle is often associated with the origins of tragedy[22] in its preoccupation with the individual in conflict with the world whereas the female principle is often associated with the comic acceptance of that world. As this thesis unfolds it will be argued that, characteristically, Shakespeare associates the drive to impose both political and personal order on society with the ability, or rather the inability, to accept the sameness in difference.

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[22] See Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience,* (London: Abacuss, 1982) pp.219-51.

Traditional classifications of drama normally begins with the basic distinction between tragedy and comedy, a separation common in Greek and Roman drama, and clearly established by Shakespeare's time. By common traditions then, tragedies were serious, involving some ultimate questions about the moral framework of human existence in the face of a common fate, death. Tragedies were by this definition serious and formal, 'high' art, if you will. There was no such formal agreement about comedy, and upon the early modern stage there was fierce competition between rival companies seeking to win audiences over with different 'brands' of comedy. This inventiveness and structural flexibility when matched with the popularity of early modern comedy underscores an undeniable aesthetic beauty and cultural value in a period when this protean form was recognised as being resistant to definition, as somehow exceeding the binary opposition of a gendered system of genre.

Derrida's fascinating post-modern appraisal of the regulation of genre bearing a striking resemblance to the regulation of gender re-opens the debate which has raged for centuries as to whether or not comedy is an aesthetically inferior form in need of continual correction. As David Daniell notes "the history of literary criticism is also the history of attempts to make an honest creature, as it were, of comedy"[23] a point which will be reiterated throughout this chapter as the sources for this 'dishonesty' are sought. Standing accused of corruption and promiscuity, a defence is mounted in favour of comedy, which will require close scrutiny of the system of prohibition that is genre and the ways in which comedy seeks to inhabit and destabilise that system.

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[23] David Daniell, 'Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Stanley Wells, (Cambridge, 1997), p.102

I

Derrida cites Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* on the relationship between genre (Gattung) and gender, through the many resonances of the terms "*gattieren* (to mix, to classify), *gatten* (to couple), and *Gatte/Gattin* (husband/ wife)".[24] This may provide a connection to Wittgenstein's theory of generic resemblance as a form of family resemblance where a sequence of influence, imitation and inherited codes connect individual works together, *marrying* characteristics or conventions in order to *produce* specific effects. Primitive though this Wittgensteinian[25] theory of family grouping within genre is, it suggests that there is a need to leave room for polygenesis, for the unobvious, underlying connections between the features (and the works) of any one isolated genre.

In the phenomenon of remote influences Derrida's view of the *hymen* as the symbol of the madness of essentialising sexual difference bears some relation to the ideology of genre as a form of classification freighted with a political imperative:

> The genre has always in all genres been able to play the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organisation and genealogical tree, order of reason, order of reasons, sense of sense, truth of truth, natural light and sense of history.[26]

There is a temptation in genre theory to define the opposition between comedy and tragedy as somehow interminably separate and antithetical. This predilection towards defining literary form against what it is *not* establishes a juxtaposition between 'official' and 'non-official' modes of communication which expresses form in association with a sort of genre hierarchy. Definitions of tragedy may be more easily

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[24] Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, (New York and London, 1992), p.243
[25] *ibid.*, p.252
[26] *ibid.*

made, especially since Aristotle began by making them from within the theoretical confines of a generic binary which, in itself, reveals the deeply ingrained social symbolism of genre as a chronotypical system of evaluation.

Properly used, genre theory must always in one way or another project a model of the coexistence or tension between several generic modes or strands: and with this methodological axiom the typologising abuses of 'traditional' genre criticism can be definitely laid to rest. In *The Law of Genre*, Derrida opens with the literary mantra: "Genres are not to be mixed./ I will not mix genres./ I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them".[27] But he then embarks on an exploration of how the taxonomy of genre is at the heart of the Law itself a law of impurity, according to a principle of contamination.

For the remainder of this chapter I will argue that it is this possibility of cross-contamination that prevents the eternal recurrence of the same and permits invention and difference. The issue of difference also highlights the fact that some genres are 'looser' or more open-ended in their conventions or more permeable in their boundaries than others. This permeability is of intense concern to more rigid aesthetic theories as it quickly undermines typology, as the movement of comedy throughout time demonstrates. The dramatic comedy that grew out of the boisterous choruses and dialogue of the fertility rites of the feasts of the Greek god Dionysus could not have contrasted more dramatically with the dignity and seriousness of tragedy with its homogenising and spiritually redemptive symbolism. Representative of the central and ancient principles of sexual and social inversion, comedy swiftly positioned the early modern public stage as a locale wherein the collective consciousness of its audience could wrestle with notions of power and propriety. The dramatic comedy of

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[27] *ibid.*, p.223

the Renaissance was capable of staging dramatic comedies that mimicked rituals of purification and purgation in a historical period that was experiencing a seismic shift in cultural values.

Historically, literature has been classified according to a law of genre which has sought to impose a sense of order upon a literary history of invention, hybridity, and *disorder*. But the question of how this 'disorder' both mutates and oxygenates order in literary discourse is simultaneously the story of how the genre of comedy evolved from a 'goat-song' to an aesthetic form.

Laying Down the Law

Over the past one-hundred years, comedy has been studied as a dramatic form which has retained its characteristics from ancient folk practices long after the beliefs that nurtured them had either become obsolete or been subsumed into the secular aspects of theatrical practice. It has been the aim of twentieth century writers like F.M. Cornford,[28] Suzanne K. Langer[29] and C.L. Barber to imbue comedy with the Classical credentials required for serious academic scrutiny. Their studies of agrarian fertility rituals, rites of passage and the social inversion of public revels gave comedy an anthropological credibility that had long been denied. In the wake of these readings, the cultural significance of the comic was analysed through a multitude of theoretical critiques as a form with well defined structural components and vital social elements. Indeed, not since the Renaissance has a definition of comedy been so clear, or, at times, so symmetrical.

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[28] F.M. Cornford, *The Origins of Attic Comedy*, (Michigan, 1993)
[29] Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (London, 1977)

Many poststructuralist theorists are drawn to comedy's apparent indifference and resistance to definition.[30] The fluidity and plurality of the comic form may house the division of the inauthentic subject, so beloved of postmodern theory, but the ironic delivery of humour is often the product of the sheer diversity of comic locations. Comedy can equally refer to a genre, a tone or a series of events which force us to think multilaterally, as it is both a literary tradition with recognisable structural qualities, and a way of describing isolated events or passages within other types of work.

As a dramatic form, the historical development of comedy appears to confirm the idea of a relatively permeable entity adapting to suit the demands of the day. It is this generic permeability that caused such scholarly exasperation during the Renaissance, since the desire to impose conformity upon dramatic form was synonymous with the desire to impose order upon society. The Elizabethan stage was also continually under attack as the source of various forms of contamination, both psychological and physical and as comedy deals with so much sexual and scatological humour a literary defence had to be mounted against accusations of impropriety. Nevertheless, during the early modern period comic plays, poems and other vehicles for humour existed in a populist schema which continually evaded scholarly precision, as a purity of form was sought for a genre that dealt with themes thought to be local and vulgar. This quasi-Aristotelian attempt to produce a symmetrical literary system reflective of humanity as an amalgamation of two competing facets of character has shaped all subsequent Western theory by positioning comedy

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[30] See Andrew Horton, *Comedy/ Cinema/ Theory*, (Berkely: University of California Press, 1991) and Kirby Olson, *Comedy After Postmodernism: Rereading Comedy from Edward Lear to Charles Willeford*, (Texas, 2001) for a discussion on the indefiniteness of comedy as one of its postmodern virtues.

antithetically to a vision of art that can somehow communicate beyond the moment of its creation like tragedy.

The ultimate authority on genre theory in the Renaissance is to be found in Plato's *Laws*, where the socially inferior form of comedy is divided into two categories: the satirical or the farcical. Out of the various 'sub-genres' of farce and satire, the romance paradigm became fluid in the hands of many early modern dramatists, who developed a variety of comic formulae such as 'domestic comedy', 'city comedy' and 'humours comedy'. Whether these new idioms were developed in a scathing backlash to the idealism of late Elizabethan romance can only be determined after a close analysis of the social aspects of comedy. However, it is the 'mongrel' form of tragicomedy that possesses the key to a fuller understanding of the aesthetics of comic drama, contesting, as it does, the rigidity of genre from the stand-point of a dramatic hybrid once denounced by Dryden[31] as an ill-bred dog, 'barking' in the face of convention.

Mongrel Tragi-comedy

Plautus[32] may have coined the term 'tragicomoedia' to denote a play in which gods and mortals, masters and slaves, reverse the roles traditionally assigned to them, but this social inversion has indeed caused a great deal of controversy throughout the ages. In the Renaissance and thereafter, tragicomedy was mainly comic, although Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy almost always included some comic or grotesque

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[31] John Dryden, 'Essay of Dramatick Poesie', in *The Works of John Dryden*, 17 (Berkeley, 1971), pp.44-9
[32] See the Prologue to Plautus' *Amphitryon* (Loeb Classical Library, 1916), pp.1-122.

elements. It is the synthesis of these two generic modes, or strands, that is of interest, as comedy overthrows the tyranny of the tragic while tragedy destroys the comic. It is my contention that tragedy is installed along the margins of every comedy, regardless of sub-genre, and that tragicomedy is a loose definition capable of encapsulating the absurdity of much comic drama where laughter is the only response left for individuals faced with an empty and meaningless existence. Working from the assumption that there exists no formal definition of this generic 'mongrel' from the classical age, it appears that Aristotle used something like the Renaissance meaning of the term (serious action with a happy ending) in mind when, in the *Poetics,*[33] he discusses tragedy with a dual ending.

Tragicomedy was the most popular dramatic genre of the early seventeenth century, and one possible reason for this popularity is the genre's emphasis on hybridity, and hence its daring propensity for subversion. While critics have often sought to resolve the paradoxes of tragicomedy, the politics of the genre can only be fully understood if we engage with, rather than attempt to synthesise, its stubbornly mixed nature. It is inherently political, foregrounding the tension of opposing and uneasily reconciled forces brought into the servile flattery of an absolutist court or the constitutionalist subversions of absolutism within the City of London. One could therefore suggest that its formal structure encodes important aspects of early Stuart England's national, sexual, racial, religious and political hybridity.[34]

Claims of form at the expense of substance heralded a fascinating new idiom that enabled dramatists to explore the frontiers of known sexual reality. One of the prime achievements of tragicomedy is the serious treatment of the darker potentialities of sexuality in a comic framework. Thus, illicit or problematic sex drives imply some

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[33] See George F. Hand, *Aristotle's Teleological Theory of Tragedy and Epic*, (Heidleberg, 1995), p.21
[34] Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation*, (Routledge, 1997), p.ixff

broader dislocation in the social moral order. In certain tragicomic scenes, sexual malaise indicates the protagonist's temporary alienation from the spiritual universe, but the ingenuity of tragicomic conventions ensures that both audience and characters are generically protected from theatrically exciting and psychologically compelling explorations of sexual dilemmas that skirt the boundary of the tragic.

The special province of tragicomedy is the exploration of the anxieties and fantasies that exist between desire and fulfilment, between sexuality and sex. By its defining dramatic requirements, tragicomedy connects sex with both death and laughter, effectively providing an aesthetic bridge between the ontological turmoil of tragedy and the concupiscence of comedy. According to the genre's chief Renaissance theorist, Giambattista Guarini,[35] there is a combination of the "comic order" (in the development of the plot towards a happy ending) and the laughter of comedy with "the danger but not the death" of tragedy. Following Guarini, in his preface to *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1609) John Fletcher wrote that a tragicomedy "wants deaths, which is enough to make it no comedie" and that its characters can range from "a God" to "meane people" who are generically the source of laughter.[36]

Sex and death are presented as alternatives to one another with the consequences of the sex-death symbiosis generating representations of sexuality that are morbid, warped, and often disturbing. Sexual desire is therefore presented as sudden and unavoidable madness, a sickness, a harbinger of death, but clues are still provided for the audience to anticipate a happy ending of sorts. Such generic markers are conventionally cryptic asides or indications of the presence of a controlling character. This provides a safe perspective from which to observe as well as to

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[35]Giambattista Guarini (1601), *The Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry*, selected and translated by Allan H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism Plato to Dryden,* (New York, 1940), pp.505-33
[36] John Fletcher, *The Faithful Shepherdess*, in *The Dramatic Works of the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. Fredson Bowers, (Cambridge, 1966), III.483

participate in the sexual fears and anxieties of the characters. From within the confines of the 'comic order' however, sexuality leads not only towards the possibility of death but also to ridiculous behaviour which further shields the audience from the sufferings of characters by portraying various forms of insatiable desire and indulgence which arouse satiric laughter. This helps to create a complex portrait of sexual obsession as both horrifying and absurd.

This generically determined mix of tragedy and comedy may be designed to provoke both pity and laughter but the 'happy' endings often fail to subsume entirely the guilt and misery which have preceded them. Technical rather than emotional difficulties have been altered and as these overtly artful resolutions do not adequately compensate for the elaboration of sexual difficulties, the discomfort at the end of tragicomedy often translates as aesthetic dissatisfaction. This emotional and aesthetic discomfort is intrinsic to the endings of tragicomedy as painful consequences are always short-circuited. The serious is often undercut by an incongruity, a falling short of an agreed upon standard of seriousness. These ludicrous, obviously absurd, incongruous, exaggerated or eccentric conclusions may not always be comic, but nonetheless, they display one of the main generic markers of comedy.

Generic Progress

Ever since Leo Strauss began arguing in the 1950s that "tragedy and comedy are from Plato's point of view equally necessary and equally problematic" [37] critics have been developing a view of Plato's philosophy as itself *tragicomic*. Following on from Hayden White's *Metahistory*, it has become apparent that historians and philosophers

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[37] Leo Strauss (1959), *On Plato's Symposium*, ed. Seth Benardete, (Chicago, 2001), p.171

of history consistently use more than one trope or mode of 'emplotment' to express ideological preferences, which determine the ways in which political and ethical issues are handled. Invariably, moralistic or aesthetic choices determine the inclusion or exclusion of certain details, be they structural or stylistic. This appropriation of the *telos* of history as inherently poetic and rhetorical provides readers of historical texts with a code capable of unlocking the ideological remit of the literary. Why an author would choose to present their ideas in a particular mode is revealed as a polemic and strategic confrontation with the exigencies of time since stylistic or generic conventions contain socio-symbolic messages historically specific encryptions of concern. White argues that form is therefore immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right.[38] Therefore, the modes of emplotment that White identifies are inevitably structured ideologically, as generic modulations which follow an organised hierarchy with a political imperative.

The materialisation of genre as a system of regulatory norms that have over time produced "the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface"[39] exhibits the strenuous cultural labour required to produce a dramatic corpus and inscribe it with the marks of generic difference that eventually come to be taken as natural. The premise that genre entails a hierarchic and retrogressive social philosophy has resulted in many of the abuses of categorisation which ordained a rank-ordering system that corresponded to the divisions of feudal society. Critics such as Northrop Frye have not been alone in

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[38] Genre choices affect certain ideologically overdetermined categories (harmony, order, concord and discord, energy, nature, paternity, art, and so on) and offer at different times the possibility of a semantic fusion through which a text can thematize its own ambivalent relation to the structure of a social power. See also Macherey and Balibar, 'On Literature as Ideological Form' in Robert Young ed., *Untying the Text* (London, 1981), p.85ff.

[39] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, (New York and London, 1993), p.9

detecting the political bias of the relegation of comedy and satire to a lowly status, that reflects the moral standards and social classes they symbolise.[40] Tragic drama may have been thought since Aristotle to represent "men better than they are" while comedy depicted "men as worse"[41] but, the very fact that Plato's anti-tragic dialogues appear to have been overlooked by those critics keen to adopt an Aristotelian rigour for tragedy, points to a preoccupation with decidedly unpleasant emotions.

George Steiner, who perhaps identifies images of humanity doubled up in agony to be more acceptable than images of humanity doubled up in laughter has advanced the view that tragedy displays "in the very essence of his suffering… man's claim to dignity".[42] Frye has also counselled against searching for moral or realistic conflicts in the comedies since only tragedy will satisfy those who believe that "literature's essential function is to illuminate something about life, or reality, or experience, or whatever we call the immediate world outside literature".[43] He goes on to argue that comedy merely "seeks its own end instead of holding the mirror up to nature", to such an extent that he understands the comedies to be so "obviously conventionalised that a serious interest in them soon leads to an interest in convention itself".[44] We may read this as a claim that comedy holds up a mirror to custom, reflecting the tastes and limitations of any and every society. Similarly, Cicero claimed that comedy held up a "mirror to custom and an image of truth",[45] although he was well aware that it was a somewhat distorted fairground mirror.

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[40] Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays,* (Princeton, 1957), p.22
[41] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, (New York, 1947), p.5
[42] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy,* (London, 1961), p.9
[43] Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance,* (New York, 1965), p.8
[44] *ibid*
[45] Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour,* ed. Helen Ostovich, (Manchester, 2001), p.248

White identifies Hegel as the philosopher who employed the comic mode of emplotment through his use of the trope of synecdoche to integrate parts into a larger historical whole. One way of reading Hegel may provide a sense of satisfying resolution, reconciliation and organic completion in the present, but this conservative position is disputed by theorists such as Georg Lukàcs who regard Hegel's commitment to tragedy as bearing testimony to his "utter integrity" as a thinker.[46] Rather than concerning itself with the ultimate verities sustained by a commensurably profound ontology, comedy is seen to have a limited focus dealing with the immediate and the pragmatic, and hence ephemeral and philosophically insignificant issues. But the question remains, what can comedy teach us about life? Is comedy about superficial and sometimes even grotesque pleasures? Or does it give us insight into the highest realms of human desire?

Binary Objectives

Not only has comedy been deemed inferior in terms of its material content, rather, its status as the putative antithesis of tragedy has frequently been described not in a relation of antithetical equivalents, but of dependent subordination. Working from within the series of oppositions: serious/light-hearted, profound/frivolous, eternal/transient, tragedy has been seen as the primary form which establishes the norms on which comedy is reliant. Walter Kerr advances this theory by describing

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[46] Georg Lukàcs (1938), *The Young Hegel*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (London, 1975), especially Part III, Chapter 8, 'Tragedy in the realm of the ethical'.

comedy as "a parasitical form, and no absolute" as it needs "a richer form to feed on being in essence a shadow".[47] The shadowy origins of comedy have further enhanced this mistrust of the comedic, as it developed out of the satyr plays of ancient Greece and the dream-like *Komos* so closely related to the Dionysiac frenzy of ancient festivity. Furthermore, the Aristotelian classification of comedy, at least in the material sense, hinges on the treatment of "deformity", "the ridiculous", "the ugly and distorted"[48] which sets comedy in differential opposition to the putative concern of 'art', namely the aesthetic appropriation of the 'beautiful'.

As an idiom that is concerned with continuity and survival, comedy is concerned with 'living on' sometimes happily ever after, but always unharmed. This has made for a particularly resilient literary form, capable of mutating along with changes in social and political conditions. Dependent on the presentation of imperfection comedy did however, during the late Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, strive for a perfection of form. Not easily definable by structure alone or subject matter, early modern comedy can be identified through its celebration of the capacity to endure adversity, to turn turmoil and confusion into stability, even to take the 'ugly and distorted' and perceive an undiscovered 'beauty' therein. Attempting to locate itself in a perfect society, in some form of u-topia, comedy reaches out towards acceptance, integration and reconciliation. If such a world could exist, dramatic comedy would represent the highest of all poetic art forms. It would have the ability to triumph over the tragic, to overturn the tragic mutability of our bodies and celebrate a universe free from distortion and corruption.

At the root of both tragedy and comedy, however, lies the same pretence: in comedy the pretence to wisdom which although farcical attempts to take the human to

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[47] Walter Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy,* (New York, 1967), p.314-5

[48] Aristotle, *Poetics 5* in *The Comic in Renaissance Comedy,* ed. D. Farley-Hills, (London, 1981), p.9

the limits of experience; in tragedy, the pretence to wisdom allows humans to go beyond what appears as the limits of existence and to painfully, and, nobly discover those limits. Between these two genres lies a hybrid which has been deemed 'problematic' by genre theorists as it reveals the very instability of generic classification that is at the root of the inventiveness of literature. Tragicomedy occurs because of a lack of agreement about values and behaviour, which therefore demands a more acute portrayal of life. Ambiguity and danger force the amusing to turn serious and the serious to dissolve in laughter, avoiding the idealism of tragedy and the lack of realistic immediacy associated with comedy.

The mixture of the comedic and the serious reveal that the separation of categories are not inherent in nature, rather it is human intellect which identifies similarities between individual texts and deploys aspects of the grouping to predict other aspects of a social hierarchy within the group. Genres may have been defined through characterisation: kings and gods in tragedy, slaves and commoners in comedy, but it is within the very restrictions of this definition that 'value' is associated specifically with class affiliations. This interest in 'value' reveals to what extent genre choices are social evaluations, which must be investigated philosophically if culture is to be described, not in neutral terms, but as an activity with political and moral objectives.

Genre theory, as limitation, as prohibitive construction, permits the invention of new idioms because it allows audiences to grasp the social significance of the confrontations between generic categories and the organisation of the *classes* themselves. Throughout this thesis, the problematic status of generic definition will be explored through an analysis of texts which question the very categories they have been placed in. The 'tragicomic' is therefore addressed primarily as a sub-genre of

comedy but more significantly as a marker of the generic ambiguity which lies at the very heart of the aesthetic. The question as to why a hierarchy of genres exists, opens up a debate on the nature of hierarchy itself as an epistemological model. From such a perspective, the disclosure and reflection of the structuration of power, not only between generic categories in dramatic literature but also between gendered, corporeal bodies in early modern England, suggests the instability of all classification. This scrutiny of boundaries explores the concept of the genreless text as impossible: any one text can belong to any number of genres, but no text can remain out-with the inclusivity of the generic. This means that it is in principle only ever possible to work with the category of genre as a hypothesis projected onto texts which never quite conform to an empirical definition, but which must be read as though a master list of genres existed.

Genre Knowledge

Jacques Derrida, suggests that the law of genre is a taboo on miscegenation, but that the condition of this taboo is the counter-law of the impossibility of not mixing genres (and genders).[49] Derrida exposes the ideological horizon whereby the law of genre is conflated with the law of Nature. He illuminates the guiding assumption of all genre theory, from the past to the present, which upholds that generic combinations and mixtures are not acceptable, and that the law of genre must be preserved at all costs. The notion that 'kinds' are somehow naturally simple is underscored by the belief that the natural is thus the principle by which the world is a self-generating succession of sameness, and not the propagator of the 'hodge-podge' of hybridity referred to by

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[49] Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *op. cit.*, pp.221-252

Renaissance playwrights such as John Lyly.[50]

This restrictive classical requirement is revealed as a partially totalitarian dictum, which is utterly violated by the 'irresponsibility' of artistic representation. Take for example the plethora of generic categories that were available in the period of intense literary experimentation that we refer to as the early modern period. Here, writers appear to specialise in hybrid forms and generic mixtures: the emblem book (of icons and adages), the florilegium (collections of different types of verse), the book of essays (Montaigne's *The Essayes* is the most famous example), or the anatomy (where a subject of intense topicality is dissected). The law of genre, or more precisely the law of *nature*, was presumably threatened by this large diversity of literary 'kinds' thus posing a threat to the idea of generic classification. The fluidity and multivalence of genre was possibly perceived as a threat to the whole notion that there must be an order of 'kindness' to things. Strict taxonomic regulations were seemingly applied to almost every area of early modern existence with the taboo on miscegenation policing both private and public realms. It is perhaps possible to say then, that rather than finding genre mixing inadmissable, certain authorities were terrified by the possible results of generic hybridity, which they perceived as going against nature with the consequent horrific inevitability of the production of either monstrous or ridiculous creations.

What emerged from this period of literary development was the provision of a

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[50] In his prologue to *Midas* (1592) Lyly remarks how quickly fashions in clothes, food, and plays alter and how in his present age once-distinct nationalities and generic forms all 'co-mingle': "What heretofore hath been served in several dishes for a feast is now minced in a charger for a gallimaufrey. If we present a mingle-mangle, our fault is to be excused, because the whole world is become an hodge-podge". See *Gallathea and Midas*, ed. Anne Begor Lancashire, (Lincoln, 1969), p.80.

totalizing perspective for a new empiricism, the promotion of a theoretical order

capable of accounting for nature as something concrete, constant and universally

uniform, as something that obeys laws while admitting diversity. But in order to see

nature as a single and unique realm that embraces a diversity of species and genres,

dramatic genres can no longer be viewed as objects of and for imitation, but as objects

of and for representation.

Historical Symbiosis

From the standpoint of Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*, which is an exemplary treatise, is

to recognise this period in literary history as a time of polarisation, where both generic

flexibility and neo-classical rigidity stood in direct opposition to one another. In fact,

as Carolyn Miller suggests, "the number of genres in any one society…depends on the

complexity and diversity of that society".[51] From this complex and diverse historical

locale Shakespeare's own satirically fatuous depiction of the number of genres, sub-

genres, and even super-genres at the early modern dramatist's disposal seems all the

more farcical as evinced in Old Polonius's dazzling parodic recitation of an inventory

of genres:

> Tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral,
> tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral,
> scene individual or poem unlimited.
> <div align="right">(Hamlet, II.ii.407-11)</div>

Many of the problems normally associated with defining a literary genre have been

side-stepped by the assumption that Shakespeare is central to it. Shakespeare's plays

can be praised – paradoxically – for their willingness to break generic conventions,

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[51] Carolyn R. Miller, 'Genre as social action', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, pp.151-67. Reprinted in Freedman and Medway, *Learning and Teaching Genre,* (Portsmouth, 1994), p.36

for their blending of satire or tragedy with history, for providing the ultimate comic

history, and even, in the early plays and the late plays, for absorbing elements of

romance and the heroic play. So the Shakespearean canon itself can be identified as an

example of this Polonian nightmare.

A revaluation of the generic divisions of the First Folio prompts a revaluation

of the early Shakespeare and undoes the assumption that Heminge and Condell were

performing a confident exercise in dramatic taxonomy. Francis Meres may have

enthusiastically described Shakespeare as "among the English…the most excellent in

both kinds for the stage", the best in both "Comedy and Tragedy",[52] but the textual

materialisation of the Shakespeare canon into *three* distinct categories tends to

occlude the bare and incontrovertible fact, that the variety and scope of the early

modern stage presented the editors of the First Folio with several challenges.

Even the best efforts of contemporary critics seem to endorse Samuel

Johnson's 1756 verdict that

> The players who in their edition divided our author's work into comedies,
> histories and tragedies, seem not to have distinguished the three kinds by any
> very exact or definite ideas.[53]

Around the time that Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* (1596) was published as a 'history'

there seems to have been a shift away from identifying new historical plays as

tragedies. Meres, in 1597, identified *Richard II, Richard III, Henry IV and King John*

as tragedies, but the various qualifying terms 'famous', 'chronicle', 'famous

chronicle', 'true chronicle', and the 'true and honourable' begin to appear more

frequently to denote a play's historical veracity.

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[52] Francis Meres, from *Palladis Tamia* (1598), *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 3 vols., ed.Gregory Smith, (Oxford, 1904), II.318
[53] Samuel Johnson (1756), 'Preface to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays', *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. H.R. Woodhuysen, (London, 1989), p.127

Elsewhere however, the word 'history' denotes simply a story: Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604) is termed a 'tragical history', as were the first two quartos of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601). The *Taming of A Shrew* (1594) was referred to as a 'pleasant conceited history' and *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) as a 'most excellent history' (and a 'comical history' in head titles).[54] Earlier uses of these terms also sometimes distinguish between 'famous' (well-known and true) historical subject matter and what the players or writers made of it, although William Webbe, in 1586, states that he understands poetry to be divided into three sorts, "which are Comicall, Tragicall, Historicall".[55] It is not wholly facetious to suggest then, that the first canon of the 'history' play, as opposed to that designated by the epithets 'true/famous/tragical/chronicle/reign', consists solely of those 'histories' the First Folio attributes to Shakespeare. The genre has remained Shakespeare's ever since, and his dominance of it, unequalled elsewhere by any of his contemporaries, is still a significant feature of his reputation.

Recent Shakespearian scholarship has stressed the extent to which the cosy demarcation of texts, into the Histories, the Tragedies, the Comedies, is itself the product of a particular, distinctively early modern, ideological frame of mind which preferred to see history or politics as something performed only in the public sphere, whilst comedy is somehow a matter for private delectation.[56] In fact, as the cultural materialist critique has emphasised, the substance of the comedies is every bit as political as that of the histories, and in these terms, the politics of Illyria or Arden are

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[54] W.W. Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration, Vol. 1 Stationers' Records: plays to 1616,* (London, [1939] 1962), pp.327, 310, 203, 278, 294, 244
[55] William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie,* (1586), in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I.249
[56] Jean Howard, 'Shakespeare and Genre', *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan, (Oxford, 1999), p.307

as relevant to the discussion of constitutional issues in Shakespeare as is the politics of Richard II's England or Caesar's Rome. According to Peter Smith, the comedies best illustrate Shakespeare's appreciation that politics should be understood as the relations between individuals within communities, the definition of which is constantly shifting, as it is a "labyrinthine world with no fixed signposts".[57]

As Jean Howard notes, the only way to interrogate the consequences of the textual materialisation of the Shakespeare canon into its three distinct categories, and the questions of ontological status that his 'problem' plays raise, is to put each individual text into conversation with their contemporaneous texts.[58] One may quickly surmise that a remarkable proportion of Shakespeare's comic concerns – whether patterns of action like the exposure of hypocrisy, depictions of the legal system as corrupt, or the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society are shared with his contemporary dramatists, but with subtle and surprising differences. When ***Measure for Measure*** stands shoulder to shoulder with Marston's *The Malcontent* then the revolutionary potential of the romance paradigm can be viewed afresh, as it is only through providing a conversational forum for the disparate texts in this vast body of writing that we can hope to undo the production and reproduction of Shakespeare's uniqueness, or at least challenge a blind faith in its efficacy. This last point may seem polemical but the contention should rest with the realisation that Shakespeare did not work in isolation.

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[57] Peter Smith, *Social Shakespeare,* (London, 1995), pp.17-39
[58] Jean Howard, 'Shakespeare and Genre', *op. cit.,* p.307

Generic Materialisation

The illusion or appearance of isolation or autonomy, which a single printed text evokes, also constructs the very real possibility of the creation of a great cultural monument. It should be recalled, that the publication of the Jonsonian and Shakespearean Folios were, indeed 'monuments' which marked the end of an ostensibly oral tradition. Both Jonson's *Works* (1616) and Shakespeare's *First Folio* (1623) have become identifiable as monolithic markers of literary invention, but in the much later publication of the Beaumont and Fletcher canon (1647) a monument to the laughing Cavalier was erected. As Peter Thomas states, what is peculiarly pertinent to the Beaumont and Fletcher project was that

> the folio was not…simply a commercial or aesthetic venture: it was also a morale boosting gesture of defiance, a propagandist reassertion of the Stuart ethic at a crucial moment in the fortunes of the Court.[59]

It is therefore possible that the sense of identity and self-respect which this text sought to provide is also reflected in the purposeful urgency that seems to accompany the fraught publication of both Shakespeare's and Jonson's collective works more than twenty years earlier. The possibility of grasping texts as socially symbolic acts, as ideological but formal and immanent responses to historical dilemmas is therefore both unavoidable and necessary.

The recent account of the publication of the First Folio, offered by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, addresses the question of why the editors do not arrange the plays in chronological order, as Jonson had. Either because they did not know the

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[59] P.W. Thomas, *Sir John Berkenhead 1617-1679: A Royalist Career in Politics and Polemics*, (Oxford, 1969), p.134

order of composition, the order of publication, or perhaps because the generic

distinctions were too ephemeral, appears to be the overall, and somewhat

disappointing conclusion as to why the collection was given the title of *Comedies,*

Histories, and Tragedies.[60] I agree with the Oxford editors that this title

> successfully navigates between the Scylla and Charybdis of 'works' or 'plays',
> while at the same time confidently advertising the range of Shakespeare's
> output – as successful in three genres as Jonson had been in one.[61]

But it is nevertheless possible to suggest a different genealogy for the volume.

Heminge and Condell's publication is inclusive where Jonson's is selective: though it

excludes some plays attributed to Shakespeare (*The London Prodigal, A Yorkshire*

Tragedy, 1 Sir John Oldcastle, and *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of*

England), it greatly extends Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre. Where Jonson rejected

collaborative work, the editors of the Folio included plays which they knew to be

collaborations, and others whose sole authorship by Shakespeare may well have been

as doubtful to them as they are to modern scholars.

Moreover, where Jonson did not distinguish by genre (although the engraving

on the title page of the 1616 Folio features personifications of tragedy, comedy,

pastoral, satire, and tragicomedy), Heminge and Condell positively embraced the

universals of Comedy and Tragedy, which presented Shakespeare as a dramatist who

had surpassed Jonson's dramatic output, with the addition of a genre that Jonson had

not even attempted; the 'history' play. It is perhaps significant then, that the first play

in Jonson's Folio of 1616 is dedicated to the foremost historian of the day, William

Camden. *Every Man In His Humour* is prefaced by his famous allusion to

Shakespeare's histories which promises that *this* play will not "with three rusty

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[60] Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor with John Jowett and William Montgomery, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion,* (Oxford, 1987), pp.36-38
[61] *ibid*., p.38

swords/ And help of some few foot-and-half-foot words,/ Fight over York, and Lancaster's long jars", nor will a "Chorus waft you o'er the seas".[62] Jonson's satirical animus towards the isolated, and in his view, falsely venerated, genre of the history play seems irrefutable as historical drama flouted the classical unities of time and place.

Like Marlowe before him, but with greater explicitness, Jonson announced his purposes in prologue and 'induction', but his programme was based on Aristotle's three unities of action, place, and time, to which he stringently adhered since he sought a precision of form. Condemning the discursiveness of the romantic mood he wanted 'realism', believing that it was the mission of comedy to depict contemporary life with moral intent, not by telling pleasing tales of fairies and Calibans. He believed in the presentation of boldly conceived types, each representative of some folly or vice, in order that through the resultant satire men might laugh and be cured of their errors. In the Prologue to *Every Man In His Humour*, Jonson engenders comedy as feminine, claiming that "she would shew an image of the times, and sport with human follies, not with crimes".[63]

Jonson's definition of comedy was nevertheless complex and not easily reduced to a single formula, but in the Induction to this same play, Cicero's tripartite dictum that 'comedy is an imitation of life, a mirror of manners and an image of truth' is reworked thus:

> And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror,
> As large as is the stage whereon we act;
> Where they shall see the time's deformity
> Anatomized in every nerve, and sinew,
> With constant courage, and contempt of fear.[64]

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[62] Ben Jonson, Prologue to *Every Man In His Humour*, *The Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. William Gifford, (London, 1853), p.3
[63] *ibid.*, p.3
[64] *ibid.*, p.31

The general theory of this period, that comedy reprehended vice, was combined with the Horatian view that the genre of comedy satirised contemporary behaviour. This was a position wholeheartedly embraced by late Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, but however, the theorisation of the comic genre aroused little interest until this historical juncture with Jonson at the forefront of a new emphasis upon the variety of possibilities within the conventions of a singular form.

M.C. Bradbrook describes the history of comedy in the early seventeenth century as the history of the traditionalists' slow retreat before the advance of the "more rigorous" Jonsonian art, which was based less on insight than upon general standards of decorum, order and hard work.[65] After Jonson**,** literary criticism was never quite the same. Even though he is generally accredited with the business of dramatising humoral psychology, *Every Man In His Humour, Every Man Out Of His Humour* and *Bartholemew Fair* subvert this view. He recognised how comedies embraced the odd rather than the ordinary, the idiosyncratic rather than the stereotypical character, subscribing to Sidney's Platonic sentiment, that the 'odd as well as the even' was required for comedy. The delight, or sympathy, of Shakespeare's romantic comedies paraded a host of prototypical characters, closer to types or *species* rather than individuals. In contrast, the mocking ironic laughter of Jonson's satire is intentionally designed to distance and estrange the viewer, to promote a virtual cognoscenti amidst his audience. But then, Jonson and Shakespeare were both at the forefront of their profession, continually assessing and addressing the tastes and peccadilloes of their audience.

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[65] M.C. Bradbrook, *The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy,* (London, 1955), pp.103-11

These different approaches to comedy show how dense networks of affiliated texts collectively receive and shape the 'form and pressure of their times', by mediating social change and contestation. This returns us to the recognition of comedy as a complex mode of perception, one whereby the possibility of wholeness and coherence is confirmed in the face of incoherence. The ultimate authority for this can be identified within the Platonic-Aristotelian inheritance of *eidos* and genre, which was applied to comedy as a 'family' grouping, in whatever form it took: romantic, satirical, or farcical. From this perspective genre became the validator of good 'taste' from the pedagogue's point of view, which attempted to define, and defend, comedy as a species of cautionary tale.

Didacticism and the Defence of Comedy

George Whetstone (1578) was not alone in perceiving the presentation of comedies as demanding the correct balance of "vertue intermyxt with vice" whereby evil would not be 'taught' but discovered:

> For by the rewards of the good the good are encouraged in wel doinge: and with the scowrge of the lewd the lewd are feared from euill attempts: maintayning this my oppinion with *Platoes* auctority.[66]

This pedagogic imperative seems to rely upon recommending the work of Ancient dramatists and philosophers as they upheld the Ciceronian edict of 'mirroring man's life', of drama as mimetic representation. Comic mimesis was also defended by Harrington who appreciated and promoted the fact that the moral aspect of comedy ensured that "vice [was] scorned, and not embraced," with Puttenham in agreement

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[66] George Whetstone (1578), *The Dedication to Promos and Cassandra* , ed. Gregory Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I.58-9

that it "tend[ed] altogether to the amendment of men by discipline and example".[67]

Thomas Lodges's careful use of Horace conflates the effect of early Roman comedy with the new type of comedy on the late Elizabethan public stage where "a thefe was loth to be seen [at] one [of] there spectacle[s], a coward was neuer present at theyr assemblies, a backbiter abhord that company".[68]

Lodge's premise is to be understood as a well-crafted counter-attack against the anti-theatrical assault upon the London stage, and his *Defence of Poetry* is an admirable attempt to assuage the deluge of prejudice which Sidney, amongst others, superficially advocated. In *An Apology for Poetry*, Sidney asks why the Puritanical assault has been so virulent upon the drama and he offers the following speculation: "perchance it is the Comik, whom naughtie Playmakers and Stage-keepers haue iustly made odious". He goes on to state that this cannot be so as:

> Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which [are] representeth in the most ridiculous and scorneful sort that may be; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such as one.[69]

Of course, Sidney was concerned with the "right vse of Comedy", and as such his argument begins to dismantle the accusation that "Comedies rather teach then reprehend amorous conceits". He focuses on the neglect of those rules which govern time and unity in structural precepts as "grosse absurdities".[70]

Sidney's condemnation of theatrical practices may focus on what would have been traditionally viewed as matters of generic convention, but his famous reference to the stage as being filled with performances which violate both aesthetic and social

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[67] *ibid.*, p.124, p.156

[68] Thomas Lodge (1579), Lodge, *A Reply to Stephen Gosson's Schoole of Abuse in Defence of Poetry, Musick, and Stage Plays*, ed. Gregory Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I.81

[69] *ibid.* II.176

[70] *ibid.*, II.177,186

principles repays closer scrutiny. Sidney thus accused the early modern stage of producing:

> Neither right Tragedies, nor right Comedies; mingling Kings and Clownes, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in Clownes by head and shoulders, to play a part in maiesticall matters, with neither decencie nor discretion: So as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulnes, is by their mungrell Tragy-comedies obtained.[71]

More seems to be revealed about the politics of Sir Philip Sidney than the nature of genre, but it is always telling that such systematic critics disclose more about themselves than the object of their scrutiny. Nevertheless, Sidney was not alone in displaying a complete abhorrence of the generic hybridity fostered by the stage, as it implied the dissolution of other boundaries of both a sexual and political nature.

'Very tragical mirth'

The 'comic relief' afforded by the "mingling of Kings and Clownes" works through a deep and ancient principle in comedy. Historically monarchs relied on the licensed speech of their court jester, or fool, to remind them that they were mortal, that regardless of their sovereign power, they were not divine. In tragedy, the failings of kings who have forgotten, like Lear, that to be truly regal and authoritative is to "see feelingly" (*King Lear*, IV.vi.148) is magnified by swift juxtapositions between 'reason' and 'madness', between tragic and comic motifs. In that "most piteous tale of Lear" (V.iv.213) or *The Tragedy of Hamlet* where "One woe doth tread upon another's heel" (IV.vii.162) the many variations of Sidney's depiction of

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[71] *ibid.*, II.199

'mongrelisation' are demonstrated alongside the curious volatility of laughter. Within these two highly revered tragedies an analysis of the dramatic discourse between fools and their masters, between the subversion of comedy and the authority of tragedy appeals to the very distinction between these two monolithic super-genres.

Far from enjoying a total freedom of speech, clowns had to resort to complex linguistic strategies to disguise their criticisms for fear of punishment. One should note how eager Lear's Fool is to avoid being "whipp'd" although he does use certain conversational strategies to control or influence the linguistic behaviour of his social superiors. The relative power of his conversational prowess originates in his condition of being a 'primary knower',[72] as he rarely asks a question that he sincerely wants answered. More like the "schoolmaster" who offers to "teach thee a Speech", (I.iv.115) Lear's Fool already knows the answers and his elicitations have the purpose of signalling his intention to joke and to obtain from his interlocutor permission to deliver a *punchline*. However, the control he exerts is relative, it is based on persuasion and manipulation and therefore requires a fragile maintenance within each conversational turn:

> I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipp'd for speaking true; thou'lt have me whipp'd for lying; and sometimes I am whipp'd for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o' thing than a fool; and yet I would not be thee, nuncle; thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides, and left nothing i' th' middle.
>
> (I.iv.182-8)

Here, comedy enters the tragedy without ceremony to demonstrate that the filial disloyalty that the great king is experiencing can be expressed best through the metaphor of poor housekeeping. The domestic and social elements with which

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[72]Margaret Berry, "Systematic Linguistics and discourse analysis: a multi-layered approach to exchange structure", *Studies in Discourse Analysis*, ed. M. Coulthard and M. Montgomery, (London, 1981), pp.49-53

comedy is associated - the 'lower' stuff of the quotidian universe - is used to intuitively relate to Lear's confusion over his abrupt loss of social status.

The specific status of tragedy as a form of entertainment relies repeatedly on the interactive context of dialogue, where the linguistic tools of comedy – puns, quibbles, and riddles – are all employed in constraining the conversational options left open to the other character in the dialogue. Somewhat surprisingly, the 'melancholy prince' Hamlet displays a jocular familiarity with the tonal and verbal ambiguities of comic language and is involved in many diverse instances of humour within his dramatic play-space. There is the exchange of verbal repartee with Polonius of which the following is only an example:

> POL: Will you walk out of the air, my lord?
> HAM: Into my grave?
> POL: Indeed, that's out of the air.
> (II.ii.209-211)

And there is the conflict of comic and tragic tonalities in his response to the whereabouts of the murdered Polonius:

> In heaven; send thither to see; if your messenger find him not there, seek him I' the other place yourself. But if, indeed, you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.
> (IV.iii.34-8)

There is a darkness here which focuses more sharply on the tragic as the pleasure induced from Hamlet's antic humour becomes more of a thrusting snort of aggression rather than the free and spontaneous laughter which comedy seeks. As the realisation increases that the ultimate authority in this drama will be tragic, a social commentary on class structure manifests itself. Hamlet may toy with rhetorical sophistry but he stands in opposition to Lear's Fool. As his social inferior, Lear's Fool performs cultural negations and symbolic inversions whereas Hamlet's wit is the mark of his

social superiority, and his power of mind takes expression in both his attempts to puzzle out the meaning of life and death, and his humorous adroitness.

Renowned as one of dramatic literature's finest and most enigmatic achievements, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not only a dramatic work filled with pathos and violence, it also exploits fully the conventions of comic relief to alleviate the tensions resurrected by its tragic form. In fact, in 1604 one Anthony Skoloker praised Shakespeare for combining light and heavy matter in a single play: "*Friendly Shakespeare's Tragedies*, where the *Comedian* rides when the *Tragedian* stands on tip-toe…pleas[ing] all, like Prince *Hamlet*".[73] Thus, as the image of Shakespeare the man was associated with social mobility so the image of Shakespeare the dramatist was characterised by stylistic range and generic flexibility.

Infectious Humour

The idea that badly made plays violated class and gender distinctions positioned the stage as a place where improbable events took place which stretched the audience's credulity. Comedies were highly lucrative products of the burgeoning theatrical industry and were subject to the same suspicions as the 'common comonties' or commodities of the market place. This identification between comedy and commerce conflated the idea that the corporeal presence of actors upon a stage (particularly in connection with the theatrical practise of cross-dressing) was tantamount to a marketing of flesh, to a prostitution of poetry. This perhaps had more to do with the location of the early modern public theatres in the liberties of London where brothels, bear-baiting pits, and barracks were its close neighbours, and hence, the source of a

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[73] E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems,* 2 vols. (Oxford, 1930) II.214-15

good deal of its custom. However, since Aristotle, comedy has been invariably

denounced as an inferior form of drama as it deals with an inferior class of person.

Almost one hundred years after Shakespeare's comedies were performed John Dryden

was still displaying the classical aversion to comedy in his work *A Parallel of Poetry*

and Painting (1695) where he describes the distinction between comedy and tragedy

as a "Lazar in comparison to a Venus".[74] As Dryden progresses along the somewhat

dubious neo-classical perspective that comedy's only redeeming feature is that it may

act as a placebo "suitable to dampen the dangerous political propensities" of "the

vulgar gazers" and "the beastly audience" he becomes a useful point of departure back

towards the historical conception of the public, professional theatre as a

'contaminating' influence upon an unwitting 'vulgar' public.

In *A Treatise on Daunces*, the 1581 pamphlet attributed to Stephen Gosson,

the theatre is described as one of the "accessories and dependents (or things annexed)

to whoredom".[75] John Northbrook in 1577 had also queried the moral didacticism of

the stage, producing his own pamphlet the *Treatise wherein Dicing, Dancing, Vain*

Plays are reproved. The theatre had become a centre for dubious activity, a place to

"learn how to be false and deceive your husband…how to ravish and beguile, how to

betray, to flatter, lie, swear, foreswear, murder…poison…rebel…"[76] As Steven

Mullaney has pointed out in his book, *The Place of the Stage* (1988), the theatre easily

slipped into the socially dubious nature of the enterprises which surrounded it, located

as it was in the Liberties that housed "marginal spectacles" ranging from "hospitals

and brothels to madhouses, scaffolds of execution, prisons and Lazar-houses".[77]

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[74] *cit., The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, eds. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, (London, 1986), p.72
[75] *ibid*., p.62
[76] *cit.*, Bradbrook, *op. cit*., p.36
[77] Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play and Power in Renaissance England,* (Chicago, 1988), p.31

The theatre was bound to be associated with, to be seen in terms of, these more familiar spectacles, with the geographical location indicating the status of the theatre within the culture: as something to be kept apart, a distrusted alien that threatened the civil, moral and social order. Thus, the theatre came to be likened to the disease and prostitution which surrounded it, not only in the minds of its Puritan opponents but also in the minds of almost everyone who witnessed these spectacles.

According to Mullaney, the most iconographically contaminating of these spectacles was leprosy, which, he writes:

> entered into the moral imagination of medieval culture at an early date, such that it altered and determined not only the lives of those afflicted but also the metaphors, customs and institutions that shaped the lives of those otherwise untouched by the disease.[78]

The disease metaphor no doubt revived by periodic outbreaks of the plague, continued to shape social policy long after the last lepers were ferried to Southwark in 1557, an event Mullaney carefully describes. In fact, the initial attempts to control the public theatres were made on the basis of public health. Letters between the Lord Mayor of London and the Privy Council during the years between 1580 and 1600 testify to the changing perspective on the theatre and to the supercession of one kind of vision by another.

Throughout this period, the Lord Mayor repeatedly petitioned Elizabeth's government to discourage public plays as a means of curbing the danger of infection:

> It may please your honor According to our dutie I and my brethren have had care for staye of infection of the plague and published orders in that behalf which we intended god willing to execute with dilligence. Among other we find great and dengerous inconvenience of people to playes, beare bayting, fencers, and phane spectacles at the Theatre and Curtaine and other like places

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[78] *ibid.*, p.32

to which doe resorte multitudes of the basist sort of people; and many enfected with sores running on them.[79]

It is the sight of open sores, a disfigurement historically associated with leprosy now attributed to the plague and to syphilis, that one sees at "the Theatre and the Curtain", not the plays, bear baiting or fencing that are performed there.

If as Mullaney argues, the spectacle of leprosy affected the metaphors of the early modern imagination, the same is no less true of spectacle itself: the physical process of ocular speculation (the *way* of seeing was conceptualised in metaphoric terms as a form of intercourse). The eyes were viewed as a channel, a vagina, if you will, the means through which a mind is impregnated.[80] However, this impregnation is itself a transgression, an unnatural submission that results, in the mind conceiving illegitimate ideas. As Cressida pronounces, "minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude" (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.ii.112) and by implication, venereal infection. Thus, the Liberties themselves become a kind of 'running sore' infected by 'the basist sort of people', which threatens the 'body', both political and visceral, of London.

This association of the corruption of both mental and physical health infused much debate on the propriety of the early modern theatre. However, until the diseased and infectious 'body' of London had at last dragged itself out from the terrifying grip of plague, the long arms of the State attempted to grasp and display the infectious potential as synonymous with the 'latent' moral corruption of the theatre. The late 1580s witnessed a shift in the public attitude to theatrical entertainment, with Philip

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[79] E.K. Chambers and W.W. Greg, eds., *Dramatic Records of the City of London: The Remembrencia*, Vol. 1, The Malone Society, 3 May 1583, (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), pp.43-100

[80] This operation of the eyes is not only limited to the fanciful poets. Drawings of the eye made by Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century, and by Vesalius, the Belgian anatomist in the sixteenth, resemble drawings of female organs. See Andreas Vesalius, (1555), *De Humani Corporis Fabrica: An Annotated Translation*, trans., Daniel Garrison and Malcolm Hast, (Northwestern University, Illinois, 2003).

Henslowe signing the partnership agreement for his new theatre, to which the infamous Little Rose 'inn' lent its grounds, its name and evidently its reputation as one of the original 'Bankside stewes' licensed by Henry II in 1161 and owned for nearly two centuries by the good sisters at Stratford-at-Bowe. Thus, the principal employer of players also became an employer of prostitutes.

It was shortly after Henslowe's acquisition of the Little Rose and the erection of the Rose that the Lord Mayor's office altered its objection to the theatres, emphasising decadence over disease. At about the same time, those within and around the theatre community, who had before been silent, began to note – some with amusement, some with mockery, some with dismay – the coupling of the stage and brothel. John Davies satirises the courtier who replaces the theatre with the whorehouse on his daily round; Henry Chettle, with tongue in cheek, scolds the player for taking trade from the prostitute; and Thomas Nashe defends the theatre as a place of social and cultural improvement, not of moral decay.[81] Of course, mention of prostitution was invariably accompanied by its relationship to disease, since the association of the theatre with the brothel was not merely a puritanical conceit or an accident of locale but a material fact, one seemingly recognised by everyone from Puritan to player to Privy councillor. Therefore, the rhetoric behind the accusations of the seductive powers of illusion gathered momentum, and to a large extent a bizarre comic hubris since the material situation of the theatre was reflected in the volatility associated with the comic form.

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[81] John Davies, 'In Fuscum', *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alexander Gossart, 2 Vols. (London, 1876),2:38; Henry Chettle, *Kind-Hart's Dream* (1592); Thomas Nashe*, Pierce Pennilesse* (1592); all cited in Ann Jennalie Cook, 'Bargaines of Incontinence': Bawdy Behaviour in the Playhouses', *Shakespeare Survey* 10, (1977), p.286.

Derision Medicinable

As Lawrence Danson points out, Shakespeare's romantic comedies and histories may have been denounced as old fashioned and fantastic romances or "mouldy tales", but it is not only the 'romance' plays which expose the seamy underside of contemporary urban life; *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), and *Measure for Measure* (1603) "know all about a world of universal prostitution".[82] In fact, under analysis these two plays display startling similarities to the 'city' comedies of Shakespeare's contemporaries. They may both contain the courtly figures associated with romantic comedy, and both allude to absent monarch plays, but their focus on urban merchants, artisans and the lower classes intervenes in contemporary ideological struggles. The relevant historical and ideological content of city comedy is thus identified with the materialistic ideology of the capital during the early modern phase of its expansion. The emergence of the urban marketplace as a "central urban institution of the preindustrial city"[83], and its displacement of the "feudal order and the moral values that uphold it"[84] also relate well to Shakespeare's most problematic comedies.

In addition feminist readings have detected in city comedy the salient traits of a dominant early modern discourse that constructs woman as naturally incontinent and inconstant[85]. From this perspective, therefore, the characterising feature of city comedy turns out to be its treatment of gender and sexuality which brings such comedic anomalies as *The Taming of the Shrew* into close proximity with this posthumous sub-genre. As Mary Beth Rose has noted, while Elizabethan and

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[82] Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres,* (Oxford, 2000), p.56
[83] Susan Wells, "Jacobean City Comedy and the Ideology of the City", *English Literary History*, 48 (1981), p.37
[84] Lawrence Venuti, *Our Halcyon Dayes: English Prerevolutionary Texts and Postmodern Culture*, (Madiston and London, 1989), p.136
[85] Gail Kern Paster, "Leaky Vessels: The Incontinent Women of City Comedy", *Renaissance Drama*, 18, (1987), pp.43-65

particularly Shakespearean romantic comedy "concentrated on the complexities of eros, dramatized as sexual desire seeking and finding fulfilment in the heroes' successful resolution of the process of courtship", by contrast "Jacobean city comedy brings into the light of representation precisely those dissociations of Renaissance sexual ideology which romantic comedy evokes but seeks to reconcile and constrain".[86]

The early Elizabethan fashion for romantic comedy was gratified by notable playwrights such as John Lyly and Robert Greene, but it is with Shakespeare that the romance genre really flourishes. The formalist theorist, Northrop Frye, has presented certain universal genres and modes as the key to organising the entire literary corpus, perceiving the romance paradigm as pertaining to the "mythos of Summer" which is "perennially childlike" in its "extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space".[87] This thematic code relates well to Lyly's *Gallathea* (1588), Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1590), and among Shakespeare's early romances, *As You Like It* (1600) and *Twelfth Night* (1600), where the farcical abounds in a host of mistaken identities and other fantastical feats of substitution. However, moving from the pastoral to the urban does more than substitute one geographical location for another. There is a distinct reflection of history in this thematic concern, as the relaxed laws of the country are replaced by the strict statutes of the city.

The highly conventionalised formulae of *As You Like It, Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing,* all display a close association with the pastoral archetype and the idyllic myth of pleasant pastures.

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[86] Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama*, (Ithaca and London, 1988), p.43

[87] Frye, *Anatomy of* Criticism, p.186

Indeed, although many romantic comedies take Italy for their scene, the green and pleasant lands, fertile countryside, and game-filled forests, all seem to work on the principle of a kind of national comedy, wherein not only England's precarious present but its perilous past is presented with a vision of history as a romance replete with a happy ending and a new sense of community. Danson is swift to point out that this is not irrelevant to Shakespeare's "contemporaneous development of 'history' as a genre that alludes to the conventions of both tragedy and comedy".[88] It is also interesting to note that the comedy which infiltrates the history play tends towards a form of politically subversive humour which mocks the master/slave dichotomy. In this sense, comedy is given a voice in   history, a voice of dissent which demands explanation.

The dialectic between Elizabethan dramatic form and social process is especially conspicuous in the triadic romance pattern of exile and return, or as C.L. Barber constructs it, as "release through clarification".[89] On the one hand the experience of the characters can be seen as a fictional analogue of both the theatrical and social experiences of its audience. Actions can also be related to moral patterns, most succinctly described by Frye as the pattern of entering, responding to and leaving a "green world".[90] There are several other comic structures such as that of illusion and enlightenment, which Frye applies specifically to both *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598) and *Twelfth Night* (1600). Nevertheless, the idea of English history as a romantic comedy began to wane as the 'mortal moon', chaste Elizabeth herself, grew closer to death. This may allude to a crude simplification of generic evolution, but perhaps this was the reason why many of Shakespeare's contemporaries began to

[88] Danson, *op.cit.*, p.54
[89] C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, p.6
[90] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* p.182

relocate their lush comic scenes within the decaying urban territory of the city.

The comedies of Thomas Heywood and Thomas Dekker both display transitional features, with middle-class realism proceeding alongside sentimental and romantic fantasies. *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599) is a nostalgic attempt to indulge in a comic fantasy of universal nobility whilst working within an optimistic view of absolutist politics. Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (1610) and Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605) explore the transient forms of the commodification of the human subject, particularly in relation to women as 'movable' goods. Both these plays will be studied more closely in Chapter 3 as examples of patriarchal law. Although these plays are classified as 'comedies' generically encoded with comedy's structural preoccupation with marriage, there is an obvious alteration in values in relation to convention. These 'city' comedies dramatise a credit-based socio-economic order where the demonisation of women underlines the critical implications of disenchantment with 'legitimate' sexual and social exchange. Both are fascinating considerations of the link with the principle of simulation that cross-dressed actors and prostitutes stage as identity is shown as a social construct. The genre of Comedy may have been gendered feminine, but in disclosing the constitution of gender as a theme, the dramatic selections which have been made throughout this thesis exemplify their importance within the literary canon Thus, in scrutinising the shifting boundaries between popular genres an analysis of the once immovable distinctions between genders becomes inevitable.

In Middleton's biting satires we are led towards a new set of generic conventions, invariably termed as 'city' comedy, where only the most entrepreneurial rogues triumph, as in the case of *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605) or *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613). The earlier play anticipates the much darker comedy of

Massinger, in particular *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1620) and *The City Madam* (1623). But the emergence of city comedy as a distinct genre is complexly interwoven with other phenomena at the end of the sixteenth century. While the existence of Roman urban comedies in particular provided a precedent of the city plays of Jonson, Marston and Middleton, in the first decade of the seventeenth century the obvious popularity of this genre suggests that it could not have taken hold in such varied and sophisticated forms had it not addressed the particular anxieties and struggles of a specific historical paradigm. It is within the classical 'intrigue' comedies, the 'humour' comedies and the city comedies that we can detect the introduction of a social note into the equation which bears an unmistakably bourgeois flavour as the concerns of the mercantile classes are addressed.

Playwrights such as George Chapman, Philip Massinger, and Thomas Middleton form a much needed bridge between the 'romantic' affiliations of early Shakespearean comedy and the darker, more problematic disclosures of his later comedies. These darker comedies employ social critique and interrogation as themes which run throughout Jacobean comedy displaying luminously the intertextual relationship which exists between texts. It is not enough to claim that Shakespeare was attempting to resolve the conflict between comedy and tragedy in his dramatic comedies, but that he was attempting to rival the increasingly popular 'city' comedies within a progressively competitive market. This competition stimulated invention and the evolution of generic forms as the demand for novelty increased. The way in which particular plays have been in 'conversation' with other genres and sub-genres throughout their performative lives, reveals an often forgotten process which is nonetheless an indispensable component in the genealogical progression of genre. We can either view these texts with their multiple plot structures, dubious origins and

collaborative constructions despairingly as 'curs of mixed blood' or more positively as expressions of inevitable social and aesthetic change, where intense cultural concerns were exorcised. In light of the confused milieu in London following the accession of James I, this confusion in the romances stems from a confusion of allegiance.

In the plays written by John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont, the self-conscious representation of aristocratic manners made them the Cavalier's favourites, and much more suited to the political machinations of the Restoration stage, and yet, the enormous variety of their plays makes any kind of classification difficult. In fact, the prologue to *The Woman Hater* (1606) exploits this generic ambiguity stating that one:

> dare not call it Comedie, or Tragedie; 'tis perfectly neyther: A Play it is, which was meant to make you laugh, how it will please you, is not written in my part: For though you should like it to day, perhaps your selves know not how you should digest it tomorrow.[91]

The taste for comedy changes: what one society (or indeed, generation or class) finds hilarious, may be perceived by another as horrifying. The emergence of Jonson's humour comedies, Fletcher, Beaumont and Middleton's city comedies, and Dekker and Heywood's more celebratory version of the same sub-genre displays just how much the field of comedy was filled by satire in the early seventeenth century. Nevertheless, Shakespeare did not turn automatically to this satirical vein, but to a different set of generic conventions. *Pericles* (1606)*, Cymbeline* (1609), *The Winter's Tale* (1609) and *The Tempest* (1610) are all genre-conscious works which not only veer away from the 'realism' of their contemporary texts, to magical islands, mysterious mountains or pastoral retreats, but they also seem to signal a realisation

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[91] Fletcher and Beaumont, 'Prologue' to *The Woman Hater*, ed. Fredson Bowers, *Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, I.157

that the remorse-ridden fathers and lost children, the torn families in search of wholeness, do not quite fit into society's organising rubric.

Perhaps these despairingly problematic plays illuminate the ephemerality of the generic distinctions in the First Folio, but equally they are, perhaps, as Jean Howard has defined them: exemplary city comedies, 'anti-romances' produced by the great 'romantic' Bard.[92] According to this formulation traditionally held definintions of Shakespeare's 'problem' plays as generically ambiguous, can be extended to both his 'late' plays and his early comedies. Throughout these dramas generic fluidity not only signals theatrical experimentation, but also the mutability of existence is deconstructed; for as Lukàcs reminds us, the fact that the truth can only be expressed ironically is a sign of the fallen state of the world.[93] The irony of the problem plays and the hidden complexities of the romance paradigm is to be found in an emblem of the frustration of human impulses in a world which has become alien to them.

As Charles Taylor suggests, the age of Shakespeare was the last era to address as well as experience the acute sense of alienation and despair which pervades contemporary public philosophy, an age which witnessed a fundamental struggle between those who clung to an idea of community, or commonwealth, and those who sensed that a natural state of disorder better described political reality.[94] In the end it was an intellectual struggle won by the pessimists, crystallised in the writings of Machiavelli and Hobbes. Man was indeed, as Machiavelli claimed, 'hell-bent' on 'self-ruin' and the only mechanism for the conservation of society lay with an emergent liberal legalism, the fiction of public and private spheres of government and

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[92] Jean E. Howard, 'Shakespeare and Genre', *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan, (Oxford, 1999), p.297-309
[93] Georg Lukàcs, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukàcs, (London, 1977), p.198
[94] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* (Cambridge, 1989), pp.115-23, 212-9, 275-89

mythologies of 'rights' dedicated to patrolling these notional boundaries.

However, the legislators of early modern convention: the aristocracy, the local judiciaries and the puritanical theologians, try as they may, found it exceedingly difficult to contain the subversive tendencies of dramatic production. The basic mystery of theatrical performance, that sudden epiphany of intoxication which the cathartic laughter of the comedies releases proved harder to restrain than the rebellious restlessness of the populace. The violence and insensitivity of a comic form which practised detachment and distance from the everyday exposed not only the faults, foibles and injuries of others but depicted 'masked' characters who maintained themselves in a hostile world by exploiting the realisation that everything can be reduced to pure surface and inessential appearance. By a process of ostentation the comic character was able to stand in for an entire class who were experiencing the disillusionment and despair of standing at the nadir of a paradigmatic shift, stifling the recognition that the repetitive, obsessive, foolish behaviour of the Theatre of Cruelty that was their governing body, would go on and on indefinitely. Walter Kerr puts an escapist twist on this theme, suggesting that "within comedy there is always despair" but also adding that it is "a despair of ever finding a right ending except by artifice and magic".[95] For comedy is an escape aid; its celebration and affirmation of life requires a triumph of fantasy and imagination over the realities of life (and death). One must rise above and beyond the 'real' world, without gravity – one must detach oneself from the way things are – in order to accomplish one's desire.

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[95] Walter Kerr, *op. cit*, p.79

Conclusion

As Lawrence Danson so ingenuously puts it: "Tragedy has flourished sporadically in theatrical history, but comedy is forever".[96] We must however, proceed with caution when adopting the biological analogy of evolution, with its implication that only those genres that are well adapted to their functions survive. Idealist theoretical approaches may seek to categorise 'ideal types' in terms of essential textual characteristics but their inevitably structural appropriations should be recognised as a-historical. Steven Neale stresses that "genres are not systems: they are *processes of systematisation*".[97] As a result of their dynamic nature as processes, Neale argues that definitions of genre "are always historically relative, and therefore historically specific".[98] Similarly, Boris Tomashevsky insists that "no firm logical classification of genres is possible. Their demarcation is always historical, that is to say, it is correct only for a specific moment of history".[99] Generic conventions therefore need to be studied as historical phenomena.

Current genres progress through phases or cycles of popularity, sometimes becoming 'dormant' for a period rather than disappearing completely. On-going genres and their conventions themselves change over time, and in reviewing this 'evolutionary change' one may acknowledge the dynamic fluidity of genres without positing the final demise of genre as an interpretive framework. As the generic corpus ceaselessly expands, genres (and the relationship between them) change over time; the conventions of each genre shift, as new genres and sub-genres compete for longevity.

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[96] Danson, *op. cit.,* p.48
[97] Steven Neale, *Genre,* (London, 1980), p.51
[98] Steven Neale, 'Questions of Genre', *Approaches to Media: A Reader* eds, Oliver Boyd-Barret and Chris Newbold, (London, [1990] 1995), p.465
[99] *cit*., David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, (Cambridge, 1989), p.147

And yet, we would do well to recall that formalist theorists such as Todorov have convincingly argued that "a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres".[100]

As Alastair Fowler notes, the Renaissance debate on genres was not unlike our own,[101] although we must remain vigilant to the specific differences which prove that the boundaries of literature were not the same as those that critics now dispute, since Art's universality resided in broad principles. Early modern scholars[102] thought of the 'kinds' as adaptable, not in particular generic forms. We can therefore look to characteristic action patterns as defining features of certain types of drama, or attempt to recognise similarities in plot structure, theme, or motif. However, identifying and attempting to isolate tragic and comic components, or designating comedy as that which is not tragedy will only reassert Fowler's warning to the unwary that no sooner has a generic label been applied, than it can be falsified.

Take for example Byron's generic definition as "all tragedies are finished by a death,/ All comedies are ended by a marriage".[103] While it may be irrefutable that nowhere is the formal model of convention, more obviously present than at the ending of a play, delineated thus, comedy is the opposite of tragedy. A comedy contains no deaths; if death were to enter, comedy would not exit. In the case of *Love's Labour Lost* (1598) however, death does enter the play, in the form a letter, which halts the comic proceedings abruptly. This dramatic comedy may concern the subject of love, it may include passages of rhetoric and witty verbal exchanges between characters, and

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[100] *cit.*, John M. Swales, *Genre Analysis,* (Cambridge, 1990), p.36
[101] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature,* (Oxford, 1982), p.4ff
[102] Sir Thomas Elyot's (1531) *Boke of the Governour*, demands a natural expression and condemns over ornamented style; John Jewel's (1548) *Oratio contra rhetoricam*, claims that rhetoric should remain a natural and spontaneous gift; Thomas Wilson's (1560), *Arte of Rhetorique*, more interested in giving reasonable advice on how to adapt style to different circumstances and uses than in fixing rules; Roger Ascham's (1570) *Scholemaster* gives advice on humour and wit close to Wilson's.
[103] Lord George Gordon Byron, 'Don Juan', *Selected Poems of Byron,* (London, 1970), Canto III.9-10, p.401

crucially, it has a 'happy' ending of sorts, but according to matters of generic taxonomy, *Love's Labour Lost* defies convention, it does not end with a marriage. If this were typical of its 'kind' all four (or five) couples would wed in the final scene, but there is a critical comment on the reasoning behind this diversion. The characters note the way in which this play differs from the norm. When the Princess and her attendants depart, Berowne says:

> Our wooing doth not end like an old play;
> Jack hath not Jill: these ladies' courtesy
> Might well have made our sport a comedy
> (V.ii.873-5)

Here Berowne suggests that the play cannot be a comedy as it does not conclude with a marriage and that this is a 'modern' play, a new type of comedy which entertains and provides pleasure but nonetheless flouts convention.

While the mixing of comic and tragic episodes was undoubtedly considered a stylistic flaw in classical dramatic theory, Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is notable in its effective use of comic and tragic 'relief', and it is within these aspects of the Renaissance appropriation of generic classification that we find a parallel with more 'modern' dramatic theories. "The words of Mercury" may indeed be "harsh after the songs of Apollo" (*LLL*, V.iii.923-4) and comedy observes the fact that there can be no death admitted into the dramatic space. Death would violate specific structural constraints which necessarily condition the work of the comic dramatist. Typically entering its last act with all of its subplots unresolved and with all of its characters still alive, comedy reveals the two major factors which complicate its resolution, and hence its generic 'kind'. These features push the termination of the plot in the direction of complexity which can only ever be resolved through artifice and a sense of strained interconnection, but perhaps this is because the simplifying device of death

is denied to the democratic art of the comedian. Since the comic character is immortal, the dramatist is denied the tragic opportunities for murderous simplification, which the tragedian so frequently exploits.

Tzvetan Todorov may have bemoaned the dissolution of genre classification in the twentieth century by stating that "it is even considered a sign of authentic modernity in a writer if he ceases to respect the separation of genres",[104] but he was not alone. René Wellek was also dismayed by the declining respect for generic classifications, observing fearfully that:

> boundaries are being constantly transgressed, genres combined or fused, old genres discarded or transformed, new genres created, to such an extent that the very concept has been called into doubt.[105]

And yet the slightest attention paid to the conventions of dramatic comedy upon the early modern public stage reveals that the tendency has been perpetual.

Sir Philip Sidney's pronunciation of the genres, 'kinds' or *species* of his time, that "if seuered they be good, the coniunction cannot be hurtfull",[106] appears to share the more progressive, post-modern celebration of the perennial literary 'fashion' for hybridisation and experiment. However, Sidney's exploration of the preoccupations of his time with 'invention' is a problematical one, as later in his *Apology for Poetry*, he reveals his ultimate concern as the need to ascertain the 'right use' of genres, or to promote the correct context for genres in the maintenance of decorum. His concern with the propriety of dramatic representation is reflected in the depictions of a hierarchically stratified society which was experiencing what David Underdown has termed the Renaissance "crisis of order". According to Underdown, the sense of

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[104] Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse,* (Cambridge, 1990), p.13
[105] René Wellek, *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism,* (New Haven and London, 1970), p.225
[106] *op. cit.*, p.173

impending breakdown was never "more widespread, or more intense, than in early modern England"; moreover the breakdown was one that he sees as having developed out of a "period of strained gender relations" that "lay at the heart of the 'crisis of order'."[107] The particular impact of this crisis was felt in and around the public theatres of London, in the liberties which housed them, as men and women struggled with startling shifts in both social and sexual mobility and the perceptions of propriety attendant upon them.

Nevertheless, out of the complex organic relationship between the authors of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean drama and their environment, the processes of generic evolution are rarely restricted by theoretical writings. Close scrutiny of generic formulae only seems to confirm that literary theories and fashions do not exist in a vacuum, but divide and multiply through a form of imitation. It is not an evolution in the strictly Darwinian sense of the word, because this sense is based on a conception of the identity of the organism throughout its mutations, whereas social change is endless, it has no point of maturity, and it is not structured by a goal.[108]

For the Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, an artistic work is always unique and artistic genres are merely prohibitive and restrictive. This harbouring of the Romantic ideology of the primacy of authorial 'originality' and 'vision', which emphasises individual style and artistic 'self-expression', follows a tradition that celebrates the position of the artist either working 'in tension' with generic taxonomy, or breaking the mould of convention altogether. The Renaissance may have indulged in abstract hypotheses about the origins of genre, but as we can see, from our own modern preconceptions of genre, it

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[107] David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603-1660,* (Oxford, 1985), p.100
[108] John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History,* (Oxford, 1986), p.114

entailed a hierarchical and retrogressive social philosophy, that brings them into alignment with early modern literary theory. The class-specific break between the genres can be perceived as carrying the force of reaction through into ideological conventions. And the clear and precise antithesis between the two forms of tragedy and comedy may now be reassessed as the mirror of each other's elements, the one informing the construction of the other's image. For without the comic we could not survive the tragic, and without tragedy there would be no need for comedy.

This preliminary chapter may have surveyed the basic framework of the 'law of genre' but it has not yet addressed the parameters of judgement which inflect Shakespeare's dramatic comedies. The law of genre is a form of legislation imposed on literary works by the bureaucrats of the academy and since the early modern period these scholarly attempts to restrict artistic invention have largely passed unheeded, as dramatists continually demonstrated a fluidity of style that challenged the confines of genre. In the next chapter, the generic flexibility of comedy is explored with the assistance of several genre conscious plays. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, stand as two of Shakespeare's most legally fixated comedies appearing to doubly interrogate the judicial nature of literary demarcation and early modern litigation as an endless source of ambiguous humour. As matters of judgement give way to matters of individual preference a similarity is fused between generic law as it is imposed upon what is presumed literary and the legal constitution of Renaissance London. What therefore stands out in the comedy of impossible legislation and the tragedy of its enforcement is the utopian escapism of the comic form, as it strives to survive beneath a hostile authority.

Chapter 2

Shakespeare Before the Law

In an attempt to set out the stakes of judgement, the parameters of law, one has

already made a judgement, become involved with judgement, placed oneself before

the law. To be in the proximity of the law, to enter its precinct, is to stand between

right and wrong, propriety and impropriety: a no-man's land, or hinterland, a non-

place, or indeed a *u-topia* where the possibility of equanimity is eternally promised,

and yet perpetually deferred. Therefore, of the law's fictional and figural

representation as a phantasm, which moves through blurred or invisible boundaries,

we are assured of only one thing: that visibility will be poor. Justice, constantly

blindfolded, asks us to follow her blindly.

To illuminate this hazy rebus, it becomes necessary to think of opening a dark

labyrinth to the light of a kind of philosophical adjudication: a flashlight of thought

via a systematic engagement with, amongst others, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François

Lyotard, who in placing certain texts before the law of philosophy investigate the site

and presuppositions of judgement. The task then, of this chapter, puts us in the situation of having to judge the case for comedy, which thus prescribes judgement without grounding its possibility; we therefore repeat the presupposition of judgement in the attempt to examine its origin and form with a selection of plays which provide examples (which cannot be just examples) of this situation. The contestation of this peculiar and interminable suit is that as comedy is instituted in violence, this violence returns to question the institution even as it simultaneously defends it.

The status of the community and the nature of judgement figure in different ways, in the early modern comedies before us. Indeed, part of the strategy for summoning these specific comedies for exegesis is to sanction the rehearsal of *différends*. In Lyotard's terms, a *différend* is when:

> [A] case of différend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict which opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties, while the injustice suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom. [109]

Geoffrey Bennington in 'Ces Petits *Différends*' also cites Lyotard as stating an explication of the *différend* as "a case of conflict between (at least) two parties that could not be resolved equitably for lack of a rule applicable to the two modes of argumentation".[110] We shall see that time and again the confrontations and strategies of generic taxonomy or those implicated in the topoi of, not only the *différend*, but the *frontier*, and the *legislator*, complicate and contaminate or, are presented and repeated by, dramatic comedies which interrogate the prescription of a rigorous hierarchy of generic boundaries and ends. Indeed, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye speaks of the 'action' of comedy in:

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[109]Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Vab Den Abbeele, (Minnesota, 1984), §12
[110] Geoffrey Bennington, *Judging Lyotard* (London and New York, 1992), p.151

moving from one social centre to another [as] not unlike the action of a lawsuit, in which plaintiff and defendant construct different versions of the same situation, one finally being judged as real, the other as illusory.[111]

Hence the importance of the theme of creating and dispelling illusion in comedy: the deceptions caused by disguise, obsession, or hypocrisy, invariably through the negation of reality, resolution or revelation.

Two of Shakespeare's most problematic comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596)[112] and *Measure for Measure* (1603), display an obvious fascination with the Law which slides towards a dark contempt for the potential illegitimacy of the Law. Although forced betrothal and banishment are redeemed by a comic celebration of the Law's openness to interpretation, the presentation and repetition of the cause for *différend* is exacerbated by those silenced by the law. How we attempt to negotiate these endings will also have a bearing upon our representation of not only judgement, but also the politics of comedy, as the peculiar conclusions of comedy continually demand a reconfiguration of justice. As we shall see, in comedies contemporaneous with Shakespeare's, such as Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1609), Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604), and *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605) and Webster's *The Devil's Law-case* (1619), we are repeatedly confronted with the general problem of the structure of subjectivity and the specific problem of the construction of the legal subject.

All of these city-comedies dramatise the effect to which changing economic conditions disrupt social relations: as the individual's relationship to the material

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[111] Frye, *op. cit.*, p.166

[112] This play may not be traditionally identified as a 'problem' play but its anti-semitic themes are now considered problematic in conjunction with its generic classification as a comedy. See also A.G. Hammon, *Eternal Bonds, True Contracts: Law and Nature in Shakespeare's Problem Plays,* (New York, 2004) for a lucid defense of this play as 'problematic'.

world changed, the ways in which they thought about themselves, their ideas of

subjectivity also changed. For as the social technologies, to use Foucault's

terminology,[113] and the discursive practices by which ideas of identity had previously

been constructed no longer met the need/values of the current conditions, Jacobean

society faced an 'identity crisis' in the broadest sense of the term. It is therefore hoped

that scrutiny of these texts will allow us to view more perspicaciously the scenes of

judgement demanded by the *différend* which have, in principle, been involved in the

production of these plays as formal and ideological constructions. Inquiring more

generally into the cultural work performed by city comedies and the drama's role in

the social struggles of its time of production, the degrees to which comedy is involved

in the constitution of those forms of masculinity and femininity suited to civic life

become apparent. From within the confines of a society which had rigidly controlled

an economy regulating the generic claims of love, paternity and sovereignty, the

gendered interplay of the comic form seems to signify a potential within civic life,

especially the potential that sexuality and desire will spin out of control unless certain

forms of regulation, internal or external, control the appetites which lead to social

catastrophe: poverty, plague, murder, violence, adultery.

Making a Case for Comedy

In the type of conflict we are examining, the genres of tragedy and comedy enact in

exacerbated form legal processes that cannot easily be dismissed. The point is that

there is no tribunal which could settle their disputes *properly* as litigation due to the

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[113] Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, eds. L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, P.H. Hutton, (London, 1988), p.19 ff

possibility of an exacerbated *differend.* Lyotard defines the *différend* as a matter of judgement where no tribunal could ever pretend to properly settle a dispute as though it were a matter for litigation. According to his formulation litigation becomes impossible as matters of judgement are continually arbitrating between two possible positions. Thus, the location of the specificity of this *différend* becomes a general question of the relationship of genres:

> A *différend* requires the attempt of one genre (be it cognitive, performative, economic) to impose its hegemony on another genre (be it ethical or speculative), to enforce judgement of cases pertaining to one genre in terms of another.[114]

In these terms, the best (because most testing) situation would clearly be that in which the claims of the subordinated genres are the hardest to overcome. Ultimately any defence of comedy is similarly a defence of propriety, for decorum, for property, for possession of knowledge, for control of desire. The challenge we face then, in mounting a defence for comedy is problematised by the emphasis of comedy and the comic on the discontinuity and the arbitrariness of the law itself, of both legal and literary legislations. This challenge is further complicated by the curious repetition and mimicry in the comedies of both the laws of comedy and the relationship between Comedy and the Law.

On the one hand, this means that comedy usually represents the dominant society or practices of its play as operating according to arbitrary laws, perhaps positioning the dominant order as the result of some fortuitous chance, rather than as a form of necessity. Take for example, the number of comedies that begin within not only a tyrannical milieu but, a social system as bewildering for the ordinary citizen as it is beneficial to the pretentious legislator, where unjust laws and confusing edicts are

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[114] Geoffrey Bennington, *Judging Lyotard*, *op. cit.*, p.152

part and parcel of a dramatic existence. The judges and jurors who people city-comedy willingly seem to embark on a single course of action without fully knowing their destination, perhaps accepting as inevitable later collaborations, revisions, improvisations or afterthoughts; swept along by the excitement and entertainment the scandal of public trials afford. The petty solicitors or 'tramplers of time' are terrifyingly captured in enduring caricature, particularly in Middleton's creation of Harry Dampit in *A Trick to Catch the Old One* who combines the role of lawyer and usurer. In 'trampling' the time or wasting time, the time that is always the client's money, unscrupulous men like Dampit 'trample' the law in their desire to be rich and successful. There is a direct challenge to the sovereignty of the law through imitation by characters like Dampit and the entire role-call of "whoreson fogging rascals" (*The Devil's Law-Case*, IV.i.24) who would practice legal chicanery for little more than their own self-aggrandisement. This prompts a recurring question throughout these comedies: are the representatives of the law beings of such moral stuff that they can safely administer the power of judicial law? And more crucially, the Law may specify the destination, but what then is its right to judge?

The impetuousness of the legislators in the comedies is mirrored by the oddness of the juridical in that the law has an essential relation to the accidental. There is a peculiarity at work within the juridical in that it must take account of a kind of necessity of the accidental, not only in the form of the event, or the object of litigation which, in comedy tends towards the contingent or the opportunistic, but also in the form of the case, or the hearing of the case: where the unscrupulous can balance the truth on a knife-edge. This relation to the accidental can be elaborated in terms of an essential fictional or fictioning activity of the law in its constitutively impossible drive to predict the case, or the *accidental* origin of the case, which cannot be

predicted as such. Furthermore, as Derrida puts it, the law must attempt to take *itself* as a case and fictionalise its own origin or institution, stating the law of the Law (as case) in the form of a narrative which constructs the illusion of absolute authority and wisdom.[115] The hypocrisy of a grand-narrative which recounts an absolute authority not based on fact lays bare the incentive comedy requires for mocking the tyranny of the Law.

Judgmental laughter, or at least, the losing of oneself to laughter and the discombobulation of one's ideologies in a single moment of comic revelation is a rare and wonderful thing. However, the task of adjudication, of fair and balanced judgement, invariably shares with purely critical laughter this enormous difficulty in arriving. Derrida reminds us of the inaccessibility of the law, of its need to be mediated, citing as the first sign of its inaccessibility its ability to defer interminably, to adjourn or delay judgement. In Derrida's essay, 'Before the Law',[116] this law of delay, becomes related to a question of time, of timing, with the man from the country enacting the legal subject's discomfort at being left before the Law, or, out-with the Law. The law of delay becomes an experiment in comic timing, or rather tragic-comic timing, as Derrida's work on Kafka's fable joins problems of 'antipredicative' judgements to questions about the nature of ethics. The epistemological and deontological or temporal areas of the Law's original premise are never affirmed to the man from the country, who delays or defers his own entry to the law of the city. The authority of the Law seems to exclude all historicity and empirical narrativity which positions its rationality as alien to all fiction and imagination. Derrida goes on to illustrate the dangers in the lack of imagination that prejudgement and prejudice possess, revealing the extent to which they are instrumental in both the construction

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[115] Derrida, 'Before the Law', *op. cit.,* p.190 ff
[116] *ibid.*, pp.181-220

and destruction of justice. Moral law, judicial law and natural law are all implicated, behind the façade of the 'wise and necessary fiction' of the Law, erected as it is to restrict and prohibit the very inhumanity of humanity. From cradle to grave the law prejudges the human species as an acrimonious animal in need of strict regulation just as 'mankind' prejudges the Law as 'impenetrable' or inaccessible. We are all therefore out-with the Law, in that we stand before its universality and generality as singular examples of potential law-breakers; otherwise there would be no need for the impenetrable edifice of the Law. This revision between the law and what is out-with the law, is reflected in the operation of comedy, where these energies are aesthetically negotiated. In this respect the formalist constraints of genre can be seen to flow into, by analogy, the larger concerns with the restraining powers of law as part of the process of regulating social behaviour. The formal concern in one sphere offers a thematic resource that comedy is able to take up because of its own generic implication in the business of the 'law'.

The fear of death, the terror of the final judgement and the potential for torture - somehow beyond imagination - in some form of punishment, is what gives all law, both ecclesiastical and political its hold. The legislators of the comedies who mediate this process – the dukes, surrogate fathers, pimps and usurping tyrants- are banking on that fear. In comedies where indecision and stasis signal the deferral of little more than cruel games of cat-and-mouse, this seemingly endless procrastination displays an acute insensitivity. As a result, for all the apparent sociability of the comic u-topia, an isolated, narcissistic individualism seems to prevail. In many Shakespearean comedies the relinquishing of individualism is a precondition of social harmony, but the uneasiness of this resolution is always underpinned by the apparent unwillingness of those requested to make that sacrifice. There is, therefore, always the possibility that

in the incongruous world of the comic the wailing plaintiff, declaring itself as the victim of a crime may well become the victim of the Law, but then this all becomes a matter of presentation, of identifying an appropriate mode of representation.

Representing civic instability

In what follows, I will suggest that the civic stability being constructed in comedy depends for its ultimate supplementation on the state and on the state's acting out a sanctioned violence supposedly denied to the individual members of the commonwealth. The reliance on civic institutions is notable throughout the comedies with the Law and the city's sites of incarceration and control frequently given as the clear alternatives to private duelling and brawling. In Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (1611),[117] Sir Davy Dapper contrives to have his prodigal son, Jack Dapper, incarcerated in The Counter, a notorious debtor's prison, in order to effect the reform he himself cannot achieve.[118] In many of the comedies, self-regulation goes hand in hand with enhanced state regulation. The violence of gallants and courtiers was as worrisome as the violence of petty criminals and apprentices and as such Elizabeth forbade private duels while the London City fathers attempted to control brawls and street crime. William Gouge advised husbands that if their wives absolutely required physical correction, perhaps it would be better to have the constables undertake it,

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[117] Thomas Middleton, *The Roaring Girl* (1609), in *The Best Plays of the Old Dramatists*, ed. Havelock Ellis, (London, 1890), pp.1-114

[118] The sub-plot of *The Dutch Courtesan* (with Cocledemoy and Mulligrub) contains elements of trickery aimed at punishing the embryonically bourgeois Mulligrub for his pretentiousness and cheating, which sees him taken all the way to the gallows before Cocledemoy reveals himself as the cause of the Puritanical vintners incarceration and has him freed. See also Jonson, Chapman and Marston's 1605 collaboration *Eastward Ho!*, a rollicking tale of conycatching and doggerel repentence, where a great deal of time is spent in the lowest levels of the Counter, in what is apparently either the Hole or the the Twopenny Ward, where a prisoner could starve to death if they did not secure some form of support external to the prison.

rather than the husband himself.[119] It is crucially historical, that at this point in time the constables begin to employ the force the good subject eschews as the state takes over the management of violence from private and particular citizens. Indeed, one of the tasks of the Tudor-Stuart state was to accomplish this transmission of authority over violence.[120]

There is indeed a heavy reliance upon civic institutions and carceral enterprises within the comic form which is not so historically accurate as ideologically interesting. Over half the scenes in *Measure for Measure* take place in a prison or in the Ducal chambers, and the legalistic language in *The Merchant of Venice* has been frequently commented upon by critics.[121] Webster's *The Devil's Law-Case or When Women go to Law, the Devil is full of Business* (1619),[122] warns of the misuse of the public court as a site of vengeful lambasting where the "cause of any fame" will quickly be engendered in "scurvy pamphlets and lewd ballets". (IV.ii.34) This seems to serve as a reminder that the court-room has always been viewed as a particular form of entertainment and, of course, a source of scandal. The elaborate court-room drama formula, so successful that it was repeated from one play to the next, appears as a complex fantasy about class struggle, gender, and above all about the role of the state in supplementing citizens, supplanting the prerogatives of a

[119] Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Weatern Society,* (Cambridge, 1988), pp.83-4, 118. See Also David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance,* (London, 1984), pp.195-8
[120] See Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Stuart Years,* (Ithaca, 1991), p.119-129
[121] Thomas H. Luxon, 'A Second Daniel: The Jew and the "True Jew" in *The Merchant of Venice*', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 4: 3, (January, 1999), pp.31-37. Richard H. Weisberg, *Poethics and Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (Columbia, 1992), pp.94-103. E.J.F. Tucker, 'The Letter of the Law in *The Merchant of Venice*', *Shakespeare Survey* 29, ed. Kenneth Muir, (Cambridge, 1976), pp.93ff.
122 John Webster, *The Devil's Law-Case or When Women go to Law, the Devil is full of Business* (1619), ed. Frances Shirley, (London, 1972)

degenerate aristocracy, and asserting control over the use of violence. The need to control unruly masculine subjects was achieved by suturing the male subject to the state and its institutions, supplementing deficiency with the imagined plenitude and rigour of the law and its institutions of incarceration and correction: thematically this is also the preoccupation of comedy.

The Foucauldian idea of magisterial surveillance and the kind of government of 'shadows' described in *Measure for Measure* allows us to examine the case of Duke Vincentio, who is "very strangely" (I.iv.50) absent from his ducal duties, having transferred the task of reawakening the "strict statutes and most biting laws" (I.iii.19) he believes are required by his hedonistic vassals, to another man. He also believes that his authority is no longer feared and is thus useless, but in staging a fictional trial he reinforces the need for benevolent rule by pardoning *almost* everyone. This particular Duke hazards the lives of the people of Vienna by passing his absolute authority to a man renowned more for an icy temperament than merciful impartiality. But then, Vincentio has seemingly indulged his citizenry for too long, in the benevolent role of "father of their idle dream" (IV.i.64) and must devise an ingenious method for the reintroduction of socially cohesive and corrective legislations. He may leave Lord Angelo "To th' hopeful execution" of his plans, but secret intentions invariably signal the inception of cross-purposes and tragic possibilities.

In the romances there is a tendency to depict a world, however harsh it may initially appear, as fundamentally and essentially benign. In the gentle comic Arcadia of the romance we could describe comic play as a dreamlike spectacle of desire which escapes the self-conscious, censorious restraints and prohibitions of consciousness. Not so in the 'problematic' comedy of *Measure for Measure* where the humour descends into shades of nightmare. In the trial scenes of this and certain other late

Elizabethan and early Jacobean city-comedies, reality appears to be invoked, only to be dismissed. The representation of the fluidity of both identity and language displays the limits of legalism as the Law is presented as being capable of performing acts of aggression which are directed not so much against the pleasures of life as against the desire that challenges the sovereignty of rational consciousness.

An aversion to death and its uncanny deferral is rigorously instituted throughout the plays under examination. However, the beheading of a comic character may be prevented by the substitution of a decapitated prisoner who has already died, but this does not quite side-step the sacrilegious treatment of a corpse. Moreover, the lewd and insidious acts that are concealed under cover of darkness of night still whisper the dirty little secret: that lust annihilates difference. Both disguised rulers and rogues intervene at the 'eleventh hour', revealing their identity to us in the face of catastrophe; this serves as a reminder not only of comedy's enormous reliance on chance and coincidence, but also its exploration of humanity's similarity in sex and death. This appeal to universality may invariably be deferred but the ever-questioning nature of the comic pushes unsettling realisations onto the stage which interrogate notions of singularity and generality. The annihilation of the individual may appear to be the province of tragedy, but the darker purpose of the tragi-comic thrust is demonstrative in the challenge to our sentimental notion of individual significance. More subtly disturbing is the renewed recognition of what Falstaff called "food for powder… mortal men", (*1 Henry IV*, IV.ii.65-6) that from the perspective of power politics, in the functions of biology or the state, indifference makes perfect sense. As many of the female characters reveal, the body can become a mere coin in a terrifyingly usurious biological economy, with one body substituted for another, in bed-tricks and dark walled gardens. Indeed, the clipping of a beard, the shaving of a

head or the donning of a friar's habit attempts to convince the disbelieving that

singularity is an illusion, and in death, as in life, we are all unique in our similarity.

In Defence of the Imitation of the Law

The Merchant of Venice explores another facet of this problematic two-sided

valorisation of the singular individual. Portia's abhorrence of the law's indifference to

justice is fantastically enacted throughout *The Merchant of Venice*, where a series of

trials are installed within a comedy which demands that "there is no power…can alter

a decree established", lest "many an error, by the same example…rush into the state".

(IV.i.216-20) The exasperated Venetian duke, who presides over the court of justice

in *The Merchant of Venice*, is so disgusted by Shylock's inhumanity and

vengefulness, that he threatens to adjourn the hearing indefinitely. This disregard for

the cries of 'justice' cannot simply mitigate the irreducible concern for the sanctity of

oath and contract which congests the comedies, otherwise the Law would be revealed

as a sham and the absolute authority of the state as a mere simulacrum. This eminent

judge postpones the proceedings in readiness for the arrival of a "more learned

doctor", who just happens to be a comic cross-dresser (with a vested interest in the

case), and yet, Portia's law-trick is undeniably based on a sound grasp of the

(fictional) Venetian law. Indeed, Portia's bizarre position as law-giver, attired in a

false suit of men's clothing is to pursue Shylock until it is clear that he has himself

brought forward a false suit. Shylock may demand 'the law', 'stand' for law, but

through the absolute necessity of preserving the law Portia reveals him to be a man

filled with hate.

As the wise little lawyer Ariosto declares in *The Devil's Law-case*, it is

invariably, "Bad suits, and not the law, breed the law's shame", (IV.i.72) and as the

numbers of inventive lawyers and credulous claimants mount up throughout the comedies, it becomes apparent that it is somehow the supposed guardians of the law who permit the breeding of its infamy. Of course, rather more than being *mirrors for magistrates* these plays are all displacements. The historicity of these plays is revealed primarily through the kinds of stories they tell and as such these dramas are places where cultural fantasies, anxieties and the crisis points of certain social logics are revealed.

One could only speculate on the position that Portia shares with Isabella on the early modern stage, as representations of female subjects in a society ruled by a female monarch. Both women are "enskied and sainted" (*Measure for Measure,* I.iv.34) as they possess that "prosperous art" where they may "play with reason and discourse" (I.ii.182), and "well [they] can persuade", (I.ii.183) one with the force of a mystic and the other with the will of a learned lawyer. However, both are subject to the social contract drawn up by patriarchy with Portia advising herself on a husband of her own chosing and Isabella being advised that there is no choice. However, at the beginning of *Measure for* Measure, the "prone and speechless dialect" (I.ii.180) of Isabella's pleading eyes searches for an idiom in which to phrase the (as yet) unsayable or to present the (as yet) unpresentable**.** Later she finds a way of pleading for Claudio's life through the silent seduction of her body, in a language she herself is not even aware of. She maintains this assertivness and focus until the final scene of the play when she returns to the speechless dialect that is a consequence of the Duke's surprising offer of marriage. Her voice is unusual in the comedies as it joins the ranks of the melancholy who find themselves out-with the protection of the Law, and although justice is seemingly done, in favour of her brother and his young family, Isabella is 'taken' as a wife without ever uttering her response.

Measure for Measure, Point for Counterpoint

We can account for Isabella's melancholic voice as resulting from several astonished

encounters with doubled or multiple perspectives in *Measure for Measure*. Her

confusion and sense of victimisation repeatedly function as dramatic epiphanies for

the spectator as they accompany epistemic shifts, which confound interpretation

whilst simultaneously illuminating contradiction. We have already argued that

Isabella's body acts as a site of *aporia*, or paradox, where epistemological, ontological

and sexual issues converge symbolically. She is consistently located on the threshold

of the dialectical movement between the convent and the brothel through her

representation of woman as the abject other. However, her depiction of the

dichotomous split within the gendered identity of woman not only dazzles and

destabilises the spectator through a relentless repetition of unresolved and

unresolvable problems, her actions result in an effective deconstruction of sexual

politics beneath the aegis of patriarchy. Isabella achieves this by raising questions on

prohibition and permissiveness through a dialectic which forces a reevaluation of

cognitive and cultural presumptions, and yet, she herself is a paradox: able to

persuade others to her point of view while somehow unable to verify her own

subjective existence.

Thomas Playfere, an Elizabethan preacher, called paradox "the intermingling

of extremities"[123] which suggests the challenge made by the dialectic to conventional

thought and to single, presumably stable truths. As Rosalie Colie puts it, "paradox is

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[123] Thomas Playfere, *A Sermon preached at Saint Maryes Spittle in London on Tuesday in Easter weeke, 1596* (London, 1596), 21, cited in Bryan Crockett, *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England*, (Philadelphia, 1995), p.19

always somehow involved in dialectic: challenging some orthodoxy, the paradox is an oblique criticism of absolute judgement or absolute convention".[124] In light of this statement paradox is revealed as enjoying an intimate relationship with epistemology particularly upon the early modern stage in comedies such as *Measure for Measure* where social and gendered subjectivity is represented as highly performative. Through the elaborate staging of a chain of oppositions and numerous substitutions, sexual and social difference is posited as complicated instances of *differance*, which recognise the theatrical manipulations of subjectivity between men and women, rulers and subjects. This *differance* is, in the words of the fantastical Duke, "not a resemblance, but a certainty" (IV.ii.188) as the opposed figures throughout this play, and the ethical or aesthetic attributes that are attached to them, bear the signs of an extreme instability, incompleteness, and apparent reversibility. The antitheses between genders and social categories thus generate oppositions between rhetorical and psychological categories, or, as it becomes clear, between the tropes of "resemblance" and "certainty" themselves.

Isabella's interrelationships with the Duke and Lord Angelo reveal the ease with which the dialectic of comedy can provoke and legitimate certain political and sexual substitutions. These 'substitutions' of one body for another, in the demand for Isabella's 'maidenhead' to substitute for her brother's 'head', or the exactitude of punishment enacted upon Lucio the scurrilous gossip instead of Angelo the corrupt legislator, allude to the world as a system of tropological deviances and the institutional, political and sexual consequences of such a mechanism. Through the language of concealment and exchange in *Measure for Measure* an examination is conducted into the hidden influence of the state upon society as the dialectic of guilt

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[124] Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, 1966), p.10

and justice turns to guilt and mercy. However, it is not justice which is vanquished by this movement, but the pride associated with self-interest; a pride evident in the Duke's conceit, Angelo's egotism, Isabella's haughtiness and Lucio's unfounded superciliousness.

The dialectic of comedy suffuses this dark stage-play not only through an interrogation of the episteme of truth but also through the rhetoric of astonishment and amazement. Contradiction is expressed verbally by both bawds and brides, the cloistered and the incarcerated. This dialectic, or anamorphic oscillation between one perspective and another, underscores the 'inbetweenness' of the paradoxical state, and this is registered in liminal sites as seemingly diverse as the convent and the brothel, the gaol and the court-room. The dialectic of comedy reveals another of its facets and poses another of its questions: how can such places of figurative stability remain so literally in flux? In what ways do these institutions exist within and out-with the law? To what extent do the professions of the bawd and the executioner disclose a political paradox?

Isabella's "unhappy brother" (I.iv.21) Claudio is presented as a youth "most strait in virtue" (II.1.9) who has entered into a contract marriage in good faith but breached the legal requirement of abstaining from conjugal relations until after the public, church ceremony. The confusion surrounding hand-fasting marriages and pre-nuptial engagements during this period will be examined thoroughly in the next chapter, but for the moment our focus should remain upon the dialectic movement of *Measure for Measure* in its representation of the paradox of juridical law. The impregnation of Madam Juliet "Expresseth [the] full tilth and husbandry" (I.iv.45) of Claudio but their 'embrace' also emphasizes the dialectic within each and every subject: to be human is to desire; to be human is to err. As Pompey declares, sex out-

with marriage would be 'lawful' "If the law would allow it" (II.i.128) and as the law will not allow unregulated sexual activity it appears that the only possible solution will be "to geld and splay/all the youth of the city" (231-2). In the symbolic castration of Claudio's execution, the sacrifice of a scapegoat[125] is required. The fact that Claudio was once reputed as a 'virtuous' youth, informs his moral collapse as instituting an especially harsh penalty, a contradiction in terms when the hypocrite Angleo is his judge. Claudio's literal aphanasis will be performed as a lesson to be learned by all: that the law has the power to both civilize and dehumanize. The law thus narrates the origin and continuation of a boundary between the bestial and the rational; the law in *Measure for Measure* is therefore depicted as foundationally flawed, constructed, as it is, upon contradiction.

The political paradox *Measure for Measure* discloses can be explored in the connection between the dialectical movement of comedy and that uncertain, paradoxical liminalty the court-room possesses. Gaston Bachelard has shown us that the "majesty of the threshold" can perform cognitive functions by means of a "dialectics of outside and inside",[126] however, Michel Foucault is even more useful for our purposes in his discussion of:

> sites…that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.

Foucault breaks these sites down into two types: "utopias," which "are sites with no real place [and] present, society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down" which alludes perfectly to the comic universe; and "heterotopias," which are,

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[125] The importance of the figure of the 'scapegoat' will be studied in greater depth in chapter 4.
[126] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, 1994), pp.223, 231

places that do exist…which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, like all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, or inverted.[127]

The court-room, or the Court of the aristocratic legislator can be described as a heterotopia that is often portrayed as a utopia, as it is a site ultimately more contestatory and suspecting than ideal and perfect.

As such, the law and its legislators must be subjected to frequent and rigorous interrogation because within the notion of the law as reconciliatory or harmonizing, a resonating play of opposites often slides into a quagmire of dishonesty and deceit. The heightened visibility of legislation is important here as Lord Angelo attempts to reintroduce "strict statutes and most biting laws" (I. iii.19) to a populace which has run past the "hideous law,/As mice by lions" (I.iv.63-4). His analogy of the law as a precious gem that can only be appreciated
if it is visible is extolled in his speech on ignorance as an inadequate justification for wrong-doing:

> The jewel that we find, we stoop and take't
> Because we see it; but what we do not see
> We tread upon, and never think of it.
> (II.i.25-6)

Angelo's unconscious motivations are perceptively interpreted by Claudio who recognises this new government as an aggressive attack on the 'bestial' within society. The disturbing imagery of Lord Angelo's view of "the body public" as "a horse whereon [he] doth ride", that will "straight feel the spur" (I.iii.66-69) of his resolve denotes the destructive face of patriarchal legislation. Claudio for all his weakness, knows that men are by nature corrupt but it must be left to Isabella to teach Lord

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[127] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986), 22-27, p.24

Angelo the cruelty of possessing a "giant's strength" and of using it "like a giant" (II.ii.108-9) devoid of pity.

When Angelo first hears Isabella's disquisition on pity as the sibling of mercy his view of the paternalism of justice is destabilized, and he finds himself in an unexpectedly erotic state of temptation, where not only "prayers cross" (159) but previously held cognitive 'truths'. Claudio has previously described Isabella as both physically alluring and linguistically adept when he beseeched Lucio to "Implore her, in my voice, that she make friends/To the strict deputy: bid herself assay him," as he has a profound and inscrutable faith in his sister's ability to "move men" (I.iii.186-91). The image of a young woman about to cloister herself in the convent of the silent Order of Saint Clare could not contrast more significantly with the world of this play where "liberty plucks justice by the nose" (I.iii.29) and fornicators beg to receive their "punishment in thanks" (I.iv.27), but this dichotomy powerfully exacerbates the movement of the dialectic. As a result, a world of paradox and contradiction begins to gape at the seams as the 'stitching' of reality starts to give way against the pressure felt from numerous contradictions between opposed characteristics.

The dichotomy which manifests itself in the encounter between the stern Lord Angelo and the 'pleading' Isabella reflects a sadistic trait in this man of "professed abstinence" when the possibility of sexual servitude is presented to him. But how can we account for this split within Angelo's subjective identity? Foucault emphasizes how disciplining mechanisms themselves set in motion a wild proliferation of what they endeavor to suppress and regulate: the very 'repression' of sexuality gives rise to new forms of sexual pleasure recognizable as forms of surplus-enjoyment or perversion[128]. Angelo embraces this excess and attempts to keep secret his desire "to

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[128] See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.43 for a comparison between Hegel and Foucault's approach to the effect of diciplinatory activity.

sin, in loving virtue" (II.ii.183) with a woman he perceives as "bait" (181). His self-referential 'confessional' in the second act, does more to underscore the relationship between sexuality and its disciplinary control than exorcise it. This confessional self-probing unearths a new layer of Angelo's sexuality, as the confessional activity itself becomes sexualized, giving rise to a satisfaction of its own where he will "write 'good Angel' on the devil's horn" (II.iv.16). According to Judith Butler "the repressive law is not external to the libido that it represses, but the repressive law represses to the extent that repression becomes a libidinal activity"[129]. Paradoxically, it seems that the eternal game Power plays with itself may well set in motion a process which leads to its own ultimate downfall.[130]

This structure of double (and thereby self-effacing) disavowal also expresses the patriarchal matrix of the relationship between man and woman. Isabella is an insubstantial shadow, hysterically imitating, but never quite able to acquire the moral stature of a fully constituted self-identical subjectivity. Isabella's ultimate form of servitude is to mis-represent her femininity as autonomous while her feminine submissiveness and compassion embody the projection of an early modern male sexual fantasy. What appears to excite the patriarchal figures of power in this play is the image of a chaste, compassionate anchorite, willing to take a vow of silence and prostrate herself before the authority of the Lord. Angelo realizes that "to catch a saint,/With saints dost bait thy hook" (II.ii.180-1) and the "enskied and sainted" girl who has been sent to him thus 'moves' him more than any common strumpet.

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[129] *Ibid*., p.49

[130] According to Slavoj Zizek, in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology,* (London and New York, 1999)Marx made the same point about capitalism: "It will meet its end not because of resistance to it from external forces of pre-capitalist tradition, but because of its ultimate inability to master and restrain its own inherent antagonism - as Marx put it, the limit of capitalism is Capital itself, not the islands of resistance that still elude its control (sexuality, nature, old cultural traditions)", *n.* 7, p.306.

Angelo's demand that Isabella "lay down the treasures of [her] body" (II.iv.96) prostitutes her femininity beneath the tyranny of "the voice of the recorded law" (61) by threatening "ling'ring sufferance" (167) to those who would contest its authority, an authority it does not truly possess. Isabella's decision that her chastity is worth more than her brother's life is as monologic as Angelo's interpretation of the law. Neither appear capable of entertaining the playful double vision of comedy that either Pompey or Mistress Overdone exemplify and remain embittered and dissatisfied till the play's end. This tragic outlook is counterpoised by those other voices, which speak out in different registers, to raise the question of the legitimacy of the law. Such voices can be heard in the libidinal world of Pompey and Mistress Overdone whose trade in the pleasures of the flesh provide an example of the impossibility of full legalistic control whilst the 'fantastic' Lucio, who slanders almost everyone he meets, serves to complicate matters even further.

Lucio describes Pompey's imprisonment as his "right" (III.ii.68) as a bawd, as his fate in such an illegal and immoral profession. Of course, every word Lucio utters is imbued with irony and he himself is no stranger to the bawdy-houses of Vienna. Pompey's status as an untouchable in early modern society is reiterated by the Duke who refers to the "filthy vice" of his trade along a nexus of contradictions regarding purity and danger. The disgust attendant upon the bawd's trade is summarized by the juxtaposing of eating, drinking and clothing oneself from the profits obtained through "abominable and beastly touches" (III.ii.25). But this 'trade' in women as sexual commodities can be profitably compared to the 'business' of marriage. Lucio's trick of speaking more than he knows impels us to question the relationship between prostitution and marriage when he asks Pompey whether there are, "none of Pygmallion's images, newly made woman, to be had now, for putting the hand in the

pocket and extracting it clutch'd" (III.ii.45-6). Pygmallion's images, his statues, grow

into action from a rigid and lifeless stone, become human in order to be married, and

can thus seem to provide a counterpart not only to the figural growth of prostitution,

but the thematic movement from convent to matrimony enacted by Isabella.

Each and every heterosexual union in this play appears to conceal the

business acumen of marriage and sexual relations behind the prohibitive façade of the

law. Claudio and Juliet's union has been hindered by "the propagation of a dower"

(I.iii.156) while Lord Angelo has spurned his fiancée Mariana as her dowry "came

short of composition" (V.i.217), a situation which "disvalued" her reputation. Lucio

may have "purchased …many diseases" (I.ii.46) in the houses of resort but the

financial impetus of marriage is continually counterbalanced against the

concupiscence of an embryonically capitalist society which buys and sells pleasure. It

is therefore important to recall that in the light of early modern moral psychology it

might be suggested that Shakespeare's Vienna is a place of more than one kind of

prostitution where Pompey the bawd's casuistry is both frivolous and historically

meaningful. Pompey's defense of his trade as a necessary vice where "good

counsellors lack no clients" (I.ii.110-1) is supported by Sherwin Bailey who notes that

theologians throughout the ages have "found it difficult not to concede that the harlot

was in some sense indispensable to the well-being of the body-politic."[131] He points to

Augustine's *De ordine* which raises the question of the inevitability of prostitution:

"What can be called more sordid, more void of modesty, more full of shame than

prostitutes, brothels, and every other evil of this kind? Yet remove prostitutes from

human affairs and you will pollute all things with lust."[132] The bawd therefore

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[131] D. Sherwin Bailey, *The Man-Woman Relation in Christian Thought,* (Condon, 1959), p.161
[132] *Ibid*, p.161-2

represents a truth that supports the dialectic of law and love as it is reiterated within the 'holy bands' of matrimony: that lust is out-with the jurisdiction of legally sanctioned nuptials. In this way, human nature is revealed sometimes remorselessly, sometimes comically, as the mortifying consequences of the law are transposed against the vivifying power of sexuality.

Throughout *Measure for Measure* the play of antitheses is all but illusory as the dialectic of love and law has rarely been so clearly and antagonistically presented. Angelo, or Lust, is contrasted with Isabella, or Purity. The Duke, or Rule is opposed to Pompey, or Misrule and we may find that although the Duke is morally superior, the whore-monger is a good deal more honest. However, each individual character faces a different concept of the law, which offers mutually impossible alternatives: honour and life are opposed while honesty and deception are united. Their lapses can be viewed sometimes in the light of tragedy and sometimes in that of comedy but one thing is always certain; this comedy is profoundly concerned with awakening a sense of consciousness in humanity.

Reinstating differance

In using Lyotard's theory of the *différend* we can open up this and other plays to another possible interpretation: they all show the limits of abstract legalism in a society where the central code that subjects believe in (or at least subscribe to) has become suspect through misappropriation. Of course, a good deal of Elizabethan and Jacobean comedy participates in the process of re-inscribing cultural norms: specifically in relation to the patriarchal constraint of women. In the discourse whereby what is seen as dangerous and excess to the social order is gendered female, the other of the patriarchal domain, and as such, all women are perceived as a direct

threat to patriarchal stability. In comparison, *Measure for Measure* differs most dramatically from other city comedies, where order is (to some degree) reinstated – or as Thomas Nashe writes, where "pride, lust, whoredom, prodigality, or drunkeness" are "beat down utterly"– for it, in the end, brings in "the halter and the gallows" as a threat for the unrepentant.[133] Nevertheless, plots revolving around teaching husbands and wives, lovers and whores 'proper' behaviour, invariably leave some score unsettled, and as Catherine Belsey states, "there are no *perfectly* happy endings".[134]

The cause for *différend* is exacerbated by the necessary violence of passing sentence, of providing an end to the deferral of serious business. To return to Lyotard's terms, a *différend* is "signalled by silence and/or sentiment, a frustration of language trying to phrase something in the absence of the means to do so."[135] In many ways, the only answer to the injustice of an unfair sentence is silence, exasperation. However, silence very often commands complicity, as does the laughter generated by comic displacements. Therefore, we could cautiously concede that the privileged witnesses to the *différends* staged by these comedies are collaborators in the simultaneous creation and ruination of meaning, by displaying that their privilege is part of a rhetorical hierarchy that depends on the repression of an opposing term. The aporetic structure of comic closure is erected by the impossibility in which jurors are situated as themselves dispensers of impossible sentences. The text may lay claim to a comic resolution but instead offers only an uneasy oscillation between contrary poles

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[133] Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Pennilesse* (1592), *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama: The Theatre in its Time* ed. G. Blakemore Evens, (New York, 1988), pp. 13-15
[134] Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture,* (Oxford, 1994), p.34

[135] Bennington, *Judging Lyotard*, p.156

of discourse where certain elements cannot be harmonised within the rhetoric of redemption and inclusion, and are thus, merely ignored. Chapter 4 will analyse this degraded character position in full as the expulsion of anti-comic figures are identifiable as symbolic inconsistencies which punctuate the text and give it its texture, however, as they are obliged to choose where no choice is available, their position as tropological deviances signpost them as markers of a *mise en abyme*: or at least *keys* to the abyss in any comic text, as it is in any event a linguistic problem, a question of language as such.

The anti-comic figure is charged with breaking the rules of comic harmony. They are therefore brought before the Law of comedy where the offence that has been committed is punished through mockery or ritualistic humiliation. The moments which leave the anti-comic figure before the Law of Comedy are examples of what De Man calls 'undecidability' or 'unreadability', where questions of epistemology are suspended within rhetoric and ways of knowing reveal their dependence upon ways of saying. Derrida uses this concept of judgement in very specific ways in both 'Before the Law' and 'The Law of Genre' where the laying bare of the *différend* in this way marks an aporia or deconstructive event, a rupture or epistemic break, that signals a shift from one dominant episteme to another. In this sense, Frye's theory that the movement from *pistis* to *gnosis*, "from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom"[136] may not always, conclusively be a movement from illusion to reality, particularly if one perceives the crystalisation of a new reality to be as illusory as the last. One could then argue, that as the comedies take their point of departure from

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[136] Frye, *op.cit.*, p.169

accidental or incidental features, they show the arbitrariness of the Law by enacting it, by staging and suspending all the preconceived notions of the presumably absolute, categorical authority of a Law which assumes an authority it does not have.

Invariably, Shakespeare's comic dramas present a certain original and extreme tension or torsion within the antinomy of the Law. There always (already) exists a split in the Law between description and prescription, value and validity, regularity and ruling, generality and particularity, freedom and necessity, subjecthood and subjection. It is this logic of performativity that comedy rails against. The comic pushes itself up against the generic rules which constrain it, interrogating the dialectic of the Law, playing one argument off against another, demanding straight answers from an epistemology which finds itself caught between a formalism of the Law and an empiricism of events. A lawgiver of logic via marvellously illogical routes, the Comic knows that philosophy *is* the Law, and so, plays along as philosophical artificer. The philosophical experience we encounter is not unlike the critical application of deconstruction: a certain questioning, a certain crossing of boundaries, limits…*frontiers*. It proffers a certain questioning of legislations, and a certain interrogation of the subjectivity of legislators who would forcefully impose their will upon society.

Accidental Absolutes

That a legislator may be a charlatan is always already implied in both the comedies and deconstruction. Rousseau characterises the *legislator* thus: as the possessor of a "great soul" whose "true miracle" is that he must "prove his mission".[137] But

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[137] Jean-Jacques Rousseu, *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right,* trans. Charles M. Sherover, (New York, 1974), p.69

Rousseau knew that there are no indubitable signs, that nothing can prove a miracle to be a miracle, that in the moment of his coming, the legislator may, in the final analysis be a charlatan. To put it another way, legislation implies forms of exclusion that always threaten to return; in relation to comic theory laughter may well function as that excess (i.e. the sign of excess) and comic form as the site where it occurs and is presumably 'tamed'. The miracle of legislation, perhaps all legislations, is that the charlatan may well succeed by enforcing an illegitimate politics upon an unsuspecting citizenry, or at least a socially *detrimental* but ultimately credible politics upon an unsuspecting citizenry.

Wielding an authority one does not truly possess excites the tyrant and unnerves the charlatan. Lord Angelo fears that he is acquiring the mantle of the charlatan legislator in his sovereign's absence, as his initial references to counterfeit currency imply. His expressions of anxiety about having "so great a figure…stamp'd upon" him (I.i.48-49) are so unlike Portia's declarations of imposture, as she enters wholeheartedly into the spirit of a game wherein all shall think that she and her waiting woman "are accomplished / With what [they] lack". (*MoV*, III.iv.61-2) But then, Portia's heroic law-trick is commendable in its comic deferral of death, whereas Angelo's corruption of the Law incites shame and horror. Angelo's 'game' becomes his desire to enforce his will through the force of Law, a force which he commands and yet cannot control. Portia's desire is also to temporarily turn the Law to her advantage; however, she interprets the process of trial and judgement as a necessary means to control and repress the disruptive forces of unruly masculinity.

Just as her father had devised the trial of the three caskets to safeguard her, Portia counters the advances of unsuitable matches through her inventive application

of 'mood music'.[138] This example of Portia's recourcefulness demonstrates how potentially disruptive a well educated Renaissance woman could be and although the comedies depict young men in need of direction they also broach the problem of the unruly and cunning woman. The desire to repress disruptive forces, can be seen especially in Jacobean tracts like *Hic Mulier* (1620) or Swetnam's *Araignment Against lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women* (1615), and rests upon the formulation that all the "ills attendant" upon a society that is becoming more capitalist are "excess, abuses, or even subversions of the system"[139] rather than inherent in the system. Powerful, independent women, sexually active women, or women dressed in men's clothing disturb categories by challenging the status quo through insubstantial glimpses of another future, as "spectres"[140] capable of disrupting perceived reality.

As Slavoj Žižek explains, what we experience as 'reality' depends upon symbolisation or representation – as, for instance, we depend upon language to explain something that happens to us, to explain our material and immediate experiences – but in the process of symbolisation something is always left over. This non-symbolised material, that which escapes the symbolic order (Žižek calls it the 'big Other'), remains to 'stain' the fabric of reality; it is what does not fit into the 'normal' world and thus threatens to expose the stitching of reality. *Hic Mulier's* vehement attack on 'mannish women' can, in this way, be explained as a reaction against the 'gap' opened up "between the supposed reality of one's social status and sexual kind, and the clothes that were to display that reality to the world";[141]

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[138] "As are those dulcet sounds in break of day/ That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear./ And Summon him to marriage." (*MoV*, III.ii.51-3)

[139] Thomas Moisan, "'Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?': Subversion and Recuperation in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, (New York and London, 1990), p.196

[140] Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology", in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, (New York, 1994), pp.26-28

[141] Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England,,*(London and New York, 1994), p.96

in other words, women in men's clothing escape and then threaten the distinction between 'men' and 'women' as 'mannish woman' escapes symbolisation as that supplement at the source which challenges the symbolic order. These disruptive forces are supplements brought into being by transgressing the boundary between masculine and feminine. This exemplifies the process of selection and exclusion which always seeks the supplement at source.[142]

For the citizens of Venice/Belmont, Shylock embodies the destructive force of abstract legality (a capitalist condition) and his downfall serves to (symbolically) rid society of the stain or 'spectre' of the unruly sexuality of youth, standing, as he does, on the margins of society, a foreigner and a Jew. Less symbolically, in *The Dutch Courtesan*, Francischina herself serves as the spectre who interrupts the attempt to create a complete unified reality. She is the externalisation of commodification in a society that depends upon misrecognising its foundation: a foundation that places commodification at the heart of an embryonic capitalism.

In speaking of anxiety in *The Merchant of Venice*, an anxiety produced by the rise of capitalism and, therefore, the destabilisation of the traditional social system, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of 'territorialization' is useful. This theory provides an explanation for the process of cultural 'de-coding' or the destabilising of the official vision of the world, a process that the citizens of Venice work to suppress. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they argue that

> the prime function incumbent upon the socius has always been to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them, to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channelled, regulated.[143]

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[142] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore and London, 1974)

[143] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane, (Minneapolis, 1983), p.33

This coding of the 'flows of desires' structures society as it determines acceptable behaviours. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari view society as a 'body' of codifying desires, or, in other words, through the process of 'territorializing' (coding) flows of desire, our vision of reality emerges since society exists as an arrangement of shared codes. Antonio and Bassanio's use of Christian rhetoric that demands that the Jew should dispense 'mercy' depends upon a shared or internalised view of mercy as an essential, universal quality.

Portia's eulogy on the 'quality of mercy' subtly parodies this universality which superficially perpetuates and supports the status quo while other forces escape and resist containment. *The Merchant of Venice* provides an excellent example of a society experiencing deterritorialization. We must observe, however, that it is justice - Law - not the 'quality of mercy' that prevails under Portia's direction. Portia stands for the emblem of the 'good' daughter, who insists on the putative letter of the law, on the absolute necessity of preserving the law. However, whereas Shylock may expect the judge and jury to stick to the 'letter of the law' Portia wants to locate something in excess of it. It is only after the verdict is rendered that Portia allows mercy its proper place and function, "to season justice". (IV.i.196)

Conversely, Angelo, whose very blood is 'snow-broth', commands the law with such arctic logic that mercy is devalued. Lord Angelo's corruption of the law issues from his inability to balance licence and repression not only within the state, but also within himself, as he steadily draws Isabella into the marketplace of the physical, into a mentality that thinks more about desire than piety, or indeed pity. His argument that Isabella should be willing to commit fornication in order to save her brother's life, since she has implied that an act of fornication is not enough of an evil to merit death, becomes an experiment in the tragicomic timing of the antipredicative,

and the 'demigod' "voice of the recorded law". (II.iv.61) Lord Angelo may well

attempt to expound that measure for measure, an eye for an eye; the law will match

like for like but fails to complete the Old Testament dictum, that vengeance belongs to

God the creator, and He alone. Curiously, it is left to another charlatan, the feigned

holy 'father' (as he is repeatedly called in disguise), the Duke Vincentio, to expedite

the pietistic deceptions of Angelo the fraud, and to reveal that an excess of desire, for

either love or money, and the frustration of that desire, can open up the sluice gates of

madness.

That the legislators of the comedies are invariably impostors or ineffectual

sovereigns points to the necessarily flawed aspect of sovereignty and the requirement

of the state to employ an 'outsider' to repair, and make whole the society impugned

by autonomy:

> He who rules men ought not to control legislation, he who controls legislation
> ought not to rule men; otherwise his laws, being ministers of his passions,
> would often serve only to perpetuate his acts of injustice; he would never be
> able to prevent private views from corrupting the sacredness of his work.[144]

The conflation of legislative authority and sovereign power is obviously viewed by

Rousseau as a socially destructive force. Nevertheless, the position of the legislator as

a "fortunate impostor",[145] reinforces the eternal possibility of charlatanism, and serves

as a reminder of the aleatory nature of power and political domination. But whereas

there is always the potential for violence or force to emanate from the promulgator of

extraordinary laws, it is claimed that their reliance on 'wisdom' is one sanctioned by

the gods. Therefore, from within the formal and ideological constraints of the

political, the Absolute is propounded as the ultimate legal authority. Humanity must

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[144] Rousseu, *The Social Contract,,* p.65
[145] *ibid.*, p.66

profess that the phantasm of the law, that omnipotent, eternally absent authority, is the Almighty Himself. But how can we account for this fantastic vision of the law?

The Inner Courts of the Soul

William Blackstone, writing at the start of the eighteenth century, speaks of a divine social contract between subject and sovereign signed by God himself as: "all subjects are equally bounden to their allegiance", as if "they had taken the oath; because it is written by the finger of the law in their hearts."[146] The law here comes before the law, in both the figural and temporal sense; in the political theory of contract, a contract is needed on which to base the contract and so on *ad infinitum*. The law is therefore without origin (other than prohibition), and without a political foundation. Therefore, a relation to the law is a relation which, whether interrupted or continued, is paradoxical, in that it involves guilt without fault, 'rapport sans rapport'. In the comic dramas under examination what is being explored is the moral dilemma, perhaps the paradox of guilt *tout court*, incurred by merely existing in the face of the Absolute, the unrepresentable, the absent God, 'the law which is not law'.[147]

The question of 'why have you forsaken us, oh Lord?' is one which flies from the lips of many of Shakespeare's characters. *Measure for Measure* persistently subverts the comic promises of immortality, encouraging instead a suspicion that we are each tragically betrayed by the supposedly benevolent biological and political systems to which God has abandoned His human offspring. In this sense, perhaps the play is a result of the plague year 1603 not only in its emphasis on the replenishment of the population but also in its portrayal of a city abandoned by its benevolent but exasperated Lord to an agency of deadly retribution. God has seemingly and

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[146] William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 Vols. (Dublin, 1769-70), I.369
[147] Derrida, 'Before the Law', p.95

mysteriously absconded, leaving his children in a pointless (or at least inscrutable)

universe, and in the cold hands of Avenging Angels like Lord Angelo.

The 'holy terror' of the Law as the unrepresentable, has both a fearful and an

alluring quality, which both seduces and violates the subject. However, the Law is

supposed to be just, that is, impartial, indifferent, free from desire. But, the Law is not

the opposite of desire, it is, as Freud knew, the taboo from which desire is generated.

Terry Eagleton outlines the paradoxical desire of the law to dictate our desires, to

prohibit what we desire and desire what we prohibit:

> [I]t is only through the Law that we can have access to the desire which it
> prohibits, since the prohibition is the first we learn of it. 'If it had not been for
> the law', writes St Paul to the Romans, 'I should not have known sin. I should
> not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not
> covet." (Romans 7:7)[148]

But covet we do, which makes reducing Voltaire's famous dictum about God to its

lowest common denominator all the easier: for if concupiscence did not exist, it would

be necessary to invent it. Indeed, the faculty of reason which weighs, measures and

controls desire and experimentation works against stagnation in search of evolution

and expansion. For example, even the misogynistic Benedick, in *Much Ado About*

Nothing is brought to a position where he can justify his love for Beatrice with the

excuse that "the world must be peopled" (II.iii.232-3), but against this form of

potentially promiscuous reasoning the laws that govern human cohabitation act as a

form of constraint, in an attempt to prevent the capitulation to the forces of inhumane

lust.

As Malhereux in *The Dutch Courtesan* observes "so in nature those actions

that are most prohibited are most desired" (*The Dutch Courtesan*, III.i.43-4). This is a

theocratic premise invariably used to incite repression and to distinguish between

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[148] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic,* (Oxford, 2003), p.150

legally sanctioned expressions of love and the promiscuity of unrestrained lust.
Marston's use of Montaigne's observation that those who "could live with the smoke
of roast meat might live at a cheap rate" (II.i.104-5) mocks the legislation that outlaws
physical desire. In the comedies the drive towards procreation is indefatigable and as
we have already discussed, this drive is possibly connected to the cultural trauma
following the 1603 plague, one of the worst to hit London in the entire Elizabethan
and Jacobean period.[149] The spectacle of people given over to moral degeneracy may
have had a cathartic effect. Rehearsing vice, the theatre could also stage its
punishment and exorcise it. Certainly an apocalyptic sense of unfettered vice
dominates plays like *Measure for Measure* (1603), *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605), *A
Trick to Catch the Old One* (1608), *The Devil's Law-Case* (1619) and, of course, *The
Malcontent* (1605) where the 'horn mad' courtiers of this play sneak from bed-
chamber to bed-chamber.

Therefore, the overarching message of comedy, whether romantic or satiric, is
that desires need to be controlled rather than annihilated. In setting themselves high
above others, the virtuous and the pompous refuse to enter into the communal
requirements of any human society, with plays such as Shakespeare's *Measure for
Measure* and Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* revealing their epithymetic function by
summoning men of a certain "professed abstinence" (*The Dutch Courtesan*, I.i.110) to
the open courtroom of the city streets and stews to make virtues go forth and prove
themselves.[150] The exposition of man's 'natural' lusts reveals that the 'wise' victims
of comic intrigue are desperate and despairing passionate men who display the
destructiveness of sexual repression at work. Malheureux in *The Dutch Courtesan*, in

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[149] Thomas Dekker, *The wonderfull year* (1603), ed. F.P. Wilson, *The plague pamphlets of Thomas Dekker,* (Oxford, 1925), pp.28-9
[150] "If our virtues/ Did not go forth of us…" (*Measure for Measure*, I.i.33-4)

essence, transgresses the 'law' of the nascent capitalist society by attempting to conflate the dichotomy between abject and symbolic, pure and impure: his desire for the courtesan Francischina is, within the bounds of the play, impure, yet still he 'must enjoy' her. Malheureux thus nearly threatens to show the distinction between pure and impure – a distinction which underpins the whole discourse of sexuality in Jacobean society – as simply social construction. Thus, Malheureux's final disposal of Francischina indicates his return to the presumed natural order of his society. *The Dutch Courtesan,* in other words, participates in re-coding, or to borrow an image from Thomas Nashe, in 'utterly' squashing, any disruptive, threatening forces.

At the Entrance to the Hall of Mirrors

The literary fascination with the law as phantasmatic has only been surpassed by the ordinary citizen's realisation of the inaccessibility of the legal system and of the need for mediation, which, it can be argued, comedy is able to provide. But as Jacques Derrida has argued, it becomes necessary to think of a "certain historicity of law and a certain historicity of literature"[151] if we wish to reveal the lack of presence the Law (of both legalism and literary categorisation) possesses. The absence of a definable historical origin has forced the law to create "legitimate fictions on which it bases the truth of its justice".[152] Just as invisible boundaries have sprung up between countries and communities, so this has led to the emergence of the frontier as a *theme* for political thinking. Indeed, it is understood that frontiers of any description are non-

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[151] Derrida, 'Before the Law', p.214
[152] *ibid*., p.183

natural inscriptions, but that they are also from nature, or against nature, "drawn against a nature on the other side",[153] a nature that has been repressed or prohibited.

To think of the law originating as prohibition provides a connection to the concept of repression, which Freud 'invented' as an answer to the question of the origin of moral law, in the form of a meta-narrative. As Derrida reminds us, Freud made the connection between law and political foundation when he derived society and morality (the forbidding of murder and incest) from horror and repentance at the primeval murder of the father. But in this narrative of the history of law as prohibition, a short-circuit may be detected. If the murder inaugurates morality, how is the moral desire for repentance, which in Freud's explanation drives men to self-repression, to be accounted for? It appears as if the need to legislate has always been prior to the law, or 'before the law' in Derridean parlance. But how could this self-repressive mechanism have been activated: accidentally? As Prince Hal seems to imply, where both the law and comedy are concerned, "nothing pleaseth but rare accidents". (*1 Henry IV*, I.ii.180) Indeed, the story which Freud uses to found morality turns out to be a fiction, which is needed in order to ground what is, in the final analysis a fantastic and improbable narrative. The phantasmatic origin of Freud's law explains why the Law is essentially inaccessible. Producing a double-bind by constantly promising itself, announcing itself and yet only ever able to offer itself accessible in the most approximate terms, the Law, Derrida argues, is the product of its own ambiguity. It is formed, paradoxically, from both an inaccessibility and an incitement to approach. The very shape of the relation between negotiation and interruption, which enjoins and forbids, seems dubiously folded back on itself, a relation between relation and non-relation, that renders the law dissymetric and

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[153] Bennington, *Legislations*, *op. cit*., p.263

unstable. The chiasmic invagination of this proposition illicits doubt, evokes a phantasmatic figure of the Law which is described by Derrida as that which cannot be seen or touched, only deciphered.

The Law is not to be seen or touched, but deciphered. Therefore, the Law is always 'open to interpretation'. Thus, one of the primary anxieties over the Law has always been hermeneutical: who is authorised to interpret and determine the Law? The important fact for jurists to establish, then, is that the Law is not an infinitely flexible system open to any ingenious interpretation but rather, it is a complex store of memories. Yet, still feared, by laypersons and lawyers alike is that the Law introduces uncertainties by exceeding its own confines. C.L. Barber may have included that fantastic fiction, *The Merchant of Venice* in his thorough analysis of festive comedy, but admits that although there is a festive emphasis, in the Saturnalian hounding of the scapegoat figure, this play is rather more of a "kind of history" than a comic "gambold".[154] As has been discussed earlier, Shylock embodies the destructive force of abstract legality in a nascent capitalist society where the ritual expulsion of his destabilising presence is required to make the body politic whole again. Therefore, we could infer that the inclusive tendency of comedy more often than not reconciles or converts rather than repudiates. However, the scapegoat ritual may expel some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos or even tragedy which forces *The Merchant of Venice* to skirt the comic balance. To return to Derrida's advice, that we should think of this kind of history- this history of storytelling- as a certain historicity of Law, seems to lead us along a labyrinthine route of law-tricks and dissembled words towards a hybrid and perverted law.

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[154] C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy,* p.166

Shakespeare's vast body of work encourages the contemplation of societal contradiction, but in representing these issues in the form of comedy the audience is presented with an array of potential solutions to seemingly insurmountable and immovable dilemmas, even if only in wish fulfilment, of apparently inescapable class or gender assignments. This is possible as comedy operates across a pattern of tension, release, clarification and finally celebration that exemplifies how joy is not only inextricably linked, but even dependent on terror. It indulges in fantasies of defiance and liberation and, of course, the consequent punishment which reinforces the notion that these comic pleasures, do indeed, lie in the contemplation of a certain anxiety in others.

In the tragedies this manipulation of anxieties focuses on the audience's inability to intervene and stop the murderous chain of lies and misunderstandings. This places the audience in direct contact with the psychologically shattering inevitability of death, as each individual is isolated within their own tragic vision of events. In the comedies, however, we are offered the 'safe haven' of the typical happy ending where pent up anxieties are released by a reconciliation of previously unhopeful elements. The phenomenology of desire in Shakespeare's works serves to illuminate the quest for personal identity, but the human impact of the comedies themselves, centre upon our acceptance, and even celebration of our one-ness with ourselves and our community, which the reconciliations and marriages at the closure of comedies is supposed to represent. Nevertheless, comedy also contains irreverent, playful, subversive and grotesque elements that relate to the rituals and myths of 'popular' rather than 'high' culture. In this respect comedy could be defined as the overturning of the tragic through the ruthless interrogation of widely held cultural norms.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the audience is reminded of the political and racial prejudices of the early modern Europeans, who, as conspirators in anti-semitic acts, demonstrated the threat felt from the destabilising effects of the Jewish diaspora. Shakespeare's choice of the character of Shylock the Jew demonstrates, somewhat subversively, that this man's cultural identity has been largely constructed by the Christians of Venetian society. Upon hearing his heart-rending speech upon discovering his daughter's betrayal of him[155] it becomes increasingly difficult to jeer at this embodiment of an Elizabethan bogey-man, reconstructed, as he is, from rumour and racial antipathies. This humanising of what has been dehumanised in myth disrupts the image of a devilish Jew intent on tricking a benevolent Christian into human sacrifice.

Shakespeare achieves the paradoxical presentation of a dramatic figure who is at once a consummate and implacable monster and distressingly human. We witness Bassanio, the hopeful lover eager to marry money meeting with a Jewish creditor who converses with him in the curt, but not impolite manner of a professional banker. Shylock simply reiterates the sum requested; he is a business man and there is no reason for him to express eagerness for this bond, particularly as he has been humiliated by Bassanio's friend Antonio, and sees no reason to accommodate either of them. As Shylock himself says:

> Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
> You spurn'd me such a day; another time
> You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies
> I'll lend you thus such monies?
>   (I.iii.121-4)

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[155] "If you prick us, do we not bleed?..." (III.i.63)

One can imagine the response of a jeering, Elizabethan audience, teeming with prejudices and anticipating the scornful treatment of this 'villain'. Thus, Antonio reflects their sentiment:

> I am like to call thee so again,
> To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
>
> (125-6)

It is a certainty that with each malicious rebuke, the audience would unite in the spirit of theatrical fantasy, and would have cheered loudly in approval as the Christian asserted his superiority over the infidel "stranger cur".

Shylock's previous soliloquy aside (36-47) is a sort of diploma piece for the qualifications demanded by the role that has been brought into play. And, through his uttering of incoherent and furious revilings, which urge confused religious, racial and commercial rivalry, popular prejudices are activated by the veiled, but potent, self-destructiveness of his promptings to revenge. However, just as the expression of the universal phenomenon of prejudice against Shylock's "accursed tribe" is presented through his individual characteristics, Antonio's arrogance, high mindedness and self-righteousness are also mocked. Indeed, here we have Antonio, the representative Christian, proposing to borrow money at interest, an act of usury that was traditionally condemned by Christian doctrine and law. The occasion seems to suggest itself to Shylock as a proper one for trying to get Antonio to see the moral problems of money-lending from the Jew's point of view:

> Methoughts you said you neither lend nor borrow
> Upon advantage.
>
> (130-2)

This would appear to be Shylock's bid for some semblance of mutual understanding, but, Antonio is, in fact, determining the circumstances which will thrust a bond on Shylock:

> Lend it rather to your enemy,
> Who if he break thou may'st with better face
> Exact the penalty.
>
> (130-2)

The penalty for default beggars belief but is agreed to and imposed by both parties. Shylock has already ruminated over the possible misadventure of borrowing on the strength of absent vessels, but, Antonio's overwhelming desire to make a financial gift to his friend Bassanio has removed all caution from his purposes.

So, when Shylock presents a revolting bond to Antonio as a "merry sport", it may be a poor sort of joke, but nonetheless, the veiled threat of circumcision, of taking "a pound of man's fair flesh" (160) would have had an uproarious effect on the Elizabethan 'pit'. The unnerving implications of the Judaic ritual of circumcision were bound up with theological, racial, genealogical and sexual concerns. And indeed, many textual sources of the time refer to the association between this rite with ritualistic and surreptitious murder. Therefore, Shylock's offer to take a pound of Antonio's flesh would have probably been interpreted by an early modern audience as an occluded threat of castration. Moreover, this bond would perhaps also imply that Antonio's forfeiture would entail a conversion to Judaism itself as circumcision was believed to 'turn a man Jew'.

Although Shylock does not specify the location of his intended incision it is interesting to note that not only does the word "flesh" carry the philological meaning of 'penis' but that the euphemism itself is invoked by Shylock's suggestion to "cut off" rather then 'cut out', that part of the body which "pleaseth" him. It is not until the

court-room scene in Act IV that Shylock reads from the bond that the location is "Nearest his heart" (IV.i.249) which again is a possible euphemism for the unmentionable genitals; a troubling thought for any man threatened with such a cut. Not surprisingly, popular writers took advantage of the punning opportunities made available by this double entendre, particularly, Shakespeare himself. The comedies are replete with bad jokes about male genitalia and as we shall discover in chapter 5 this genital obsession is a totemic principle in comedy, where pleasure and anxiety converge. During the trial scene Antonio speaks of himself as "a tainted wether" (237) best suited to suffer the extraction of Shylock's cut. Additionally Gratiano's tasteless joke about "mar[ring] the young clerk's pen" (V.i.237) offers another instance from the play of men's castration anxieties.

Throughout the play Antonio and Shylock fiercely insist on their differences from each other. To the last, they seek ways of preserving that difference through symbolic acts which would convert their adversary into their own kind. Although, paradoxically, these symbolic acts of a threatened circumcision and Shylock's figurative reversal of his Judaism through baptism, erase, rather than preserve the boundaries that distinguish the merchant from the Jew. This play of oppositions reconstructs those diametrically opposed roles of self and other and switches them back and forth in the liminal zone of the court-room. In chapter 4 the ritual of the scapegoat victim, who is necessitated by this movement, will be further analysed, but in the closing moments of the trial in *The Merchant of Venice* the law of comedy discloses itself as being as dangerous as the law of Venice, if not juridical law itself. Shakespeare's desire to allay such fears produces a fantasy ending of legally enforced conversion which consummates the Elizabethan demand for social cohesion. Through the spectacle of coercion scapegoats are sacrificed for the common good and young

lovers are converted into legally sanctioned promulgators of a new future. However, the labyrinthian route which this comedy follows functions on a crucially symbolic level which associates juridical law with incoherence and injustice.

Historically, the labyrinth has been associated with both intricate artistry and deception. The *domus daedali* served as an emblem throughout the Middle Ages of human error, or as a figure for a world occupied by hideous Minotaurs, Vice or Envy. An artifice like the labyrinth Minos had built to hide the shame of his cuckoldry, warns us of the monstrosity produced by an artifice that allows the expression of unnatural desire and presents the labyrinth as a space that always threatens to conceive the illegitimate. The labyrinth represents some form of perversion of technology or artifice channelled to the worst possible ends. It is unsurprising then, that legal language is often represented in Jacobean drama as mere obscurantism and cant, at times rather more like alchemical jargon than serious professional discourse. Witgood's observation that one is easily "swallowed in the quicksands of law-quillets" or split "upon the piles of *praemunire*" (*A Trick to Catch the Old One*, I.i.10-11) alludes to the belief that the Law is a linguistic quagmire in which both the guilty and guiltless alike could be caught.

Living On (Happily Ever After) in the Comic U-topia

Having a vested interest in the aleatory nature of life is common to nearly every comic character, but the dispossessed Duke Altofront in *The Malcontent* (1605) transmits a turbulent excitement as he divines the hidden anxieties of a jealous and illegitimate court, through the comic contingencies of his double-dealings. In this "bitter play" which is "neither satire nor moral, but the mean passage of a history" (Induction, 50-2) Marston is brilliantly mocking the familiar gambits and rhetoric of the Elizabethan

and Jacobean stage – dukes disguised as hermits, magical elixirs, 'empoisonings', death's-head maskers and so on. Much of the humour moves so quickly that it is easily lost "What news from limbo?" (II.v.141) quips Malevole to a knifed corpse as it suddenly resurrects. Indeed, much of the dark humour that can be found in these Jacobean 'city' comedies relies on the opportunities afforded by, not only incongruous surprises but disguise.

The fantastic reversals of situation to be found in, not only *The Malcontent,* but also in all of the other comedies with which we are concerned rely heavily upon concealed identity and intent, as with Witgood and his Courtesan, who devise a 'jest' to unpack the pockets of his covetous uncle. Their trick to catch the old miser by the deception of an illusory bond of wedlock becomes a trial not only of wits but also of wants, as desires are kept ever out of reach by the inadequacy of means. In *The Devil's Law Case* the scheming Romelio devises evermore fascinating and despicable routes to increase his family's wealth, beneath either the guise of a brotherly matchmaker ready and willing to commodify his only sister, or as a Jewish physician, who would rather kill than cure his unfortunate patient. Meanwhile the disguised judge, whose surveillance of his wayward son has allowed him a privileged insight into the accusations laid against him, reveals himself as a special witness capable of passing sentence on a pack of vengeful deceivers.

Helen Gardner may intuit that while a tragic plot must have inescapable logic, comic plots consist of "changes, chances, and surprises" and that comedy itself is "an image of life triumphing over chance".[156] Those characters who people the comedies however, seem to depend upon chance triumphing over life, as the fine art of state-craft attempts to delimit and constrain the subjectivity of desire through prohibition

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[156] Helen Gardner, "As You Like It", *Shakespeare, the Comedies: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Kenneth Muir, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), pp. 61-2

and repression. Malevole, Isabella and her brother Claudio, Witgood and his

Courtesan, even Freevill and Malheureux, all place their faith in the aleatory nature of

chance, and although they all pursue different forms of revenge and/or justice, all

depend to a large extent on the contingent. In the various comedies before us, the

point has been repeatedly made that the acting and cataloguing of vice are a necessary

prelude to the edifying spectacle of reform and correction. That we are vulnerable to

chance, that we should be on our guard against the unpredictable, is augmented by our

relationship to the Law.

Terry Eagleton describes the "vast, self-regulating organism" of the Law, as

"impenetrable as a jellyfish", always open to interpretation, and therefore always

beyond our control; he further defines the figure of the Law as "vengeful and

vindictive".[157] Nonetheless, this is undoubtedly a tragic configuration of the justice of

the Law. The randomness and contingency, the irruption of the aleatory into the

quotidian universe, is what tragic essentialism finds abhorrent. Indeed, the comic u-

topia, that 'non-place' free of the constraints of the everyday world, detached from the

old or dominant order and outside of time, that ludicrous context marked by the lack

of *conventional* rationality, morality and/or work, in which the comic character is not

threatened is, thus, the very opposite of the tragic deadlock and clenched resolution

that Eagleton propounds as so expiatory. Such a u-topia takes many forms. It might be

the traditional, festive end of comedy, that bliss beyond time in which the inclusivity

of community is celebrated, where marriages promise the births of a new world,

peopled with hope and happiness, or the carnival atmosphere of a city comedy

preparing the ground for a mock trial of the law itself, enacted by those crafty,

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[157] Eagleton *op. cit.*, p.130

compliant, inextinguishable forms of life which get their way by yielding, by adapting

to the intransigent.

The tension or narrowing of the conceptual space inherent between the genres

of comedy and tragedy, when faced with a summons by the literary law of genre is

always already strained. The constraint upon these two seemingly obverse forms,

emanates from the sameness, that each would deny the other. For if it is true that the

glorification of the Law is the province of tragedy, then it is equally true that the

double-bind of comedy is that once it has defined its *u-topian* perspective, it is no

longer a u-topia: so defined, it is *placed* within the oppositional order of the dominant

society, and is thus incorporated into that society. Jonathan Dollimore, in fact, has

argued of *Measure for Measure* that the raison d'etre for its emphasis on rampant vice

and diseased sexuality is to justify the rigorous application of the Law as a

corrective.[158] And while we could wholeheartedly agree that comedy *realistically*

represents a trial of social codes and conventions it is more critical to remind

ourselves of comedy's deconstructive project: a process whereby castration and

mimesis,[159] transgression and affirmation,[160] the double reading (writing/bind/science)

of deconstruction (and comedy) may be either conservative or revolutionary,

depending upon how it is deployed.[161] Or, put another way, the teleological thrust of

comedy, despite whatever political or ethical stance it takes, "leaves the world as it

was" though "our grasp of why it is and was" has changed.[162] And yet occasionally,

[158] Jonathan Dollimore, 'Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure', Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism,* ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Manchester, 1985), pp.72-87
[159] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago, 1981), p.84
[160] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago, 1978), p.274
[161] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, (Evanston, 1988), p.141
[162] Jacques Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage,* (Manchester, 1984), p.120

one can perceive the subversive potential of an art form which refuses to sublimate itself.

Indeed, just as one could argue that Derrida wants philosophy to live on, one could maintain that comedy desires to perpetuate a tenable position for the Law. For if the philosophy of Law were to reach its goal, its telos (its conclusive thesis), the desire of philosophy and its telos would disappear, become paralyzed, immobilized, die.[163] Hence comic deconstruction strives to keep the discussion going, living on, open;[164] that is the ethics of discussion in this comic utopia. As a result, we can see comedy at the end of philosophy in the sense that philosophy attains its goals in comedy: to go on, to survive and continue in a world which is hostile to it. Nevertheless it is far from clear that we should rejoice in this prospect, for there is much despair in comedy, a despair that comes from the recognition that the repetitive, obsessive, foolish behaviour depicted in comedy will continue indefinitely.

Since the comedies likewise often enact this arbitrariness, they interrupt something that will go on ever after (happily or not). *The Taming of the Shrew*, at first glance, seems to end happily, but Kate's submission is suspect (and is usually played so that we are not convinced that she has submitted); we are left with the sneaking suspicion that the *agon* of this marriage (and all marriages) will go on indefinitely. As we have already discussed, the Machiavellian intrigues and enforced marriages of *Measure for Measure* inevitably seem mere dictatorship as Duke Vincentio's pseudo-divine edict appears as so arbitrary and despotic.

We must acknowledge that "repetition overdone or not going anywhere"[165] belongs to both philosophy (or any other dominant order) and comedy, and that the

[163] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, p. 129
[164] *ibid.*, pp.111, 116
[165] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* p.168

interminable deferral of serious business, in theatrical or excessive rhetoric, at bottom, comes to nothing. But in admitting the void of uncertainty that the aporetic creation and ruination of meaning offers us we not only profess that nothing has been accomplished or learned, but we also concede that we must begin again. Or as Derrida states, we are always beginning; the arche-originary 'yes' with which we 'begin' and 'end' can only be a fiction, hearsay.[166] We are given over to affirming an endless recitation of ourselves that never actually takes place. This corresponds easily to the teleological thrust of the comic form and its potential to rehearse the numerous causes for *différend* where this rehearsal involves an unmediated display.

Repetition and Reproduction

That tragically misguided men are counterpoised by tragically vendible women is the culmination of much comedy. Romelio in *The Devil's Law-case*, commodifies his sister Jolenta, and when her two suitors seemingly kill each other in a duel, Romelio sees "the advancement of our house", "out of the death of these two noble men". (III.iii.24 & 23) In a similar vein the villain of *The Malcontent*, the conspiratorial Mendoza, declares that there is:

> No band of nature so strong,
> No law of friendship so sacred,
> But I'll profane, burst, violate,
> 'Fore I'll endure disgrace, contempt and poverty.
> (II.i.15-18)

Both characters are men of seemingly "worthy parts…blasted / By insolent vainglory", (*The Devil's Law-case*, I.i.121-2) as both are determined in their efforts to

[166] Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramaphone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', *Acts of Literature*, pp.253-309

further their own accoutrements. With the consummate ease of a Machiavell, Mendoza plots his immanent seizure of power through a political marriage of convenience. His trait of proposing to women who are already married becomes increasingly disturbing, as he banishes the murderously complicit Aurelia and attempts to dispose of the virtuously despondent Maria. Contentiously, we could also argue that one of the main reasons for Shylock entering into a "losing suit" (IV.i.62) in the Venetian court-room, is after the 'theft' of a daughter that he guards as jealously as his ducats.

Throughout all of these comedies, women are related to currency. Portia, the "golden fleece" which "many Jason's come in quest" of (I.i.170 & 171) has all the appearance of a highly confident, wealthy heiress. In fact, when confronted with a prospective husband her confidence is revealed as a distortion of her actual position as her activities are curbed by the will of a dead father. This appearance of control is the first thing she relinquishes to Bassanio describing herself as an "unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpractised" before him, calling him "her Lord, her governor, her king", declaring that "Myself and what is mine to you and yours/ Is now converted" (III.ii.161 & 167 & 168-9). But in committing herself to Bassanio, she undergoes an important conversion: Portia transfers the will of her dead father to her new husband, along with complete mastery over her. In *Measure for Measure* domestic bliss is exposed as a euphemism for the domestication of the human animal, not only in the 'harnessing' of women to a life of male servitude, but also in the channelling of masculine sexuality and desire. It is not only bawds (as Elbow supposes) who "buy and sell men and women like beasts", (III.ii.2) throughout the comedies, but also marriage itself which displays traits similar to a corrective institute. As Lucio

declares, his enforced marriage to the prostitute mother of his child is worse than "pressing to death, whipping, and hanging", (V.i.518-9) which will, of course, closely follow his nuptials. Indeed, as Tysefew quips in *The Dutch Courtesan*, "marriage and hanging are spun both in one hour". (V.iii.150)

When Witgood tells his Courtesan, in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, "Fate has so cast / it that all my means I must derive from thee", (I.i.48) he opens up a rollicking city comedy in which, as "The wedding dinner cools. / Who seem most crafty prove oft times fools". (V.ii.192-3) The disregard for probability may invariably be demonstrated as a structural principle in comedy but the plots with which the playwrights of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean stage present us could usefully be termed as *le comique significatif*,[167] comedies with some sense of utility about them, serving as moral critiques and correctives to the dominant order in play. The element of improbability may also be discerned in some of the repentance speeches which conclude many of the comedies. For example, the use of the jingling octosyllabic couplet (i.e. at the end of *A Trick to Catch the Old One*) conveys the impression that such ironical declarations should not be taken too seriously.[168] That reform is the expected return for the inclusivity of forgiveness and tolerance is offered up time and again as a basic premise of the comic form. So too Shakespeare, throughout his comedies, conflates subjection and subjecthood to underscore the certitude that the dominant society is caught in obsessive, repetitive behaviour that accomplishes at most very little, at worst nothing. A long, familiar list of tyrannical and ineffectual law-givers and rulers subject the subjects of their realms to baffling and transient legislations. Shakespeare's representation of the search for a more

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[167] See Charles Baudelaire for his discussion on the significative comic (*le comique significatif*) and the absolute comic (*le comique absolu*), 'On the Essence of Laughter', *The Mirror of Art,* trans. Jonathan Mayne, (Doubleday: Garden City, New York, 1956), p.143-144

[168] "Lend me each honest hand, for here I rise,/A reclaymde man loathing the generall vice" (V.ii.90-1)

benign form of legalism provisionally offers hopeful outcomes for 'ordinary' people that can be dismissed as mere compromise.

Nevertheless, the provisionality of comic resolution, more than purveying meaninglessly happy endings, cautiously implies some criticism of a society that acknowledges and permits the existence of surrogate-fathers, pimps and temporary law-makers. In short, comic conclusions provide impostors with an opportunity to reveal the extent to which they have any real power. Therefore, when Webster's newly appointed judge Ariosto announces, "That these so comical events be blasted / With no severity of sentence" (*The Devil's Law Case*, V.vi.63-4) one becomes aware just how much the arbitrariness of laws leads to the arbitrariness of ends in the comedies.

Quite how these capricious and spectacular denouements occur should be of the utmost importance to us as they accomplish a movement "from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the old characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom".[169] However, the inclusivity of these finales as outlined by critics such as Northrop Frye, requires closer scrutiny as those characters who served as obstacles to the hero's desire are forever excluded, and the archetypal use of marriage as a harmonious resolution is always qualified.

Conclusion

As *Measure for Measure* accentuates, a 'blessed' betrothal may become as much a 'ritual death' as a banishment, for betrothal and banishment both share a sameness, a disturbing realisation that for the ceremonial figure of the bride (which will be

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[169] Frye, *op. cit.*, p.169

scrutinised in the next chapter) and the ritual figure of the scapegoat (which will have to wait until the fourth chapter for a full explication), they have become synonymous; both have become 'dead in law'. William Blackstone, describes the "very being or legal existence of the woman" as "suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband".[170] Husband and wife become one person in law, and as such, a woman can only be sued as a "feme sole" if her husband has "abjured the realm, or is banished: for then he is dead in law".[171] One is banished from the aegis of their sovereign while the other sacrifices the self. Subjectivity is cast adrift, names change or are simply rendered meaningless, and both undergo a form of trial. The scapegoat is subjected to a mock trial, a ritualistic hearing where it is inevitably found necessary to expel a certain evil from the society, whereas the ceremonial trial of couples who 'bear witness before God' becomes another instance where we bear witness to acts of social exclusion and inclusion, respectively.

The prized method of 'play' which dramatic representations of ritualistic hearings allow, lays the cornerstone for an edifice that will be simultaneously erected and – as is the penchant of comic deconstruction – demolished, all within the teasingly obfuscating language of comedy. In 'Plato's Pharmacy' Derrida shows – quite playfully - how writing acts as a *pharmakon*, threatening to blur the distinctions between good and evil, body and soul, visible and invisible:

> This double participation, once again, does not mix together two previously separate elements; it refers back to a *same* that is not the identical, to the common element or medium of any possible dissociation[172]

[170] Blackstone, *op. cit.* I.442
[171] *ibid.,* p.443
[172] Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, (Chicago, 1981), p.127

This notion can be transposed into a working theory of comedy to the extent that comedy/writing confuses or plays with, renders ambiguous ideas that could supposedly be transmitted through clear speech. But rather than condemning these characteristics, we should embrace them by celebrating comedy's anarchistic tendencies.

The *pharmakon* is acting, then, not only as a bridge between two supposedly opposite elements, but also as a subversive device which erases the distinction between the two elements it bridges and assumes both their identities simultaneously:

> The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the difference of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the *differends* (italics mine) that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve. Already inhabited by difference, this reserve, even though it 'precedes' the opposition between different effects, even though it preexists differences as effects, does not have the punctual simplicity of a *coincidentia oppositorium*. It is from this fund that dialectics draws its philosophemes.[173]

Derrida's *pharmakon*, like its Greek paleonym, translates as 'medicine', but this can either name 'poison' or 'remedy'. Dialect constitutes the counter-poison of the *pharmakon* which also embodies a host of other roles, such as that of scapegoat, imitation, magic – the literary presence of ambivalence, playfulness, transcience, facsimiles, and paradox. Derrida embraces the *pharmakon* for these very faculties, for it is essentially the *pharmakon* that facilitates his method of deconstruction, in that this Derridean lexeme represents the breakdown of binary oppositions or "coincidentia oppositorium". Since comedy and deconstruction are primarily concerned with just this sort of play, this turning of "the world on its strange and

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[173] *ibid.,* pp. 127-8

invisible pivot"[174] the *pharmakon* "produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth".[175]

Comedy may take its cue from its utopian perspective, it may administer the quintessential *pharmakon* – the laughter of comic relief – which is both deadly to the old order, and therapeutic in providing a new socially *inclusive* perspective. But the generically problematic endings remind us that the law of genre is continually being undermined in some way, and that the artificiality of ends emanates from an artificiality of vows. The rigidity of oaths 'made in heaven' are undermined by the realisation in comedies such as *Love's Labour Lost* that promises are no sooner made than broken. We may 'lose our oaths to find ourselves' but oaths are not to be taken lightly, for they represent in the private world a form of customary jurisprudence which gestures towards the legality of contracts and other binding agreements. The security that contract and oath-swearing affords may seem deceptive, but in this sense, the law seeks to offer reassurances. The oath is uttered almost as an initiatory spell "one that penetrates and carries away the inner courts of the soul".[176]

However, if as Iris Murdoch once said "that anything that consoles is fake"[177] we are left in an unutterably despondent position. Our late modernity, or postmodern despair harbours a suspicion of 'happy' endings, believing that the bloody conclusions of tragedy are somehow *more* cathartic for the agnostic soul. Comedy's artificiality of vows, oaths, contracts and ends speaks of a hope and redemption so reminiscent of a Christian ethos as to be scorned by many post-modern commentators. The selfish gene of tragedy is contemptuous of the infectious germ of comedy's communitarian vision, and although both genres desire to re-establish ideological normality, the reintegration

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[174] *ibid.*, p.97
[175] *ibid.*, p.104
[176] *ibid.*, p. 125
[177] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* (London and New York, 1970), p.86-7

of the 'surviving' individual is paramount to comedy's purpose. Therefore, the desire

for the annihilation of the self does not rest easy with attempts to delimit and qualify

individual existence within the comic u-topia.

Perhaps what forces comic endings beyond the grasp of taxonomic regulation

is installed within John Fletcher's definition of tragicomedy: "It wants deaths, which

is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it

no comedy".[178] If the audience's expectation of comic interludes and farcical

denouements is perpetually thwarted then the expected dianoetic laughter is replaced

by a sort of thrusting snort of aggression. It becomes increasingly difficult to

laugh in the face of despair which appears on more than one occasion in the comedies.

Philip McGuire summarises *Measure for Measure* "as a play that opens with the law

being invoked to punish fornication by death and that closes with the law being

utilized to punish fornication by marriage".[179] This observation, returns us briefly to

the cause for *différend* where women, scapegoats and prisoners of the law all deny the

sublimity of the *belle mort* in favour of the ritual death of betrothal or banishment.

The incision which this observation makes into the textual body under inspection

allows a form of scrutiny into the very generic make-up of comedy, wherein the

archetypal use of marriage as a comic resolution is opened up as the 'merciful' signal

to the end of the dispute, the cessation of the *différend*.

The utopian original position of humanity is a lost origin, it is a simulacrum of

an absent society, where, in a hypothetical state of nature, an environment of complete

equality and sameness is inhabited. Much romantic comedy strives to retrieve this lost

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[178] John Fletcher, "To the Reader," *The Faithful Shepherdess,* ed. W. W. Greg, *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher,* (London, 1908), III.18
[179] Philip C. McGuire, *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences,* (Los Angeles, 1985), p.71

originary state by offering a representation of an uncontroversial common perspective on the social world, relieved of the contingencies that exacerbate hostilities by convergences of opinion and the exposition of essential understandings which promise a possible and unproblematic resolution. There is an originary premise that prefers the conception of justice as the representation of a genuine reconciliation of interests: if the discursive policing in comedy is to be legitimate, it is therefore essential that it is potentially identifiable from everyone's point of view. But, whereas, in some comedies a universal consensus on justice seems to prevail, and good triumphs easily over wickedness, there are other, some would say 'problematic', comedies where social interaction cannot be experienced as the easy exchange of meanings between equal partners, where the position of the other, is incapable of being subsumed into the one who speaks, and where the one who speaks in turn occupies many different places at once. If we look closely at the more satirically-minded comedy which succeeded and eventually supplanted the romantic variant, we can extrapolate the vision of a comedy which attempts to anchor and organise the dissensus, fragmentation and contingency characteristic of the social and political world.

The tightrope which comedy walks is that fine line which divides recognising the rules and transgressing them; violating the Law but carefully embracing its symbolism. Comedy has mastered playing the Law at its own game, by deceiving it, by lying that it loves every aspect of its many personalities, whilst flirting, some may say irresponsibly, with anarchy. The tautness of its double-bind with the Law, as it reiterates a desire to incite and prohibit, is always already inscribed in Comedy. The Comic is always already before the Law and yet beyond it. Thus, we continually find comedy at the border, on the edge, at the limit, manning the barricades against the

violent interiorisation of the Law. The Law may always be a law of repetition, and repetition may always be a submission to a law as the Law always imposes itself with force and violence, but the Comic interminably reiterates a desire to overturn the Law and reinstate rebelliousness.

As the next chapter will explore more fully, the rebelliousness of comedy emanates from the position of the subaltern and is most frequently embodied in female characters. This present chapter has dealt with the concept of Law as prohibition and in referring to the need to control 'unruly' desires, particularly *masculine* appetites; comic resolutions invariably resort to the institution of marriage as an iconic emblem of equilibrium restored. However, it can be argued that the harmonious tableux which furnish the closing scenes of early modern comedy sanitise the violent oppression imposed upon a society which subscribes to patriarchal values by distancing the audience from the historical specificity of marriage during this period.

Chapter 3
Hymeneal Comedy

Comedy's relationship to the Law, the Law that imposes boundaries upon both genre and gender, exploits what Derrida calls the "between", the "antre", or the "hymen".[180] Comedy demands that rules are broken, that boundaries are transgressed, that a path is beaten between apathy and anxiety; but more than this comedy demands that *hymens* do not remain intact.[181] Anticipating marriage or the act of consummation, comedy precipitates transformation and reconciliation. Like the hymen, rules can be broken secretly, silently, and although no difference is immediately observed things are never quite the same, something is simultaneously lost and gained. Tyranny and love, subjection and independence are interwoven throughout the comedies and by guarding the opening of understanding the *hymen* represents the phallogocentric boundaries of Western metaphysics.

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[180] Jacques Derrida, 'The First Session', *Acts of Literature*, p.128

[181] C.L. Barber, *op. cit.*, pp.11ff for a discussion on the "dramatic epithalamium" of romantic comedy where the desire for sexual consummation which expresses "with full imaginative resonance the experience of the traditional summer holidays".

Throughout the comic drama of the Renaissance rituals surrounding matrimony are pivotal in providing an arena for conflict over status, gender relations, property, religious belief and individual autonomy versus community control. As we have already discussed in the previous chapter, the theatrical representation of the discourse of conjugal coupling in comedy carries with it certain sexual-political implications as the idealising language of Platonic love is juxtaposed with an examination of physical appetites. For although Tudor and Stuart marriage was primarily viewed as a means for the transfer of property, issues of inheritance, and kinship bonds, matrimony was also indicative of an underlying sexual desire.

In designating the space between desire and fulfilment the *hymen* becomes the aperture through which the merging of two separate subjects into a singular monad of being can be viewed as anything but accidental. Catherine Belsey argues that desire is actually anterior to the unconscious,[182] which in Kristevan terms positions love as an 'outlaw'.[183] In this sense marriage can be denounced as a sly calculation aiming at the highest authority, an economy or strategy of mastery designed to contain the excesses of the human animal. However, as desire is forever predicated on lack, marriage can be identified as the symbolic coda which resounds within the alienated human soul. The notion of 'lost' souls rampaging around the earth in search of their 'soul' mates is regulated by the symbolic order of Western metaphysics where the plenitude of wholeness is guaranteed by the re-conjoining of souls that were once separated but have been eventually drawn back together by divine forces.

For the Renaissance reformers, moral politics was no mere secondary consideration, but rather a centrifugal means of attaining social power and control.

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[182] Catherine Belsey, *Desire,* p.61

[183] Julia Kristeva, '*Romeo and Juliet*: Love-hatred in the couple', *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (London and New York, 1987), p.263

The institution of marriage, was necessarily overt, public, and ceremonious, and was at the centre of the system of values which occupied a position at the conjunction of the spiritual and the material. It regulates the transmission of wealth from one generation to another and it also regulates the sexual activity. But it is also concerned with procreation and as a sacrament it belongs to the realm of what is numinous and sacred.[184] But more than this, marriage was reified as a site of spiritual purification where one Christian soul complemented and completed what the other lacked. Matrimony thus locked men and women together not only materially and biologically but spiritually. As such, the idea of marriage as 'confinement', as the crucible for acceptable sexual and gender relations, is revealed as the result of permanent historical effort, as the consequence of historical processes of construction that interminably reinforce ideology. Illuminated thus the alleged moral dis-order of the Reformation period is interpreted not simply as an absence of order, as 'immorality', but rather as an interested ascription within the framework of major processes of *re-ordering*, of re-inscribing dominant discourses. The secular authorities established new claims to power by shifting marriage increasingly out of the area of competence of kin groups and into the sphere of the Church, while at the same time massively extending the control over the legality of marriage. Add to this the municipal campaign against prostitutes and the regulation of all female sexuality and the pervasiveness of purity discourses becomes apparent. Therefore the surge of purity discourse on new modes of ecclesiastical control and state development reveal once more that the questions of purity raised by hymeneal comedy always relate to questions of power.

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[184] This argument rests upon the biological imperative of marriage as procreative which is also regulated by the symbolic order laid down by the early modern Church – hence the 'mystery' and sacrament of marriage.

Hymen and Limen

Following on from Foucault, Giorgio Agamben's introduction of the term 'bio' in place of the term 'legal' implies that empires create their identities through an extended control over bodies.[185] The complexities of power relations throughout the Renaissance emanate from the sovereign power associated with the old feudal hierarchical system vying with an emergent form of capitalism. How the early modern subject was governed and subject to self-governance can be usefully compared to this notion of the 'bio-political' where different types of sexual identification and practice were consistent with the political agendas of a pre-industrialist society, as well as being characteristic of its inherent contradictions.[186] As such, sexual matrices of behaviour and subjectivity become entrenched through processes of normalisation, which support and reproduce systemic bio-political power.[187] Through the historical displacements represented by drama, comedy represents an early modern world where power was inscribed indelibly upon the female body, with particular emphasis laid upon the woman's hymen as a membrane "tainted with vice and yet sacred",[188] "a tissue on which so many bodily metaphors are written".[189]

The Greek *hymen* means "membrana", although in the Greek anatomy this term was never associated with feminine virginity. This correlation was later developed by Christian scholars in search of a physiological mark that would ensure

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[185] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford, California, 1995), p.6ff

[186] See Alan MacFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: 1300-1840,* (Oxford and New York, 1987), p.75 for a discussion of the comparatively late age for marriage as a direct result of capitalism as it is "interested in mobilising a youthful workforce of willing consumers with the ability to pay for goods and services."

[187] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* Vol.1, (New York, 1978), p.139-40

[188] Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p.160

[189] *ibid.,* p.165

the symbolic purity and 'vendibility' of woman that was unique to her. As a symbol

of transformation and 'exchange' assurances had to be provided as to a woman's

chastity and subsequent 'viability' on the marriage market. Thus, the conjugal

'breaking' of the hymen enacted ritualistically the transmutation or metamorphosis of

two bodies into one. As can be gauged from this gloss, the hymen is a notoriously

unstable and ambiguous concept, with an anxious and uncertain history. In French,

this word, whose meaning is balanced, much more than its English counterpart,

between the two opposed terms of "marriage" and "maidenhead", has been exhumed

by Derrida as an encryption which can neither allude to the consummation of a

marriage nor "the veil of virginity".[190] The fragility of this lexeme is employed by

Derrida in much the same way as he employs *pharmakon* and *différance* to function

as loci of double meaning: both as separating membrane and fusion in marriage.

These small undecidables are treated not as foci, but as junction points, from which

meaning can pivot in lateral relation to what surrounds them, sending out and being

subject to ripples of insecurity in the larger framework of the text. In this sense, the

hymen is developed as an indicator of both proximity and discontinuity, and as such

can be used to enhance and to suggest the possibility of phallogocentricism in the

conclusions of Renaissance comedy whilst also simultaneously offering the resistance

of an alternative view to contemporary debates.

Arguably, it is the specific position of the stage in Elizabethan and Jacobean

London – one of ambiguity and ambivalence – that allows for Renaissance

playwrights to dramatise the contradictions of their culture. Paradoxically, the

hegemonic ideology of heterosexual marriage is both promoted and disfigured by the

very liminality of the theatre, standing as it does at the very "antre" of the City proper.

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[190] *ibid.*, p.114

In his study *The Place of the Stage*, Steven Mullaney argues that the liberties – the social and material space existing beyond the walls of London city and where the theatres were located – served as a "transitional zone" or:

> a culturally maintained domain of ideological ambivalence and contradiction, where established authority reached and manifested, in spectacular form, the limits of its power to control and contain what exceeded it.[191]

The drama thus performed on the early modern public stage, was firmly situated within a marginal space which allowed for the theatre's privileged ability to stage the "incontinent hopes and fears"[192] of a society immersed in a fierce debate over the emergent reform of marriage, and hence morality. Precisely, then, because of its vantage point outside the jurisdiction of the City, on the "threshold" or "limen" of society, Renaissance comedy is able to show these ideological fissures which emerge and exist wherever cultural change is experienced. For as the conditions of society shift, the ideas about 'reality' – that naturalised ideology which predisposes and organises our relation to the world – no longer hold true and anxiety and crisis become immanent.

Matrimony in Renaissance comedy must be analysed as a response to specific contradictions within the beginnings of a hegemony in the domestic sphere of the late Elizabethan City of London. In both romantic comedy and its more satirical progeny city comedy, there are always two contradictory aspects of conjugality in operation: commerce and celebration. Both the restraint and the license of the early modern market-place confront each other dramatically as comedy rotates upon the axis of a festive iconography where the politics of marriage centres on the construction of the exchange value of woman and the festive elements associated with her body. In the

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[191] Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage, op. cit.,* p.ix
[192] *ibid.*

many instances of female cross-dressing in comedy women disguise the very thing they are substantively valued for, their femininity. Viola, Rosalind, Julia, Jessica and in different ways, Portia, all participate in a dangerous form of comic license where they not only symbolically invert gender assignments but interrogate the 'value' of woman both economically and psychologically.

Equality and Equilibrium

The sexual politics of Elizabethan romance are demarcated by time: the earlier the comedy, the more evident the challenge to the limits of sexual equality and the subsequent reaffirming of those limits. For example, in *The Comedy of Errors* (1594) good wives are "bridled" (II.i.14) while Kate, in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594) is symbolically muzzled during her transformation into an obedient wife. A change of interests can be detected from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1595) onwards as it tentatively presents a cross-dressed heroine who precedes the transvestite plot-devices of later comedies and the plethora of dramatic representations of the many early modern anxieties which surrounded betrothal contracts and 'spousals'. As legally binding contractual agreements, the abrogation of betrothals could ruin a woman's reputation, a factor which Katherine the 'shrew' is made painfully aware of as she awaits her bride-groom at the altar. She would be considered as "damaged goods" and therefore unmarriageable[193] if Petruchio were to abandon his promise to her father, a terrifying prospect for an early modern woman as the status conferred upon her in marriage was definitive. This fear is enacted in the later comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* where Hero is abandoned at the alter *because* she is thought to have given up

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[193] Margaret Loftus Ranald, "The Manning of the Haggard: or *The Taming of the Shrew*", *Essays in Literature* 1, (1974), p.157

her virginity. Her 'part' is played by the waiting woman Margaret, in a charade

designed to enforce Leonato's rejection of her.

Apprehension and disquiet accompany each of the betrothals in the

comedies, which increases as the focus on virtuous and constant women is scrutinised

in relation to the promiscuous and immature men that they are contracted to. The

ambiguity of psycho-sexual roles is worked through by a long line of cross-dressed

and disguised heroines who find that "It is the lesser blot, modesty finds,/ Women to

change their shapes than men their minds." (*TGoV*, V.iv.110-11) And this in a time

when the statutes on clothing were viewed as sacred and the switching of apparel

between the genders was perceived as a sign of moral degeneration.[194] United in a coy

and clever form of subversion, the cross-dressed heroines of these comedies display a

shared awareness that to alter their apparel is to alter the gender biased perception of

early modern woman; and as a boy-player enacted these impersonations the

ambivalent humour of gender construction is further underscored.

In making men (and women) believe they are "accomplished with what they

lack" the double-cross cross-dressers in the comedies enter a dangerous game of

subterfuge as they represent neither the proper male nor the proper female, slipping

through the net of Renaissance reasoning. The possibility of disturbing dislocations to

the gender system were no doubt exacerbated by the all-male mode of theatrical

production as the sight of boys dressed as women triggered unruly desires in both

sexes, which Jean Howard quite rightly identifies as "one of the most overtly

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[194] See Margot Heineman, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge and New York, 1980), p.100, for a discussion on the law which upheld the sanctity of appearance. See also Middleton's address "To the Comicke Play-readers, Venery and Laughter" which prefaces in the quarto precisely how *The Roaring Girl* frustrates expectations because it is subject to censorship for defying these laws: "For Venus being a woman passes through the play in doublet and breeches, a brave disguise and a safe one, if the Statute unty not her cod-piece point". (ll.13-15)

stigmatized practices enumerated in the anti-theatrical tracts".[195] But cross-dressing as disguise allows access to secrets, to untold confidences, to moments of revelation and in the exposure of the fragility of the dividing line between masculine and feminine behaviour comedy ridicules the performativity of the gender system. Both *As You Like It* (1600) and *Twelfth Night* (1600) are exemplary instances of the theatrical nature of gender assignments. The early modern theatre may stage various attempts to channel sexual energies into the acceptable, legitimate institution of marriage but in exploiting transvestite actors to negotiate this position heterosexual union is forever placed in contradistinction to the homoerotic subtext of the comedy.

The inversion of gender roles may be doubled by the dramatic constraint of the all-male mode of production but much of the humour evoked in hymeneal comedy is concerned with this doubling, with this sense of ambiguity and liminality. The multi-layered inversion of cross-dressing boys-as-girls-as-boys traverses the boundary between reality and drama with such alacrity that the notion of identity itself is disrupted to display a difference within subjectivity which is neither masculine nor feminine, but at the limen *between* the genders. Marriage may remove a woman from the circuit of exchange but in disguising her femininity, the cross-dressed comic 'woman' is licensed to parody and exaggerate the cultural construction of subjectivity. Her self-conscious 'masquerade' of masculinity reveals the contradictory nature of patriarchy and attempts to redefine, in limited ways, the position of gender within this ideology. These transvestite female characters change their roles in order to defend an aspiration towards marital equality where faith in one's own constant soul offers only a partial representation of the notion of self awareness as an indicator of one's inalienable 'humanity'. Therefore, woman in disguise may be permitted a brief

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[195] Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle,* p.93

glimpse of man's fickle attitude to love and monogamy but their unmasking or

unveiling is invariably accompanied by a redefinition of gender roles, particularly in

light of contemporary developments in Renaissance philosophy and ethics.

As one of the many contradictions of Protestant marriage theory, the elevation

of the wife to her husband's equal, undermined starkly hierarchical theories of gender

and opened up space for ideas of negotiation, mutuality, and contract between men

and women, some of which we may observe being worked through in Shakespeare's

romantic comedies. Renaissance Humanism may have regarded the education of

women as an adornment to beauty and manners, but as the *hic mulier* controversy of

1620 attests,[196] there was an increasingly assertive female audience, who were

demanding and gradually "getting more freedom".[197] The freedom of movement

afforded by cross-dressing in the comedies allows female characters to oversee

courtship without the restrictions of early modern gender expectations but it does so

according to neo-Platonic idealisations wherein the male 'beloved' is deified.

Nevertheless, the main thrust of hymeneal comedy, as a dramatic form which

anticipates a union of opposites or the reconciliation of differences, promotes the

discourse of a Platonic metaphysics which privileges the unstable subjectivity of the

hymen over the monologic authority of the *phallus*.

The Medicine of Marriage

The idealised woman, the perfect woman, the object of neo-Platonic reverence aspired

to being loved platonically, not for her ability to make children or to extinguish a

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[196] Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, eds., *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640,* (Urbana and Chicago, 1985), p.13-5
[197] Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind 1540-1620,* (Brighton, 1984), p.263

masculine need, but for her intellectual capabilities. Indeed, due to the unearthing of classical aesthetics woman became a symbol, a Muse, who was depicted as a slender and androgynous figure. Conversely, the dialectical dualism of neo-Platonism that pits spirit against flesh, body against soul, mind against matter is arguably a particularly pernicious and destructive philosophical position, a reinforcement of the dichotomous struggle within the human, between body and soul, between emotion and reason, between masculine 'spirit' and feminine 'matter' and their interminable dialectic. During the Renaissance, however, this was not merely a trend or a concept, it was a revolutionary movement that enveloped society, and, as a representation of a return to speculative dialectics, neo-Platonism was indeed instrumental in the scientific reappraisal of dogmas such as the intellectual inferiority of women to men.

Neo-Platonism may have validated a growing concept of individualism but this would have been impossible without the doctrinal shift from the community of faith to individual salvation propagated throughout the Reformation by improved standards of literacy and access to literature. Nevertheless, the debates which surrounded marriage from this period demonstrate the early modern concern with the importance of community before self, family before the individual, as the consequences of individualism were perceived as potentially tragic. The solipsism of 'inverted' neo-Platonism may have glorified nature and therefore woman but this was through a hedonistic lens which downgraded love in marriage and celebrated the 'unconfined' passion of adultery. Marriage was presumed to belong to the world of grace, which was identified with the Platonic world of spirit and rationality. Adultery on the other hand, belonged to the world of nature. The wife was thus a low creature, and the illicit lover a queen of love.[198] The tension that exists between these two

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[198] See Dennis De Rougemount *Love in the Western World,* (New York, 1949), p.276, for a historical account of the Petrarchan version of neo-Platonism.

philosophical constructions is ripe for comic exploitation as ambiguity and contradiction are the well-spring of humour. Thus, the comic potential of the Platonic doctrine of love as an artificial philosophy is burlesqued as the lovers' idealisation eventually gives way to the sexual relationship which reinstates conjugal relations and the husband's 'government'.

Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* scoff at the 'puny' lies told by love-sick men but give themselves in marriage swiftly. Rational love, as a counter to passionate love is provided by Julia's servant Lucetta in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, who understands the concepts of love and marriage from the bottom of the social ladder. She is fully aware of the practical nature of marriage as a social necessity, a site of financial security, and as a religious sanctification of sexual relations. From her status position passionate love is a fantasy for characters in romances, since marriage is an arranged business transaction in which the woman's desires are forgotten. "O they love least, that let me know their/ love" (I.ii.33-4) is Lucetta's revelation that if man were "But constant, he were perfect" (V.iv.113) and that the abstract language of neo-Platonism encourages foolishness and self-delusion.

The neo-Platonism of *Love's Labour Lost* (1595) is also considered as detrimental to the social order. The men of Navarre must learn the lesson that spiritual abstraction is forever tempered with physical necessity. In seeking introspection and waging 'war' against "the huge army of the world's desires" (I.i.10) a comedy is set in motion that appeals to the body and in particularly to sexuality. This comic movement is, as Greenblatt states: "the heart of its theatrical magic; 'great creating nature' – the principle by which the world is and must be peopled",[199] although the depiction of

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[199] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England,* (Berkeley, Oxford, 1988), p.86

philosophical study as a naïve and artificial doctrine activates the hymeneal urge to cure those devoted to chastity. Again it is left to the 'ladies' to 'purge' their lovers of both their puritanical affectations and their subsequent choleric affections by setting them extended tasks to prove their fidelity, maintaining that their entire psychological and ethical character will be changed. This is, of course, one of the mechanisms of hymeneal comedy in action as young, inexperienced males are re-educated as to their proper place within society as part of a loving and procreative couple. Uniting the lover's spiritual affection with corporeal desires allows equilibrium to be restored, although there is little hope of consummation in a comedy which flouts generic convention by refusing to "end like an old play". (V.iii.873) In *Love's Labour Lost* the remedy may have been provided, but it will take time to work through the body, both social and political. It is worth noting that the ending is the masque of winter and spring, where the aleations of the abiding rhythms of nature stand against the neo-platonic aspirations of the king and his lords. This dramatic comedy may not end like an "old play" but it certainly echoes the fescennine rituals of old comedy where the cyclical movement of nature is celebrated.[200]

Suggesting that physical reproduction is inferior to spiritual and intellectual propagation still privileges the homoerotic love of a male over a female. Unsurprisingly then, when a woman assumes the role of the male beloved in the discourse of Platonic love there is an attempt to elide or deface her real corporeal presence, and in so doing, provides her with the same rarefied status as the male Platonic lover. The apology offered by Renaissance reformers for the homocentricity of Platonic love redefined the relationship between lover and beloved as chaste rather

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[200] Frye *op. cit.,* pp.163-186. Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art,* (New York, 1953), p.347

than carnal,[201] thereby extending to heterosexual love a new paradigm in which the female beloved incites *spiritual* desire rather than the *fleshly* disorder with which she is traditionally associated. In *Love's Labours Lost* the reference to woman as "a child of our Grandmother Eve" (I.i.260) recalls both a pre-lapsarian innocence and the corporeal temptations of mankind's fall from grace, but this invocation of woman as the source of all human suffering was an ideology in recession. Previously entrenched feminine virtues such as taciturnity and modesty were replaced by the more 'masculine' attributes of wit, learning and "allurement".[202]

These traits may be embodied by the cross-dressed heroines of the comedies but the 'holiday humour' of hymeneal mirth permits aristocratic ladies such as Olivia in *Twelfth Night* to parody the consequent elevation of women through Platonic discourses without reverting to disguise. As the intensity of her suitor's love is expressed through professions of loyalty and servitude to a confident and commanding mistress, Olivia demands that she rule her husband in a comic world where such hierarchical inversions are temporarily permitted. The cross-dressed heroine Viola, however, emphasises that such unruly desires must either be eschewed or sublimated in order for souls and minds to unite with an affection that is based on mutual admiration, friendship and equality. Whether or not Viola and Orsino find wedded bliss is immaterial, since within the comic teleology of the drama the civil solution of marriage effects a double remedy, offering a cure for the love-sick male patient, who is emasculated by his "unnatural" veneration of the female beloved. The woman must also be remedied so as to curtail the sexual-political disorder inherent in

[201] Jill Kray, 'The Transformation of Platonic Love in the Italian Renaissance', *Platonism and the English Imagination*, eds. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton, (Cambridge, 1994), pp.80-1
[202] Ian MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medieval Science in European Intellectual Life,* (Cambridge, 1981), p.64

her protracted inversion of the traditional gender hierarchy. In this respect, the subversion of Platonic ideals through comic depictions of lovesickness can be read as an attempt to restore order, clarifying the extent to which what is viewed as natural in love is revealed as a linguistic and cultural construction. The rhetorical and ethical contrivances of neo-Platonism promote an essentially self-regarding love which as Malcolm Evans states "celebrates the transcendent Petrarchan lady as a bestower of superhuman powers while cowering in the shadow of the physical, mortal woman perceived as 'pitch that defiles' (*LLL*, IV.iii.3)".[203] This metaphysical position is deconstructed by comedy as one of the wider philosophical issues which reinscribe moral and ethical constraints upon the gendered body.

Transformations

Although the philosophy of neo-Platonism was originally constructed around homoerotic relations, its vocabulary of hierarchy and subservience was easily applied to the heterosexual mode of love and marriage advanced by the early modern Church. This appropriation effected a change in the traditional gender hierarchy, granting the female beloved a new metaphysical and theological significance that enabled her to occupy a dominant position in her (unmarried) relationship with a male suitor. Importantly, the need to avoid sexual intercourse before marriage imbued neo-Platonism with a Christian imperative that permitted an extended period of courtship

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[203] Malcolm Evans, 'Deconstructing Shakespeare's comedies', *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis, (London and New York, 1985), p.78

where many women were allowed to enjoy a certain amount of control over their suitors.

That comedy is *supposed* to end in marriage, or anticipates a future union, reminds us that the comedies are typically concerned with the vagaries of courtship where some of life's major dichotomies are played out. At once unmarried and betrothed, chaste and desirous, settled and unsettled, driven mad by love and offered salvation from a mad world, wooers enter a transformative state which at some point must be resolved. Submerging itself in a lover's world of confusion and uncertainty where nuptial vows are broken and betrothals are forgotten, comedy enters the *hymen* between not only gender distinctions but also the classificatory boundaries of genre. It is always at those points where lovers are dishonest or husbands too brutal that comedy seeks resolution. The arbitrary conventions of comic closure are habitually used to resolve the problems resuscitated by carnival license and in exploiting unifying social ceremonies such as a marriage, or a banquet, are typically deployed to mask the dissonance inherent in the intractable materials with which the comedy frequently deals.

David Cressy defines marriage as a point in the human lifecycle where social, religious, ritual and festive 'concomitants' intersect at "the passage from one state to another".[204] Locating the liminality of matrimony's transformative processes at the margins of society proper Cressy remarks that "in myriad ways, marriage signified a passage into adulthood, a mark of social maturity",[205] affecting the couple's social, sexual, and economic status within the wider community. The rite of passage that constitutes nuptial vows is also accompanied by the celebration of the rights of the

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[204] David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, religion, and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England,* (Oxford, 1997, 1999), p.286
[205] *ibid,* p.288

body, as the events which surround the legal declaration of holy union adheres to a tradition of festivity and license which anticipates conjugal union. Dramatic representations of wedding practices as "festive" disclose a profound ambivalence that marks ritual celebrations as transitional states that are structurally dangerous. In moving from one status to another subjectivities fluctuate wildly as "the whole repertoire of ideas concerning pollution and purification are used to mark…the power of ritual to remake"[206] a man and woman as husband and wife.

Assigned new privileges in life, the married couple entered the realm of 'domestic authority' where they could issue instructions and make decisions, unlike dependent persons who were expected to follow orders.[207] The solemnity of marriage rites gave way to nuptial festivities, either in the form of a celebratory meal or a feast which could last up to several days with "no want of good cheer, no lack of melody".[208] As Cressy states however, this depiction of "harmony, hospitality, and largesse" could be little more than a nostalgic literary construction in the "stressed economy of the late Elizabethan era",[209] and in the comedy of this period we find few examples of it. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio takes the sexual and scatological license of wedding feasts to the very limit employing carnivalesque taming rituals that shame his bride into submission. His blasphemous antics at the church service shame everyone in attendance resulting in a shocked wedding ceremony of silent guests. In this sense, the festive element is employed as the means for containment that usually characterises carnival. However, there is a neat pastiche of early modern wedding practice in this comic scene whereby the threat of untamed

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[206] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,* (London, 1996), pp.116-7
[207] Cressy, *op.cit.*, p.287
[208] *ibid.*, p.356
[209] *ibid.*

ritual is exposed as ever-present and immanent.

With the marriage ceremony now solemnised at church, Renaissance wedding-parties had to travel and the procession became an integral part of European marriage customs. But the evolution of popular and ecclesiastical thought on what made a marriage valid and legally binding ran concurrently with notions of propriety, therefore, the sexually charged atmosphere of marriage festivities became of genuine concern to Puritan reformers. As Cressy intimates "Eating, drinking, dancing, music, jesting, and sexual innuendo remained standard accompaniments to the rituals of holy matrimony, despite godly disapproval of these 'unmannerly and froward customs'." [210] The noise and rowdiness of the procession to the church displeased some[211] and in the Puritan *Admonition to Parliament* in 1572, the following complaint is recorded:

> Women, contrary to the rule of the Apostle, come, and are suffered to come, bare-headed, with the bagpipes and fiddlers before them, to disturb the congregation, and that they must come in at the great door of the church else all is marred (with divers other heathenish toys in sundry countries, as carrying of wheat-sheaves on their heads and casting of corn, with a number of suchlike, whereby they make rather a May-game of marriage than a holy institution of God).[212]

Just as proselytising clerics viewed this type of ceremony as blasphemous Petruchio's actions in church should be viewed similarly. He demonstrates his iconoclasm by reducing the pronouncements of the priest to simple statements that are inferior to his own patriarchal authority, shouting "ay, by gogs wouns" (III.ii.159) and violently abusing the priest when Katherine is asked if she will marry him.

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[210] *ibid*, p.350. Cressy cites Miles Coverdale, *The Christen State of Matrymonye, wherein housebandes and wyves maye lerne to kepe house together wyth loue* (1552)
[211] *ibid*., p.351
[212] *cit.*, Ethel L. Urlin, *A Short History of Marriage Rites, Customs and Folklore in Many Countries and All Ages,* (Detroit, 1969), p.54

Katherine's 'bridal dinner' fares no better as Petruchio removes her right to "feast, revel and domineer", (223) to be "obeyed" on this her wedding day. Asserting his new position as lord and master, Petruchio carefully details her new position as his wife: she is now his sole property, a *femme couverte* whose legal personality is completely subsumed in that of her husband. According to Catherine Belsey this legal status is conferred upon a married woman who has surrendered her property and her autonomy to her husband, but this kind of covering alludes to not only a form of social mastery but a form of sexual domination as well. "Among animals, to cover is to inseminate"[213] and in the hymeneal tradition, the consummation of a marriage was also an indication of the husband's mastery over his wife. The process of 'holy union' is summarised by Gremio in *The Taming of the Shrew* who wishes that someone would take on Kate and "woo her, wed her and bed her" (143) as the vows of marriage were considered worthless without sexual consummation.

It is through the transformative power of hymeneal rites that dramatic comedy celebrates the rights of the body, particularly the 'bawdy' body. Hymen, the Greco-Roman god of marriage, the overseer of hymeneal or marriage rites had become considered by Renaissance scholars as a personification of bridal defloration and is summoned at the close of several comedies if not by name, then in spirit. In *As You Like It* he appears in person to "bar confusion" (V.iv.127) and "make conclusion", (128) but as the "rustic revelry" (178) strikes up, the "true delights" (198) of the marriage-bed are instinctively anticipated.

In keeping with the epithalamic tradition the generic conventions of comedy are shaped and reshaped by tensions about marriage and the process of celebration. A social ceremony such as a wedding is not value-neutral; it is freighted with all manner

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[213] Catherine Belsey, *op. cit.*, p.133

of anthropological resonances and is clearly so seen by Katherine Eisaman Maus, who

argues that:

> The wedding, at which the lover's alliance is made permanent and potentially
> fertile, is an appropriate ritual for a comic conclusion – once this primary
> relationship is assured by marriage, social regeneration seems to follow as a
> matter of course.[214]

Similarly, in a discussion on Roman New Comedy, which references authorities as

diverse as Freud and Claude Levi-Strauss, David Konstan shows how the dynamics of

romance comedy flow from the social tensions in the society to which they relate.[215]

Attempts variously to repress, reinterpret, and resolve the dangers and fears

associated with marriage is central to the praxis of hymeneal comedy. Curiously, from

The Two Gentlemen of Verona on, representations of women vocalising their desires,

in fact, actively pursuing their desires, increases. Late Elizabethan and early Stuart

comedy delights in depictions of women who are as capable of obtaining sexual

gratification as men. "If the cat will after kind,/ So be sure will Rosalinde" (*AYLI*,

III.ii.109-10) portrays an almost predatory activity in cross-dressed heroines, but

women like Rosalind do not commit fornication; they demand the theological sanction

of sex through conjugal rites. Mariana in *Measure for Measure* and Helena in *All's*

Well That Ends Well both willingly insist and gain their conjugal rights through the

deception and subterfuge of bed-tricks, laying bare their bodies to recalcitrant and

unwitting bridegrooms. Both of these characters undermine the key ingredient in

matrimonial contracting by ignoring the free and unforced consent of both parties, but

then, the drastic measure of the substitution of one woman's body for another under

the cover of darkness calls attention to the drastic position of women who lived with

the indignity of an unconsummated marriage.

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[214] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *On Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind,,* (Princeton, 1984), p.127
[215] David Konstan, *Roman Comedy,* (Ithaca, 1983), pp.15-32

Dympna Callaghan questions the relationship between real marriages and May license through her analysis of gendered play in both festive and literary inversions. She argues that

> female desire is not clearly affirmed in this inverted world, just as in actual social sites of symbolic inversion, such as carnivals, women were as likely to be abused as given sexual license.[216]

This ambiguity is reiterated across the dominant strain of Elizabethan and Jacobean comedy, where the bawdy body, the becoming body that "rounds apace" (*The Winter's Tale*, II.i.15) is both celebrated and distrusted. Unlike ritual proper, or carnival, Shakespearean comedy invariably presents a virtuous and tenacious depiction of women who assert themselves as autonomous subjects, exercising the freedom of will that ultimately determines the security and future happiness of the comic community. They become stock figures in which atonement is embodied. This carnivalesque appropriation of the feminine body demonstrates the responsibilities imposed upon the female gender as custodian of not just male sexual behaviour, but also of the harmony of the entire social order: inscribed as simultaneously chaste and immoral, as imperfect, unfinished, and in need of constant surveillance.

Sexual desire is depicted as the force that establishes the gender hierarchy, demanding that women's behaviour be both shameful and modest, that she fulfil the duties due to her husband. Within this libidinous economy there is little wonder that there is so much confusion over notions of chastity and the acceptability of sexual activity. Even from within the sexually licensed confines of the marriage bed, a woman still had to retain her dignity in that, she was expected to curtail both her husband's and her own desires: fundamentally, a married woman was as vulnerable to

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[216] Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage,* (London and New York, 2000), p.44

accusations of whoredom as an unmarried woman who sold her body to paying customers.[217] This issue is taken up at the beginning of *The Winter's Tale* where Hermione's account of married sex, augmented with Leontes' revelations of courtship, culminate in scandalous accusation and pathological male jealousy.

Purity and Danger

The dialectical distinction between the virtuous/vicious woman was promoted throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by the authors of domestic treatises and sermons on social conduct. William Gouge signed the "Epistle Dedicatory" of his *Of Domesticall Duties* (1626) as "The Watch-man of your soules", and ostensibly, the content of all eight treatises, reinforces the link between public and communal activities in their preoccupation with "household government". The reliance on marriage manuals or guides to running a household, in the sense of ordering, controlling and ruling a stratified community anticipates the intensely though covertly political discourse of hymeneal comedies. Literature that broaches the domestic invariably implies that wives need 'correction' on account of their unruly desires, and as Heather Dubrow has argued:

> The very act of writing a manual or delivering a sermon on marriage gestures towards the principal strategy: the act implies that wedlock is an institution that can indeed be regulated, controlled, and ordered by someone who assumes the authority to do so.[218]

Attempts to control the emotional, physical and psychological demands of women appear to be of more concern than the control of masculine desires, but this of course pertains to that Renaissance obsession with the corruptibility of the womb, and the

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[217] See Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One,* (1608), (Menston, 1970), [not paginated]
[218] Heather Dubrow, *A Happier Eden: The Politics of Marriage in the Stuart Epithalamium,* (Ithaca and London, 1990), pp.26-7

ease with which adultery could be concealed and bastardy engendered. These educational treatises, pamphlets on manners, spiritual tracts, and sermons produce much more than guidelines for the smooth running of home and state, as Lisa Jardine notes: "all conspire to try to turn the wishful thinking of the male community into a propaganda reality".[219] Throughout Renaissance literature, the concept of virginity and/or chastity, distinctive as the meaning of these two terms are, appear to be continually blurred together and are developed across a number of different discourses.

Protestant reformers such as Luther, succeeded in establishing a polemical discourse about the immorality of their age as an accurate description of reality. In so doing, they instigated as absolute their own dividing line between marriage and illicit sexuality. At the same time, they created a yardstick that has largely been adopted by historians to assess behaviour in the areas of marriage and sexuality, and that implicitly remains alive and well in the concept of social discipline. The history of the social control and disciplining of gender relations, marriage and sexuality thus traces not just a history of conventions, attitudes, behaviours and their transformations, but also moves through the more abstract principles of perceptions and standards of definition.

Mary Douglas has drawn our attention to the important function of notions of purity as integral to the construction of social boundaries and taboos,[220] as social order is established with their help and maintained by means of their permanent reformulation. Accordingly, talk about pure undefiled sexuality within marriage and

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[219] Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare,* (New York and London, 1983), p.62
[220] Douglas, *op. cit.*, pp.4-5

its strict separation from all possible forms of illegitimate, 'indecent' and thus, impure sexuality outside marriage assumed an important function in reform debates about a new social order and its realisation. As Douglas has shown, the purity principle has played a key role in conflicts between the centre and the periphery of society in various historical configurations. During the Renaissance such conflicts were often fought out as struggles between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

Specifically, a discussion of marriage must analyse the administration of citizens' lives through the regulation of sexual conduct, and a study of comedy's many experiments with matrimonial material would flounder without surveying the paradoxical historicity of a civic institution which is indicative of both sexual desire and purity. As becomes apparent, the legal history of marriage is part of a cultural history of gender, displaying the extent to which the private and domestic are caught up between the public and the political. It is these intersections of ideology that reveal to what extent culture is reliant upon gender and vice versa. Thus, Michel Foucault's claim that sexuality is not a natural given, that it has a history, leads us to question the veracity of the cynical materialist view of love that marriage is the handmaiden of lust. For Foucault, sexuality:

> is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.[221]

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[221] Foucault, *History of Sexuality, op. cit.*, pp.105-6

Foucault further underscores that the sexualising of subjects (bodies oriented to a 'proper' sexuality that is acceptable to hegemony) occurs through the body's "integration into systems of efficient and economic controls".[222] These systems of control are what he calls "technologies of sexuality", those ideological, economic, and institutional structures which inform and support a specific subjectivity or sense of identity. Teresa de Lauretis extends Foucault's theory on the grounds that he ignores the construction of "difference" for male and female subjects, and so she argues that the "technologies of gender" must also be analysed.[223] Thus we see that early modern comedy reminds us of the connection between stage cross-dressing and the problematising of gender roles in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean society. As this following section will explore, nowhere is this issue more evident than in the debate concerning the difference between a 'wife' and a 'prostitute' than Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*.

Courtesans and Courtship:

Learning the Difference Between Love and Lust

Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605), is a play crucially concerned with the difference "betwixt" courtesans and wives. As Coppelia Kahn remarks, *The Dutch Courtesan* illustrates the Jacobean obsession with "polarization" because, along with other city comedies, the "action and metaphorical structure pivot on either fixing or crossing the boundary between the chaste wife and the lustful whore".[224] The inverted

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[222] *ibid*, p.139
[223] Teresa de Laurentis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction,* (Bloomington, 1989), p.88
[224] Coppelia Kahn, 'Whores and Wives in Jacobean Drama', *In another Country: Feminist Perspectives on Renaissance Drama*, eds. Dorothea Kehler and Susan Baker, (Metuchen and London, 1991), p.252

neoplatonism of the young bachelor Freevill produces a cynicism towards the 'sport'

of lovemaking where "Since, then beauty, love and woman are good, how can the

love of a woman's beauty be bad?". (I.i.50) Marston's material ideas are reflected in

current society, or at least in the philosophical writings of Montaigne where:

> Wedlocke hath for his share hounour, justice, profit and constancie: a plaine, and more generall delight. Love melts in onely pleasure, and truly it hath it more ticklish; more lively, more quaint, and more sharpe…there must be a kinde of stinging, tingling and smarting.[225]

Whether or not Marston used Montaigne as his source, there is a remarkable similarity

in the philosopher's distinction between wedlock and love and Freevill's own

"bifurcated philosophy" towards women. Freevill claims that lust is a "lively sin,"

which absolves his "sometimes inconstancie" through the belief that a courtesan

"sell[s] but only flesh" whilst simultaneously procuring a 'chaste' marriage partner

that will secure his "health and name". (I.ii.104; II.i.142) Freevill's desire for the

more socially acceptable Beatrice also includes his desire for higher economic

standing and increased status. His use of the Petrarchan love-sonnet may serve to

mask the material foundations of marriage; rather than recognising, as Beatrice's

sister Crispinella and her suitor Tysefew do, that marriage is both a venal and an

economic transaction, he exploits a neo-Platonic rhetorical stance that transcends the

material plane. His unwillingness to recognise his betrothal to Beatrice as both an

economic and social arrangement by focusing on the idealisation and glorification of

her body deflects attention away from the place of sex within the nascent capitalist

culture he inhabits.

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[225] Michael Montaigne, *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne, 1580, 1597*, trans. John Florio, 1603. World's Classics Edition, 3 Vols, (London, 1904), III.83-4

Freevill's cynical acceptance of the courtesan Francischina at the beginning of the play - which precedes his violent rejection of her - is initiated by a subtle satire on the Puritanical self-righteousness which stalked the Liberties of London. Freevill's friend Malheureux accompanies him to the courtesan's house to "make her loathe the shame she's in" and to cement his own sense of probity since "the sight of vice augments the hate of sin". (I.i.171) Marston arguably casts Malheureux as a stock figure, a moral absolutist, in order to mock the Puritan doctrines against both excessive sex and the theatre, for the theatre and lascivious sexual behaviour were explicitly linked in the Puritan perception of the Liberties. Philip Stubbes, in *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) writes an especially heated attack on the theatres in which the two are connected:

> Do they not induce whoredome and unclennes? Nay, are they not rather plaine devourers of maydenly virginities and chastitie? For proofe wherof, but marke the flocking and runing to Theatres and curtens, daylie and hourely, night and daye, tyme and tyde to see Playes and Enterludes, where such wanton gestures, such bawdie speeches: such laughing and fleering: such kissing and bussing: such clipping and culling: Such winckinge and glancinge of wanton eyes, and the like used…If you will learn to become a bawde, uncleane, and to devirginat Mayds, to deflour honest Wyves…If you will learn to rebel against Princes, to comit treasons, to consume treasurs, to practise ydlenes, to sing and talk of bawdie love and venery…If you will learn to play the whore-maister, the glutton, Drunkard, or incestuous person [then go to the theatre].[226]

Likewise in *The Schoole of Abuse*, Gosson writes that women who "lack customers all the week…flock to the theatres, and there keep a general market of bawdry".[227] It is in this vein of thought – this language – that Marston's character Malheureux speaks: he directs very similar complaints against the "common house of lascivious entertainment" where "warmth and wine and youth" (I.i.56 & 57) tempt men into the "head sins". (I.i.70)

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[226] Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), (London and New York, 1973), [not paginated]
[227] G. B. Evens Ed., *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama: The Theatre in Its Time,* (New York, 1988), p.20

Ironically, this man of "professed abstinence", (I.ii.109) is afflicted by blood humors and is "caught" by the beauty of "an arrant strumpet". (II.i.130) Freevill, now planning to marry Beatrice, the modest and virtuous daughter of a landed nobleman, "resign[s]" his courtesan "freely" (II.i.98) but cautions Malheureux that prostitutes "sell but only flesh, no jot affection". (II.i.137) Thus, while Freevill, according to both his abandoned mistress and her bawd, is "a fool, an unthrift, a true whoremaster…a constant drab-keeper", (II.ii.35-7) he always appears to maintain his reason, and he never forgets that Franceschina is in the business of "fleshly entertainment". (I.i.106) Malheureux however, is unable to tell the difference between love and lust; he rails against the "tyrannous respects" of man which "fetters" his new-found passion, "calling that sin in us which in all things else/ Is nature's highest virtue". (II.i.77-8) Thus the Puritan zeal of Malheureux disappears and in its place an equally monologic voice appears, this time vocalising a desire for unrepressed lust in place of purity.

In fact, Malheureux's passion so overwhelms him that he accedes to Franceschina's wish for revenge and agrees to kill Freevill: "Let me be vicious, so I may be loved./ Passion I am thy slave". (II.ii.110) By this point in the play Malheureux is totally controlled by his passion, his body and the "inborn heat" (II.i.73) of his desire. Freevill however represents the 'well-rounded' Renaissance gentleman, ready to renounce his mistress in favour of an honest and 'undefiled' future wife. He now theatrically declares that "until my soul showed me the imperfection of my body, and placed my affection on a lawful love" (I.i.90-1) he was devoid of reason. Thus, while Freevill can fantasise that his passions are controlled by his reason, Malheureux maintains that "There is no God in blood, no reason in desire". (IV.ii.13) Malheureux then, swings from virulent misogyny – "I shall hate the whole sex to see her" (I.i.147) – to collapsing the very distinctions between

"sanctified" love and "bestial" lust that philosophers like Montaigne preached, saying "No love's without some lust, no life without some love". (I.ii.143) Significantly, both Malheureux's collapsing of love and lust together and Freevill's comment about his soul teaching him the imperfection of his body invoke the classical distinctions between lust/love, body/soul. In postmodern terms it is these abject/symbolic distinctions which inform the technologies of sexuality by what is widely regarded as either acceptable or inadmissable in society.

Even by the late middle-ages, influences of Aristotle's division between masculine spirit and feminine flesh are echoed in the Church's condemnation of the body: "To restore the image betrayed by Adam, one sought to subjugate the Flesh again to the authority of Reason".[228] Of course, the iconized principles underlying the pure/abject dichotomy were drawn from Socratic rather than Christian texts where two kinds of love are defined by Pausanias in the *Symposium*. Richard Burgess cites the poet Desportes' understanding of this dichotomous desire as:

> Love is inseparable from Aphrodite, and if there were only one Aphrodite there would be only one Love; but there are two goddesses and there must be two Loves…The elder one is the daughter of Uranus, the younger, who is the daughter of Zeus and Dione – her we call common; and the Love who is her fellow-worker is rightly named common, and the other Love is called heavenly.[229]

The higher love diffuses itself throughout the multiple forms of the natural world and instils a desire to return to the perfect unity of the *One,* out of which humanity has emanated. As we begin to struggle towards this goal, however, our natural imperfections, resulting from our birth from the lower stuff of being, perverts our purer love to the lower Venus giving rise to all our earthly and fleshly desires – a classic/medieval version of libido. It was always the express aim of neo-Platonism to

[228] Robert Millar, Ed., *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds,* (New York, 1977), p.400
[229] Richard Burgess, *Platonism in Desportes,* (Chapel Hill, 1954), p.73

use esoteric philosophy to learn to seek the higher Venus and reunion with the *One*, and elements of this process were adapted to Christianity by the early Fathers with the higher Venus surviving deeply submerged within the Virgin mother of Christ.[230]

In *The Dutch Courtesan* the separation between 'higher' and 'lower' bodily strata can be clearly seen in the distinction between the whore (Francischina) and the virgin (Beatrice). Kahn argues that the aim of such oppositions is to split off woman's body from her soul: "A whore is all body, all lust, without soul; a wife or virgin, all soul without body or lust." [231] Hence, the logical flippancy of Freevill's jest attending to the upkeep of brothels: "Ever since my intention of marriage, I do pray for their continuance…lest my house be made one". (I.i.59-60 & 62) Thus, splitting "woman's body from her soul" allows for the possibility of an idealised woman: the etymology of Beatrice, "she who is blessed",[232] contrives that only she can be the lawful love of the play when divested of all (feminine) materiality. In essence, Beatrice has to transcend her own body in order to escape the spirit/male and matter/female dictum whereby the unfinished "becoming" body is displaced onto the female body. Or as De Lauretis states, "as in all patriarchal representations of gender in Western culture, sexuality is located in Woman, but, like desire and meaning, it is the property and prerogative of men".[233] In other words, men control definitions of desire: women who express their desires are whores, are abject; only a woman without "body or lust" eludes the position of whore/woman. Beatrice thus serves as the example of the "natural" and legitimate femininity – one who exists to be glorified – while Francischina is "unnatural" and a "money-creature". (I.i.90) In this sense *The Dutch Courtesan* exposes, just as Foucault explains, that sexuality is a "historical construct",

[230] *ibid*.
[231] Coppelia Kahn, *op.cit.*, p.251
[232] Hilary Spence, *The Modern Book of Babies Names,* (London, 1988), p.23
[233] Teresa De Lauretis, *op.cit.*, p.104-5

a "complex political technology", based on the "formation of special knowledges"[234] including the belief that "Woman corrupted is the worst of devils" (II.ii.197) and that love informed by the soul can be purified through recourse to the higher Venus.

Because Freevill gives up Francischina for the holy union of matrimony, he operates through the early modern technologies of sexuality that define woman as either abject or pure and then misrecognises this difference as natural and innate. In this sense, Freevill serves as an agent of *re-coding* because he, more so than any other character, depends upon elaborate constructions which conceal the materialist underpinnings of his society. For as Jean Howard has observed, in order to "produce and reproduce class and gender difference within a social order dependent on these differences to justify inequalities of power and privilege",[235] his reality depends upon a carefully maintained distinction between pure and impure woman.

Tranvestism and Androgyny

"As is typical of comedy", Jean Howard reminds us, "marriages and reaffirmations of marriage signal the channelling of desire into socially acceptable forms".[236] Although this statement is inarguable, the majority of Shakespeare's comedies promote the idea that "docile and chaste wives are not to be taken for granted",[237] perhaps not even not to be desired. The ever-dutiful daughter Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew* eschews parental consent and marries a man she barely knows while Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* (1603) is "the shadow of a wife" (V.iii.307) in more ways than one as she

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[234] Foucault, *op.cit.*, p.105
[235] Jean E. Howard, *Stage and Social Struggle,* p.57
[236] Jean E. Howard, 'Civic Institutions and precarious masculinity in Dekker's *The Honest Whore*', *Early Modern Culture* 1, (2000), p.22
[237] *ibid.*, p.26

excludes herself from this system of phallogocentric exchange. Patriarchs such as Lord Nolan hear only the "sound of doomsday" in Moll's dismissal of marriage, as she goes on to state how entirely unsuited to her lifestyle such a contract appears unless: "Honesty and truth unslandered,/ Woman manned, but never pandered" (V.ii) becomes the norm. This is the ironic bequest of a woman who uses her male apparel to take on the role of defender of womankind and forceful subverter of gender stereotypes, in a declaration that maintains that her subjection to wifehood will only occur if all the world's wrongs are righted. In fact, *The Roaring Girl* toys with the realisation that in this world, acting like a man is clearly better than acting like a woman, which is curiously advocated as a potentially beneficial route to a complementary marriage of minds.

While this text privileges marriage as the central fact of middle-class life and the necessary means for the aristocracy to reproduce itself and pass on its wealth, marriage *per se* is not depicted as an untroubled or attractive institution, and it does not accommodate sexual desire easily. The main impact of Moll Cutpurse, is that she stands out-with the marriage fold, refusing to be herded into a submissive position. Her critique of the institution of matrimony is one which undermines the premise of female subordination, forcefully asserting that for a woman, marriage means a loss of control and freedom. Thus, Moll contests the sovereignty of the husband with her radical declaration that: "marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i'th'place". (II.ii.43-4) There is however, an inconsistency in Moll's representation of female subjectivity which works through a nexus of contradictions sign-posting a number of complex social tensions.

The tension that this text exposes is that which narrows the passage between Moll's condemnation of marriage and her threats to beat rancorous women. (II.i.215-

21) Howard asserts that "If Moll's 'corrections' worked, women would again be docile and men manly, and happy marriages would be assured".[241] However Moll's ideological discourses produce only conservative propositions, of marriage as the locale where women lose their maidenhead, their voice, their independence, and marriage as a site of containment for unruly women. Moll's contradictory appraisal of the 'happy' state of matrimony and its tragic suppression of women bends the text out of shape at several points as the threat of censorship no doubt plays upon the dramatist's mind. On the one hand Moll's transvestite exploits may seem to be devoted to unmasking the pretensions of male upstarts but this is forever invested in confirming the values of a benign form of patriarchy.

Moll instructs by example how a man should behave and takes obvious delight in teaching unruly males how to treat women. In castigating Laxton for thinking "each woman thy fond flexible whore" (III.i.71) she completes the discourse of radical reform with another of her striking declarations: "I scorn to prostitute myself to a man/ I that can prostitute a man to me". (III.i.109-10) The impact of Moll's threat to the patriarchal constraints upon female sexuality are fairly obvious, as women who claimed an autonomous sexual subjectivity were automatically branded as whores. Nonetheless, there appears to be no evidence of Moll's sexual activity, other than a great deal of bawdy humour, as when Trapdoor suggests they "wap" and "niggle" under the "ruffman's" (i.e., copulate under the hedge) much to the amusement of the assembled gathering, Moll included. But as Howard points out: "For Moll there seems to be no way, outside of dream and solitary pricksong, to gratify eros without enduring an unendurable subordination and exploitation".[242]

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[241] Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle,* p.179
[242] *ibid.,* p.185

Howard's formulation of Moll's "solitary pricksong", the auto-eroticism of playing by herself upon the genital emblem of the viol, contains an interesting exposition on Moll's defiance of patriarchal, phallus-oriented sexuality. However, the insistent linkage of Moll with this particular instrument and her mastery of it functions not just on the physical level of erotic gratification. Moll's intellectual capabilities are also demonstrated here. According to Lawrence J. Ross stringed instruments were symbolic or conducive to virtue and order as wind instruments were to error.[243] "Being Apollo's attribute", writes the musicologist Curt Sachs, "the lyre expressed the so-called Apollonian side of Greek life, wise moderation, harmonious control and mental equilibrium, while the pipes stood for the Dionysian side, for inebriation and ecstasy".[244] The viol-de-gamba however, shaped like a dismembered female body, although usually associated with cultivated serious music, was often mentioned in comic situations, where it connoted an affected ass. The viol may have been played by gentlemen, merchants and other men of virtue, but such wastrels as Sir Andrew Aguecheek was a player "o'th Viol-de-gamboys" in *Twelfth Night* (I.iii.25-6) and Onesiphorous Hoard in *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605) describes his niece's attributes rather unfairly as "The voice between her lips/ And the viol between her legs/ She'll be fit for a consort very speedily".[245] Perhaps more trenchantly, the dramatic representation of a powerful woman straddling this beautiful, feminine, Renaissance instrument would have visually unsettled her audience. Although her performance in this scene is observed only by one staged spectator her mastery of the instrument is but another manifestation of her transgression of gender roles and

[243] Lawrence J. Ross, 'Shakespeare's "Dull Clown" and Symbolic music', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 17:2, (Spring, 1966), pp.107 ff
[244] Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments,* (New York, 1940), p.129
[245] (I.i) See also Middleton's *Your Five Gallants* (1607) for a similarly bawdy treatment of female viol players in Goldstone's description of courtesans "with their viols betwixt their legs, and play the sweetest strokes; 'twould e'en filch you soul almost out of your bosom." (II.i)

augments the symbolic display of the manner in which her presence in the public

sphere plays upon the thoughts of a sexually inquisitive audience, especially women.

Indeed, Moll's interminable questioning of the efficacy of married love as the basis of

civil society lays her character bare to a range of accusations and intimidation as she

declares that she likes to 'lie a both sides o' the bed'. Her solitude is questionable,

particularly in a period when the only conceivable and socially acceptable outlet for

sexual activity was in conjugal coupling.

In refusing to submit not only to men, but to her own physical nature, Moll

associates independence with physical denial:

> She that has wit, and spirit,
> May scorne to live beholding to her body for meate,
> Or for apparell like your common dame,
> That makes shame get her cloathes, to cover shame.
> (III.i.133-6)

Moll expresses the traditional dichotomy between body and spirit, rejecting altogether

the world of desire where identity is governed by "apparell" and where marriage is

not the union of opposites but the handmaiden of lust:

> Base is that minde, that kneels unto her body.
> As if a husband stood in awe on's wife,
> My spirit shall be Mistresse of this house,
> As long as I have time in't.
> (137-40)

This cynical materialist view of love is nevertheless undermined by Moll's awareness

that marriage is regulated as a container for human sexuality.

The idea that being a harlot constitutes masculine behaviour is no doubt

paradoxical, but it displays acutely how anxieties about women's sexuality, in this or

any other period, are a projection of male sexual fantasies. Indeed, in *The Dutch*

Courtesan Freevill explicitly addresses this bifurcated construction when he tells

Malheureux that "only men give to loose [behaviour] because they are men, therefore

manly". (I.i.122) Take for example the scenario afforded by Mary Fitzallard's attempt to accomplish a match with Sebastian Wengrave, by disguising herself as a boy in Moll's company:

> MOLL: How strange this shows, one man to kiss another.
> SEBASTIAN: I'd kiss such men to choose, Moll;
> Methinks a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet.
> (IV.i.45-7)

As Sebastian admits that he has discovered a new layer to his sexuality, a bawdy denouement occurs with his request to be serenaded by Moll. Sebastian appeals to Moll to amuse herself in some way while he enjoys the "drink" that "tastes better/ In an outlandish cup". (53-4) At the slightest mention of duelling, said in jest by Sebastian, Moll declares that she "should draw first, and prove the quicker man" (78) which causes Sebastian to lay bare the double-entendre that "there shall be no weapon at this meeting". (79) To appease her a viol-de-gambo is offered up to "end [her] quarrel singing", (82) but Moll shows that she is as capable of innuendo as any man claiming that "it shall ne'er/ Be said I came into a gentleman's chamber/ And let his instrument hang by the wall". (90-1) Sebastian's parry to this riposte: "…it had been a shame/ For that gentleman then that would have let it hung still,/ And ne'er offered it thee". (92-4)

It is so perfectly obvious from the common figurative use of language that the fighting instinct and the sexual instinct are fundamentally allied. The warlike metaphors of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (1596) are a case in point, where Theseus turns to his future wife and gushes: "I wooed thee with my sword,/ And won thy love doing thee injuries". (I.i.17-8) In the bawdy bedchamber scene the euphemism of a man's threatening weapon is replaced by the more playful euphemism of a musical instrument and denotes the pleasures of the body beyond the threatened violence of a potential defloration.

The chivalric code may have ruled the arts of both love and war but as Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* demonstrates, when military conduct is applied to matters of the heart tragic consequences are inevitable. Moll's comic inversion of chivalric honour in her duel with the cad Laxton may be juxtaposed alongside Viola/Cesario's ineffectual duelling in *Twelfth Night*. Moll teaches Laxton a valuable lesson: she rejects his advances, lectures him on behalf of "fallen women", and eventually fights and wounds him. She not only talks like a man, she can wield a sword as effectively as any gentleman. Conversely, Viola/Cesario may "speak masterly" (*Twelfth Night*, II.iv.23) in her young male apparel but her mastery of language is employed more usually to resolve conflict. This young woman may know how to "speak to [men] in many sorts of music" (I.i.57) but unlike her twin brother she can no more answer with her fists than grow hair upon her chin. But Viola and Moll switch roles by the close of their respective plays. Viola cannot reclaim her femininity until her "woman's weeds" are returned to her, she remains locked in the transvestite economy of comedy, whereas Moll scrubs up well for her finale, clothed respectably as a wench once more, no longer threatening in her relation to the symbolic order.

The women of these comedies impersonate the rhetorical sophistry of educated men but are expected to return to their previous gender position by the close of the play. This initially appears to strengthen the notion of comedy's didactic function as the concern with genealogy, with the idiom of survival, with living on (happily ever after), and it explicates conflict resolution as the preferable route to a new future. However, accepting comic conclusions as anything other than provisional is invariably problematic as previously dynamic and transgressive characters are submerged within the expected propriety of their gender. It would appear that these figures lose everything: the triumph of their parodic masquerade could be dismissed if

we view cross-dressing as not so much a political act as a psychological haven where fantasies of egalitarianism can be enacted, before returning women to their assigned gender positions. A recurring question arises in relation to these clumsy conclusions: do they point to the imperfect state of matrimony itself? Is it better to marry than to burn? Or, does comedy support the established order by defending marriage, the laws of inheritance, convention and a settled state of affairs?

Conclusion

Contemporary debates about the status of women and wives, and questions that interrogate the issue of women teaching men how to view women are crucial to our understanding of the early modern theatre's comic agenda. Inverting the concept of woman as property and reinforcing the notion of married equality through the lens of Renaissance Humanism may not liberate the female gender entirely but does serve to illuminate the conflation of sex and money as the basis of a nascent capitalist society.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the casket which Jessica throws to Lorenzo is an odd counterpoint to the three caskets that Bassanio must choose from to win the "golden fleece" (I.i.170) that is his future wife. The moral of these caskets emphasises the danger of judging by external appearances but in liberating this casket of jewels from her father's house, Jessica finds that love and wealth are uncomfortably intertwined. In contrast to Lorenzo's conviction (II.vi.28) Jessica's terrible doubts are made manifest in her continual questioning "Who are you? Tell me, for more certainty". (26-7) As she struggles with the magnitude of her decision to elope with Lorenzo she questions the man below in the darkness, suddenly unsure of his intentions. Her awareness of the inherent uncertainty of one mind regarding the

contents of another is heightened by her having to don a disguise which reinforces her fear that appearance is all we really have to go on. She has, after all, disguised the one thing she is valued for, her femininity.

There is here a complex inter-working of the theme of love-is-blind along with the assumption of apparel as substantive of identity as the men surrounding Jessica "hold a candle to [her] shames". (40) The shame she feels at her "exchange" (35) may be concealed beneath "the lovely garnish of a boy" (45) but surely Cupid's blushes are reserved for the need she feels to "gild" herself with ducats. (49-50) The complex polysemy of this word is important to an understanding of the reason both for Jessica's doubts and the constitution of early modern female subjectivity. Firstly she will cover (gold-plate) herself in wealth so that her external appearance will be all the more attractive, as she suspects that her new-found love is enticed by her coating of wealth. The word 'gild' also suggests 'guilt' which is appropriate to the sensations she must be experiencing as she is not only committing the crime of theft against her father, she is also defying his paternal authority by eloping. Also, if we take 'gild' as 'geld', we observe a young person who looks like a boy but who lacks the prime signifier of masculinity: the penis.

When Jessica makes this remark, Gratiano appears to respond by swearing an oath by his "hood". (51) This can be read as 'manhood' but may also refer to the foreskin as a mark of uncircumcised Christian manhood. This notion of small, almost insignificant pieces of flesh which legitimate subjectivity, are referred to by numerous cross-dressed heroines who realise the fragility of the *hymen* they have transgressed at moments when the logic of the *phallus* is unremittingly aggressive. In referring to their 'lack' of maleness cross-dressing heroines acknowledge the danger they are placing their virginity in by leaving the imagined safety of the feminine realm of the

domestic. They set course for law courts and battlefields, towards the aggressive masculine realm which is fraught with mortal danger.Women disguising the one thing they are substantively valued for, in exchanging the outward appearance of femininity for the outward appearance of youthful masculinity, may toy with a strong homoerotic subtext but in the blurring of gender boundaries we are confronted with the fact that much of our judgement on the roles ascribed to men and women are tied to preconceived notions rather than to subjective needs and motives.

The essentialising rhetoric of gender polarisation becomes increasingly dangerous in *The Merchant of Venice* as Shylock attempts to recoup the losses made from both a broken bond and a 'stolen' daughter in a pound of human flesh. Indeed, comedy explores the theme of sex and money and the marketing of flesh, not just in prostitution but in marriage, as the evil which underlies early modern morality. In court, Shylock speaks of the necessity of freeing all slaves if flesh may not be owned, or the necessity of granting him the terms of his bond if it may. What the court attempts (and achieves) is a temporising hypocrisy for the purposes of this bond; flesh is not marketable, yet for slaves and women it will remain so.

Natalie Zemon Davis traces the relation between husband and wife in Renaissance Europe as "especially useful for expressing the relation of all subordinates to their superiors". She describes how: "in the little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolisation".[246] As the case of Portia exemplifies "a lady richly left" (*MoV*, I.i.161) was still subject to the "will of a dead father". (I.ii.25) As an emblem of wealth and status, a rich heiress was a valuable token in the libidinal economy of early modern patriarchy and from this perspective

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[246] Natalie Zemon Davis, *op. cit.*, p.150

love is merely a supplement to the financial security offered by a marriage transaction.

Even in romance comedy where love is the theme, romantic relationships are explored from a social perspective. Tragedy may address the inner passions of lovers but comedy examines the institutions of courtship and marriage and their relationship to the social contract. For example, a tragic tale of love like *Romeo and Juliet* focuses on inner emotional desire, whereas comedies such as *The Taming of the Shrew* emphasise the economic aspects of marriage – specifically how economic considerations determine who marries whom. In this early Shakespearean comedy, the ageing merchant Baptista auctions his daughters off in "a desperate mart" (II.i.320) where the "greatest dower" (336) shall secure the youngest after the elder, less saleable girl has been 'brokered'. Baptista's daughters are denied the "disguise of love" (*TGoV*, V.iv.109) which so many of Shakespeare's comic heroines are permitted. There are no cross-dressed escapades between clandestine lovers,[247] although "counterfeit supposes" (V.i.118) buy Bianca enough time to defy her father and marry Lucentio clandestinely.

The irony of Petruchio's test of wifely obedience in the final act insists that there is no escape from the socially defined role of woman unless it is through the temporary release afforded by subterfuge. It is all the more thrilling then that Katherina and Bianca may be denied the license of a festive disguise but still reveal an aptitude for the slight deceptions practised by those wilfully compliant daughters and wives that wait in the wings. As such, Katherine and Bianca can be celebrated as emblems of a submerged form of female anarchy: when they swear obedience we can

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[247] Although in the Induction Sly is made to believe that the page is his 'wife' there is nowhere a more protracted cross-dressing anywhere else in the Shakespeare canon. But my contention rests with the denial of cross-dressing possibilites to female characters subsumed by patriarchal forces.

never be sure that they are speaking truthfully. There are however, numerous instances of male characters' attempts to circumvent social expectations in both *The Taming of the Shrew* and other plays. In fact, a primary source of excitement in comedy stems from its permeable social boundaries, criss-crossed continually by those men who employ a disguise or a clever lie, particularly those suitors who plot an encounter with their beloved, where they will "have leave and leisure to make love to her,/ And unsuspected court her by herself". (*The Taming of the Shrew*, I.ii.134-5)

In the guise of educators these potential husbands will woo with "books of love" and compete like "adversaries of law", (I.ii.274) but as Bianca proves, the object of their desire will gracefully receive their attentions while singling out the suitor she herself prefers. Portia mocks the Petrarchan wooer as a teller of "quaint lies" (*MoV*, III.ii.69) who would boast that women "fell sick and died" (71) when denied his love. Rosalind mocks the "quotidian of love" (*AYLI*, III.ii.357) that causes lovers to pine away as she knows along with every other comic heroine the true danger of desire. In this respect, the women in comedy are love's tutors. They are the educators with a vested interest in a utopia that has yet to arrive, a utopia where woman's desire is not the by-product of masculine fantasy.

According to Catherine Belsey, the Renaissance view of sexual desire, or more historically 'passion', was of an intangible danger that would turn "women to whores"; "it renders men effeminate, incapable of manly pursuits; it threatens identity arousing fears that subjectivity itself is unstable".[248] Therefore, comedy presents a vision of marriage as a remedy, of both sexual and ideological deviations. Philosophy may seem foreign to concupiscence but perceptions of sexuality are underpinned by philosophical opinion as hedonism and stoicism wrestle interminably in the field of

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[248] Catherine Belsey. 'Love in Venice', *Shakespeare Survey* 44, ed. Stanley Wells, (Cambridge and New York, 1992), p.44

ethics. Comedy attempts to teach the Humanist doctrine of marriage that the joining of minds is as important as the joining of bodies.

Byron's claim that "comedy ends in marriage" leads us along as misleading a route as C.L.Barber's distinction of comedy as "dramatic epithalamium". Comedies rarely end either in a marriage or with the noisy lustrations of the marriage bed. Comedy appeals more to the genre of the prothalamion, as it turns upon the *anticipation* of marriage and all its attendant blessings, and although this trope is indeed epithalamic, the focus of comedy is forever on the reconciliation of opposites, on the drawing together of antagonistic elements in the hope of a new and prosperous future. As ever, marriage is about compromise and negotiation, from the start of the process to its completion. Tensions of identity and opposition are central to this relationship and as such it is subject to the same dichotomous pressures as any other hierarchical system. In the comedies of the early modern theatre men and women are represented who must negotiate a compromise between love and market forces, between pleasure and profit, heart and mind, ruler and subject. If we then agree that in the hands of cross-dressed comic heroines Renaissance Humanism was a tool for domesticating men does this negate the growing repressiveness of marriage? No, but in the fantastical denouements of comedy a utopian vision is made manifest. In this mythical and transitory place comedy propagates a hymeneal mirth that celebrates living on (possibly in the 'happily ever after') in a revitalised world where the stagnant ideologies of the old order are examined in the hope that they will be dispelled.

Now that we have examined the fears and anxieties of the patriarchal order as they are embodied within notions of sexuality and gender our focus must shift towards the strategies employed by dramatic comedy to interrogate these assumptions. This

chapter has been central to the argument that comedy mimics the dialectic of history by presenting antithetical positions in an attempt to reconcile them, and the tool for this management of crisis has been identified as marital union. This project is not unproblematic as marriage during this period was undergoing extensive changes with Humanist ideals dismantling notions of gender identity. Again, the antithesis between the gender divisions of male and female were being gradually eroded. The position of dramatic comedy in this movement leads the thesis towards an examination of marriage as a sacrificial ceremony where men and women renounce their individuality for the good of the community. The next chapter will examine the rite of the *pharmakos* as a dramatic re-enactment of individual sacrifice and the variety of ways it has been represented upon the early modern stage.

Chapter 4

The Pharmakos

"Like the plague, theatre is a crisis
resolved either by death or cure."
　　　　　　　　　　　　(Antonin Artaud)[249]

Shakespeare's comedies outline the *pharmakos* as defined by Frye as the

"scapegoat"[250] but also as expanded upon by Derrida to mean both remedy and

poison. It is therefore appropriate to present an image of early modern society with its

fears, anxieties and contingent desires displayed in theatrical spectacles which bear a

stunning resemblance to purgatory rituals. This will lead us towards Artaud's

conflation of theatre and plague, as possessing a curious 'viral' quality which induces

praise in the formation of "a superior disease because [there] is an absolute crisis after

which there is nothing left except death or drastic purification".[251] This distinction

will be elucidated as an obvious but crucial analogue to the dramatic genres of

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[249] Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double,* trans. Victor Corti, (Montreuill, London and New York, 1970, 1995), p.22
[250] Frye, *op. cit.*, pp.172, 175-6
[251] *op. cit.*, p.22

comedy and tragedy themselves with their distinct methods of expurgating crisis and

the construction of theatre as an institution capable of delivering restorative, if not

propagandist, images.

Tracing the Pharmakos

Comedy sets in motion a narrative process in which diverse languages, logics,

discourses and codes are, at one point or another, revealed to the audience as

fictions.[252] Essentially illusory in its depiction of life and constantly capable of

disrupting the expected order, dramatic comedy may succeed in mimicking the role of

ritual and its ability to avert crisis. We have already observed in the last two chapters

the ritual of legal inference and marriage as harmonising ritual, that comes together in

the representation of comedy. But it must also be noted that comedy is, inevitably, a

chimerical universe where stereotypes of persecution or stereotypical crimes exist. It

is noteworthy that comedy works in stereotypes, and none are more strenuously

conveyed than that of the scapegoat. René Girard refers to the "scapegoat

mechanism"[253] as a systemic hatred inherent in and essential to the continuation of

humanity, that is controlled to reconstitute the workings of force and hegemony. Thus,

the mythology of persecution in the comedies is no simple ideation but a full system

of representation where the mentality of the mob, carried on the tide of popular

opinion, triggers the necessary mechanism of association without revealing that the

entire process is fuelled by degraded superstition and naivety.

Girard, locates the scapegoat in the recognition, or as he states, the "mis-

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[252] Steven Neale, *Genre, op. cit.,* pp.83-7
[253] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero, (London, 1986), p.37

recognition", of difference, as the system of differentiation used to threaten the relationship between the collective and the 'victim'. His identification of the scapegoat as a 'foreign body', which troubles the centre with its presumed exteriority resides in the acknowledgement that "Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility and its morality".[254] In apprehending the comic scapegoat as a dangerous supplement, it thus becomes necessary to anatomise comedy as an aesthetic form in which certain characters repeatedly "do the work of victimage or sacrifice"[255] for societal accord. Naomi Conn Liebler evokes this analogy in relation to the hero of tragedy who draws "all the ambiguity and crisis present in the community"[256] towards themselves in an attempt to avert some form of communal annihilation. This essentially prophylactic formula replicates, within the generic conventions of theatrical mimesis, what can only be termed as the pharmacological influence of the scapegoat or *pharmakos*: a figure of immense ambiguity in comic drama, as both the source of laughter and the cause for concern.

If we take Girard's conception of "persecution texts" as historical artefacts where the "face of the victim shows through the mask" as there are always ideological fissures or "cracks" in the perspective of the narrator (who is possibly also the persecutor), then in comic texts the mask is always still intact as "it covers the whole face so well that we have no idea it is a mask".[257] This is because the *pharmakon* of theatre, in mimicking ritual, is utilised as a combat zone between disorder and its

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[254] *ibid.*, p.22
[255] Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre,* (London and New York, 1995), p.123
[256] *ibid.*, p.9
[257] Girard, *op.cit.,* p.37

other, introducing characters brought to life upon the stage to simulate a certain type

of *enchanted* reality where:

> Death, masks, make-up, all are part of the festival that subverts the order of the city, its smooth regulation by the dialectician and the science of being…[258]

But behind the masks worn by the parasite or *alazon* of Tudor and Stuart comedy, we

find the very persecutions that constitute the scapegoat mechanism, albeit containing

certain mythic distortions or 'comic' transfigurations.

In Derridean terms, the ritualistic component of comic drama is referred to as

the rite of the *pharmakos*, a dramatically significant ritual which exploits ever

increasing levels of mockery to purify the comic community of excessive or aberrant

behaviour. The re-establishment of order is provisionally sought by both myth and

comedy, but as the *pharmakos* in myth has its original counterpart in long forgotten

classical antiquity, the existence of real victims behind the almost mythological comic

texts of the Renaissance become compounded with dramatic simulacra who are

regarded as little more than works of imagination. What has become imperceptibly

submerged here is the fact that the *pharmakon* of theatre is "the locus, the support,

and the executor" [259] in the creation of the *pharmakos* or scapegoat. It is the very

instrument of remembrance that serves to underscore the nature of theatrical

interpretations of ritual purification in a prophylaxis against the resurgence of

infractions of the law and their spread throughout the immediate community.

In both Tudor and Stuart comedy representative scapegoats are anatomised

and dissected by the gaze of the audience and the tools of the critic as individuals

destined to re-enact their pharmakographic roles by repeating symbolic versions of

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[258] Derrida, 'Platos Pharmacy', *op. cit.,* p.139
[259] *ibid*., p.129

ritualistic Dionysiac sacrifice. They are humiliated and torn to shreds, misrecognised and then reallocated subject positions as 'untouchable', impure and dangerously supplementary, by communities who have no other choice but to exorcise them. The theatrical tradition has advised us that we must not pity them, because they are mimetic simulacra, representatives of societal aberrations, braggarts, swaggarers, pomposity personified and mercy devalued. And as their 'swinish' appetites, moral and sexual deviations, and murderous vengefulness are all dissected in the theatrical *pharmakon* that is the process of communal remembrance, one's expectation for conflict resolution will interminably be troubled by these non-assimilable foreign bodies at the very core of comedy.

To nominate the location of the core of comedy is to presume that an adequate definition of the whole exists, a presumption taken to extremes by many of the structural accounts of a notoriously unstable and *quixotic* genre. It is nonetheless irrefutable that in its drive to delimit excessive or transgressive behaviour, comedy revolves around the parasitic, the alien or the dangerously supplementary, perpetually interrogating the presumed purity of the social interior. The impossibility of this plenitude reveals the scapegoat/parasite as a necessary complement, inhabiting a space within the comic community which in some instances may appear as sinister but invariably functions symbiotically.

The Sacral Parasite

The whole trajectory of the scapegoat's career, self-expansive and self-destructive, continually transgressing the proprietary boundaries that distinguish the self from the other, the subject from the object, the speaker from the hearer, the mind from the body, a knave from a gull, marks this figure as possessing a subjectivity in transition.

As Victor Turner has argued, the instability of the transitory is viewed as dangerous and polluting to many societies. In his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Turner describes the ritualistic role of "liminal personae" or "threshold people" who are necessarily multivalent and ambiguous. These "entities" represent the transitional, the ineluctably non-definable. Turner perceives them "as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew"[260] in "a symbolic milieu that represented both a grave and a womb".[261] The structural dichotomy of liminality in diachronic transitions is evident in a number of Shakespearean comic texts: the "hoodwinking" of Parolles (*All's Well That Ends Well*), and Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*); the trial of carnival with Falstaff as its surrogate in both *The Henriad* and the *Merry Wives of Windsor*; and the trial of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. All reassert the dialectic which foregrounds the construction of culture and the tension inherent in the diametric universe of comedy.

Fellow anthropologist Mary Douglas shares Turner's assumption on the prevalent notion of "purity and danger" in the ritual process arguing that:

> that which cannot be classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as "polluting" and "dangerous."[262]

Turner, however, views the liminality of the neophyte in purgatorial rituals as traversing "the passage from lower to higher status through a limbo of statuslessness".[263] His focus upon the ritual powers of the weak, reinforces the anthropological perspective that the very continuity of a group depends on various forms of ritual separation. The need to extinguish the contaminating effects of the

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[260] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure,* (New York, 1969), p.95
[261] *ibid.*, p.96
[262] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger, op. cit.,* p.109
[263] Turner, *op. cit.* p.97

liminal are represented as the primary requirement for communally significant events to proceed, such as marriage after the rite of passage in courtship, or the expected parturition after conjugal union.

This goes a little way towards explaining the pervasiveness of particular themes in comedy relating to sex and marriage and the reason why they hold such a central position in this thesis. The regulation of desire and the drive towards procreation is contained by images of sexual continence with the cross-dressed wooer adhering closely to Turner's definition of the *pharmakeus* as "the undifferentiated character of liminality is reflected by the discontinuance of sexual relations and the absence of marked sexual polarity".[264] Ambiguity and paradox signal social and political danger because "liminality, ambiguity, indeterminacy are all antithetic to the human desire for systems and structures".[265] This surfaces in a need to re-order society, to purify it of entropy, and as aberrations most commonly appear as sexual or libidinal, unruly appetitive desires must be hounded out. Hence, from the "sick desires" (*AWEW*, IV.ii.34) which poison Bertram's mind against the worthy Helena, or the "very midsummer madness" (*TN*, III.iv.53) of Malvolio's erotic fantasies concerning his employer (who sees from the outset that he is "sick of self-love", [I.v.85]) to the symbolic castration and "dishorning" of Shylock and Falstaff, the scapegoat mechanism in comedy can be recognised as a sacrificial crisis which demands that "Ill-weav'd ambition" (*IHIV*, V.iv.87) is "shrunk" by the rite of the *pharmakos*. The ideological imperative of this form of comedy is contained in Henry IV's exclamation: "we are all diseas'd/ And with our surfeiting and wanton hours/ Have brought ourselves into a burning fever", (*2 Henry IV*, IV.i.54-6) a stance both profound and paradoxical in its connection to the value and idleness of theatrical

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[264] *ibid.*,p.104
[265] *ibid.*, p.120

entertainment. This last but crucial point underscores the now familiar concept that the scapegoat may be from the outside but is also from within, a centripetal force to be reckoned with.

Prophylaxis and Purgation

The "sacrificial crisis" as defined by Girard, is a crisis of distinctions, a crisis affecting, or infecting the cultural order. The crisis that demands the rite of the *pharmakos* has been caused by the disappearance of presumably natural distinctions which have brought into focus the dissolution of regulations pertaining to the individual's proper place in society. Thus, it is not only the dissipation of certain social mores but the dissolution of metaphysical plenitudes which can instigate a sacrificial crisis.[266] After citing Girard's discussion of the tragic protagonist as a *pharmakos*, with special attention paid to his claim that scapegoating requires an artificial or assigned differentiation (signalled by marginalisation, misrecognition, and demonisation) in order to permit the community to exact its violent penalties, Naomi Conn Liebler concedes that:

> It may or may not be in the nature of human communities to enact violent sacrifices of their designated doubles, but it is unarguably the practice of human communities to organize themselves hierarchically, and therefore politically.[267]

And it is, indeed, politic to clear away the old order along with its advocates, before the community can begin to attempt to recuperate its losses and embark on a process of healing. For within both ritual proper and theatrical ritual, boundaries are inscribed recurrently, limits are constantly redrawn.

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[266] Girard, *op.cit.*, p.294
[267] Liebler, *op.cit.*, p.18

This is however not to say that theatre is synonymous with ritual. As Brecht wrote in his *Little Organon for the Theatre* "Theatre may be said to be derived from ritual, but that is only to say that it becomes theatre once the two have separated".[268] It would appear then that we have all but lost sight of drama as little more than a vehicle for moral instruction, but it has its origins in magical or religious rituals. We should recall how comedy sets out in adversity, or takes its departure from the realm of the tragic. This permits us to rediscover a festive perspective, a ritualistic imperative located in the capacity of the comic to reconstitute those socio-politically important rituals that have been avoided or breached by the tragic. The violation of social codes produces disastrous results, and in displaying the dual constitutive liminalities of drama, tragic and comic theatre enacted the early modern community's material need for a remedial process of suturing or reconstituting both the moral and legal constitution. In this sense representational catharsis was, and to a large extent is, always being organised through communally significant events that function to redress or purify what has been contaminated.

In citing Barbara Myerhoff's analysis of rituals as "containers that shape and reveal the contours of a culture's collective values",[269] Liebler contends that theatrical performance contains a ritual element which functions liminally or just below the surface of consciousness:

> Ritual in performance does not merely remind its audience/ participants of its significance as a purely intellectual or moral exercise; as a functioning component of the performance it transforms its agents and its auditors during the course of the performance in which it occurs, just as it would in a formal liturgical setting such as a Mass. [270]

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[268] Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. J. Willett, (New York and London, 1966), p.181
[269] Myerhoff, (1978:86) *cit.,* Liebler, *op. cit.,* p.54
[270] *ibid.*, p.56

This conflation of ritual action with sacred ritual is a compelling one, as early modern city workers were invariably only able to attend the theatre on a Sunday. Indeed, theatre owners such as Philip Henslowe were careful to obey the ban on "interludes and plays on the Sabbath", closing their doors on the only afternoon when the London citizenry were regularly free, but should have been preoccupied with more godly activities. As Leah S. Marcus points out, "Some of the most avid play scourgers condemned drama on account of its heathen origins and its association with Roman fertility rituals",[271] further underscoring how drama inhabited the early modern imagination so provocatively.

In this sense, the secular and the sacred were being merged, but as Liebler affirms:

> Ritual action is not always sacred ritual; that is, it need not have specifically religious validity. It is a form of mimesis that belongs to all members of a community, not only to a priestly or ruling constituency, and is not only reserved for authorised occasions. Such action entails the mnemonic of something sacred, something upon which survival depends, whether spiritual, physical or communal.[272]

As the early modern theatre attempted to legitimise its practices and disassociate itself from "the pantaloon, whore and zany" of street theatre,[273] with its grossly over-determined didacticism, the subversive elements of artisanal culture demanded holiday diversions. The inception of carnival in popular early modern culture was never a single, unitary discourse, but a symbolic system over which continuous struggle to wrest its meaning was waged by competing ideologies. Time and again we find comedy located on the threshold of revolutionary upheaval advocating curatives. This veritable *pharmakon* attempted to administer a cure to social foibles and provide

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[271] Leah S. Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton and Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes,* (Chicago and London, 1998), p.48
[272] Liebler, *op.cit.*, p.116
[273] See Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse* (1592), *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, pp.13-15

access to an authorised discourse by means of an aesthetic that was capable of producing ideologically acceptable endings, for a populace that both feared and desired social change. All this was enacted beneath the watchful gaze of a political order that was at times hegemonic but that also had access to a very a powerful and violent state apparatus. Within this context the ***pharmakon*** provides a cure but also in accordance with the logic Derrida articulates it demystifies the conditions under which that cure might be provided and hence offers a brief glimpse of an alternative.

Mightier Than the Sword: Satirical Scalpels and Comic Scythes

Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia' encapsulates the humour, common speech and vulgarity of the carnivalesque as "a rich cacophony of spontaneous, generative and profane linguistic performances",[274] what Chris Jenks refers to as "dialogics at its peak!"[275] However, Bakhtin's work on theatre as the popular expression of the people, with the power to subtly subvert 'official' authority, no longer serves to explain Tudor and Stuart comedy, since by the end of the sixteenth century, the stage had become a formalised "spectacle", a money-making enterprise, not an expression of the folk-culture. Despite its marginal, liminal status comedy *is* a commodity, written for an audience's entertainment and thus greatly dependent on the audience's taste and desire for enjoyment. Nevertheless, Bakhtin's awareness of the element of violence in carnival and its filial relationship with comedy has been largely ignored by traditional literary criticism. The *pharmakos* in comedy is a carnivalesque figure dramatically constructed to fulfil society's need for a scapegoat.

The structuralist methodology from the middle of the last century may have

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[274] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Social Heteroglossia", *Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris, (London, 1994), pp.73-80
[275] Chris Jenks, *Transgression,* (London and New York, 2003), p.166

identified how integral the ritual aspect of drama is to a fuller understanding of the comic genre, but critics such as C.L. Barber's sentimental depiction of comedy as a "civilised equivalent of the primitive rite"[276] possesses a disturbing tendency for re-evaluating potential aberrations and purging them from the social corpus, which enjoins the violence of scapegoating as somehow unimpeachable. This exemplifies how the structuralist project of turning festive disorder back towards an affirmation of metaphysical absolutes forestalls the competing interests of social groups. 'Truth', 'honour', and 'love', are curiously intertwined with 'vengeance', and the volley of expletives and general abuse which rain down upon those ostracised pariahs of the comedies are mitigated by a humanistic piety which smiles benevolently at the re-nomination of what are after all only "froth and scum". (*MWW*, I.i.148)

As Malcolm Evans pointedly states, proto-structuralists such as Barber and Northrop Frye inscribe "moral and aesthetic certainties as a meta-mythology which occupies a historical void".[277] The comedies may have been traditionally denounced as imaginary explorations of social equality, returning any sense of momentary solidarity as exactly that, fleeting. But, the scapegoat figures of these plays, exploited and scarred by victimisation, abusively referred to as the "cankers of a calm world", (*1 Henry IV*, IV.ii.29) refuse to be continually marginalised or simply rendered innocuous. As Evans observes,

> This is not the froth to be blown off the top of the text but froth that sits at the bottom, problematizing any comic 'spirit' or essential meaning that the theological mode of criticism in quest of the Shakespearean *logos* might wish to recover…[278]

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[276]C.L.Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy,* p.209
[277] Malcolm Evans, 'Deconstructing Shakespeare's Comedies', p.81
[278] *ibid*. p.82

The scapegoat as the sediment that lies at the bottom of any comic text reconstitutes the notion that this non-essential addition to the comedy is in actuality what gives the drama form - a body - onto which what is grafted is not an animal soul but the original human condition, that of being out of joint, of abyss and excess.

The act of violent imposition in which the comic scapegoat is imbricated, indicates the fundamental fantasy whereby comedy provides the co-ordinates for a presumably contingent situation into which the *pharmakos* becomes disoriented by a set of ever shifting social codes. Involvement in this world of comic hubris relies on audience and actors accepting the violence of the accidental, but the problem lies in the act of authentically choosing one's way either on the individual or the collective level. For example, the figures of Shylock and Malvolio are shattered by their reversal of fortune as resolute individuals, while braggarts such as Falstaff and Parolles are 'swept along' towards rehabilitation and reinstatement within the collective. Frye may claim that "[t]he tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated",[279] but there have only been these two options made available, both under the threat of extermination or expulsion. However, the choice of anonymity or synonymity, singularity versus collectivity, dispersed as it is throughout the comedies as the choice to freely assume one's imposed destiny, has less to do with alternative possibilities than the theological problematic of the existence of free-will in a deterministic universe, as the unbearable tension experienced through images of coercion and conformity illustrate.

In 1962, Hugh Dalziel Duncan wrote:

In great comedy, unconscious, hidden and suppressed conflict is brought to light. And if the dream is the guardian of sleep, comedy is the guardian of

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[279] Frye, *op. cit.*, p.165

reason in society because it makes possible confrontations of social disrelationships.[280]

It may be true that comedy rejects mystery by vocalising the unspeakable in an effort to establish rational discourse, but in attacking the hierarchy by ridiculing those who place societal principles "beyond reason"[281] comedy merely allows us a way to *negotiate* reason. There is no guarantee that meaning will not wander, a political position from one stance to another, a prejudice from one principle to another. We must not forget the early modern period was a time of intense surveillance and censorship - one which enacted that Foucauldian 'government of shadows'- a place where the colloquialism 'to stick one's neck out' bore the most mortal of connotations.

Nevertheless comedy always appears to make allowances for multiple "reasons" or "truths" to coexist, which provides a possible rationale for the continuation of the comic scapegoat who is not killed, but reprieved. For critics such as Duncan comedy differs from tragedy in that it is deemed unnecessary to kill the clown "for he can mend his ways",[282] he can be rehabilitated, and his sacrifice is only symbolic after all. This stance goes on to ally itself to the notion that the end result of comic purification is open, rational discourse which yields enlightenment, by attempting to reduce social differences, not by eliminating them, but by bringing them to light in laughter, and thus making open communication possible.[283] This analysis is a common one where comedy, instead of accepting rigid social laws, keeps "convictions about social means and ends open to reason".[284]

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[280] Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order,* (1962), p.393
[281] *ibid.,* p.394
[282] *ibid*., p.399
[283] *ibid.,* p.404
[284] *ibid*., p.406

"In comic absolution, we are forgiven our sins because they surely will not threaten the group once they become 'understandable' through open and free discussion".[285] This perspective on the interrelationship between the comic scapegoat and society proposes an idealistic form of didacticism during the process of comic purification: "If that the injuries be justly weigh'd/ That have on both sides pass'd". (*TN*, V.i.354-5) But as we have the "balance here to weigh the flesh" (*MV*, IV.i.250-1) of the sacrificial victim, it becomes apparent that the weight of the world, in the sins of the community, have been placed upon them and it will be difficult to "entreat [them] to a peace". (*TN*, V.i.366) After all, they have lost everything, they have been expelled from their own comic universe.

As Artaud states "there can be no spectacle without an element of cruelty as the basis of every show",[286] which reminds us of comedy's ability to undermine and destabilise existing structures, particularly through an important process of de-mythification. This last point requires particular scrutiny as human culture is predisposed to the permanent concealment of its origins in collective violence, and comedy works under the auspices of carnival to seek out a suitable scapegoat, to bring them to the forefront of the collective imagination. Liebler has identified this *pharmakos* as "a victim of a very special kind,"[287] and although we should avoid the "interpretive trap" of blaming the victim, it is irrefutable that the *pharmakos* has somehow worked towards this ambivalent position, doubling itself with the community, somehow 'othering' social order by railing against widely accepted beliefs. The search is over before it has begun, the victim was chosen at the very moment of the carnival's inception. In fact, the scapegoat is very often the catalyst for

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[285] *ibid*., p.397
[286] Artaud, *op.cit*., p.77
[287] Liebler, *op.cit.,* p.20

carnival, with their excessiveness, their transgressiveness, promoting their subject

location as anomalous, polluting; a necessary sacrifice for the vindication of society.

It is this shift from 'poison' to 'cure' and back again that accounts for the ambivalent

status of the comic scapegoat. The figure is both a source of social critique and a

projection of commercial anxieties; it generates a satiric perspective that serves to

demystify social mores, even as it reaffirms a moral hierarchy, while at the same time

it becomes the focus of violent outrage, as it is either expelled (as in tragedy) or

folded back into the social order with the agency of the comic scythe of laughter.

Theatrical Ritual (theatre as *pharmakon*)

Artaud's belief that theatre should "make us think" independently of social constraints

anticipates that dramatic art will "lead the mind to assume deeply effective attitudes

from its own point of view".[288] His desire to restore theatre to a religious,

metaphysical position "to reconcile it with the universe"[289] may demand that we

differentiate art from aesthetics in order that we can "turn away from present-day

theatre's human, psychological meaning and rediscover a religious, mystical meaning

our theatre has forgotten".[290] But it is not theatre which suffers from amnesia. Theatre

functions as a mnemonic of the past as much as a window on our future. His analogy

of theatre as a "plague", a delirium-inducing virus "as beneficial as the plague",[291]

reflects a philosophical tradition traceable from Plato to Nietzsche that personifies

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[288] Artaud, *op.cit.*, p.51
[289] *ibid.*
[290] *ibid.*, p.35
[291] *ibid.*, p.22

dramatic art as "that sorceress expert in healing" capable of turning humanity's "fits

of nausea into imaginations with which it is possible to live".[292]

The anxious pleasures of desire occupy much Jacobean city comedy and the

pre-emptive comedy of Shakespeare. In these satirical and comical plays, the trace of

the *pharmakos* ritual, reveals one of the central concerns of the "complaint genre" as

plays which satirically (conservatively) redress moral lack in society. This desire to

repress disruptive forces, seen especially in Jacobean tracts such as *Hic Mulier* (1620)

or Swetnam's *Araignment against lewde, idle, froward and unconstant women*

(1615), rests upon the formulation that all the "ills attendant" upon the body politic

are "excess, abuses, or even subversions of the system"[293] rather than inherent to the

system. For a society based upon social status and on the maintenance of rank and

degree, people acting other than in accordance with the demands of their natural state

upset the normal and divinely ordained order of the universe. Obviously, as many

critics have shown, the theatre did indeed threaten to erase or blur gender and class

distinctions by its practice of using boys and male commoners to play women and

kings; but Stubbes also insisted that in portraying wicked deeds, the theatre offered an

immoral example for the audience to emulate. The concern that the theatre would

infect the city with all manner of unwanted and unlicensed behaviour promoted the

idea that theatrical entertainment was morally and politically subversive.

The theatre, of course, had its proponents as well as its critics. Thomas Nashe,

in *Pierce Penilesse* (1592),[294] suggests that the purpose of theatre is to contain

"mutinies at home" by throwing the otherwise idle citizens "bones to gnaw upon", in

order that the state will not be troubled with "intermeddle[ers]". In other words, the

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[292] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Tragedy* eds. John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Leibler, (London and New York, 1998), p.56
[293] Thomas Moisan, *op. cit.*, p.196
[294] Nashe, *op.cit.*, pp.13-15

stage is a necessary diversion to keep people from worse mischief, such as "felony or

treason". Thus while Stubbes and his like condemned the theatre for its content,

accusing it of spreading corruption and immorality,[295] Nashe saw dramatic art as "the

sour pills of reprehension, wrapped in sweet words".[296]

In practising imitation dramatic poets of the Renaissance were accused of

corrupting minds, of encouraging transgressive behaviour across the social hierarchy.

Within the liminal space of the theatre, an institutional force which disregarded

physical boundaries as much as it appeared to corrupt societal ones, this perspective

on the technique of imitation, and the production of the simulacrum is described by

Derrida as having "always been in Plato's eyes manifestly magical,

thaumaturgical."[297] So it would seem that this magical art of imitation contains a

pharmaceutical force, an element that confuses the senses, like a drug, or a virus. The

antidote has always been the *episteme*, an awareness of reality, an ontological

counter-poison used to oppose the delirium-inducing effects of this dramatic art. Thus

Derrida compounds the "chain of signification" from *pharmakon*, through the

ceremony of the *pharmakos* to the figure of the *pharmakeus*, as the "wizard,

magician, or poisoner" capable of instigating the ritual of purification demanded by

some specific breaching of social codes. *Pharmakon* may mean to colour or to paint

but its etymology is also applicable to the drugs of sorcerers and doctors.[298]

Derrida's depiction of the rite of the *pharmakos* as a way of purging entropy

from society reinforces the pharmacological imperative of art, which is both socially

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[295] Associating all revels with the contagion of rebellion, the authorities were instinctively sure that riotous "apprentices and servants drew their infection" from the playhouses where the people also caught the plague; but as Thomas Nashe insisted, this analogy was a kind of category error, which miscalculated the new theatres' social role.
[296] Nashe, *op. cit.,* p.14
[297] Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', p.136
[298] *ibid*., p.137

disruptive and ameliorative via the process of theatrical mimesis. The illusory aspect

of art, its desire to imitate what is essentially real leads us along a labyrinthian route

where "concealed doorways that shine like mirrors"[299] promise an epistemic clarity

which can never be truly apprehended, because in its "silence" dramatic literature

denatures the very thing it imitates. Mimicking voice, miming reality, drama is mute

to interrogation: propelling the audience into a realm of rhetoric and metaphor.

Thankfully, the ontological nihilism of this perspective is rescued by the Derridean

admission that although the *pharmakon* may have a narcoticising effect, an uncanny

ability to estrange one from reality, there is an antidote. This counter-poison is not

only to be found in the "knowledge of the real nature of things",[300] although an

awareness of the 'actual' does purge the mind of delusion; the communal process of

remembrance or anamnesiac dialectics *negotiates* previously charted but seldom

traversed ethical and moral regions.

The prodigal plot of *The Henriad* administers a prophylactic for societal and

moral deviance in Prince Hal's strategy to distance and decontaminate himself from

the dubious legitimacy of his father's accession. The image of an afflicted social body

with "rank diseases" that "grow, / And with what danger, near the heart" of a

corrupted kingdom (*2 Henry IV*, III.i.39-40) demands a ritual of purification to restore

equilibrium. Warwick opens the *pharmakon* of anamnesiac dialectics as one would a

medicinal cabinet saying: "It is but as a body yet distempered; / Which to his former

strength may be restored / With good advice and little medicine". (*2 Henry IV*, 41-3)

As such, a recognition of the difference between reality and mimesis becomes

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[299] *ibid.,* p.128
[300] *ibid.,* p.135

a tautologous device where one pharmaceutical force is employed to counter another. This expulsion and sacrifice is:

> the cure by *logos*, exorcism, and catharsis [which] will thus eliminate the excess [of the dangerous supplement]. But this elimination, being therapeutic in nature, must call upon the very thing it is expelling, the very surplus it is *putting out*. The pharmaceutical operation must therefore *exclude itself from itself*.[301]

The pharmaceutical separation of dialectics, of philosophy must thus be used to counteract the *pharmakon* of the dangerous supplement. It is down to the *pharmakeus* of dramatic mimesis to permit access to the pharmacy of stored memories which provide the only real remedial deliverance from humanity's "intestinal organisation of self-complacency".[302]

This paradoxical figure offers the theatre audience the good remedy of remembrance in the form of anamnesiac dialectics. In the *pharmakon* of theatre the playwright may be instantly recognisable as the *pharmakeus*, as actors are moulded into human representations. There is always one of 'his' creations however, who mimics the technique of sleight-of-hand, like a distended surrogate illusionist. This figure wears the mask of the initiate, setting in motion the rite of the *pharmakos*, able to set "the dish o' poison" (*TN*, II.v.104) for the sacrificial victim, to "stand for sacrifice" (*MoV*) when all hope of compromise seems lost, to administer "sweet physic" (*AWEW*) to the diseased body politic, or indeed, to "turn diseases to commodities" (*2 Henry IV*, I.iii.233) in times of social unrest.

Liebler invokes the similarity between the dramatic genres of comedy and tragedy as essentially "festive" forms because they are dialectical genres which "celebrate" by "reconstructing, re-membering what is lost".[303] Above all, in the words

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[301] *ibid*., p.129
[302] *ibid*., p.128
[303] Liebler, *op .cit.,* p.8

of Artaud, the demand that theatre should be "as beneficial as the plague impelling us to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and divulging our world's lies, aimlessness, meanness, and even two-facedness"[304] registers the benefits of the charmed space of the stage as possessing an invaluable remedial function.

This "good remedy", which is beneficial to the entire community, reveals itself as the "Socratic irony"[305] of self-knowledge and self-mastery, dependent upon the expulsion of what is revealed as a supplement: the surrogate made *pharmakos* or scapegoat by the people, for the people, as the symbol of *their* excess. Pushed to the outside the supplement is railed against as "inessential yet harmful to the essence, a surplus that *ought* never to have come to be added to the untouched plenitude of the inside",[306] and it is to the ideological imperative of this "pharmakographic aggression", that we now turn.

Dissecting Deviance

According to Jonathan Sawday, the human body as the microcosmic terrain of God the creator's macrocosmic universe represented more than a pious platitude within the early modern imagination:

> The defeat of sickness and the establishment of political order were two sides of the same coin. A state in rebellion was a body in sickness. The diseased body was an image of rebellion. These images were not merely metaphors, but statements of a self-evident truth which structured the individual's experience of illness and health.[307]

In both the commercial theatre and the anatomical theatre a drama of life and death was being enacted, whereby the "urge to particularize" led to the perception of

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[304] *ibid.*, p.22
[305] Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', p.128
[306] *ibid*.
[307] Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, (London and New York, 1995), p.36

Renaissance culture as a "culture of dissection".[308] The unrivalled fascination with the

body as an ever present source of tropes, metaphors, similes and figurative twists

invests much comedy with the language of partition and by association within a

punitive framework of public dissection as penal punishment. This may have resulted

in certain similarities becoming manifest in both modes of performance although

the anatomisation of living bodies upon the stage and the testing of their pained

reactions more often resembles a perverted sort of psycho-dynamic vivisection.

In the literary sphere, dissection and anatomisation have come to be associated

with satire, with the intrusive, and often destructive impulse of comedy to make

incision into phallogocentric structures, overwhelming the narrative process. Probing

the machinations of power, either to render them impotent or to cauterise those

ignominious flows of energy generated by ignorance and fear, the scalpel of satire

may often slice into the social body with scientific precision. And yet, in what

Sawday refers to as the "macabre theatre of punishment"[309] that was the "*theatricum*

anatomicorum", the spectacle of penal dissection was rooted in the fascination with

theatrical performance as a mode of production where knowledge could be easily

transferred from one domain to another. Contrapuntally, in the accumulative force of

the rite of the *pharmakos* (enacted as it was upon the comic stage) we witness an

intrinsic violence (the fundamental violence of a dismemberment) which tears the

natural continuity of experience apart, and although the interrogative aggression of

comedy begins by reaffirming metaphysical certainties there is invariably the resultant

symbolic anatomization of the body politic.

The wooden operating theatre of London's St. Thomas's Hospital survives as

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[308] *ibid.*, p.3
[309] *ibid.*, p.51

the celebrated arena where the human body was cut and divided into diseased and healthy parts. The "Wooden O" of its neighbour, the Globe theatre, which must have resembled it in design so much, operated in analogous ways on the body politic to divide and control the visceral language of carnival, separating out productive revelry (or art) from the idleness and infection of rebellion. Aesthetically dramatic humiliation rituals were appropriated from the realm of rough justice and mob punishment and through theatrical spectacle became a way of celebrating what has been termed as the ceremony of the *pharmakos.* As has been already discussed, through the elaboration of stereotype which sustains comedy, a symbolic dismemberment occurs whereby a character is anatomised, dissected, and eventually offered up as a surrogate for society, as an individual scapegoat for the 'sins' of the collective. However, as the symbol of excess, it is imperative that we ascertain precisely how the scapegoat is *constituted* by the ritual of the *pharmakos,* constructed as that Kantian 'diabolical evil',[310] plunged into the Hegelian 'night of the world'[311] only to be immediately and vicariously recuperated by a ritualistic project which demands 'domestication', 'gentrification' and 'normalization' of whatever exceeds or transgresses social boundaries.

There is, of course, a co-dependency enacted between the 'monstrosity' of the scapegoat, and the 'beauty', or the plenitude, of the communal order. The monstrous, or rather the uncanny rite of the *pharmakos* - as the source of that which Freud described as 'unheimlich',[312] which for Descartes, was the *remnant* of a deviant

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[310] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology,* (London and New York, 1990), p.40

[311] G.W.F. Hegel, 'Janaer Realphilosophie', *Hegel's Recollection*, trans. Donald Philip Verene (New York, 1985), pp.7-8. *cit.*, Žižek, *ibid.*, p.29

[312] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", [Das Unheimlich], *Standard Edition*, 24 vols., trans. James Strachey, (London: 1955), XVII.217-256, especially pp.240-3

'will'[313] - is highly visible as the *locus* of the grotesque grounded in an abyssal

decision to demonise, to perform an act of violent imposition wherein the originary

violence at the foundation of society is momentarily exposed prior to its definitive

occlusion. As the supplement at the source, the *pharmakos* has been added and

attached like a *literal parasite*, feeding on the nourishment of the community, and as

such:

> The purity of the inside can then only be restored if the *charges are brought home* against exteriority as supplement, inessential yet harmful to the essence, a surplus that *ought* never to have come to be added to the untouched plenitude of the inside. [314]

The 'outside' must therefore be put back in its place, it must be returned to that which

it should never have ceased to be: "an accessory, an accident, an excess".[315] However,

in the imitation of men and manners, the presumed ethics of comedy, the ethical law

for being-in-the comic world reveals itself as empty as it is sublime, precisely as it

pertains to such primordially repressed displays of humanity thrown into the *mise en*

abîme, of what Hegel termed the 'night of the world'.

In Hegel's brief description of the terrible power of imagination as negative,

disruptive and discombobulatory, traces of Lacan's psycho-dynamic 'dismembered

body'[316] [*le corps morcelé*] can be perceived as the phantasmagorical, unreal,

nightmarish universe into which the scapegoat finds itself thrown. Forced through

iniquity towards a maddening loss of identity, the movement from natural to symbolic

surroundings initiates a withdrawal-into-self, a withdrawal from the actual world.

What Hegel determines madness as the closing of the soul into itself is exemplified by

Shylock's 'contraction' in his turning away from the violent synthetic imposition of

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[313] Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols., trans. J. Cottingham, (Cambridge, 1984), II.13-5

[314] Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', p.128

[315] *ibid*., p.129

[316] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London, 1977), p.4

the *new* order of Belmont, in his silence at the iniquity of his conversion to Christianity. That Shylock was somehow predestined by the text to experience this 'infinite lack of being' is also found at the core of Hegel's concept of madness where this type of withdrawal from external reality is conceived as a 'regression' to the level of the 'animal soul' towards a spiritual abyss.

Dis-membering the Past

Poets and playwrights throughout history may have been denounced as "charlatans and thaumaturges,"[317] as "species of the genus – *pharmakeus*," both magicians and poisoners, as masters of illusion and equivocation, imitators and dissemblers. But the ambiguous goal of the *pharmakon* of theatre is ever to purify through symbol and analogy, through driving the *pharmakos* or scapegoat out as "the human symbol that concentrates our fears and hates".[318] Frye notes that "playing at human sacrifice seems to be an important theme of ironic comedy"[319] but falls short of Girard's formulation of humanity's endemic need to victimise or identify scapegoats as a form of psychic cleansing.

Historically, the dismembering and reunification of Dionysus is the cosmic myth of eternal renewal. And as culture is dismembered, the notion of a sacrificial crisis comes into being, bringing with it the dissipation of the psychological illusion of metaphysical certainty. Comic scapegoats are not hounded to their deaths; they may be violently expelled, or forcefully reintegrated but their reformation is generally assured by the comic form of what can now be explored as a mutation of the Dionysian ritual.

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[317] Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', p.352
[318] Frye, *op.cit.*, p.46
[319] *ibid*.

Jan Kott observes in *The Eating of the Gods, or The Bacchae* that,

the significance of the scapegoat inheres less in its broad social symbolism than in the expression of a Dionysian divine frenzy, *sparagmos* (tearing flesh) and *omophagia* (eating raw flesh), in the human.[320]

The sacral offering in the Dionysian myth, in all its narrative variations, culminates in a frenzied attack, a divine loss of (self) consciousness, where the assembled initiates become dehumanised, tearing the ritual victim to pieces (*sparagmos*), and consuming their raw flesh (*omophagia*). It may be generally assumed that comedy does not find it necessary to *literally* annihilate the parasitic, although it should be noted that in certain comedies, the scapegoat skirts the border between symbolic and actual execution.

In *The Henriad*, the unrepentant Falstaff jests his way towards a rejection which will quite literally see him dead and buried, unaware that he is the object of the hunt. "Embowell'd! If thou embowel me to-day, I'll give you leave to powder me and eat me tomorrow", (*1 Henry IV*, V.iv.111-20) he blusters, determined to live another day, selectively defective in taking note of the number of times he is referred to as a deer, or a buck, targeted for extinction. Unfortunately for Falstaff, by the beginning of *Henry V* (II.i.85) the King does eventually kill him in banishing him from his affections, but not before he has "anatomized his company" (*AWEW*, IV.iii.32) as a mock-king, a scapegoat, and a pariah. Falstaff is handled with similar insensitivity in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where he stumbles blindly into yet another trap.

The "public sport" (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV.iv.14) which the merry

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[320] Jan Kott, 'The Eating of the Gods, or *The Bacchae*', *Tragedy*, ed. Drakakis and Liebler, p.256

wives of Windsor improvise to exorcise Sir John is clearly based on, made up of,

vestiges from ancient rituals whose original meanings have corroded with time.

Falstaff is to come to Herne's oak at night "disguised like Herne, with huge horns on

his head". (IV.iv.44) Children, dressed as fairies, will then "pinch him sound, and

burn him with their tapers". (IV.iv.61-2) Fairies had not, for Shakespeare, quite lost

their association with the triple Hecate, but for the merry wives they have already

declined into the gossamer creatures of children's stories. The pinching may be a dim

memory of the hunter god, torn apart by his hounds. It may also remind us of the

pinching of Caliban by sprites in the later play *The Tempest*, or of the possibility of an

ancient race, worshippers of the horned god[321], who would have burned his effigy to

death, not as an act of moral cleansing, but as a guarantee of his rebirth the following

year rejuvenated and revitalised in order to resume his role as fertility god. This is the

opposite of Mistress Page who, intending to "dishorn the spirit", (IV.iv.64) expects a

symbolic castration to result from these fictive pagan rites.

These pagan rites are in evidence in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, not in the

woods near the Athens of antiquity, but in the Windsor Forest close to a community

of solid bourgeois Elizabethan citizens. Within this shallow materialistic world,

Falstaff comes to seem a representative, however degraded, of the pre-Christian

horned god of the chase, Herne the Hunter. His association with this fertility god,

positions him as a scapegoat to be persecuted by the sexually puritanical: "This is

enough to be the decay of lust and late-walking through the realm". (V.v.137-8) He

invokes, at the climax, "omnipotent love", "that in some respects makes a beast a

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[321] The horned god is a modern syncretic term used amongst Wiccan-influenced Neo-pagans, which unites numerous male nature gods out of such widely dispersed and historically unconnected mythologies as the Celtic Cernunnos, the Welsh Caerwiden, the English Herne the Hunter, the Hindu Pashupati, the Greek Pan and the satyrs. For a further insight into the evolution of the 'horned god' see Nigel Jackson, *Masks of Misrule: The Horned God and His Cult in Europe*, (London, 2001).

man; in some other, a man a beast". (IV.v.5-6) He has indeed become a beast, "a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, t'th'forest", (V.v.12-3) but simultaneously a god shape-shifting for love: "When gods have hot backs, what shall poor men do?" (10-11) Nevertheless, however frank his sexuality ("My doe with the black scut"[16]), it is preferable to the puritanical violence in which Parson Evans schools the children:

> Fie on sinful fantasy,
> Fie on lust and luxury!…
> Pinch him, and burn him, and turn him about,
> Till candles and starlight and moonshine be out.
> (91-2 & 99-100)

Had Evans the power of Prospero and real hobgoblins at his disposal, Falstaff would no doubt have been as tormented as Caliban.

Falstaff, may momentarily represent the scapegoat genus in its entirety, like the green girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as precisely that which cannot be expelled from a full and balanced life. "Banish plump Jack and banish all the world", he had said to Prince Hal, (*1HIV*, II.iv.462) in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, but in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, this being a comedy, he is not banished, and the union of Anne and Fenton under Herne's oak vindicates him. He may have been cast in the role of a victim pinched and ridiculed by all around him but Falstaff's rehabilitation is engendered by the comedy. The distinction between love and its lustful excess dissolves in laughter, and he is welcomed back into the community:

> Master Fenton,
> Heaven give you many, many merry days!
> Good husband, let us every one go home,
> And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire;
> Sir John and all.
> (V.v.226-30)

At this point, the comedy appears to induce a form of short-term memory loss, with the demand for a peaceful resolution disinfecting the previous actions of "this greasy knight". (II.i.105)

Falstaff has been seen by the whole community as a threat to the order on which it depends, as the embodiment of riot, vice, in particular the deadly sin of lechery, and in spite of the comic context, the words that are used of him – "corrupted", "tainted", "unclean" – are very strong. He is the old Adam (*Henry V*, I.i.29) to be castigated and cast out; he is, almost, the very devil himself, as he falls into the process of demonisation enacted by comedy. The demonic face of the scapegoat pushes out against the verbal denigration through excessive linguistic aggression and profanation. Re-nominated as "cur", "fiend" and "inhuman wretch", the scapegoat's dehumanising metamorphosis is impelled through increasingly outlandish insults towards the termination of its 'comic' discourse of victimisation and the complete cessation of autonomous subjectivity.

The Scapegoat's Agony

As the supplement at the source, the scapegoat acts as a conductor for the many switches in identity and subject positioning which abound in the comedies. The liminality of these figures permeates the entire comic infrastructure, destabilising each individual member of the community. Falstaff parallels Hal, as the mock King who would corrupt "the great body of our state", (*2 Henry IV*, V.ii.136) in his role as "the tutor and the feeder of [our] riots". (V.v.63) In a permanent state of carnival excess and civil misrule, Falstaff is also described in *Henry V* as "fruit of baser quality" (I.i.62) who "obscur'd" the Prince's "contemplation / Under the veil of wildness".

(63-4) This 'doubling' of the scapegoat with a social superior is reiterated in *All's Well That Ends Well* where the unwilling manservant Parolles is accused of poisoning the mind of another "foolish idle boy", (IV.iii.199) the willingly transgressive Bertram, Count of Rousillon. The inferior is scapegoated for the superior's injustices, and although Parolles is undoubtedly "full of wickedness" (III.ii.85) in his duplicitous and dishonest dealings, there must be an involuntary pang of sympathy for him when he recognises his fate as "a man whom Fortune hath cruelly scratch'd". (V.ii.28)

The scapegoat of *Twelfth Night*, that ambivalent and anti-comic gull Malvolio fleetingly perceives life as "…Fortune; all is Fortune", (II.v.22) but like Parolles, he falls into the "unclean fishpond of Fortune's displeasure" and as he says, "is muddied withal". (*AWEW*, V.ii.18-9) Malvolio, however, like the love-sick Duke whom he comically replicates, is pursued by his desires "like fell and cruel hounds" (I.i.22) to the point of such an excess of misplaced eroticism that his "appetite may sicken and die". (I.i.2) This re-enactment of *sparagmos* in the comedies is also resurrected in one of the most infamous comedies of victimage, *The Merchant of Venice*, where the act of *omophagia* is averted by the symbolic castration of Shylock the Jew. Shylock may share with Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing* the desire to "eat [the] heart [of his enemy] in the marketplace", (IV.i.303-4) and as such displays an ancient rite of vengeance in his demands. But the unnerving nomination of a pound of flesh "to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" (*MoV*, I.iii.145-6) instils in this comedy a lingering terror of the bestial in man, of the pre-ontic carnivore. Shylock also acts as a displacement for the iniquities of the rather unscrupulous merchants of Venice but as an eternal outsider, his residency in the Jewish world of tragic aspect, reveals a legacy of displacement sewn into the very fabric of society.

The illusion of benevolence projected by the Law dazzles Shylock, causing

him not only to slide between social positions in his role as the moneylender of

Venice, but also forcing him to act out a generic slippage between a definition of

either the comic or the tragic scapegoat. He convinces himself that the Christian laws

of Venice will deliver him the penalty and forfeit of his bond, and yet becomes

transposed into the role of a "tainted wether of the flock," (IV.i.114) the "inhuman

wretch" (4) who will "stand for sacrifice" (III.ii.57) in what the Venetian backslappers

have commandeered as their "merry sport." (I.iii.140) The anti-semitism of this play

has a certain character; beginning with anodyne symptoms it is taken as a common

cold only later to erupt as a deadly disease. In the court-room scene, venom and vitriol

threaten to engulf those present until the farcically illegitimate prosecution enacts the

de-legitimisation of Shylock who is standing in the dock as the representative of the

whole tribe of Israel. The scapegoat mechanism may enact a purgatorial

pharmacology but the endemic barbarity of its victim standing up for justice, only to

be put down for sacrifice, is a difficult pill to swallow once the sugar coating of

humour has been removed.[322]

That carnivalesque language belies the immanence of death functions through

what Frye has so smoothly categorised as the 'comic process';[323] with the revellers in

these comic rituals alluding to festivity, but indulging in crueller strains of correction

the more definite the need to defer death becomes. We have already ascertained the

abusive elements that characterise carnival, and nowhere is this more evident in

Shylock's trial of mercy devalued. The sense of excitement and the reversal of fortune

which precedes it sees his enforced conversion resurrect him from the symbolic grave

the Venetians would have laid him in. Unlike, Falstaff and Parolles, those "braggart

soldiers" who scrabble about to save their skins by putting themselves at their

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[322] Of course, it is unlikely that an Elizabethan audience would have felt this way.
[323] Frye, *op. cit.*, p.43

"Majesty's command", (*AWEW*, V.iii.248) knowing that they are "safest in shame", (IV.iv.315) safest when nearer to laughter than slaughter, Shylock cannot find his bearings, he does not know which way to turn, other than inwards. His world has been turned completely upside down and now to receive mercy free and gratis devalues the statutes of Venice, just as Antonio had devalued the city's "rate of usance", (I.iii.40) and consequently Shylock's position as a moneylender. No longer is the "wealthy Hebrew", (I.iii.52) able to lend or borrow money "to supply the ripe wants" (58) of the Venetians. Money is power, and the ascendancy of such power must be retained by the ruling hierarchy, at whatever cost. However, the traditional corrective virtues of this travesty may reinforce hegemonic values, but as Shylock's trial exemplifies, this remedy resembles more closely a virulent disease, a plague of dishonesty and misapprehension.

Shylock is formulated as a grotesque abomination, a polluting anomaly, to be exorcised, lest the entire state be contaminated. It is left in the hands of the *pharmakeus* Portia to show that a "plea so tainted and corrupt" as Shylock's can be safely reversed, with only the conditional "seasoning" of "a gracious voice". The performance of the rite of the *pharmakos* "obscures the show of evil" (III.ii.74-6) that such a ritual of humiliation enacts. The *pharmakeus* becomes a conductor through whom the power of comedy is transmitted, but as Girard states, in the proper performance of ritual purification, the danger of a sort of "cosmic rebound" is great, as violence tends to strike "the very beings who sought the protection of sacrificial rites".[324]

In *Twelfth Night* Maria may "taunt" Malvolio "with the license of ink", (*TN*, III.ii.39-40) and win the admiration of the revellers of Illyria with her "common

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[324]Girard, *op.cit.*, p.280

recreation" (II.iii.127) but she also loses control of the comedy over which she attempted to preside. Malvolio is not only mortified; metaphorically he is also mortally assaulted, killed and buried. He is gulled "into a nayword" as a direct rebuke to his aspirations of social-climbing, but as Maria gloats "I have dogg'd him, like his murderer", (III.ii.71) an anamorphic distortion is introduced into the spectatorial and performative space. Visions of aesthetic oscillations between the comic and the tragic, the religious and the mimetic, the ritual and the dramatic are herein contained. We are left with memory traces of an originary violence, an unnerving foundational brutality, concealed imperceptibly beneath the aesthetics of form.

The Pharmakeus

Curiously, images of the cult of Dionysus are filled with women driven to madness and anger, and throughout the comedies, female characters appear to be instrumental in implementing the rite of the *pharmakos*. In keeping with the myth of Acteon, Bertram attempts to violate the goddess's namesake, Diana, and is "crush'd with a plot", (*AWEW*, IV.iii.302) namely a "bed-trick" wherein the object of his desires is substituted by the one who desires him. Although the initial dismemberment occurs when he "sees his company anatomiz'd", (IV.iii.32) it is the *pharmakeus* of Helena who, like Portia devises a plot which interrogates "wicked meaning in a lawful deed". (*MoV*, III.vii.43) This "poor physician's daughter" (*AWEW*, II.iii.113) stands at the margins of the aristocracy, looking in at a world from which she is peremptorily excluded. She endeavours to prove to herself that "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" (I.i.201) and strives to procure herself a husband by her own wit and her knowledge of healing. But the husband she desires is Bertram, the arrogant and snobbish young Count, now the head of the household in which she grew up, a vain

young man who harbours a destructive class-consciousness whereby the "difference betwixt their two estates" (I.iii.104) forestalls his love for her. Because of this deeply ingrained bigotry in the one she chooses to love, Helena enters a dangerous and uncertain game of deceit and duplicity, striving to gain love and respect whilst rectifying the breech of social harmony evinced by the headstrong youth of this play. "To show the merit that did miss her love" (I.i.213) Helena transforms herself into a kind of *pharmakeus*, a "magician, wizard and poisoner", helpful because she is paradoxically harmful, a force of order because she creates disorder.[325]

Driven by grief, fuelled by self-immolation, she bears scant resemblance to Shakespeare's inventory of inventive and quick-witted heroines, aligned more with the chaste Isabella, or the wronged queen Hermione. Her "ambitious love" (I.i.84) forces her into an undeniably "idolatrous fancy" (91) whereby she "sanctifies" her husband. Helena may, like Portia, "stand for sacrifice" but hers is the self-sacrifice of the utterly devoted and as such defines her femininity as a form of benign passivity. Her disquisition on servitude to "[her] master, [her] dear Lord" (I.iii.149) the Count Rousillon, reads like a nun's abasement before God. "I his servant live, and will his vassal die" (150) entombs her subjectivity in religious Puritanism, sending her out on an improbable quest in the guise of a pilgrim.

In taking full responsibility for her husband's transgression she expels herself from society, longing for death in her imitation of it:

> I will be gone.
> My being here it is that holds thee hence.
> Shall I stay here to do't? No, no, although
> The air of paradise did fan the house,
> And angels offic'd all. I will be gone,
> That pitiful rumour may report my flight
> To consolate thine ear. Come night; end day.
> For with the dark, poor thief, I'll steal away.

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[325] *ibid.,* p.84

(III.iii.121-7)

"And though I kill him not, I am the cause / His death was so effected", (III.ii.114-5) denotes banishment as the subject's death in law, rather than the military retreat of one of the "blowers up and underminers of virginity" (I.i.121 & 120) which she had earlier descried.

Helena refuses to perceive Bertram's self-imposed exile as a dream of vain-glorious war, and reveals the impact of her belief that she has merely reinforced his conviction that "A young man married is a man that's marr'd". (II.iii.291) From marking her man to stalking him stealthily, Helena displays a myriad of ambivalent paradoxes, both in her presentation of chaste and obedient femininity and her many representations of unwavering tenacity. She treads a different path from the mischievous Maria, and yet, the similarities exist as the "gift of a grave" also becomes synonymous with the gift of a womb in a biological economy which conflates images of confinement at both the beginning and the end of life. Images of life and death and womb and tomb are so compounded that with the mention of either term, one cannot help summon the other into consciousness. As such, Bertram may hoodwink Parolles in the symbolic grave scene, but Helena equally hoodwinks him in the bed-trick scene.

A woman's wiles may enforce her will upon the men she wishes to control, but nowhere is this trope utilised to such devastating effects as in *Twelfth Night*. The cruelty at the core of one of Shakespeare's most enduring romantic comedies begins when the housekeeper Maria sets about 'exploding' the pomposity of the overstuffed Malvolio. She is not only cajoled by Sir Toby as "thou most excellent devil of wit", (II.v.184) but actively indulges him in her curious but obviously effective form of flirtation. She has every faith that her "physic will work", (II.iii.161)

both in providing a humorous tonic for Sir Toby, who desires that she "possess" him (II.iii.130), and as a nasty purge for their nemesis, the puritanical steward. But like her dramatic creator, she is absent as her little "device" (II.iv.9) unfolds, re-appearing only to surmise if her ministrations have taken effect, with "does it work upon him?" (II.iv.175), concealing the supreme confidence she expressed at the outset of this "jest". Her declaration that he is successfully "possess'd" (III.iv.9) seems driven on by an almost impish malice, if not demonic frenzy, as she accelerates the onset of an invented insanity, saying to others that he is surely "tainted in's wits" (13) as he wholeheartedly embraces the carnival spirit that she has initiated.

Maria's role as the overseer of festivity, as its housekeeper so to speak, and as false matchmaker, makes her accusations all the more cruel and confrontational. "Why appear you with this ridiculous boldness before my lady?" (III.iv.36-7) she demands of the romantically misled Malvolio before elaborating on his presumed bedevilment. While, "Lo, how hollow the fiend speaks within him!", (85) is announced with consummate glee even as the comedy starts to slide out of control towards his sadistic incarceration, where they will "have him in a dark room and bound". (129)

Imprisonment in darkness stands as a symbolic death in the Dionysiac schema and as such this sign of ritual, embedded as it is in metaphor, is made manifest as a visible theatrical sign. But just how can one account for the appearance of the scapegoat victim isolated as they are by the rest of the comic community as the malignant root of all vice? Fabian informs the Lady Olivia that where Malvolio was concerned, he and his confederates had merely intended to "pluck on laughter than revenge", (V.i.353) although the "Sport royal" of Maria's "revenge" in the second act (II.iii.161 & 143) ultimately takes the unfortunate steward beyond laughter to a

symbolic grave of "hideous darkness" (IV.ii.29) where "he must run mad". (II.iv.174)

By the close of the fourth act, even the overstuffed playboy, Sir Toby Belch concedes

that they "cannot with any safety pursue this sport to the upshot" and that they would

be "well rid of this knavery". (IV.ii.65 & 63) As such, persecution for misdeeds

cannot alone reprimand those assigned the position of scapegoat. Malvolio may be "a

coward and a coistrel that will not drink" (I.iii.40-1) but to wish upon him the "gift of

a grave" (I.iii.33) exemplifies to what extent the scapegoat is not only 'othered' by the

rest of the community but somehow is complicit in its own ostracism. Feste's

enjoyment of his revenge on Malvolio demonstrates that he is returning a full measure

of antipathy. The "whirligig of time" has indeed brought in its revenge upon this un-

comic gull. Malvolio may be uncomic but he is also puritanically anti-theatrical in the

same way as Shylock deplores Venetian festivity. Therefore, to be both against festive

entertainment and theatrical praxis positions certain dramatic figures as counter-

productive elements in any comedy, and as such, they experience the most vicious

criticism.

Princes and Pariahs

Bearing in mind the crude simplification here: the dramatic life of the scapegoat is a

parole in the Saussurean sense, a series of partially autonomous and unpredictable

individual acts, transferred by society at large into a coherent system, or *langue*. As

we have seen, the interest of traditional structuralists is in *langue* and not in *parole*: in

the functions of elements as indicative of the workings of the *system*, not the

individual utterances in their own, quirky right. Sign systems are seen as operating as

a closed set. In the 'creativity' of Parolles' deception in *All's Well That Ends Well*,

access is gained to a privileged, social position, not only by disguising himself

physically in "the scarfs and the bannerets" (II.iii.201) of costly apparel, but by fashioning his entire persona anew.

Stephen Greenblatt argues, that the Renaissance was a period of intense self-fashioning where "the ability and willingness to play a role, to transform oneself, if only for a brief period" was necessitated by "the acceptance of disguise, the ability to effect a divorce, in Ascham's phrase, between the tongue and the heart". He goes on to argue that "such role playing in turn depends upon the transformation of another's reality into a manipulative fiction",[326] The equivocal instability of appearance and the ease with which another could be misled solely by external appearance renders disguise dangerously dubious. Comic scapegoats tend to be characters made entirely of false claims and obfuscations, and as their fictive status is redressed they invariably receive a humiliating dressing down.

In hailing Helena mockingly as a "fair queen", Parolles pinpoints the necessity for a temporary reversal of fortune and its contingent period of licensed misrule. The scapegoat must be assigned and anointed as the transitory and tragically deluded monarch erected for the duration of the play if the subversion of authority is to be enacted. Of course, any play which utilises carnivalesque conventions confronts the realisation that order and stability are constantly in flux and the position and status of nobility is subject to the ephemerality of all things mutable. The rituals of parody, deposition and desecration that Peter Burke has found in carnival[327] appear in so much comedy that it becomes irrefutable that the carnival is not marginal but pre-eminent in the plays as metaphor and reality. In this sense, carnivalesque substitution and transitoriness, not order and hierarchy become the norm. A particularly good example

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[326] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare,* (Chicago and London, 1984), p.228
[327] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe,* (London, 1978), pp.179-187

of this premise can be found in the epilogue of *All's Well That Ends Well* where the "king's a beggar now the play is done" as the actor sheds his theatrical costume.

What demands to be explored is whether the aesthetic renounces the political, regardless of what the fetishisers of the festive may say, even though there should already be a recognition that: "The festival must be a political *act*. And the *act* of political revolution is [always] *theatrical*".[328] Moreover, the comic form seemingly has an innate awareness that: "…for art to be 'unpolitical' means only that it allies itself with the 'ruling' group"[329] and therefore systematically evades declaring its politics. Comedy therefore insists via circuitous routes, on the crucial role of the marginal in the constitution of the central, the dominant or the mainstream, by activating the marginal in a position which can enter into a more even handed contest or *agon* with the central or the dominant. Superficially frivolous, the carnival of transgression which comedy enacts becomes a transformative masquerade, where nothing is as it seems. And although it is never actually affirmed, the comedies do demonstrate Dostoyevsky's famous maxim that a society is defined by its treatment of "outsiders", of what it chooses to marginalise.[330] This enunciation of the peripheral can be heard in the language of fool-speak, in the truths Lear's Fool delivers and the rhetorical sophistry of Feste. But, moreover, in giving voice to those voiceless figures who have been othered by society; women, foreigners, and the socially inferior, are allowed to participate in a specifically transient form of democracy.

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[328] Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', p.128
[329] Brecht, *A Short Organon for the* Theatre„ p.104
[330] Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), trans. Mirra Ginsburg, (New York: Bantam, 1992), is an exemplary instance of this concept of 'outsider law'.

Expelling the Anomaly

Comedy insistently brings about the need to reformulate and even to reconstitute the general way one relates to the marginal or liminal in thought and life. Vital in this latter respect is the rethinking of the role of margins, thresholds and the problem of liminality. Comedy indicates ways in which the marginal is not merely the realm of the borderline or parasitic case that may be bracketed or set aside in the definition of problems or institutions. It insists on us taking a closer look at the crucial role of the marginal in the construction of the central, the dominant or the mainstream, by emphasizing the importance of seemingly mixed modes and the manner in which pure types or essences are idealisations that achieve dominance through other than the purely ideal –that is, through rhetorical and institutional gestures.

Throughout comedy the hub of castigation is located in aberrant individuals who transgress widely accepted moral principles but in John Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* a fierce invective is levelled at the sexual ideology of Jacobean London, and the place of prostitutes at the margins of its society. In *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy,* Theodore Leinward argues that "What made the prostitute a threat was her unwillingness to conform to contemporary measures of social and feminine order".[331] Leinward's analysis stops short, however, for he, like the citizens of London, misrecognises all courtesans as an *external* disruption: they are in this view, the producers of rather than the products of social disorder. Cocledemoy may say that prostitution is a trade "most honourable" because "divine virtues as virginity, modesty, and such rare gems" are sold by "wholesale" (I.ii.32-41) in the emerging

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[331] Theodore B. Leinwald, *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy, 1603-1613,* (Madison, 1986), p.143

commercial marketplace of Jacobean London, but he occludes Marston's satirical swipe at the insatiable hunger of a social economy governed by exchange. Thus, rather than being an emblem for anarchy because she does not conform, the courtesan serves as the scapegoat for a society uncomfortable with its nascent capitalism. Consequently, the Dutch Courtesan, Franceschina not only represents the fallen woman - the whore - she also signifies the extent to which Jacobean culture has produced sex as a commodity. In other words, Franceschina, the abject Other, serves as a spectre who does not allow the reality of early modern London to close into a 'unified whole' but whose existence allows society to misrecognise the source of social disruption as something external. As Franceschina is a 'foreign' body in more ways than one it therefore seems evident that her presumably unchanneled erotic desire poses a greater threat to the stability of the social order than the safety of the men that would 'use' her, as she represents the very foundations of capitalism revealing that exchange value is the only value that really counts. In expelling her from society, the citizens of Marston's London legitimate chaste love and holy marriage, forgetting that Franceschina's damnation is a product of their society. And thus, Francischina's reduction to silence at the end of the play – "Ick vill not speak. Torture, torture your fill. For me am worse than hanged; me ha' lost my will" (V.iii.68) – literally and symbolically indicates the suppression of lust, particularly lust as an *extreme.* Puritanism is at the other end of the equation, with Malheureux's prudishness proving to be his downfall, which Freevill cites as "Nothing extremely best with us endures". (IV.ii.40)

Foucault writes that "the idea of 'sex' [as it developed in the seventeenth century]…enables one to conceive power solely as law and taboo".[332] This type of

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[332] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, op. cit.,* p.155

power – an internalised orientation or subjectivation to cultural codes rather than adherence to them through physical repression or violence – is apparent in *The Dutch Courtesan*. Freevil perceives desire in terms of law and taboo and is concerned that his friend Malheureux has shifted his puritanical beliefs to the opposite pole, where he can no longer conform to the cultural definitions of licensed and transgressive sexual behaviour. As the play progresses, Franceschina becomes more and more monstrous which causes Freevill to enquire of Malheureux "Cannot all these [warnings] curb thy low appetite/ And sensual fury?" (IV.ii.11). As Julia Kristeva argues, love and desire purified by the language of the symbolic, is acceptable, while "sensual" lust, the language of the abject body, is taboo as "[a]bjection persists as *exclusion* or taboo" and also as "transgression (of the Law)".[333] Malheureux, in essence, transgresses the "law" of the nascent capitalist society of Jacobean England by attempting to conflate the dichotomy between abject and symbolic, pure and impure: his desire for Franceschina is within the bounds of the play, impure, and yet he still "must enjoy" her. (IV.ii.15) He thus threatens to reveal that the distinctions between impure and pure are simply social constructions.

Nevertheless, Malheureux is not identified as the necessary sacrifice for the vindication of social codes: all danger, all anxieties about the destabilising force of commodification is displaced onto the whore, as he "that would loose all" need "but love a whore". (V.iii.29) There is a paradox in operation here that demands the total suppression of Franceschina even though the young men of the play are informed by that "idea of sex" which allows them to "enjoy her, and blood cold…laugh at folly" (III.i.278) once they have gained access to a more socially acceptable woman. Their ability to make use of a "common bosom" (I.i.87) and then rejoice in state sanctioned

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[333] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York, 1982), p.17

marriages with 'chaste' women, smoothes over the contradiction that splits womankind into two distinct categories, the saintly and the fallen, the angelic and the demonic.

There is a contrast in stereotypes perpetrated by Marston: when Franceschina invades the home of Beatrice, stating that Freevill is dead and that she alone commanded his affections, Beatrice only moans, "He did not ill not to love me, but sure he did not well to mock me…yet peace and my love sleep with him!" (IV.iv.63). Franceschina, underscores the distinction, by becoming violent and revengeful when she discovers that she is to be cast aside by her lover: "If dat me knew a dog dat Freevill love,/ Me would puisson him". (V.i.14) Indeed, her reaction fulfils the stereotype of a foreign whore, a stereotype that Marston exploits to cement Franceschina's difference from the 'proper' citizens. Not only is she from the Low Countries, with an atrocious accent, she also wants to control herself and those who interact with her. Unlike Beatrice who accepts her position passively, Franceschina has a 'will to power'; she not only roundly curses Freevill ("ick sall have the roge troat cut…St.Antony's fire, and de Neapolitan poc rot him" [II.ii.49-51]), she also *actively* plots his and Malheureux's death. Thus Beatrice is positioned as the most faithful and "patient" of lovers, one who gives men manliness, whereas Franceschina is condemned as one who would rob them of their masculinity: "I am not now myself, no man" complains Malheureux after seeing her. (IV.ii.28)

The impression left by the weight of excessive passions and transgressive behaviours perhaps stems from a refusal to acknowledge the grotesque, 'becoming bodies' that constitute reality, but, as Phyllis Rackin states, "Despising lust as a mark of weakness and degradation, Renaissance thought gendered it feminine".[334]

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[334] Phyllis Rackin, in *Privileging Gender in Early Modern England*, ed., Jean R. Brink, *Sixteenth Century Journal,* vol. 23, p.47

Moreover, in her essay on early modern sexuality, entitled "Historical Difference/ Sexual Difference", Rackin argues that during the early modern period, "Excessive passion in either sex was condemned, but it was especially dangerous to men because it made them effeminate".[335] Effeminacy is less a fear of acting like a woman, than a fear of slippage between the symbolic and its abjected underbelly. Between the 'masculine' symbolic order and everything this phallogocentric system descries, the perversity of a diacritical universe is evident.

As a by-product of the system of ordering, as a symbol of its excess, the anomaly, ironically operates as the restitutor of the conceptual categories from which they are excluded. The stigma that they bear marks them out from the crowd, and conflates physical aberration with moral deviance whether they have been excessively greedy, or excessively puritanical. Whether or not, they have "out-villain'd villainy", (*AWEW,* IV.iii.254) their covetousness incites the inversion of the symbolic order and their social instability is always and everywhere viewed as a threat to existing power structures.

Conclusion

In its exploration of internal alterity or differences *within* what are occulted or denied by extreme analytic or binary oppositions and related dialectical ventures, comedy as a form of deconstruction not only helps to unsettle the scapegoat mechanism, it poses the problem of how to relate to the "other" that is always to some extent within. This aspect of comic deconstruction bears institutional significance, as in how the anti-semitism of *The Merchant of Venice* should be approached, or how one should

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[335] *ibid.*, p.46

examine and perform the class-consciousness of *All's Well* and *Twelfth Night* or the politics of community and nationhood in *The Henriad*. It forces the issue of how to come to terms with the "other". It may thus enable one to perceive subtle methodological displacements in scapegoating in the way certain experimental or transgressive approaches are castigated or dismissed by defenders of conventional disciplinary lines. This approach is directly experienced in what could be termed as the ludic postmodernism of deconstruction in its suggestion that any form of identity is never pure other than through questionable processes of inclusion and exclusion which simultaneously raises the issue of how to articulate modes of relative specificity that remain subject to questioning and contestation.

In studying the mix of didacticism and aesthetics in comedy, one is made aware of the tragedy that is installed along the margins of any comic play. This tragic aspect is not merely to be perceived as the liminal, but as that marginalised and excluded position which defines and constitutes the centre and source of comedy. The cruelty that is made manifest by the tragic sacrifice of scapegoat figures in comedy has something to teach us all, from both the victim's perspective and that of their persecutors. Thus, it can be said that comedy bears the anamorphic stain of defiance and deviance at its very source. The tragic germ is the dangerous supplement at the heart of this hysteria-inducing form which continues to seduce and infect audiences collectively into delirious complicity with purgatory rituals of selective persecution.

Like the anamorphic death's-head imagery concealed in so much Renaissance art, the scapegoat is as a blind spot, an obscurantism shifting and cozening with mercurial wit until it is finally apprehended by the eye. The slippery multifaceted identity of the scapegoat inhabits a pivotal, liminal position, from which it is able to toy with the boundaries of orthodoxy and subversion. All scapegoats learn quickly of

the security in concealment, as they perpetually experience the exclusionary violence of the grotesque, but they also realise that their exclusion can be relocated at the centre of communal participation under the aegis of the carnivalesque. In the precincts of the ludicrous certain scapegoats enjoy an ability to draw others into the terms of their own festive world, repositioning themselves as a focal point for festivities and a source for carnival energies. Figures such as Falstaff offer exemplary instances of this device, but for the anti-comic gulls of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* the violence of their repositioning almost destroys them. In *All's Well That Ends Well* Parolles is representative of this self-consciously destabilising and unstable figure, knowing himself to be a 'braggart' but almost revelling in the confidence he possesses as "the thing that I am" (IV.iii.338). However, it is the inherent danger of this rite where subject positions remain unstable throughout that the role of *pharmakos* and *pharmakeus* are often interchangeable. As the instigator and perpetuator of the sacrificial rite of carnival the *pharmakeus* threatens to destabilise the Monarch of Misrule, to enact the reversal of fortune which makes the King, "a beggar, now the play is done", (*AWEW*, Epilogue, 1) replacing the jester's motley with the crown of thorns.

The fear of occupying this position provides the 'key-hole' that is required not only by the viewer of anamorphic, or perspective art, but also by the spectator of the comic rite of the *pharmakos*. Anamorphic art suggests that the ultimate strength of performance lies in the play of perspectives which sensitizes spectators to those choices framing their own libidinal and ideological representation of aesthetic objects. In moving their bodies (and their minds) to enact the perspectival options of anamorphic art, the viewers transfer art from the frame (or the page) to the spectatorial and performative space, thus realising the side and split visions of

aesthetic oscillation. Memory traces, the powers of imagination, are activated by the

representation of certain incongruities, of differences enacted by visual immigration

and its supplementary libidinal and material vanishings. Therefore as a concept of

transformation, anamorphosis allows us to grasp subjectivity as a 'dynamic

condition', a matter of constantly changing body schema rather than as a fixed body

image. An example can be gleaned from Falstaff's own mutability as a dramatic

figure both renowned as an insurpassably comic character and as one of indelible

poignancy, which thus invaginates the logic of concealment in anamorphism.[336]

The Renaissance understanding of anamorphism as a perspectival technique,

designed to present one image when viewed directly and another if viewed from an

angle, is deciphered by Stephen Greenblatt as that which is:

> …unseen or perceived only as a blur is far more disquieting than what may be
> faced boldly and directly, particularly when the limitations of vision are
> grasped as *structural*, the consequence more of the nature of perception than
> of the timidity of the perceiver. …We must distort, and in essence, efface the
> visible to perceive the invisible. …[T]o enter this non-place is to alter
> everything… and to render impossible a simple return to normal vision.[337]

Before, the anamorphic left only an indistinguishable stain, but now that it has been

located its skewed appearance is forever more apparent. The illusionist's trick is

uncanny in its estrangement, and in that delicious moment of surprise and incongruity

more is revealed than is at first thought. Presuming that something was nowhere and

is now here, we are propelled towards that non-place, the non-lieu of the comic *u-*

topia where incongruities and surprises are the bedrock of humour and entertainment.

The pleasure of recognition is obvious, tantalising, producing a certain indescribable

jouissance. And yet, the comparison of the anamorphic illusion in painting to the

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[336] Shylock too underscores this idea as an almost pantomimic figure of derision and as a tragic figure who loses everything.
[337] Steven Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* pp.19 & 21

anamorphic stain in drama is that we are plunged into the scapegoat's estrangement. We perceive the issue as the *pharmakos* does, from that discomfiting position of unfathomable confusion in the victim.

Operating like a *camera obscura*, the dark recesses of self-obsession produce the perfect surface for the presumably light relief of comedy to appear, for as the laughter and jeers begin to ring out, the tragic aspect recedes, otherwise the pleasure in humour would be vanquished. In this scheme, occupying the same textual space appears to defy the impossibility of generic systems doing so, as,

> we can neither separate them entirely nor bring them into accord, so that the intellectual gratification of radical discontinuity is as impossible to achieve as the pleasure of wholly integrated form.[338]

We are as impressed by the resemblances as we are frustrated by the chasm that keeps separate that which is irrefutably conjoined. Indeed the tragic vein may have been tapped by the violent interiorisation of the scapegoat, but the threat of its explosion is contained by that Renaissance theorem of *simpatico*. As Hal's comment on Falstaff, "Were't not for laughing, I should pity him" (*1 Henry IV*, II.ii.106) reverberates throughout the comedies, the scapegoat crisis in evidence excuses itself.

However, the anamorphic stain of the tragic that marks out the scapegoat of society's dis-ease darkens and intensifies the comic preconception that the festive community is as like the everyday as it is different. It reveals that the two can only co-exist briefly. As perspective attempts to realign momentarily, the tragic and the comic appear to overlap. The whirligig of time does indeed bring in its revenges as scapegoats find to their cost, with the instability of the inter-relationship between the festive and the quotidian, the chivalric and the carnivalesque, enforcing the idea that they inhabit each other in as much as they inhibit each other. Crucially they are both

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[338] *ibid.*, p.22

repelled and impelled towards each other, as when Princes "have a truant been to chivalry" (*I Henry IV*, V.i.94) and waste the precious time precociously even though there is an overarching awareness that "If all the year were playing holidays, / To sport would be as tedious as to work". (I.ii.197-8) Then the Lord of Misrule must be brought to book, and the licence for carnival revoked. The comic mask begins a rotation, the grin imperceptibly contorting into a grimace.

According to Slavoj Žižek, Lacan's name for the "pathological bias constitutive of reality"[339] is anamorphosis. What we perceive as a tragic stain on the face of the comic also enforces an awareness that reality already involves our gaze, "that this gaze is *included* in the scene we are observing, that this scene already 'regards' us",[340] appealing to us on a level of identification. This occluded self-motivated construction of dramatic reality is viewed from a point which eludes our eyes, from a point which transgresses the boundary between inside and outside, both promoting and excluding the perspective of the foreign body. To be recognised is to be expelled, sacrificed as the source of contamination. The scapegoat incorporates many disguises in its attempt to elude identification, but within the rite of the *pharmakos*, in the theatre that is *pharmakon* we are all essentially foreign bodies, unaware that we are being played with, rather than being allowed to play.

Play is an important component in the development of the human; it is where we learn boundaries and limitations. In light of this comedy is a necessary form of play where humanity is permitted the freedom to experiment, and dream. These dreams may be denounced as mass hallucinations, transgressive depictions of alternative realities that are at worst disruptive, at best worthless. However, as this thesis has attempted to illuminate, comic currency has very real value and can be

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[339] Žižek, *The Ticlish Subject,* p.78
[340] *ibid*.

exchanged in the purchase and sale of ideologies, both current and in recession. This is the location in which the comic form really excels: in the marketplace of cultural exchange. As we cross the threshold of the final chapter of this thesis the accountability of comic discourse will be called into question as to whether it is of benefit either to the individual or collective psyche.

Chapter 5

Breaching the Symbolic Order

The question of whether comic form is subversive or supportive of the social order

raises complex questions concerning the ideological implications of literary forms;

one implication is that literary conventions reinscribe social conventions, whereas

another indicates that they may subvert them. Raymond Williams's description of

literature as "a form of practice in which ideology both exists and is or can be

internally distanced and questioned…" offers a possible course through this dualistic

argument. Following Althusser, Williams opens up an understanding of the literary as

"one of the areas where the grip of ideology is or can be loosened, because although it

cannot escape ideological construction…it is a continual questioning of it

internally".[341] It remains to be investigated precisely how comic texts work

simultaneously within and against ideology, and to identify which elements reinscribe

and which challenge social conventions. Perhaps only then can a useful contribution

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[341] Raymond Williams, 'Marxism, Structuralism and Literary Analysis', *New Left Review* 129, (September-October 1981), p.63

be offered to the subversion/ containment debate which has immured comic theory for so long.

As Althusser and Macherey claim, art contributes to our deliverance from ideology even though its essential function appears to legitimate the power of the social class which controls the means of economic production.[342] Dramatic comedy may emerge from disruptions of the social order, but to argue for it as a completely uninhibited and emancipatory form is made difficult as it appears to exploit social hierarchy at once plangently and lovingly. The action of comedy can, therefore, be described as a dialectic between the Other and the Self, between the forces of social disruption and the forces that re-establish the social order. This dialectical movement can be viewed as fore-grounding the construction of culture and the tension that is inherent in the diametrically formulated universe of the comic form. Comedy can thus be identified as addressing the tension between a subversive energy and a festive, playful element on the one hand, and the socio-political rituals through which society is ordered on the other. In this sense, comic discourse generates both pleasure and power. It invites a *breach* of rules, not so that the legislative boundaries can be forgotten but in order that correct behaviour may be reaffirmed. Nevertheless, it is not the immanence of societal balance that should concern us as much as the routes taken by comedy through the labyrinth of state ideology, as not only an exploration of the philosophy of the 'underdog' but as a productive constituent of idealist propaganda.

The Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung* may be profitably applied to this dialectical conundrum as it "represents the victory of the slave and the constitution of meaning".[343] This dialectic of confrontation reconstitutes the social order through

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[342] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, (London: NLB, 1977), pp.51-5 & 163-5. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1978), pp.24 & 130-2

[343] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p.275

interrogation and realignment, but this 'little' victory is hard won. Derrida describes the *Aufhebung* as "the form of the passage from one prohibition to another, the *circulation* of prohibitions, history as the truth of prohibition".[344] In that comedy appears to dispel prohibition without suppressing it, it too remains within the same restricted economy of the *Aufhebung*, destined like all transgression to conserve or confirm whatever it exceeds. This definition of the *Aufhebung* leads us back, as Derrida notes, to the German verb *Aufheben* meaning to surpass while maintaining, just as the *Aufhebung* means to negate and to conserve at the same time. Comic discourse demonstrates this economy as it too "wastes nothing and profits from everything".[345] Comedy suggests certain positions to be heeded by, and by way of, philosophical aesthetics: firstly, that particular things can resist subsumption and yet yield meaning; secondly, that human happiness is promised, albeit in a negative fashion, as an immanent possibility; thirdly, that claims about what is possible can arise outside philosophy proper and become essential for philosophy; and finally, that all such claims, although objective, may nevertheless be sheer illusion, depending on what is done in response to such claims.

To profit, or make sense of the incomprehensible, is how the comic ventriloquises philosophy although according to George Bataille this amounts to nothing more than "vulgar consciousness".[346] This is a sentiment shared by Pierre Bourdieu, who propounds a theory of comic humour whereby comedy enounces nothing because of its political neutrality.[347] In further exploring a form that appears to attest to neither this nor that, a third term emerges in comic discourse that alludes to

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[344] *ibid.*
[345] *ibid.*, p.335, *n. 13*
[346] *ibid.*
[347] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power,* (Oxford, 1991), p.100

a detachment, a dislocation that could only be called *liberation*, which could only

amount to a raising of the bar. Scrutiny of comic discourse proves that this

emancipation of the subject can only ever be achieved through *play*.

The playfulness of comedy, however, is responsible for the production of an

excess, a surplus described by Derrida as "the almost nothing into which meaning

sinks, absolutely".[348] Here we are reminded of the danger as well as the pleasure that

comedy invokes, as laughter exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only

on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what

Hegel calls abstract negativity.[349] Although laughter is not negativity, it is, as excess,

an *aporia*: a seemingly insoluble logical difficulty. And yet, illogical, abstract thought

often highlights the *lack* of logic in any single presupposition. According to Derrida,

once a system has been "shaken" by following its totalizing logic to its final

consequences, one finds an excess which cannot be construed within the rules of

logic, for the excess can only be conceived as *neither* this *nor* that, or both at the same

time – a departure from all rules of logic. That "certain burst of laughter [that]

exceeds" philosophical form "and destroys its sense"[350] the transformative power of a

certain pleasure, which is derived from questioning, can be detected in the pleasure

we may take from *play*, as playing goes some way to explaining the importance of

comedy.

Ludic Play

Comic discourse as dialectical process, explores the space between the real and the

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[348] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p.256
[349] *ibid*.
[350] *ibid*., p.253

imaginary and manifests itself as the gap between what understanding can grasp and what it can only declare as logically possible. This dialectical process exposes itself within the illusion of mimesis where alternative modes of rationality point to the possibility of a more fully rational society. Hegel refers to the necessity of mimesis as *spectacle,* [351] (generally of tragic representation) as the locale where humanity can imagine the possibility of its mortality. Theodore Adorno's reference to mimesis as a *necessary semblance,*[352] however, relates more fully to comedy's representation of subjectivity and society as a prerequisite for social evolution. This semblance of social consciousness may not radically revolutionise the social order but it does leave a residue of resistance to the inhumanism of the social system.

Adorno's formulation of dramatic art as societal *semblance* is especially disturbing as well as being especially illuminating because it is posited as an entirely necessary illusion, a socially unavoidable and instructive mirage, closely related to the remaining vestiges of ritual in theatrical rites. It is also a *semblance* of subjectivity, in both senses of that phrase: the production and reception of dramatic art requires the very subjectivity to whose pretensions and failures it attests. Moreover, in simultaneously engaging with and unmasking the constitution of subjectivity as *semblance*, dramatic art gives expression to those repressed voices whose liberated and pluralistic chorus would mark collective subjectivity, if only the logic of domination were surpassed. In this utopian sense too, dramatic art is doubly a semblance of subjectivity: a negative image of a different collective future, but one whose capacity to project what is possible stems from occluded layers of contemporary experience.

There can be no horizon for dramatic historical change unless people can

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[351] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford, 1977), p.443
[352]Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, (New York, 1973), p.404

imagine and enact something *other* than the prevailing modes of reality and reason.
And for such imagination and such enactment there must exist a play-space for the
staging of subjectivity's many *semblances*. In the volatile space of the comic form,
attempts to breach the symbolic order by interrupting the servile complicity of speech
and meaning can either become reactionary or subversive. This is accomplished by
attempting to annihilate the collusion between the symbolic order and the subject,
whereby the individual unconsciously reiterates an occluded complicity with the
systems of prohibition which constrain it. The subject of comedy is a system of
relations between strata: the theatre, the psyche, society, and the world. Within that
scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is nowhere to be
found, since as art - in its perpetual quest for human freedom - makes the domination
and impotence of the symbolic order apparent. Leading from Nietzsche's
problematical definition of tragedy,[353] the Dionysiac urge in drama tends towards the
dissolution of the *illusion* of self, thus the comic stage serves as a paradigm of the
socio-political space which structures the representation of the social body at its
political nexus.

By examining precisely how mimesis serves to de-centre the strong
constitutive subject it becomes apparent that there exists a narrow and essential
correlation between the art of politics and the art of theatre. David Hawkes describes
thus Machiavelli's consideration of the deliberate deception in the construction of
illusion: "an innovative ruler must disseminate a systematic illusion among his
subjects if he is to retain power".[354] It appears then that illusion, as a form of
deception, is ultimately necessary for political innovation and the reform of custom.

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[353] Frederic Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Francis Golffing, (New York, 1974), p.4
[354] David Hawkes, *Ideology,* Second Edition, (London and New York, 2003), p.30

Jean-François Lyotard has taught us to distrust the seamless metanarratives of development which legitimate oppressive regimes,[355] whether based in consent or terror. Likewise, Michel Foucault has reminded us that who possesses discourse possesses power, and 'authority', which is connected to 'desire', involves *"the rules and processes of appropriation* of discourse".[356] The egalitarianism of speech may be only an illusion, a game, but it is nonetheless a power-game where the rules of engagement demand subjection. Capable of redemption or destruction, comedy uses language in its quest for utopia as it stages contestations that attempt to transform dominant discourses, driven as it is by the *desire* to open up opportunities for resistance. This desire has a complex preoccupation with explicitly political investments made in those institutions designed to secure domination and subjection. It would be more modest, however, to trace the constraints and resistances of desire in their historical discontinuity, as desire, even when it is profoundly conventional, is at the same time the location of a resistance to convention. Desire demonstrates that individuals want more, and that more exists.

The ways in which Renaissance comedy depicts desire in its myriad libidinal excesses and constraints, unveils it as the point where ideology and fantasy conjoin. The comedy functions as a dream does with the audience - or "dreamers"- inventing their own grammar for the images and symbols presented to them. Comedy demonstrates how much we need mimesis to *dream* historical change and it is only for the sake of real historical transformations that comedy holds fast to the prospect of utopia, seeking its traces in a society desirous of transformations.

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[355] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* (Manchester, 1984), p.xxiii
[356] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, (London, 1972), p.68

The Non-place of the Comic *U-topia*

Much of what has been said so far in characterising the comic in formal laws and its capacity to represent and negotiate real social tensions, comes into focus with regard to what we may call the comic *u-topia* – what others have referred to as the *agon* or the argument which has harnessed philosophy to comedy since the anti-tragic dialogues of Plato. By allowing for social critique and utopian projection, comedy aspires to, or culminates in, a *u-topia.* Literally a "non-place" free of the constraints of the everyday world, detached from the old or dominant order and outside of time, a ludicrous context marked by the lack of conventional rationality and morality, where comic characters are protected from the threat of real violence and death. Such a *u-topia* takes many forms. Often described as that 'bliss beyond time' in which *everyone* supposedly lives happily ever after, the 'safe haven' offered by comic play's temporary escape from tyranny provides a different, detached perspective on things that is neither inside nor outside the realm of the theatre.

Correspondingly, Derridean deconstruction is characterised in terms of a search for the non-place, the non-*lieu*, the non-site or *u-topos* from which to interrogate philosophy[357] or any other dominant order. Deconstruction tends to what is neither inside nor outside, what does not 'take place' (*n'a pas lieu*), is not an 'event', or is an event (*événement*) whose advent (*avénement*) is to come (*à-venir*). On the one hand, this involves constant reference to what Derrida calls "undecidables" or "quasi-transcendentals". These lexemes are recognised as non-concepts such as *pharmakon*, *hymen*, *gram*, and are defined as unities of simulacrum that inhabit but are not included in a system, resisting and disorganising it instead.[358] These undecidables

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[357] Jacques Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other', pp.108-112
[358] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p.43

might be described as u-topias of language, holes in the fabric of the text, punctures that punctuate the text and give it texture. These "non-places" then are not resources and reserves of meaning, but mark a *mise en abyme*, an abysmal staging and setting of meaning, a simultaneous creation and ruination of meaning. On the other hand, what is 'accomplished' by Derridean deconstruction is not some new system but "undecidability" itself.[359] In other words, it seeks in its writing to inhabit and enact a *u-topia*, a "non-place" of alterity and otherness that marks the end of history, the closure of the history of meaning and being.

The way in which the *u-topia* shows itself and is inhabited is crucial to understanding the debates surrounding comic discourse as a form of deconstruction. Comedy as a contestatory discourse is evident in its narrative drive to overcome the paternal and patriarchal obstacles facing the renewal of the comic community. Of course, there is the problem of plays merely reduplicating the patriarchal structures they appear to interrogate, but there is also a strong case for comedy's ability to use the logic of the symbolic order to unravel it and thereby subvert and overturn its phallogocentrism. Therefore, what is of greatest importance is precisely how comic discourse inhabits the structures it seeks to demolish, exactly how comedy reveals the impotence of the patriarchal order, and to what extent it causes a breach to occur within that symbolic structure.

Dreaming Patriarchy, Dreaming *U-topia*

The dream of patriarchal authority is a nightmare for both men and women alike. Daughters subdued for eager husbands beneath the rule of masculine will destabilises the contract of 'mutuality' that has been argued for since the late sixteenth century, as

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[359] Jacques Derrida, *Disseminations*, pp.93, 127

the master/slave dichotomy is reinforced through the reiteration of oppression and exploitation. Throughout Renaissance comedy the demand for reciprocal love is played and replayed usually by young women quick to disguise their physical attributes and win the love of young men by rhetorical sophistry. The representation of these willing and wayward women is nevertheless often viewed as a reinforcement of patriarchal desires, of masculine fantasies as the dream of sexually experienced and available women is projected onto a procession of confused but delighted men.

In *The Comedy of Errors* (c.1589) Antipholus of Syracuse is called husband and ordered home by a beautiful woman he has never seen before, who just so happens to be his estranged twin-brother's wife: "To me she speaks; she moves me for her theme./ What, was I married to her in my dreams?" (II.ii.180-1). The gentleman's relish of illicit sexuality is also evident in *Twelfth Night* (1601) where Sebastian can hardly believe his luck when an emboldened Olivia seizes him and drags him off first to the altar and then to her 'estate': "What relish is in this? How runs the stream…If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep". (IV.ii.59-62) That comedies abound in dreams, that the very action of comedy seems to arise from the hinterland of waking consciousness, with its implausible denouements and illogical conclusions hints at the very etymology of its generic title.[360] Comedy as 'dream' points to the very place where fantasies are enacted and symbols created which designates comic drama as the default sphere of dreams. Comedy thus presents itself

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[360] In *The Oxford Greek/English Dictionary*, there are various meanings given for the word 'comedy'. *Komodia* is derived from *komos* "revelry" and *komi* "village", which points to the non-urban locale of much comedy where the law of the city is relaxed and characters of lower social standing can interact freely with whomsoever they meet in an atmosphere of licensed carnival. Comedy is also possibly related to *koimao* "to sleep" and *koma* "a deep sleep", thereby suggesting the oneric or dream like, wish-fulfilment quality of comedy, as well as the nocturnal setting of the Dionysiac ritual, the *pannuchis*.

as a locale for tumultuous and disorderly experiment and investigation where failed dreams of human emancipation may be re-enacted in an attempt to keep such dreams alive.

Comedy is in this case a unique and privileged type of cultural and psychic material, as the lasting theoretical suggestiveness of Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* attests to. If we view comedy as the imaginary phase prior to the holistic plenitude of the symbolic order (signified by restrictive closing scenes) we must also accept that accession to the symbolic is accompanied by an increase, rather than a lessening, of anxiety. This angst can only be alleviated by the 'comic' demonstration that acquisition of the symbolic is rather the pre-condition for a full mastery of the imaginary. This transition from the imaginary to the symbolic plays an analogous role in organising the syntagmatic movement of comic narratives from disorder to the term limit of the symbolic order itself, which bears a similarity to the now conventionalised structuralist paradigm of the passage from nature to culture. This, in turn, generates a submission to the Law, and indeed, the subordination of the subject to the symbolic order bears conservative overtones, with the possibility of a misappropriation of this clearly anti-utopian model seeming unavoidable. From this perspective, the story of the norm, of the symbolic order itself, is not that of a 'happy end', but rather of a perpetual alienation.

In Puck's sweet lullaby, "Jack shall have Jill;/ Nought shall go ill;/ The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well" (*MND*, III.ii.461-3) a connection is drawn between the alienation of women through commodity exchange and the commodification of comedy as the default sphere of patriarchal dreams. The unconscious aspect of comedy is thus to be read symbolically as a flood of new images, symbols of something unknown, repressed, or simply forgotten flow out

through comic discourse. To speak symbolically is therefore not to conceal meaning, but to express it and in having "his mare again" the male subject in comedy is subscribing to the subjection of women beneath the presumably 'natural' order of patriarchal dominion. Correspondingly, the dehumanisation of the female as an *object* of male desire also dehumanises the male who would 'ride' his sexual partner beyond the bawdy of innuendo and out into the realms of absolute tyranny and subservience.

This "faery" lullaby is pertinent to the *topos* of tyranny as the representation of women as properly gendered subjects, and subjected to phallogocentric imperatives that are invariably staged in dream-like incongruities. As the female authority that has held centre stage in many plays is dismissed as a mere May game, the temporary release from everyday constraints is shown as having been righted by women whose skills of oration have magically evaporated into whimsical parodies of feminine obedience. Renaissance comedies, by insisting upon the performative nature of gender relations, finally reveal the radical contingency of patriarchal authority. However, in the performance of subject identity as 'dream' comedy attempts to represent itself as the unconscious of the social, always manifesting itself as a disrupter, a subverter of rationality and utility.

The "fierce vexation of a dream" (*MND*, IV.i.66) where daughters are no longer obedient to their fathers, nor wives to their husbands is brought "by some illusion" (III.ii.98) to an audience seduced by the societal simulacrum of comedy. To reveal the elements of dream which enable the dreamer to perceive those hidden or repressed aspects of themselves which need to be recognised before neurosis and disorder can be rectified, comedy as the imaginary of the social attempts to eradicate the tyrannical personality. Fathers like Egeus, who bring the full penalty of the Law down upon their daughter's insolence, are mollified by love-lorn dukes keen to lay

down the weapons of war and the implements of execution in favour of "revelling". (I.i.19) This preoccupation with fathers who invoke a harsh and intolerant patriarchal Law is peculiar to Shakespearean comedy where the fantasy of absolute patriarchy is presented as a troubled dream in need of translation. Nearly all of Shakespeare's comic men are transformed under the tutelage of women who demand a reform of the existing social order. Nevertheless, the bridling of scolds and the harnessing of female sexual energy is played out at the limits of order, where emancipation and revolution co-exist, which forces comedy to conduct business on increasingly evasive terms.

Reining in Daughters

We may unwittingly collude with patriarchy's appropriation of the symbolic as the field of full human subjectivity but comedy breaches the boundary between the imaginary and this logocentric order to release its tension but also to reinscribe it, forever in a different location. This permits a celebration of our humanity, providing not only the pleasure of entertainment but also a sense of power, by demonstrating that relationships and subjectivities can exist beyond the miserable limits of patriarchy. If patriarchal culture is that within which the self originally constitutes itself, it is always already there in each subject as subject. If this is so, then, how can it be overthrown if it has been necessarily internalised in anyone who could contest its validity? If the law of patriarchal culture is the law of the symbolic, the dead Father, then the living male has no better chance of acceding to that sovereign position than does the living female. One cannot kill the father who is already dead - one cannot contest his Law.

The will of a dead father is also the story of a primordially alienated self where the threat of aphanitic subjectivity (in which the subject seeking itself as presence only discovers itself as absence) constitutes an essential aspect of comic affirmation. In Richard Hillman's *Self-Speaking in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama: Subjectivity, Discourse and the Stage*, the drama of the late sixteenth century is described as beginning "to portray the field of human relations as a symbolic order in which subjectivity is continually negotiated".[361] Likewise, Shakespeare recasts and demystifies the role of the patriarch by questioning the power of fathers (whether living or dead), a power that demands replication for the perpetuation of the patriarchal system.

In the plays of Shakespeare that depict a father/ daughter relationship, the issue of a woman's relationship to patriarchy inevitably gains a special kind of prominence. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), Theseus advises Hermia to consider the potentially fatal repercussions of her disobedience and hence her disavowal of her father's rights of 'authorship' over her:

> To you your father should be as a god;
> To whom you are but as a form in wax,
> By him imprinted, and within his power
> To leave the figure, or disfigure it.
> (I.i.46-50)

The early modern father's claim to authority, as the creator of his children in place of a transcendent deity points to an existentialist crisis whereby a daughter's departure through marriage marks the end of paternal authority and control. To be "imprinted" with whatever denomination of currency the father sees fit, the daughter is valued for

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[361] Richard Hillman, *Self-Speaking in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama: Subjectivity, Discourse and the Stage,* (Basingstoke, 1997), p.126

her transactional value as a conduit not only on the economic nexus but also the political.

A measure of control persisted in the father's choice of a groom, and as Lynda E. Boose suggests, the emotional logic behind a father's relation to his daughter's marital partner may be in response to an elaborate demand for compensation:

> Faced with the inexorable loss of something emotionally valued, individuals need to devise some way to reimagine loss as benefit or at least equal exchange. Losing one's daughter through an exchange that the father controls circumvents her ability to choose another man over him.[362]

Egeus has accused Lysander of 'bewitching' his daughter with "love-tokens" which extend to a spell-like litany of "bracelets of thy hair, rings, gawds, conceits,/ Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats…" (I.i.33-4) which have "stol'n the impression of her fantasy". (32) Egeus's accusations of witchcraft pale against his fury at the daughter who has "Turn'd her obedience, which is due to" him. (37) He declares "she is mine" (97) referring to his "right" to her, just as Lysander's love-rival Demetrius has talked of the "crazed title" of his "certain right". (92)

The comparison with Shylock is hard to ignore as both fathers demand justice for their wayward offspring. Shylock spits that he would rather that his daughter were dead at his feet (*MoV*, III.i.75-6) than wilfully disobedient. Egeus expects the Athenian law to put Hermia to death if she refuses to consent to his will: "As she is mine I may dispose of her;/ Which shall either to this gentleman/ Or to her death, according to our law". (I.i.41-3) Shylock's demand for justice is, however, also entwined with the theft of his wealth that Jessica has committed against him which

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[362] Lynda E. Boose, "'The Father's House and the Daughter in It': The Structures of Daughter-Father Relationships", in *Daughters and Fathers* (Forthcoming) eds. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers, cited in "Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare's Feminism" by Claire McEachern, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39: 3, (Autumn, 1988), p.273

undermines his ability to usure, stripping him of his earning capacity, his paternal

authority, and hence his masculinity. The "boys in Venice" (II.viii.23) target his

suffering with satirical precision "Crying, his stones, his daughter, and his ducats".

(24) It thus becomes clear from both Shylock and Egeus's reactions to their daughters

being "stol'n away" (*MND*, IV.ii.153) that we are observing the very real fears of

ageing patriarchs who see daughters as vendible commodities. The difference between

these two fathers, who are both engaged in matters of mercantile business, is that

where Egeus sees Hermia as an asset in the market of exchange Shylock covets

Jessica like a precious treasure, to be kept under lock and key. However, by the close

of both *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*, neither father, nor

his consent, is required for the nuptial bands. A higher order of a presumably more

benign nature has stripped them of their parental rights.

The rigidly stratified society which emblematises Hooker's 'Great Chain of

Being'[363] is temporarily suspended in comedy, which includes the supposed 'natural'

discourse on power and the human subjects it constitutes. Through a social order

taken as monolithic, and understood as absolute, breaches occur as the utopian

impulse draws the subject towards an inversion of the imaginary into the real. This

utopian project brings stage and audience together at the level of discourse where, as

Hippolyta maintains, dreams shared communally, "told over" by "minds transfigur'd

so together" grow to "something of great constancy". (*MND*, V, 1815-7) Gathered

into these comic texts is the burgeoning scepticism of Renaissance thinking,

interrogating conventional signifying practices as recognised in the manifestation of

the early-modern "crisis of representation".[364] In the comedies of this period,

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[363] *cit.*, Lawrence Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641,* (Oxford, 1965), p.21.
[364] Jonathan Sawday, 'Re-writing a Revolution: History, Symbol and Text in the Restoration', *Seventeenth Century*, 7.2, (1992), p.171

scepticism tends to liberate the protagonists from their initial subjection to a place where consciousness is raised.

The treatment of self-conscious theatricality in these comedies discloses the very workings of ideology through a form of carnival excess which seems to affirm nothing, but rather confirms the inequalities of the social order from an idealistically egalitarian platform. In this sense the emphatic use of couplets, proverbs, wordplay, and other illusion-breaking speech patterns display comic discourse as a provocateur of undecidability rather than as a judge of morality. Nevertheless, this level of discourse could only be termed as liberating since both men and women are emancipated from the stifling restraints of absolute and unquestioned patriarchy. Patriarchs are 'cajoled' into a position of lenience as phallogocentrism is manoevered into a relatively *benign* position.

To claim that comedy is predicated on the unfettered free-play of the signifier, however, places a critique of any comic text's own ideological investments beyond reach, particularly with comic curiosities like *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593) where a politics of meaning would be impossible to locate from this perspective, unless the emancipatory potential of a text could be identified as covert but still applicable. A theoretical concern with questions of gender and sexuality as constitutive of the whole sphere of social relations has revealed to what extent comedy attempts to disrupt the symbolic order (of which, in this case, patriarchy is the most powerful constitutive discourse) at the level of ideology. Using the Foucauldian rhetoric of discourse as power, linguistic meaning, if not mastery, is precisely what is at stake in comedy. Characters may express pleasure in the sheer multivalancy of language, but the mastery of the symbolic order is synonymous with the presumably stable constitution

of subjectivity. Whosoever has mastery over language has the power to construct the identities of those around them, the power to constitute their reality.

Taming Tongues

Katherina the shrew is characteristically represented as a threat to the symbolic order of language, with her unruly behaviour and her scolding tongue. This has received substantial critical commentary and no study of the 'dream of patriarchy', constructed as it is for Christopher Sly in *The Taming of the Shrew,* can ignore the linguistic excesses of a woman who is gauged as a threat, as the shrew herself exemplifies an excess of meaning. Karen Newman sees Katherina's "linguistic protest" as directed against "the role in patriarchal culture to which women are assigned, that of wife and object of exchange in the circulation of male desire".[365] Katherina is described as "so curst and shrewd/ That till the father rid his hands of her" (I.i.176-7) his highly marriageable younger daughter is off the market. Bizarrely, the whole monolithic edifice of patriarchy seems to balance precariously on the behaviour of one woman, which demonstrates comically how fragile the power structure of this signifying system is.

Being taken possession of, becoming possessed by an-*other* leads Katherina into a nightmare world of torture, coercion, and alienation. By the time she reaches her new husband Petruchio's house she "Knows not which way to stand, to look, to speak,/ And sits as one new risen from a dream". (IV.i.169-70) In a dazed and confused state Katherina is susceptible to both the mental and the physical violence

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[365] Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama,* (Chicago and London, 1991), pp.39-40

inflicted upon her by the husband who "kills her in her own humour". (IV.i.164) It is true that she has raised her hands to others on more than one occasion, even "binding" her sister Bianca while she interrogated her. She has lost control of her temper repeatedly, smashing a lute over Hortensio's head, while reports are confirmed of her verbal aggression as an "irksome brawling scold". (I.ii.184) But the "mad-brained rudesby" (III.ii.10) Petruchio is not only verbally intimidating; his characteristic violence and braggadocio appears to be permanently on display.

In the 'wooing' scene Petruchio's violent and scatological assault "Come sit on me" and "What, with my tongue in your tail?" (II.i.198 & 215) revels in the aggression of bawdy humour, stooping to the blatant facetiousness of inverting all the information he has received about Katherina: "And now I find report a very liar", (237) before unveiling his final threat: "For I am he born to tame you, Kate". (268) Those who see him as a player of roles (notably the cruel hawkmaster and servant beater of Act IV), as a Renaissance man who plays a part to teach those around him valuable lessons, should remember that his actions occur when no such role is called for. This is a man who terrifies his "ancient, trusty, pleasant servant Grumio", (I.ii.45) and horrifies even the misogynistic patriarchs of Padua with his taming process. His monstrous, all-consuming ego is inflicted on all who might conceivably compete with him for authority or mastery and, as his servant warns, this is a man prone to vicious outbursts. Katherina should be forewarned that if she attempts to defy her prospective husband "he will throw a figure in her face, and so disfigure/ her with it that she shall have no more eyes to see withal than a/ cat". (111-3) Theseus has described a father's will thus, but in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* we are reminded that to win a woman's love doing her "injuries" (I.i.16) will result only in emotional turmoil. Petruchio

however, sustains this manic mode and disorderly regime until he has achieved the kind of order he requires.

Of course, Petruchio's pursuit of wealth and status is not unrelated to his pursuit of power over words as demonstrated in his first scene on stage. The comic misprision of the "knock me here soundly" scene (I.ii.8) is extended throughout the play as "Katherine the curst" (126) comes face to face with her nemesis. Nevertheless, one must ask, just how effective Petruchios's methods of coercion are[366] as first Katherina loses her father and then her power over speech:

> Call you me daughter? Now I promise you
> You have show'd a tender fatherly regard
> To wish me wed to one half lunatic,
> A mad-cap ruffian and a swearing Jack,
> That thinks with oaths to face the matter out.
>
> (278-81)

Baptista may worry what the 'mockery' of such a match will do to his paternal authority but the gain he seeks is "quiet". (322) Whether this means his desire for the quiet life yields a greater return than placing his daughter's happiness before his own, or whether the economic gain he will make is an undisclosed amount, the stealth of his withdrawal from paternal association carries a certain poignancy. The quietness of this match is identifiable in the shameful complicity old Baptista shares with Petruchio. This rejection testifies to a father's radical possession of his daughter, a possession which seems inappropriate to both the utopian projection of comedy and the contingencies of exogamy alike.

The despair which the shrewish and waspish Kate experiences in this problematic comedy saturates this "kind of history", (Ind. 138) with a feeling that

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[366] My point is that Petruchio does not work alone. The father is complicit in this aggressive coercion. Without Baptista Petruchio would fail in his re-programming of Kate.

turns it towards the more "Lamentable comedy" (*MND*, I.ii.10) of the inept exchange of women as "goods" and "chattels". (*TS*, III.i.226) We are continually being asked to question the overdetermined ideological conventions of social roles, which we are either sold or buy into.

Katherina's nightmare begins when she is barred from the symbolic order (by the Law of the Father) and hence meaning. Her psychic defences are dismantled through humiliation and torture. Left with few options, she attempts to befriend one of her jailers, saying to Grumio:

> [I] am starv'd for meat, giddy for lack of sleep,
> With oaths kept waking, and with brawling fed;
> And that which spited me more than all these wants –
> He does it under name of perfect love.
>
> (IV.iii9-12)

Love-as-hate recalls Kristeva's depiction of the hatred of the consuming mother giving rise to a new erotic relationship. Likewise, "My only love sprung from my only hate!" (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.v.136) is described by Kristeva as containing that perverse "intense feeling of being within a hairsbreadth of punishment".[367] Petruchio obviously takes great pleasure in punishing Katherina's hatred of him, inverting this hate and renaming it as love. According to this theorem love is born from hate and if hate seems too strong a word, in Elizabethan lore the belief was that love would follow a marriage.[368] Petruchio uses love as a weapon and reveals the abusiveness of his breaching techniques in the violence he commits not only against Katherina, but also against language itself.

Kate recognises the emancipatory potential of language with her disquisition on the force of linguistic clarity:

> My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,

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[367] Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p.210
[368] David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, p.261

> Or else my heart, concealing it, will break;
> And rather than it shall, I will be free
> Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words.
>
> (IV.iii.77-80)

She realises that Petruchio "means to make a puppet of her". (105) He believes he has "politicly begun [his] reign" (77-80) as the absolute monarch of all he surveys, including time itself. (187) He will rename the "signs and tokens" of the natural world as he perceives the natural order of patriarchy has been subverted by this shrewish woman. To master Kate he must 'master' language by naming and renaming all that he sees including Katherine herself who is now a "household Kate" (II.i.276) a common-or-garden housewife as opposed to an unruly woman who rails against her position as a vendible commodity, a metonym of masculine desires.

Kate has wit and wiles enough to see that she must humour her lord and master if she is to survive. She accepts that there is no future in taking arms against the prevailing structure of power, especially as her husband's version of order verges on the insane. She takes Hortensio's advice that to agree with everything Petruchio says would be the best policy, even though she herself is being thoroughly humiliated. However, as an intelligent woman, and a victim of violent coercion Kate finds her salvation in identifying with her captor. Her behaviour exemplifies what we recognise as the 'Stockholm Syndrome'[369] used to describe how hostages befriend their kidnappers once they are completely convinced of their own powerlessness. In these life-or-death situations victims often comply with their aggressors believing that these are actually 'honourable' beings who have been forced into taking extreme measures by social forces. In the cruel psychological twist evinced by this siege mentality a lack

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[369] 'Stockholm Syndrome' describes the behaviour of kidnap victims who, over time, become sympathetic to their captors. The name derives from a 1973 hostage incident in Sweden. At the end of six days' captivity in a bank, several kidnap victims actually resisted rescue attempts and later refused to testify against their captors.

of meaning is torqued up to instil the maximum of meaning in nothing. A glance, or a gesture, can be translated as kindness, as love, even though an unspeakable brutality is being meted out.

The curious build-up to Kate's now notorious speech on patriarchal domination is ignited by an argument amongst women which signals how patriarchy destabilises the male/female distinction. Kate now occupies a raw and vulnerable subject position as opposed to Hortensio's wealthy widow, who is newly wedded but obviously still insatiably independent. The widow's assault on Petruchio's misogyny, that "being troubled with a shrew" (V.ii.28) does not mean that all women are in need of taming, triggers an interest in Kate that resembles surprise at anyone able to challenge her violently abusive husband. She marvels at the widow's quip that "He that is giddy thinks the world turns round" (20) but is herself roundly rebuked for having brought such ill favour to the women of Padua. The men at the banquet-table goad these women to a stand off in search of entertainment and gambling. Rather than a cock-fight a 'cat-fight' is expected, but as Kate now has "no more eyes to see withal than a cat" (I.ii.113) she has seemingly lost that ferociousness and is reduced to a 'hen' clucking for the attention of that 'cock-of-the-walk' - Petruchio.

Bianca seems always to have known how to play the game in this masculine order and thus to avoid aggressive confrontation. Petruchio attempts to embroil her in this hen-fight but she deflects his scurrilous jibes by anthropomorphising herself into a "bird" (46) concealed within a "bush", (47) vulnerable to the bows and arrows of masculine attention but accepting of her role. Bianca as "the white" (186) on the archery target that Lucentio has "hit" (186) seems less of a prize in comparison to her sister Katherina who is the red, the bull's eye that all patriarchs desire, the fiery woman tamed, subservient, subjected and entirely complicit with her aggressors.

But this has all been a dream, and a tinker's dream at that. A dream fit for a drunken reverie where perhaps Sly has fallen back to sleep, as we do not hear from him or the players of the Induction again. In laying bare the dialectic between the master and the slave comedy peers through the microscope at the limits and successive possibilities of humanity. The human animal can barely know itself if it has not grasped this deterministic movement. But just as we have "slumb'red here" (*MND*, V.i.435) awhile has reasoned slumbered too? As Derrida asserts "Reason keeps watch over a deep slumber in which it has an interest"[370] and this interest is invested in the notion that there is a certain method in madness. Therefore to identify comedy's ideological disruption is to pay close attention to a certain political unconscious as the location of radical discontinuities between ideology and social praxis. Certain contestations have taken place which have resulted in perhaps barely decipherable transformations of dominant discourses. In the illusion of the theatrical play-space the assurance has been surreptitiously proffered that human beings are in discursive control, even as their dependency on deceptive signification is paraded. Like Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* we have "often dreamt of unhappiness,/ and wak'd" ourselves "with laughing," (II.i.312-3) and in this laughter we find an awakening.

Towards a Therapeutic Dialectic

The comedic Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew* bears testimony to the rigidity of class and gender assignments which marked the shifting paradigms of Elizabethan culture and its preoccupation with the constructs of power. One could read the

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[370] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p.252

Induction as a satire of male chauvinism, especially given that it is presented as an

entertainment for the duped tinker Christopher Sly, who indulges his repertoire of

drunken, sexist remarks upon the threshold of the main play-text. In fact, the

remainder of the play appears as a fulfilment of Sly's most fundamental wishes: to be

surrounded by possessions and to truly 'possess' a woman. But women are repulsed

by this ragged tinker; both the hostess and Sly's 'illusory' wife are keen to physically

distance themselves from him, for obviously different reasons. Moreover, Sly is only

convinced of his lordly status when he is told he has a wife, which suggests ironically,

how in this androcentric culture men depend on women to authorise their sexual and

social identities.

The Induction, however, is a theoretical curiosity as it appears primarily to be

a framing device which does not completely frame the text. We are induced into the

dramatic illusion of a play within a play, but never return to the Lord's chambers, or

to the figure of the drunken tinker.[371] Through this broken, or intentionally incomplete

frame, *The Taming of the Shrew* subsumes a different identity from the one

traditionally ascribed to it. No longer can it be viewed as a social satire or a romantic

comedy wherein the heroine is taken to the incomprehensible realm of the absurd and

liberated through 'play' into the bonds of love; playfully ushered into the patriarchal

symbolic order by her own willing incorporation of mimesis; to ultimately find her

'rightful' place under phallocratic sovereignty. The consequence of the main text

subsuming the Induction leaves Kate's much contested speech on wifely obedience in

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[371] In *The Taming of A Shrew* (1594) Sly is returned to the stage "in his own apparel" , still sleeping off
the excesses he was previously suffering from. However, he is warned that his wife will "course" him
for "dreaming" outside the tavern all night, which elicits the response from the tinker: "I now
know how to tame a shrew, / I dreamt upon it all this night till now" , *The Malone Society Reprints*,
Vol.160, (Oxford, 1998).

the final scene, open to infinite interpretation particularly as the closing line's disavowal of reality "'T'is a *wonder*, by your leave, she will be tamed so" (V.ii.192-3 Italics mine) presents a key to the text as a not only a site of paradox and interrogative wonder but an instance of the therapeutic properties of the comedic dialectic.

In *Metaphysics* Aristotle claimed that "it is owing to their wonder that men both now and at first began to philosophise".[372] In this sense comedy promotes an appreciation of wonder which acts as a structural principle in the creation of the 'marvellous' movement of the dialectic. If we think of the dialectic as the paradoxical play of contradiction throughout comic drama then John Florio's definition of paradox as something "contrarie to the common received opinion" pushes us ever closer to an understanding of Lucentio's declaration that this play has been a *wonder* which demands a complete suspension of normal belief. Florio begins his definition of "a paradoxe" as "a maruellous, wonderfull and strange thinge to heare"[373] which expresses Lucentio's sentiment precisely. Working from this incredulous summation, back to Christopher Sly's preposterous hood-winking, Kate's speech becomes a source of paradox, of wonder, and fantasy. Therefore, from this closing line, which affords no real closure, *The Taming of the Shrew* can be reassessed as a mock encomium[374] or an argument *contra opinionem omnium* where contradictions cannot be easily assuaged as they evince the therapeutic dialectic of comedy.

To identify the dialectic between illusion and reality is to recognise that Shakespeare manipulated dramatic register in order that his plays could become sites of ideological and institutional contestation. In his tragedies, wherein life's tragic

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[372] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I (A), 2, 982b12-18
[373] John Florio, (1611), *Queen Anna's New World of Words,* (Menston, England, 1968), [not paginated]
[374] The mock encomium is the earliest surviving paradoxical literary form, dating from the defenses of Helen written by Gorgias and Isocrates in the fifth century BC. See Barbara C. Bowen, *The Age of Bluff: Paradox and Ambiguity in Rabelais and Montaigne* (Urbana and Chicago, 1972) esp. 3-37.

inevitability instils terror in us, comedy steps in only fleetingly, to remind the audience of the unifying and redemptive force of laughter. Therefore, in a comedy like *The Taming of the Shrew* we must analyse the tragic-comic symbols of oppression and marginalisation as symptomatic of a therapeutic dialectic which seeks to raise an individual awareness of certain false propositions or contradictions which have become embedded in the collective psyche as part of an unconscious set of beliefs.

The first contradiction in this play to produce a sense of wonder and curiosity is presented to the audience through two 'dreams' or fantasies, wherein subjectivity is disclosed as illusory and therefore easily threatened and subverted. The 'dream' of lordship that is constructed for Sly destabilises contemporary notions of social stratification, while Petruchio's misogynistic fantasy of rebellious woman tamed deconstructs gendered subjectivity and the conflict patriarchy initiates and sustains. The Lord's (im)practical joke may appear to simply make "the beggar…forget himself" (Ind.i.41) as in a "flatt'ring dream" (46), but Sly's own desires take precedence as we "let the world slip" (142) and enter the *u-topos* of the comedy. A description of this utopia, or non-place, exposes dramatic mimesis as the mirror of the unconscious where dream symbolism infiltrates the waking consciousness of the spectator.

There is a striking resemblance between the Lord as advocate of misrule and Maria in *Twelfth Night* when he hatches a "jest" that will "persuade" Sly "that he hath been lunatic" (63) for "some fifteen year or more" (113); trapped in "abject lowly dreams"(32) where his poverty has been a figment of his imagination. This consummate *pharmakeus* dons the kind of disguise that we analysed in the previous chapter of the thaumaturge, or auteur, who takes up the role of director for the ensuing

action. Nevertheless, it is Sly's hypnopompic befuddlement which begins to saturate the play as he grasps at a consciousness that he is being led to believe is false: "do I dream? Or have I dreamed till now?" (69), clutches at the Cogito as reality slides out of view. His tormentors then describe how he "waked as if [he] slept" (80) uttering the names of men "Which never were nor no man ever saw" (97). The implication here is useful for an understanding of the remainder of the play as 'dream' as the images provided by Sly's memory are reflected in the events which immediately preceded his falling asleep: the repetition of being beaten and chased from the alehouse and the argument with the hostess. This extra-sensory external influence can be felt nudging at the major themes throughout this comedy, as Petruchio's fantastical antics can be interpreted as distortions of Sly's own experience via condensations of his desire to 'rule' over women. As the previous section explained, *The Taming of the Shrew* can be read as a "kind of history", as an historical document of misogyny, or as a fantastical dream of patriarchal domination. It is through the analysis of the repertoire of dream symbolism in this play that we can read Kate's speech as a fantastical illusion.

While there is no doubt that Kate is subject to patriarchal authority, it is also true that she wields an irreducible force of her own. Contradictions in the characterisation and story of this "curst Shrew" are not difficult to grasp in the theatre where they can be reflected in the non-verbal actions of the actor. These contradictions are not inaccessible even in the play-texts so long as readers work to contain the *wonder* and power within the imagined characters of the comedy. In reassessing this play as a misogynistic 'dream' the dialectic between power as wonder and knowing as interrogation, is embodied not as it is constituted exclusively by either one position or the other, but by a dizzying oscillation between the two. *The Taming*

of the Shrew is therefore a highly visible site of contestation on account of this interrogative contradiction. The dialectic allows us to hear, in Kate's closing speech, the expression of a many sided resistance against Petruchio's attempt to dominate and coerce her which must be read in the same ironic tone which Sly's 'wife', Barthol'mew the page, is instructed to humour the "strange lunacy" (29) of a delusional drunkard. Kate's speech has been variously associated with an evocation of her own bodily pleasure[375] as if the claim to an overall sense of physical well being, being cared for, even being erotically delighted could be anything other than a disturbingly trite form of masochism.

Once *The Taming of the Shrew* is re-read as a patriarchal fantasy, dreamt by a drunken tinker, Kate's submissive speech can no longer be read as a serious moralisation as Kate's change in dramatic register to such a quick, high, and absurd tone contradicts both her previous verbal aggressiveness and her weary vocabulary of submission. Lucentio is as equally unconvinced by this comic exaggeration of tone as the audience should now be, as they too "wonder" at this unlikely spectacle. This reinforces the sense that Kate is not a 'real' wife, but a 'dream' wife who delivers a speech which is central to the play's comic theme, that a man's achievement of absolute dominion over his wife can happen only in fantasy. However, Shakespeare's dramatic sophistry weaves dream illusion with dramatic illusion by drawing the threads of historical actuality through a play-text which may, and then again, may not be a lesson in domestic deportment for men. This elaborate interweaving of historical and dramaturgical elements produces certain effects, ranging from indecision, to undecidability, to unreadability. This is part of the reason a feminist-historicist critique of the play relentlessly yields a reading of Kate as an unvendible commodity,

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[375] See Carol Rutter, *Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare's Women Today,* (Routledge, 1989), pp.21-5.

a creature to be taunted and repudiated as something unnatural and laughable in an early modern milieu which taunted and repudiated *all* forms of rebellion in women. However, Shakespeare develops the character of Petruchio the wife-baiter into a ludicrous example of an overbearing patriarch and although Kate is undeniably "froward" when she makes her first stage appearance, it is her husband who is eventually depicted as a mentally unhinged extremist.

Even before the most recent wave of feminism, many relatively conservative play-goers have expressed a distaste for the unbridled male chauvinism and contempt for women that Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* represents, frequently in the most direct and physical terms. It is also sometimes noted parenthetically, almost as an apology, that the play must have been written as a "crowd-pleaser" to satisfy the low taste of an Elizabethan audience.[376] However, the contention raised by reappropriating this comedy as the depiction of a dream illusion may be more in keeping with a truly early modern response to it. The proof can be found in a remarkable contemporaneous comedy, *The Taming of the Tamer* (1611)[377] written by John Fletcher as a response to Shakespeare's 'taming' play. This comedy is in every sense a sequel to *The Taming of the Shrew* and can also be regarded as a satire, a burlesque, and a *tour de force* that takes the earlier play into some remarkable philosophical and feminist territory. Fletcher's sequel seems to answer the question of Kate's presumed submission as the plot introduces the widowed Petruchio as a man who did not in fact, reach any point of rest in his quest to tame Kate, as she died while the marriage was still in a continuing state of struggle. There is no insinuation however, that his misogynistic aggression had anything to do with her demise, in fact, the comedy makes clear that he is now desperate to attain the victory which had

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[376] Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Robert B. Heilman (New York, 1966), *xxx ff*

eluded him for so long. His still faithful servant Tranio informs Petruchio's new wife

that "The bare remembrance of his first wife/ Will make him start in's sleep, cry out

for cudgels,/ And hide his breeches out of fear her ghost/ Should walk and wear'em

yet" (I.i.4) an observation which incites the young Maria to rebellion. An analysis of

Fletcher's Aristophanic comedy, where conjugal relations are withheld from the

groom on his wedding night, and he is barred from his own house, undermines many

of the traditional assumptions whereby *The Taming of the Shrew* is conceived as a

realistic farce controlled by the masterful Petruchio.

To unpack this notion of the play as an extended dream sequence we must

return to the Induction of the earlier play and question why there is so much emphasis

on dreaming and the construction of illusion. The Lord has instructed his servants to

speak "with a low submissive reverence" (Ind., i.53) while in the presence of

Christopher Sly, much as Kate must humour Petruchio "With soft low tongue and

lowly courtesy" (Ind.i.114). However, in the meta-fictional representation of the page

boy who is transformed into a "humble wife" (116) Kate's speech is mirrored as a

deferential play of substitution ironically supplementing the drunken patriarch's

dream of mastery.

The Lord advises his servants to ensure that the boy-actor will "rain a shower

of commanded tears" to maintain the dramatic illusion of Sly's mastery, but if he has

not that "woman's gift" to teach her eyes to cry, then "an onion will do well for such a

shift,/ Which in a napkin being close conveyed,/Shall in despite enforce a watery eye"

(24, 23, 26-8). The visual trickery of stage-craft is explained by this technique and the

dramatic illusion of mimesis is extolled by the Lord as he enthuses over the

performance he has initiated:

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[377] John Fletcher, *The Tamer Tamed, or The Woman's Prize*, eds. Celiia Daileader and Gary Taylor, (Manchester, 2004)

> I know the boy will well usurp the grace,
> Voice, gait, and action of a gentlewoman:
> I long to hear him call the drunkard husband,
> And how my men will stay themselves from
> laughter

(131-134)

The unexpected strain this image places on preconceived notions of collective reality induces an exhilarating sense of hilarity as a boy-actor convinces a "monstrous beast" (Ind.i.36) that he is a "mighty lord" (65) through "kind embracements" and "tempting kisses" (118). This representation of false consciousness could as easily be applied to Katherina as Barthol'mew, who may both be played by the same actor to enhance the conflation of dream and dramatic illusion.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) Freud makes a distinction between the "manifest content" of dreams (what is actually dreamt) and the "latent content" of dreams (the unfulfilled wish that the dream represents).[378] Although one must be wary of applying early twentieth century psychoanalysis to late sixteenth century thought, this division of dreams into two complete layers fits neatly into an analysis of *The Taming of the Shrew's* structural conundrum. Dream content is rarely presented by the mind in a simple and direct fashion. Instead a complex dream is constructed from the basic elements. The raw dream symbols are distorted via condensation (compression, conflation and omission of dream elements) and "displacement" (shifting emphasis). This is followed by a process of "secondary revision" that takes all these (by now distorted) elements and assembles them into some more or less coherent narrative structure.The Induction can be thus read as the precursory period before the 'manifestation' of the tinker's dream finds expression in the "entertainment" of the play. The possibility that the tinker has slipped back into a solid sleep is forewarned

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[378] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (New York, 1980), p.168

by not only the servant's inability to rouse him, as they bathe and clothe him, but also by Sly's own fear of falling into his dreams again (Ind.i.126). The unfulfilled wish component of the dream's latent content therefore finds its source in the Induction where Sly's confused memory provides a litany of symbols for analysis: in the desire for wealth and status, in the unchallenged mastery over women and the unquestioned respect from men.

Rather than appearing then as a "rollicking, knockabout" farce, Kate's taming illustrates the disturbing humour of what could be termed as 'verbal' slap-stick comedy. That is to say, that within the pleasure of laughter, our darkest and most brutal fantasies are expressed in an over-exaggeration of our prejudices. And yet, through this sense of play we are permitted to observe ourselves as we undergo an imaginative and emotional experience which in turn allows us to examine our own morality. In flaunting society's most cherished orthodoxies, and embracing what the culture finds loathsome or frightening, comedy transforms this seriousness into a 'joke', and then unsettles the category of the joke again by taking it seriously. Comedy therefore makes us probe deeply into the ways we are constructed both psychologically and culturally, and invites us to consider the power of humour, fantasy, and in particular, memory in our lives. Whereas tragedy represents the powerlessness of human experience, comedy represents the liberating consequences of accepting that powerlessness; even though this lesson may have been learnt through as many tears as guffaws. Freud goes further into this morass and suggests that very often our conscious mind actively tries to reject the messages of our dreams; we "repress" this knowledge. Dreams are often an expression of a repressed wish that we would rather not admit to - they thus indicate psychic conflict that can in turn be at the core of mental disturbance.

Repositioning *The Taming of the Shrew* as an early modern prototype of psychoanalytical dream work, consists in alerting the viewer to those false propositions or contradictions which have become embedded in the collective psyche as part of an unconscious set of beliefs. Through a series of 'contacts' which include free association and 'dream work', the spectator becomes a patient, led by the dramatist to recall the circumstances surrounding the occasions of their original acceptance of beliefs which represent false propositions. In this way, the dramatist, in their clinical role as societal analyst, enables the individual to recognize their initial misrecognition. Moreover, the audience is furnished with a new epistemology as the source of their false consciousness is destabilized. From the strictly psychological point of view, preventative psychiatry is the name for philosophical analysis as compared with psychoanalysis. The aim of philosophical analysis is to usher in a greater truth, or knowledge of the external world, by the negative method of elimination. This is the method, of what we have termed in this thesis, the therapeutic dialectic of comedy.

Laughter as 'Breaching'

The representational role of comedy repeatedly offers attempts to account for subjectivity in terms of spacing in what Freud calls a "topography of traces, a map of breaches".[379] We ought to examine closely the idea of *breaching* the symbolic order as the moment when comedy attempts to open up a play-space, breaking a path against resistances, rupturing and irrupting into the symbolic; here this 'comic' eruption traverses the imaginary and momentarily exposes the real. In being able to

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[379] *ibid.*, p.205

breach the symbolic order comedy therefore identifies the permeability of all symbolic systems.

As has been demonstrated in many early modern comedies the presumably monolithic edifice of patriarchy can be undermined from within. Safe from behind the cover of the illusion of mimesis the rigidly stratified hierarchy of Tudor and Stuart society may be portrayed as a chimera, as a network of symbolic co-ordinates permanently in flux and in need of maintenance. These revelations, however, raise difficult questions. The boundary between the logical and the illogical has been transgressed leaving behind the residue of an insoluble rupture, whereby pleasure itself can no longer act as the panacea theatre claims for it. "In a certain sense", writes Derrida, there is no breaching without a beginning of pain", citing Freud, and he continues, "Pain leaves behind it particularly rich breaches"[380] which we have identified in several early Shakespearean comedies, although, in another sense, breaching as a form of breaking through, of surpassing previously insurmountable obstacles can be expressed as a form of *jouissance*. In comedy this inevitable moment is found in the movement from 'tyranny to escape' as defined by Frye,[381] where the symbolic prohibition at the foundation of the social is theatrically staged and thus rendered dialectical. This climactic pleasure has a primarily transgressive aspect: it defies representation in the symbolic, and is conversely an aggressive, violent, and liberatory drive.

Through Kristeva's conception of laughter, which is synonymous with *jouissance*, the playfulness of comedy is also recognisable as the creative force which provokes the "quality of newness",[382] which textual experience brings to the human

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[380] Derrida, *op. cit.,* p. 202
[381] Frye, *op. cit.,* p.169
[382] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, Intro. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1984), p.225

subject. Nevertheless, the comic form has long been regarded as one which can

"disjoint the precision of our thoughts".[383] According to Kristeva this dislocation

functions at the level of the thetic, a phase which pertains to the boundary between the

heterogeneous domains of the Symbolic and the Imaginary:

> The thetic – that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social – is the very place textual experience aims toward. In this sense, textual experience represents one of the most daring explorations the subject can allow himself, one that delves into his constitutive process. But at the same time and as a result, textual experience reaches the very foundations of the social – that which is exploited by sociality but which elaborates and can go beyond it, either destroying or transforming it.[384]

Freud himself observed that laughter is always social. And the fact that we never

laugh alone, never without sharing something of the same repression, is amplified by

his recognition that laughter is "highly infectious"[385] and that the creative and

companionable labour of laughter conceals that essentially human propensity towards

exploitation. In the crude cackling of the hostile and sexually aggressive humour that

Freud delineates, laughter is exposed as an enunciation that springs from the body's

libidinal depths and imagines the social subject as caught up in a pleasurable play of

shifting solidarity with others.

Laughter occupies the uncanny margin of non-being, a *u-topian* and sublime

location where the socially constructed self is momentarily lost. The laughing,

transgressing subject is a subject who enters these margins and brings back some form

of knowledge from beyond the limit. In the comic *u-topia* a discourse emerges that:

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[383] *ibid.* p.223
[384] *ibid.*, p.67
[385] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* (London, 1905), p.242

> One might call the poetry of transgression [which] is also knowledge. He who transgresses not only breaks a rule, he goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows something the others don't know.[386]

In the discourse of comedy, words are played with by breaking, or bending linguistic rules. In other words, the linguistic knowledge of a comedy's audience requires a high standard of proficiency to be able to deal with the ambiguities and hidden traps of, in this case, the English language. Languages seem to contain hidden traps at all levels of linguistic analysis, so that a transposed sound or syllable or a misplaced preposition can potentially cause havoc to the general meaning of an utterance. Such havoc provokes laughter, but the havoc caused by the display of alternative 'truths' reveals disturbing gaps in knowledge, breaches in the symbolic order of language itself.

The price of taking this mystical movement from symbolic to real, results in a liberating loss of self, which according to George Bataille[387] is brought about by the thetic rupture caused by laughter. If laughter is understood in Bakhtin's sense as existing through the disparity between the word and its comic image or the distance between language and reality, then this can be transposed to Bataille's laughter which occurs through a transgression brought about by the limits representing one another. Echoing Bakhtin, Bataille claims that "nothing sublime can exist in man without its necessarily evoking laughter".[388] It is difficult to subscribe to Bataille's hysterical form of laughter, as it quakes before the sacred, with the subject 'breaking down' in the presence of the transcendent.

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[386] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', *Story of the Eye,* (London, 1982), p.116
[387] George B. Bataille, *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoeckl, (Minneapolis, 1985), p.177
[388] *ibid.,* p.68

In light of this, Milan Kundera is probably correct that "initially, laughter is the province of the devil".[389] There is little doubt that Bataille's 'dissoi-paralogoi' begins as a muffled devilish response, an amused scoffing at the order of things. But in a flash, one is overwhelmed, overtaken. Both Kundera and Bataille say that this laughter "convulses" us, momentarily dispensing with meaning and memory, demanding a purely bodily response; there may be thought before but not in the midst of a laughing fit.[390] In this laughter one experiences a moment of what Avital Ronell calls "hijacked existence", a moment of "motionless…destitution".[391] This laughter, Kundera says, follows *after* thought as a "convulsion of the face", and he assures us that "a convulsed person does not rule themselves, they are ruled by something that is neither will nor reason".[392]

Laughter and the Aesthetic

Laughter produces an atmosphere of social euphoria and economic freedom. The idea of the 'funny guy' which crowns an approved form of sociability, is a particularly precious form of capital. What Bourdieu calls the "collective worship of the good life"[393] resembles Bakhtin's carnivalesque world only in that it is offered as a site of verbal inventiveness and alacrity. Bourdieu agrees that the symbolic universe of comedy may appear as absolutely natural, as totally free, but declares that this appearance of unbridled subjectivity is:

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[389] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,,* trans. Michael Heim, (New York, 1986), p.61

[390] *ibid*., p.58; Milan Kundera, *Immortality* trans. Peter Kussi, (New York, 1991), p.323; Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Bruce Boone, (Venice, CA, 1988), p.97.

[391] Avital Ronell, *Finitude's Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium,* (Lincoln, 1994), p.5

[392] Kundera, *The Book of Laughter,* p.323

[393] Pierre Bourdieu, *op. cit.,* p.100.

in its way neither more nor less free than the improvisations of academic eloquence; it overlooks neither the search for effect, nor the attention of the public and its reactions, nor the rhetorical strategies aimed at currying favour or gaining its goodwill: it rests on tried and tested schemes of invention and expression which are also capable, however, of giving those who do not possess them the feeling that they are witnessing brilliant manifestations of analytical finesses or of psychological or political lucidity.[394]

He goes on to descry the collusion with symbolic power in which humour seemingly wholeheartedly participates. Referring to "the enormous redundancy tolerated by its rhetoric" and "the space it allows for the repetition of the forms and ritual phrases" which perpetuate "the fundamental values of the group" Bourdieu perceives comedy as ultimately expressing a "profoundly stable and rigid view of the world".[395] As he fulminates against the "system of self evident truths" which he believes comedy tirelessly reasserts, he propounds that an "essential identity, and therefore a place and rank" are assigned and reinforced in a relentlessly ideological way. His primary concern with this symbolic power or "symbolic violence"[396] is at the level of form, where this invisible power is interminably misrecognised as legitimate.

One must concede, however, that comedy has a powerful deconstructive facility, whereby the dramatic and theatrical potential of finding, misreading and deciphering epistles and jokes on ink and paper - with all their infinite possibilities of indeterminancy, interruption, interpretation, and effects on the ear of the beholder - *epitomises* all the pragmatic problems of miscommunication and misrecognition. There is an extraordinary metadiscursive density at the heart of Renaissance comedy wherein its formidable rhetorical complexity and formal self-awareness traces the

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[394] *ibid*.
[395] *ibid*.
[396] *ibid*. p.23

miscommunication and misrecognition at the heart of Bourdieu's "symbolic violence". As we have already noted, in representing a society experiencing the transformative effects of an important paradigm shift, the early modern comic stage re-enacted subjectivities in flux. Depicting identity formation as ultimately unstable and in need of constant maintenance reveals the weight of prohibition at the very foundation of the social, which comic discourse projects in order to activate a powerful dialectic.

The entire thrust of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807) consists in the process by which knowing comes to know itself. Initially, what the subject knows is an object (*an sich*), say of sense perception. In a second moment however, the subject becomes aware of itself as knowing the object (*für sich*), and then becomes aware of its own role in constituting the object for itself (in whatever small degree) from dependence on this object to assure itself of the truth of its knowledge. This is the basic moment of the dialectic.[397] The knowing subject passes an initial moment of "affirmation" of its object to an awareness of the inadequacy of this perception (hence, negation) to a new moment of reconciliation of the two previous moments in a higher (or deeper) view of the process, which then becomes the starting point of a new cycle of the dialectic. We call this movement of affirmation-negation-synthesis, on the part of the subject, "mediation" and as such it is also a process of self-assurance on the part of the subject.

What propels the dialectic for Hegel, is not some hidden thrust within knowledge itself, but fundamentally *desire*.[398] In this sense, in its diachronic articulation, comedy has a temporal duration, driven by the dialectic of *desire* which then disappears once self-assurance is achieved. According to Bourdieu's argument,

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[397] John Muller and William Richardson, *Lacan and Language,* (New York, 1982), p.362
[398] Alexandre Kojeve, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,* (New York, 1969), p.3

once symbolic differentiation and exchange are established, the *jouissance* that is lusted after is reduced to an auto-erotic moment. For many, the temporary displacing of boundaries of socially established signifying practices is just that, a harmless bonus offered by a social order which uses the safety valve of comedy "to expand, become flexible, and thrive".[399]

In her *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva refers to the "productive violence" of literature, or, more specifically, the *text*. She declares that the structuring and de-structuring movement of this signifying practice takes us on a journey to the outer boundaries of the subject and society. It is here that *jouissance* and revolution are entwined by gestures of "confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction".[400] Thus, comedy operates at the level of the dialectic, oscillating between two oppositional poles of thought, mediating the space between what is accepted traditionally and what can be imagined as immanence.

This opposition between a dualistic system and one where boundaries are lost coincides with Lacan's opposition between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, but also, in feminist terms, with Cixous' distinction between the Realm of the Gift and the Realm of the Proper: between the female/feminine "deconstructive space of pleasure and orgasmic interchange with the other"[401] and the masculine tendency to structure reality into a rigid hierarchical system of binary oppositions. This paradigm of the initial male/female distinction draws upon discourses that are important in the formation of identity politics as the two systems respectively stand for two opposed

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[399] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic* Language, p.16
[400] *ibid.*, p.26
[401] Toril Moi, *Sexual/ Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory,* (London, 1985), p.113

libidinal economies. The schematics of gender politics when highlighted by Lyotard's Nietzschean libidinal economy[402] implies that representation itself is a mechanism of repressive power and should be understood from the parameters of patriarchy.

Freud's idea of the child born free but who is forced into a state of repression within months of birth can be used to interrogate not only the subject's enslavement to the symbolic but the allegedly superior theory of humour from within the confines of the bifurcated structure of patriarchy. Derogatory humour which seeks a butt in identifying a scapegoat, conceals repressed feelings of fear and anxiety; thus reading Freud on humour suggests that there is both an economic and a phallic threat. In comic discourse, there is a curious verbal coinage of phallic power, as its linguistic inflation somehow pitches power beyond all language and value, at the apogee of rhetoric.

Comedy's Privie Parts

As Patricia Parker has pointed out, in examining the Renaissance stage we are not only better able to understand the shifting nature of subjectivity, but we also gain an insight into the "shifting nature of social exchange and verbal coinage".[403] There is an obvious and intrinsic correlation between the plays of the Renaissance and their contemporary culture which reveals "a period when English was not yet standardised into a fixed orthography, obscuring on the printed page the homophonic networks possible before such boundaries were solidified".[404] The flood of words from foreign

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[402] Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich, (Minnesota, 1985), p.6

[403] Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare From the Margins: Language, Culture, Context,* (Chicago and London, 1996), p.81

[404] *ibid*., p.1

languages into early modern English not only caused confusion, it caused a crisis of *representation*. Many in the Renaissance, notably John Florio,[405] thought of words as things, and thus as things, words themselves were susceptible to logical definition. The word itself remained empty of content, a sign-thing that pointed to or labelled other things outside it, but the word as sign could nonetheless be described uniquely so as to distinguish it for native speakers. It is unsurprising then that 'perspicuous' is a favourite word with the linguistic reformers of the Renaissance[406] as the translucency of language was preferable to the prismatic, that realm of signification where the signifier reflected a whole spectrum of meanings.

Saussure identified the impossibility of linguistic perspicuity during the early twentieth century through his identification that:

> language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign.[407]

According to Saussure, linguistic forms may lack physical correspondence with the world of things but there must be a fixing of meaning albeit temporarily for coherence to exist. Saussure's distinction between language as systemic, and language use as individual and creative is still subsumed beneath a self-regulated conformity. Lacan formulated this *point de capiton* through the notorious "phallic" symbol so dear to vulgar Freudian literary criticism and it is to the imperialism of the *phallus* as the primary signifier that we now turn.

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[405] Richard Foster Jones, *The Triumph of the English Language: A Survey of Opinions Concerning the Vernacular from the Introduction of Printing to the Restoration,* (Stanford, 1953), p.53

[406] James Patrick Callahan, '*Claritas Scripturae*: The Role of Perspicuity in Protestant Hermeneutics', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:3, (September, 1996), p.354ff

[407] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), trans. Wade Baskin, (London, 1974), p.75

Lacan saw the *phallus* as protruding into the backdrop void of meaning-potential represented by memories of a sheltered, prelinguistic space. He thus saw the *phallus* or its social correlate, the *name of the father* as the micro-sign of all meaning *per se*.[408] The *phallus* thus becomes the very instrument for "the Lacanian provocation"[409] that leads Derrida to critique the primacy, indeed the imperialism of the phallic signifier and of the symbolic order as they were formulated by Lacan. In reiterating Freud's belief that castration anxiety is responsible for the institution of the symbolic order, of the Law, of the Name of the Father, and thus of signification itself, Lacan reinstates what Jane Gallop calls an archaic phallo-eccentrism[410] which is hard to validate within deconstructive or feminist methodologies. Nevertheless, the absent or truncated *phallus* remains central to modern psychosexual fantasy as it provides mediation between libidinal analysis and the linguistic categories required for a common conceptual framework for the interrogation of the ideological construction of the subject.

In 'The Factor/Postman of Truth'[411] the reasons for Derrida's particularly vitriolic attack on Lacan's appraisal of the *phallus* is based upon his insistence that Lacanian psychoanalysis is phallogocentric and metaphysical. The indeterminate presentation of the *phallus* as the transcendental signifier is revealed as a disturbing androcentrism which predicates the whole theory of sexual difference on woman's lack. The feminine terrain of lack, of marginality, in relation to the *phallus* is supposedly open to men and women alike and corresponds to an aphanitic subject position which is above all an economic-dispossession anxiety. The mobility of this

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[408] Lacan, *Écrits,* p.287
[409] Jacques Derrida, 'For the Love of Lacan', *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascal Anne Brault, Michael Naas, (Stanford California, 1998), p.46
[410] Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction,* (Basingstoke, 1992), p.36
[411] Jacques Derrida, 'The Factor/ Postman of Truth', *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago, 1987), pp.411-96, p.481

subject position initially manifests itself as a disruption of all representation, which is a substantial aspect of the denouement of dramatic comedy. As the comedy unfolds, and the criss-crossing plots of deceit, exile and averted death multiply, the dangerous potency of the *phallus* is again deposed and revealed as completely arbitrary rather than as a transcendental signifier of difference. In the Lacanian system, the unconscious, from which *jouissance* emerges, is a feminine space: it is the space of the Other, and as such, it is the place of comedy. From within the *jouissance* of comic play the qualities of excessiveness and defiance give the *phallus* a renewed value within the symbolic system even if that value is somehow degraded. Unveiled, the phallic potency of comic discourse can be recognised as lawlessness under an otherwise repressive legalistic regime.

The undeniably emblematic association of the *phallus* with the penis as a concrete, empirical referent still remains closely guarded in Lacan's 'The Signification of the Phallus'.[412] In the Imaginary realm of comedy the monolithic emblem of the *phallus* is reiterated as the priapic symbol found in ancient comedy, amidst the nebulous haze of fertility and fecundity surrounding the renewing totem of phallic potency.[413] The *phallus* can therefore be identified as the protagonist in this Lacanian narrative of the birth of desire as it can be traced back through time to the earliest known rituals of agrarian increase and systems of exchange. It seems curious that comedy has long been termed a passive, feminine form when its primary signifier is priapic. However, the fescennine origins of comedy appear to represent the

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[412] Lacan, *Écrits,* p.1302-1310
[413] We have already discussed the ancient Greek revelry that was called *comus* and the dream-song that bound the carnivalesque elements together as the *comodia*, or comedy, just as the song of satyrs was named the *tragoedia*, or tragedy. This song, this celebration of life emerged from the country festivals that celebrated agrarian increase and human fecundity. Add to this the centrality of the *phallus* in these processional rites, as not only the emblem of Phales, the comrade of Bacchus, but as the totem of male sexual potency, the ithyphallic dimension of comedy should not be ignored.

indefinite plurality, the infinite variety of female genitalia as opposed to the phallic seriousness of meaning. The word, the logos which has a phallic fullness, a certain self-sufficiency points to the way in which comic discourse combines linguistic elements as it moulds the fluid and inconsistent forces of language. In this eroticized form of discursivity speech becomes 'imaginary' ceasing to fulfil its function as an articulation of the symbolic order, which is the proper locus of language, spilling back into the semiotic play-space of language.

According to Kristeva, this movement refers to art, as "the semiotization of the symbolic – thus represents the flow of jouissance into language".[414] In this sense the 'mastery' of comic discourse conceals the potential of phallic aggression by pretending to be mere neutral legality. Comedy performs a dialectical exchange between the semiotic world of fluid, unstructured and unstable possibilities, of freedom and play, of unfixed identity and polymorphous perversity and the symbolic world of social inhibitions, or restriction and prohibition. This movement from semiotic to symbolic, from freedom/aberration to social integration implies the movement from a pre-Oedipal to an Oedipal state. This movement is only *implied* however, as there exists an oversimplification in this sublation which misses the significant investment made in the world of comic non-conformity. Nonetheless, the quest for a mature psyche, exemplified with particular acuity in the romances, does compare fruitfully with the psychoanalytic appraisal of the signification of the *phallus*.

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[414] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 79.

Lacan's formulation of this prime signifier of phallic proportions has infuriated critics since its first appearance as it is kept firmly within the shifting sands of the double entendre. Both the penis and *not* the penis, the *phallus* is a signifier which in the process of *symbolization* becomes more real than the real. It may be no more than signifier and can play this role only when it renders 'latent' the real of which it is only a representative. The *phallus* cannot make the real penis present as it displaces the organ with a phantasmatic symbol of potency and power. As Jean-Joseph Goux explains, "The phallus is the general equivalent of objects, and the father is the general equivalent of subjects, in the same way that gold is the equivalent of products".[415] The phantasmatic *phallus* is thus the bridge thrown over dichotomy, over gender and genre distinctions, over reason and madness.

However, to say that the *feminine* form of comedy possesses an incontrovertibly phallic integrity is to deploy a vivid, almost surreal metaphor connoting both power and danger. Comedy, as a symbol of the law, is also symbolic of the phallus, but in destabilising the law of language, the law of the father, comedy is also symbolic of a 'semiotic' power. In other words, the feminine realm of language (the 'semiotic', or poetic language) overturns the domination of the masculine realm of language (the symbolic, the law of signification represented by the phallus). It is through the playfulness of the double entendre, or sexual innuendo, that comedy provides instances that explore speech as a site of political resistance against patriarchy and phallogocentric thinking. As this thesis has examined, the semiotic force of comedy is locked in a perpetual dialectic with the phallic potency of tragic signification as one form attempts to subjugate the other. In the following section this

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[415] Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtis Gage, (Ithaca, New York, 1990), p.24

process will be analysed in relation to the curious hybrid of the revenge comedy, of which John Marston's *The Malcontent* is a crucial example.

Civilisation and its *Malcontents*

Throughout this dialectical process, comic discourse breaches both, the rules of social decorum and those aesthetic conventions, or generic laws that Patricia Parker refers to as "the enclosure or formal integrity of the well made play"[416] through a pervasive network of wordplay and structural innovation which toys with the very notion both of generic stability and the stability of gender. The ability to transgress boundaries, to rupture the presumably stable confines of order has long been the province of comedy which can be verified through recourse to the ithyphallic which is related to the *herm* or boundary stone that marked the ancient places of exchange. As we have already discussed in comedy's attempt to 'dream' a more benign form of patriarchy, the meaning of market exchange is "gain at the expense of another" as it is out-with "gift exchange and confined to the predatory sphere".[417] All coherence depends upon linguistic exchange and it is through the material cheating or hidden traps that this transaction accommodates that comedy takes such pleasure in exposing.

Committing a fraud verbally, conspiring to confuse or perjure the truth, can be caricatured by the figure of the trickster who employs all strategies of unequal exchange, whatever their provenance. Whether propitiary or predatory, tricksterism visibly embodies the collective recognition of the cross-purposes in any linguistic exchange. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio's desire to "wive it wealthily"

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[416] Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins*, p.32
[417] Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750*, (Cambridge and New York, 1986), p.19

(I.ii.73) is driven by "gold's effect" (91) but his infatuation with exchange implicates him as something other than the patchwork clown of his wedding day, and as a predatory trickster throwing off his semantic cover.

Sharing with Proteus the image of duplicity, if not of multiplicity, the Greek god Hermes was known as both trickster and thief, although he was also known as the patron of trade. As Jean-Christophe Agnew has observed, his "skill at the oath" or rather "his ability to manipulate the literalism that others bring to transactions is unique to him" as this great "professional boundary crosser". [418] Hermes can also be viewed as the patron of all who attempt to undermine the illusion of order through unrestrained verbal and mental play. One such Hermetic devotee was the playwright John Marston who, as the enfant terrible of the Jacobean theatre was lambasted for his use of vile and vulgar language. In 1926, Algernon Swinburn referred to Marston as a "fierce and foul-mouthed satirist",[419] claiming that:

> at one moment he exaggerates the license of artificial rhetoric, the strain and swell of the most high-flown and hyperbolical poetic diction; at the next, he falls flat upon the naked level of insignificant or offensive realism.[420]

It is of course this sheer perversity that fascinates the reader of Marston particularly as his use of Italianate words and phrases appear to reinstate that most Lacanian of provocations. Indeed, the "offensive realism" that Swinburne pinpoints is actually at "the naked level" of a particularly insouciant significance.

In the sexual metaphorics of *The Malcontent* (1604), Marston's preoccupation with verbal and moral dissonance in the first part of the play, pivots on the curious interjection of the word 'Catzo', a word which veils the phallic potency of language

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[418] *ibid.*, p.20
[419] *The Age of Shakespeare: The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. Sir Edmund Gosse, C.B. and Thomas James Wise, vol. 11, (London, 1926), p.353
[420] *ibid.*, p.355

within the fertility of comic discourse. In John Florio's *Queen Anna's New World Of Words* (1611) [421] the Italian word for "penis", *cazzo* is defined as "a mans privie member"; and also *Cázzo ritto* is glossed as "a stiffe standing pricke". There is also the nearby reference to *Cazzica* "an Interjection of admiration, What! Gods me! God forbid, tush" which bears only scant resemblance to the "*Catso*/Catzo" reprinted in every edition of the play and generally glossed as "an obscene expression"[422] or "obscene exclamation of disgust".[423] To veil the Malcontent's verbal ejaculation as merely an "obscene exclamation" evades the subversive project of comedy to utilise language that both stages the many systems of the symbolic order and forces a breaching of those systems. Jean-Joseph Goux informs us that there is an unconscious regulatory law operating over the "symbology" of language whereby force (breaching) "creates value but has no value; it is excluded from the world of values".[424] It is therefore from within the self-regulated censorship of "symbology" that we begin to trace the value of comic discourse itself.

In the prism of the word 'Catzo' a myriad of meanings are reflected back wherein Hobbes's aphorism: "Words are wise men's counters but the money of fools"[425] is inverted through the syllogistic wit of the subversive Malcontent, Altofronto/ Malevole. Marston's creation knows that there is only one currency for which all these tokens of ours should be exchanged, and that is wisdom. Thus, with a mind to the theorem of the *logos*, Malevole complains of mankind's corruption of epistemics by citing the Devil as not only a master trickster but as "the best linguist of our age". (I.ii.26-7) The malcontent Jaques in *As You Like It* (1599) wants to become

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[421] John Florio (1611), *Queen Anna's New World Of Words,* (Menston, 1968), [not paginated]

[422] *The Malcontent,* (London, 1933), p.129

[423] *The Malcontent,* Regents Renaissance Drama Series, (1965), p.22

[424] Jean-Joseoh Goux, *op. cit.*, p.61

[425] c*it.* M.M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay,* (London, 1957), p.177

a jester so that he can speak freely to condemn evil and cleanse the world. Malevole too demands a rite of purgation declaring that he will seek his "just revenge" against the Duke who has usurped his position. His realisation that disguise "doth yet afford [him] that which kings do seldom hear, or great men use – Free speech" (I.i.154-6) covers more than his need for concealment as a banished duke; it conceals a malignancy that the comedy must work against to expurgate.

These irreverent vociferations mark him out as a 'malcontent' but also as the possessor of a subversive intellect, which has already set him apart from the rest of the court. His weary wish to be "one of the duke's hounds" (I.ii) alludes to his present exclusion from aristocratic society and his position as a jester among the dogs at the foot of his master's table. And yet, he stands as an athema to the courtiers' immorality and like a fool whispering truths into the duke Pietro's ear, he reveals how he shall employ "those old instruments of state, / Dissemblance and suspect" (I.iv.9-10) to reinstate himself and cleanse the court of corruption. In the same vein as Iago, Malevole plays the "Machieavell" to torment the minds of the men around him by targeting their male insecurities. Thus, says Malevole, he will steal from his enemy Pietro "a richer gem" than the crown –his peace of mind.

In the upside-down moral of this resolution, the real object of satire shifts to that most obsessive concern of early modern official morality, female chastity. However, the full force of the duke's fury at being made a cuckold is comically undercut by Malevole's bizarre exclamations which climb over superlatives towards the climactic "Catzo!":

> PIETRO: Death and damnation!
> MALEVOLE: Lightning and thunder!
> PIETRO: Vengeance and torture!
> MALEVOLE: Catzo!   (I.iii.97-100)

The subversive energy with which Malevole seems to discharge this word is all the more intriguing when we return to the etymological root of this braying expletive as the Italian *cazzo*, or penis. Pietro's distracted "O, revenge!" (101) suddenly appears as a desire for revenge against the very organ which threatens and assures his place within the symbolic order.

The simpering Duke of Genoa, Pietro Iacomo, has entered a living hell the moment that this malevolent jester utters the name of the object which has potentially come between him and the security of his wife's womb. It is as if Pietro has been violated himself by the phallus that Malevole brandishes amidst the "pistols and poinards" of his call to arms. It is in the strangeness of this utterance and the resonance it bears upon the dialogue that haunts and fascinates the listener, since whether it is whispered or bellowed, the reference is unnerving in its ability to provoke uneasiness.

In this context, 'Catzo' can be taken as a metaphor of an imbalanced kind. In its metonymic operation it becomes the *phallus*, no longer the anatomical penis, but the symbolic representation of the division between gendered subjects. As the "privileged signifier"[426] the *phallus* substitutes one sexual part and erects itself as the whole of sexuality and as Lacan has described his choice of this particular signifier, in one of his characteristic double entendres, it is "what stands out and is most easily seized upon".[427] Pietro seizes upon this signifier as what he both lacks and desires, for it offers stability and authenticity of meaning, as well as authority and power. The unnameable object of desire may remain beyond demand, beyond the signifier, but as

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[426] Lacan, *Écrits,* p.287
[427] *ibid.,* p.82

Catherine Belsey reminds us, "desire speaks, in the unconscious, in the Other. And its own signifier is the phallus".[428]

Thus, it is Marston's use of 'Catzo' as the unintentional stand-in for Lacan's infamous double entendre, that erects itself as the *objet a* desired by Pietro's wife, Aurelia, as the lost object in the unknowable real. This positions Aurelia abjectly as her whole dramatic *raison d'etre* is to exist as a sexually insatiable woman, a whore whose unchanneled libido will bring down the entire court and cause the collapse of her husband's political potency. With desire itself being split between the quest for satisfaction in the real, a refusal of the signifier, on the one hand, and the desire of (for) the other, the origin of meaning forever entails 'a lack of being' and until the characters of this play are relocated within the symbolic order they are dispossessed liminaries awaiting transition from the imaginary into the real.

The 'Catzo' speech has an undeniably transitional impact, pertaining as it does to a ritual act of denigration. It is particularly apocalyptic for Pietro as the usurper whose role in the marital bedchamber has been assumed by an adulterer and who now finds himself reduced to the status of the disguised and exiled duke who has brought him to this place. The danger inherent in this transitional stage is made manifest by the possibility of tragic consequences. Pietro claims that he will kill the possessor of the *illegitimate* phallus and perform "sharp surgery where naught but death amends" (II.iv.85) as he himself would rather die:

> Before her shame's displayed! Would I were forced to burn my father's tomb,
> unhele his bones, and dash them in the dirt, rather than this! This both the
> living and the dead offends.
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> (II.iv.81-4)

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[428] Catherine Belsey, *Desire,* p.61

In the aphanitic moment of Pietro's realisation[429] *le corps morcele* of 'Catzo' refers to a common obsessional fear of losing coherence and self-identity, which is represented in the imagination as a disintegration or chopping-up of the body. The disembodied 'Catzo' which threatens Pietro also stands for the sexual stand-in in a comedy unmasking the pretensions of a corrupt court.[430]

Likewise, Pietro is forced out of the dream of absolute authority and exteriority to the law, and into a nightmare of illegitimate desires. The word 'Catzo' in *The Malcontent* performs a metonymic operation of transgressive sexual desire, improper sexual conduct and unsolicited incarcerations and banishments, presumably legitimated by the phallogocentricism of patriarchal jurisdiction. This does not legalise the impropriety of the events within the text, but serves to exaggerate a set of presumptions upon which masculine prerogative rests. As such the metaphor of the 'Catzo/phallus' is best read on the figural as opposed to the anatomical level.

Both Pietro and Malevole may stand before the law in search of justice but conversely Malevole finds himself outside the law in his exile while Pietro attempts to reinstate the law, which has been benighted. The signifier of the 'phallus' arrives laden with meaning, repeating the moment of disruption of the imaginary by the *nom du pere*, instituting the desire, the drive or urge to return to the utopian state of the imaginary, of coherence, of oneness from which the subject has been exhiled. Malevole and Pietro are attempting to find their way back from the Induction of this "bitter play" to the imaginary realm of comedy where redemption and resurrection are assured. These two characters become doubled with one another, each dependent

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[429] Fear of castration. The literal loss of the penis – *aphanisis* – "the total and permanent abolition of the orgasmic capacity for jouissance". (Goux, *op.cit.,* p.119) The loss of the penis is symbolic of a provocation of fear which is applicable regardless of gender.

[430] Marston's use of the 'sexual stand-in' is evoked in plays such as *Antonio and Mellida* (1599) where two boy pages are named 'Dildo' and 'Catso'.

upon the other for their identity, each redefining meaning for the other and in the closing acts of the play this relationship can be seen as truly symbiotic. The implausible compulsion of this comedy unites husbands and wives who only moments before had seemed parted for ever; holy nuptial bands are restored and an expulsion imposed upon the tragic-scapegoat figure of Mendoza, who may well be cast off the cliff he intended for Pietro. But, as we are drawn towards a judgement upon these players, we are drawn before the Law, the law of the symbolic order, where the slipperiness of the signifier reminds us that the propriety of language may slide off into bawdy at any moment.

Also at risk is the "integrity of the well made play" that is alluded to at the beginning of this section, especially since Marston's play hovers on the brink of upsetting the aesthetic law of genre. *The Malcontent* is not only complex in structure and in language; the complexity of its generic constitution achieves a balance between comedy and tragedy, laughter and horror, and, mercy and revenge. A revealing departure from the highly fashionable revenge tragedy, this play slips into the hybrid realm of tragic-comedy, where there is always the possibility that comedy will become tragedy. However, just as Malvolio and Feste demonstrate that comedy does indeed bring in its revenges, *The Malcontent* treats comic revenge as an opportunity for social and political renewal.

Conclusion

Although sufficiently close to obscenity to risk occasional prosecution the comedies of Tudor and Stuart England only make sense in relation to a fairly strict moral code. This insight into the machinations of dramatic comedy reveals a paradox in the claim

that bawdy reinforces morality by subverting it, and like all paradoxes this requires scrutiny both psychologically and politically. Repetitive jokes about sex, illegitimacy, and mastery all testify to the framework of a social order in which marriage and family solidarity are taken absolutely for granted, and yet simultaneously there is a subversion at work where social critique and utopian projection are permitted. Comedy does not merely seek out topicality for plot, it plunges its characters and its audience into a controversy of one kind or another which relates to a structural principle of Elizabethan, or Jacobean personal, familial, and social life. The many sermons and homilies that dealt with the sovereignty of the family and the civic duties of the individual were a direct reinforcement of patriarchy in the household and the absolutist state. If we understand comedy as retrieving metaphors for art from political affairs we detect an articulation of a crisis in patriarchy itself specifically where the containment of erotic energies is concerned. In this sense, comedy as the "final resort of civilisation"[431] finds a contemporary resonance in the much overused definition of post-modern humour as "a weapon of mass instruction".

There needs to be a normative standard for deviance to exist. There is no boundary between linguistic competence and ideological competence and hence no boundary between the 'purely linguistic' elements in the semic construction of words and ideological elements in their construction. But, a word or usage is deviant not in relation to some fixed lexical usage, but rather in relation to the terms in which the common sense of a particular culture defines it. To define signifiers in terms of attributes of objects or other referential items elides any differences that may exist between verbal signifiers and theatrical signifiers. Altofronto may thrust his hips forward as he bellows his Italianate insult, but equally impressive would be an

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[431] Jerry Palmer *The Logic of the Absurd: On Film and Television Comedy* (London, 1987), p. 13

indignant stage whisper. The deviance lies with the normal use of the word itself as an expletive - a curse imbued with threatening menace.

This utterance becomes intensely ironical in that there are clearly two semantic levels involved: the meaning of the words the Duke is capable of understanding on the basis of his limited awareness of the whole situation, and the meaning that the Malcontent and the audience are able to attach to what is being said. This 'obscene' word is central to the logic of the absurd in that the listener is involved in the construction of a surprise (the *peripeteia*); implicit in this is the primacy of two enunciative roles, the speaker who delivers the surprise and all those who *receive* it. But equally central to the logic of the absurd is that the surprise is more implausible than plausible, which clearly constructs the 'butt' of a joke, the third enuciative role, as asserted by Freud.

Recent re-interpretations of Freud's theory have questioned the centrality of the listener.[432] For instance, the listener can be conceived of as no more than an instance of the Law, the instance where repressions take their form and have their effectivity. This is clear if one considers Freud's discussion of dirty jokes, which have their origin in sexual desire. The expression of this desire is made possible by the specific pleasure of jokes which subvert the inhibitions against the aggression of desire. It is also an act of aggression against the object of desire, which gives pleasure to the listener by subverting their inhibitions too.

The 'butt' is the object of aggression, which is directly hostile in the sense that the unconscious drive that is allowed free rein by the joke is aggression itself with no other drive hidden in it, such as sexual desire. 'Catzo' can thus be viewed as an act of aggressive subversion, as a 'tendentious' joke, because the pleasure it gives serves a

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[432] E.H. Gombrich, 'Freud's Aesthetics', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 12 (1962), p.301-17

purpose of releasing some drive otherwise subject to repression. Therefore, one could also describe 'Catzo' as the childish demand for play that the pleasure principle requires, as the play of the signifier, where the sign also brings with it an impact.

'Catzo' arrives with the suddenness and force of the "thunder and lightning" (I.iii.101) thrown by the gods at tragic mortals: it gives the listener much more than they bargained for and the result is almost physical. Just as the "essence of a slapstick gag is a physical assault on, or collapse of the hero's dignity",[433] 'Catzo' throws a custard pie in the blissfully ignorant Pietro's face. So, as Malevole says, he has stolen "a richer gem" than the crown from the Duke: he has degraded him through ridicule and stolen his masculinity.

'Catzo', as the transliteration of the priapic symbol of comedy, represents the disruption of the social order through a force which causes a breach to occur which cannot be easily mended. The phallic aggression of this rupture is concealed by the claim of neutrality. Humour is at all times subversive and conservative, offensive and inoffensive, serious and ridiculous. Attempting to combine laughter and aesthetics flies in the face of Kantian metaphysics as the two appear to be so indissociable but the laughter, or *jouissance*, that comedy elicits from its audience is delivered at a controlled moment: a moment the comedian calls the 'punch line', the moment that the analyst identifies as barely concealed aggression and desire.

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[433] Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies*, (Minneapolis, London, 2000), p.3

Conclusion

The Bawdy Politik

The phantasm of fixed identity, as a narcissistic instability that interminably questions, 'is this me or the other?' finds a safe haven within the imaginary confines of comedy. Cutting across the static opposition between the individual and the collective whose effects we have observed by interposing between them the mediation of a generic structure capable of functioning both on the level of individual gratification and on that of social structuration, comedy's rigorous attempts to breach the symbolic order must be read in terms of its semiotic representation of the conflict between 'inside' and 'outside': metaphysically sanctioned order and those material historical forces which challenge its hierarchical structures. To this extent, Tudor and Stuart dramatic comedy is not just a form of entertainment but a form of *representation*: a representation of all those symbolic structures through which order articulates itself. In addition to producing its other, interestingly as a demonic challenge which requires containment and decontamination prior to reintegration, the

process also offers opportunities for resistance. These opportunities involve a subsequent transformation of symbolic structures as the ideologies which hold them in place crumble beneath the weight of comedy's ambivalent confrontation with the other of its imaginary.

The ambiguity of comedy lies in its uncovering of the very contradictions that it sets out aesthetically to domesticate. In this sense, comic discourse is all the less confined to the ideologically saturated prison-house of language, as it *starts* by tackling logocentrism. In its assault on the primacy of the sign, comedy conceives a utopian vision derived from the idea of a language in which word and thing unite without loss. In this utopia of knowledge, language as the symbolic order, the word as Law, which forms the human subject in its own image, can be approximated through the effort to unmask false names, an effort at once conceptual and resistant to conceptual limitations. Comedy as this order of language is, indeed, an unconscious form, which presents signification in jokes, wordplay, parapraxes and the condensation of repressed desires. But the liberation which this imaginary affords is contained within an undoubtedly restricted economy.

Foucault articulated the constitution of the subject through language in his conjecture that discourse is power,[434] and in Bakhtin's dialogic imagination opportunities for resistance are identified from within the carnivalesque. As the dialogic is closely linked to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque – to popular forms that disrupt and relativize meaning in opposition to 'official' discourse – the mutual interdependence of thought, language and social process is identified in its attempt to

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[434] The two principle texts in which Foucault evaluates and substantiates his model of power relations are *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977,* (Brighton, 1980) and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, *op. cit.* Also Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics,*(Chicago, 1982), pp.208-226.

close down the polysemy of language.[435] Foucault's argument that the modalities of

discourses and discursive practices actually produce both the knowledge and the

social itself,[436] with modalities functioning differently in different historical

'epistemes,' positions power in a discursively productive as well as repressive field[437]

where its needs must set boundaries.

Foucault's writings have consistently shown how so-called objective historical

accounts are always products of a will to power enacted through formations of

knowledge. Within specific institutions and in comedy as aesthetic experience,

sustenance is obtained from the immanence of the artwork, where a transfigured

world is promised. This may seem speculative and reductive but without the mimetic

possibilities of dramatic comedy morality would surely lapse into either cynicism or

despair. Comedy is driven by the unthinkability of despair, and aims at an experience

of the possible that exceeds what is currently considered to be possible. In comedy's

privileging of dreams, those repositories of humanity's repressed desires, a path is

broken towards utopia, a breach is forced against its systematic imprisonment in a

depoliticised cultural praxis.

Breaching the symbolic order is tantamount to breaching all monolithic

systems of exclusion and as Foucault has outlined, the procedures for controlling and

delimiting discourse operate from the 'exterior',[438] functioning as systems of

exclusion. In comedy this is evident in the discourse which puts power and desire at

stake. Romantic comedy, for example, explores what is at stake in its movement from

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[435] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R.W Rotsel, (Ardis, 1973), p.102-3
[436] *Power/Knowledge, op. cit.,* p.121
[437] *ibid.,* p.139
[438] Foucault, 'The Dicourse On Language', *The Archaelogy of Knowledge,* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (London, 1972), pp.218-9

a harsh and violent patriarchal order to a more benevolent patriarchy that is capable of including and valuing women out-with commodity exchange.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), the plot turns on the 'niceties of matrimonial law' but, as in all the romances, there exists a problematical emotional climate that nurtures the bond between father and daughter. The paternal law is predicated on loss, and the loss of identity when the daughter chooses another man over her father. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Leonato's "Fatherly and kindly power" (IV.i.73) exceeds the expectations of exogamy. As his daughter is no mere commodity to be exchanged in a male marketplace, but an aspect of his identity, Leonato exposes the emotional costs of patriarchy. From this middle ground between Egeus and Shylock comedy reveals that patriarchy is hardly a monolithic, coherent entity speaking with one – either liberating or oppressive – voice, but composed of, indeed founded in, ideological contradictions, inconsistencies, and incongruities. Fathers like Leonato express the depth and character of their love for their daughters – a potentially destructive love – in a vocabulary that is inconsistent with the images of fathers that their culture propagates. Comedy then, re-idealises the patriarchal system, though in terms so highly artificial that they make us conscious of their presence and the emotional logic that they dissemble.

Phallogocentrism as an ideological apparatus is the enemy of *everyone*: men stand to lose by it, differently, but as seriously as women, therefore comedy does allow us to imagine a real liberation of sexuality in a transformation of our collective relationship to the body and the individual relationship of one body to another. Working through the ludic principle of play as *necessary semblance*, an approximation of the immense material organic sensual universe that is humankind also equates with radical political transformations in the dramatic arena. The effects of

these projections and transformations on the libidinal economy of the Renaissance to the present day have been bought and sold through a linguistic currency, yet it is only because this currency was propagated within a comic economy that we have been able to buy dreams of possible emancipation. In the absence of the critical and utopian "truth content" (Wahrheitsgehalt)[439] of comedy a fundamental transformation of society would be even more difficult to imagine.

Comedy can therefore be identified as an expression of the way society understands itself. It is an aesthetic representation of a human-centred world. It voices the philosophical principle that from now on the subject will be the reference point of all reality. Upon the early modern public stage, long before Descartes' *Cogito*, a metaphysics of subjectivity found one of its most remarkable expressions, and in dramatic comedies that determine precisely how social identities and relationships connect the material and the cultural, the economic and the social, the construction of subjectivity is shown inflecting the forms and values of its circulation. These dramatic comedies complicate the oppositions between community and individual, trust and self-interest in an urban environment that was rapidly embracing capitalist ideologies.

Comedy undoubtedly signals the experience that a certain culture has grown old, that something new is coming. This transition however, is only possible if consciousness undergoes the new experiences facilitated by the sceptical disposition that comedy strives for. Paradoxically, the thrilling sense of 'newness' scepticism induces is also the term limit through which the self-sufficient and frivolous cheerfulness of the comedy gets lost. In these new experiences the implications of the principle of the autonomous subjectivity which is decisive for the comedy, come to

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[439] Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism,* trans. D. Midgley, (Cambridge, 1991), pp.1-35

light. These new experiences are indicated by a term already familiar to readers of Hegel's *Phenomenolgy*, as "the unhappy consciousness." Hegel writes:

> We see that this Unhappy Consciousness constitutes the counterpart and the completion of the comic consciousness that is perfectly happy within itself.[440]

The text is clear: the unhappy consciousness is not only that into which comic consciousness turns. It is at the same time a change in which this consciousness accomplishes itself.

The comic experience leads consciousness into a 'hall of mirrors' where the self quickly loses its uncomplicated enjoyment of itself and becomes unhappy. Paradoxically, the consciousness has to become unhappy in order to obtain the 'happiness' promised by the comedy. This 'unhappy', uneasy consciousness results from the experience of *scepticism*, a scepticism generated by the provisional, and hence, presumably worthless conclusions of comedy. Thus, the optimism generated by utopian immanence is destroyed by the very scepticism that the comedy has striven for. According to Hegel's formulation 'happiness' seems to indicate a limit-position. The comedy may evoke the unhappy consciousness of scepticism but it is the truth of the whole odyssey of consciousness that differentiates its final components. Is the truth then not always postponement, anticipation, longing?

Beginning with the presumption of freedom, not with the truth of it, comedy starts as abstract self-consciousness. The remarkable thing about the whole movement of realisation which follows is that it will become more and more apparent that it cannot realise by itself this true subjectivity, this actual self-being. Liberation from the unhappiness of the consciousness originates from a fundamental misunderstanding of the singularity of the self without the unity of the universal, of identity and alterity.

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[440] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford, 1977), p.454

The unhappiness of the consciousness can then only be dissolved if this universality is admitted. The comic is thus the kind of dramatic art that most urgently calls for self-resolution, and so it comes much closer to the kind of dialectical movement Hegel sees in thought. The comic character exemplifies a dissolution of finitude and one-sidedness and it does so with a light-hearted readiness for self-dissolution: viewing events with optimistic lightheartedness.

In keeping the dialectic between excess and its restraint open, comedy can be identified as the *pharmakon* wherein sources of energy and danger are contained. Drawing antitheses together, comedy shows how juridical law is constructed and deployed, but in disclosing the complicity with legal sanctions that state institutions rely upon comedy demystifies their operations and destabilises both constitutional law and aesthetic law. This deconstructive process not only recapitulates the democratising potential of comic scepticism, it uncovers the realisation that comedy is itself an unstable entity; difficult to define as it purposefully defies categorisation.

On the one hand there is the desire of aesthetics to be significant, to be relevant, to be useful or to impart some secret transcendent knowledge, even if that knowledge is only knowing that one does not know, that no-one knows. On the other hand, there is a desire for freedom, the desire not to be bound to the past, or even the desire for significance. One may long to retreat from the politics in the streets to the magical forest of the Academy, from the world to the labyrinth of the imagination. But the double bind of comedy is also the double bind of aesthetics, and one must be aware that one politics is always being played off against another. Then we may understand that the discourse of the aesthetic is to be approached like an ideological switchboard, where the comic is a parasitic but still structural noise on the line, which hotwires the aesthetic across into questions of power via political, theological and

ethical concerns. And if we listen carefully we can begin to weigh the paradoxical arguments which have been waged against comedy; from those who would cast the Comic out beyond the precinct of the Academy, as the very essence of the inessential, as that category of the 'free particular' or the non-categorical, or those who debate whether we can keep the liberating corporeal force of laughter safe from the danger of incorporation. Then perhaps, we will recognise that only comedy and laughter themselves can wrench us dialectically out of this tautology.

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