

A DEFINITION OF COMEDY

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ARISTOTLE'S book *About the Poetic Art* (usually called the *Poetics*) contained a discussion of comedy as well as that on tragedy. Unfortunately, the second part, that devoted to comedy, has been lost. There remain only a few references to it. Since the definition of tragedy was central to the first part, we may assume that a definition of comedy likewise would be central to the second part. Our purpose in this article, in faithfulness to Aristotle's model, will be to investigate the definition of comedy.

Before beginning our investigation, let us set three limits to it. First, the word *comedy* is to be taken in its strict sense of *a likeness of the laughable in words*. Sometimes the word *comedy* is used in a broad or loose sense for any likeness whose plot goes from misery to happiness or that ends happily. Thus, in the famous First Folio Edition of Shakespeare's plays published in 1623, the plays are divided into Comedies, Histories and Tragedies, but here comedy is taken in the broad or loose sense. Plays such as *The Winter's Tale* or *Measure for Measure*, which are included under the Comedies, are by no means imitations of the laughable, even though they end happily. In this paper, we shall limit ourselves to comedy in the strict sense — *a likeness of the laughable in words*. Such a treatment seems to have been Aristotle's aim in the lost second part of the *Poetics* as is clear from his remarks on comedy at the beginning of chapter five of that work.

A second limit of our aim will be to restrict our treatment to comic drama. The reason for this is not because the word *comedy* seems to call to mind the comic drama rather than the comic novel (or some other likeness of the laughable in words), but because there are good reasons for considering comic drama and comic

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novel in an order proportional to that in which Aristotle considers tragedy (tragic drama) and epic in the first part of his book. He first defines tragedy and considers its parts. Then, he considers epic insofar as it differs from or adds to tragedy, assuming without much discussion the many things in which epic is essentially the same as tragedy. It makes sense to define the more simple and more perfect form first (unless it were less known) for a number of reasons. Our reason can see and define the essential in the more simple and more perfect form better than in the more mixed and less unified form. (There are similar reasons for considering the *polis* in political philosophy before the nation or empire.) Likewise, the more simple, more perfect, more unified form serves to some extent as a measure of the other. We should also consider that the spoken word of the comic drama is naturally before the written word of the novel (or short story, for that matter). I shall not, however, hesitate to use good examples from the comic novel in talking about the laughable.

A third and final limit in the scope of this paper is to restrict our consideration to two parts of the definition of comedy or comic drama. This restriction assumes that Aristotle has correctly defined tragedy and that comedy would be defined similarly, having in common all but two parts of the definition of tragedy. The explanation and defense of those parts of the definition of comedy which are common to it and the definition of tragedy should be sought in what remains of the *Poetics*.

Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation or likeness of an action that is serious ($\sigma\pi\omicron\upsilon\delta\alpha\tilde{\iota}\omicron\nu$), complete and of some magnitude, in sweetened speech, acted out rather than narrated, through pity and fear completing the purgation of those passions. To someone who has followed Aristotle's discourse, it is not difficult to see that comedy is also an imitation or likeness of an action that is complete and of some magnitude, in sweetened speech, acted out rather than narrated. But what should be placed in the definition of comedy instead of an action that is serious ($\sigma\pi\omicron\upsilon\delta\alpha\tilde{\iota}\omicron\nu$)? And what shall we put in place of pity and fear? Surely it is in these two parts that the definition of comedy will differ from that of tragedy. Accordingly, our paper will have two parts corresponding to these two places

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where the definition of comedy must differ from that of tragedy. Our way of proceeding will be similar to that of Aristotle himself in the *Peri Hermeneias* (ch. 2 & 3) where, when defining verb after noun, he touches only upon those parts of the definition of verb wherein it differs from that of noun. I suspect that he would have proceeded in the same way in the lost part of the *Poetics*. He would not repeat the explanation of those parts of the definition of comedy which are common to it and tragedy, but would bring out those things wherein comedy differs from tragedy.

PART ONE

We do not have to seek far to find the word to be substituted in the definition of comedy for serious (σπουδαῖον) in the definition of tragedy. It has already been used many times in limiting our aim. That word is, of course, *laughable* (γελοῖον in Greek). Comedy is a likeness of the laughable. Aristotle praises Homer for first showing the form of comedy, turning from lampoons to the laughable.¹ Hence, our task in this part of our paper will be to give some explanation of the laughable. Fortunately, we have a good beginning for this task in some words of Aristotle on the laughable in the introductory chapters of the *Poetics* before he has defined tragedy.² This part of our paper, then, will take the form of a commentary on these words of Aristotle about the laughable.

Aristotle first gives the genus of the laughable and then something like a definition of it. The first part is as follows:

Comedy is, as we have said, a likeness of those worse, not however according to every badness, but the laughable is a part of the αἰσχρός (ugly or shameful).³

It is difficult to find an exact English equivalent of the Greek word αἰσχρός. Cicero found such an equivalent in Latin when he gives the genus of the laughable in the *De Oratore*:

¹ Cf. *Poetics*, 4, 1448b34-37.

² Cf. *Poetics*, 4, 1449a 32-37.

³ *Poetics*, 5, 1449a 32-34.

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Locus autem et regio quasi ridiculi ... turpitudine et deformitate quadam continetur.⁴

Turpis in Latin has the sense of both ugly and shameful. But these two senses are very closely related. *Graceful* in English often means beautiful, but its opposite, *disgraceful*, signifies shameful more so than ugly, even though *ugly* is the direct opposite of *beautiful*. To keep the richness of the Greek word αἰσχρόζ or the Latin word *turpis*, we must in English retain part of the meaning both of *ugly* and *shameful*. Further, these words may at times have too strong a sense to cover all cases of the laughable. *Shameful*, for example, should be understood broadly enough to include the *embarrassing*. Everyone knows how often the embarrassing is laughable.

To explore the richness of Aristotle's word (αἰσχρόζ), let us examine first how the laughable comes under the shameful or embarrassing and, afterwards, how it comes under the ugly.

Homer's *Margites* stands in the same relation to comedy as does his *Iliad* to tragedy.⁵ Unfortunately, the *Margites* has been lost. But we do have Homer's representation of the blind poet Demodokus singing first in a tragic vein (about the Trojan war) and then, later, in a comic way in the eighth book of the *Odyssey*. The comic story is certainly an illustration of the shameful or embarrassing as laughable. It concerns how Hephaistos caught his adulterous wife Aphrodite and Ares in a strong net, much to their surprise and shame. The other gods come in to see Aphrodite and Ares caught in the net:

All the others
were crowding in now to the brazen house -
Poseidon who embraces earth, and Hermes
the runner, and Apollo, lord of distance.
The goddesses stayed at home for shame, but
these munificences ranged there in the doorway,
and irrepressible among them all
arose the laughter of the happy gods.

⁴ *De Oratore*, II, n. 236.

⁵ *Poetics*, 4, 1448b38 seq.

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Gazing hard at Hephaistos' handiwork
the gods in turn remarked among themselves:
"No dash in adultery now".⁶

It is not by accident that disorder or apparent disorder in the relations of men and women is an abundant source both of the shameful or embarrassing and of the laughable. We need think only of Mr. Pickwick when he gets into a lady's room by mistake at the inn or innocently into a girls' boarding school or with the misunderstanding Mrs. Bardell in his arms.⁷ Charles Knight makes the following observation about *The Merry Wives of Windsor* which is, perhaps, Shakespeare's comic masterpiece:

He (Shakespeare) made the lover (Falstaff) old and fat and avaricious; betrayed by his own greediness and vanity into the most humiliating scrapes, so that his complete degradation was the natural dénouement of the whole adventure, and the progress of his shame the proper source of merriment.⁸

One could hardly find a stronger sign of the truth that the laughable is a part of the shameful than these last words of Knight.

Besides the disorder in the relations between men and women, there are, of course, many other shameful or embarrassing events which are laughable. One thinks of the Pickwickians caught in the middle of the army maneuvers on field day⁹, or Parolles being exposed as a real coward after boasting of his bravery and fidelity¹⁰. In general, all exposure of affectation is both shameful or embarrassing and laughable as Henry Fielding emphasizes in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews*:

The only true source of the true ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation...Now affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy: for as vanity puts us on affecting false

⁶ *Odyssey*, lines 340-350, Robert Fitzgerald's transl., New York : Everyman's Library, Alfred Knopf, 1992, p. 134.

⁷ Cf. Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*.

⁸ Introductory Notice to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Imperial Edition of Shakespeare's Works (Imp. Ed.), vol. I, p. 74.

⁹ Cf. Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 4.

¹⁰ *All's Well That Ends Well*, Act IV, Sc. iii.

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characters in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavour to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under the appearance of their opposite virtues... From the discovery of this affectation arises the ridiculous, which always strikes the reader with surprise and pleasure; and that in a higher and stronger degree when the affectation arises from hypocrisy, than when from vanity; for to discover any one to be the exact reverse of what he affects, is more surprising and consequently more ridiculous, than to find him a little deficient in the quality he desires the reputation of.¹¹

Thus the man who pretends to a knowledge of wine that he does not have is embarrassed when he is found praising a cheap wine that has been poured from a bottle bearing the label of an expensive, high-quality wine.

In addition to meaning shameful or embarrassing, Aristotle's word αἰσχρός also has the sense of *ugly*. Hence, we must show how the laughable is a part of the ugly. Perhaps the best way to do this is to examine the forms of the ugly, and these are best seen in opposition to the main forms of the beautiful. For the latter, there is an important text of Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*:

The greatest forms of the beautiful are order and symmetry and the limited, which the mathematical sciences especially show.¹²

Hence, there are perhaps three main forms of the ugly: disorder, asymmetry, and the unlimited. Perhaps limited and unlimited could be identified with moderate and excessive. Whoever considers the laughable in comparison to these three forms of the ugly will see that the laughable falls under one or more of these.

Puck's laughter is aroused by the disorder of the lovers:

Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be...
Then will two at once woo one;
That must needs be sport alone;
And these things do best please me

¹¹ Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, New York: Random House [Modern Library ed.], 1939, pp. xxviii-xxix.

¹² *Metaphysics*, XIII, 3, 1078a37-1078b2.

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That befall preposterously.¹³

As it is characteristic of the wise man to order¹⁴, folly, by opposition, especially consists in disorder. Thus Puck speaks of the lovers as *fools* and their “pageant” as *fond* (this word originally meant *foolish*) and touches upon the definition of disorder when he says *preposterously* (which Latin word means putting what comes after before or “putting the cart before the horse”). We saw how Fielding regards the discovery of affectation as a very important source of the laughable.¹⁵ Affectation is a kind of disorder since it is opposed to the moral virtue of veracity or truthfulness which consists in a kind of order as Thomas explains:

Since the good ... consists in order, it is necessary to consider a special reason for good in each order. There is, however, a special order by which our exterior words or deeds are suitably ordered to something as a sign is to the signified. And man is perfected in regard to this by the virtue of truthfulness.¹⁶

It is laughable often in the practical order when someone does something out of order; as someone painting himself into a corner is an example of ending where he should have begun. It seems laughable to Socrates to investigate the stories about the gods when he does not yet know even himself.¹⁷ It is a striking instance of the natural genius of Shakespeare that he should have introduced his greatest comic character, Falstaff, with an observation by Hal of the irrelevance of even the first sense of order, that of time.¹⁸ We are first introduced to Falstaff by this dialogue:

¹³ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act III, Sc. ii.

¹⁴ Cf. *Metaphysics*, I, 2, 982a18.

¹⁵ Fielding uses *ridiculous* in a somewhat narrower sense than the *laughable* for he distinguishes between the ridiculous and burlesque. Burlesque would fall under the unlimited or excessive.

¹⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 109, a. 2, c. “Cum bonum ... consistat in ordine necesse est specialem rationem boni considerari ex determinato ordine. Est autem specialis ordo secundum quod exteriora nostra vel verba vel facta debite ordinantur ad aliquid sicut signum ad signatum. Et ad hoc perficitur homo per virtutem veritatis.”

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 229e.

¹⁸ Cf. *Categories*, 12.

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Falstaff: Now Hal, what time of day is it, lad?

Prince: Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know. What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-color'd taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day.¹⁹

This passage also touches very completely upon the excessive or unlimited character of Falstaff as well.

The unsymmetrical is the second main form of the ugly. Here it will be useful to recall Aristotle's observation that the mathematical sciences especially show the beautiful. For in speaking of the laughable, we often use two words taken from the mathematical sciences, one from each of the two basic sciences of arithmetic and geometry. These words are *odd* and *eccentric*. Both words can be used to indicate something unsymmetrical for the odd number is divided into unequal parts and what is eccentric or off-centered is lopsided. And thus we borrow words from the mathematical sciences to name the unsymmetrical or the disproportioned which is a form of the ugly. So not only do the mathematical sciences especially show the beautiful, but they also provide us with a vocabulary for talking about the ugly. This is not surprising since we name things as we know them and there is the same knowledge of opposites.

There are many examples where the laughable or comic is spoken of as *odd* or coupled with *odd*. L. Rice-Oxley writes about Fielding's comic works:

In them the oddities of men are laughed at.²⁰

¹⁹ *Henry IV*, Part I, Act I, Sc. ii.

²⁰ L. Rice-Oxley, Introduction to Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, London: Oxford Univ. Press [World's Classics ed.], 1929, p. xvii.

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Dickens also couples *odd* with *comical* or *ridiculous* as when he speaks of “an odd and comical expression”²¹ or writes, “I married Fanny under the oddest and most ridiculous circumstances possible”²². But the best example in Dickens is found in his favorite and best novel, *David Copperfield*, where, speaking of Mr. Micawber, one of the greatest comic characters of all fiction, the novelist uses *odd* to indicate something unsymmetrical or disproportioned:

I think now, how odd it was, but how wonderfully like Mr. Micawber, that when he went from London to Canterbury he should have talked as if he was going to the farthest limits of the earth, and when he went from England to Australia as if he were going for a little trip across the Channel.²³

The geometrically-rooted word *eccentric* is used to describe the laughable by Thackeray in his essay on Addison:

Addison ... looks on the world and plays with the ceaseless humors of all of us - laughs the kindest laugh - points out our neighbor's foible or eccentricity to us with the most good-natured, smiling confidence, and then, turning over his shoulder, whispers our foibles to our neighbor. What would Sir Roger de Coverley be without his follies and his charming little brain-cracks... We love him for his vanities as much as for his virtues. What is ridiculous is delightful in him. We are so fond of him because we laugh at him so. And out of that laughter, and out of that weakness, and out of those harmless eccentricities and follies, and out of that touched brain, and out of that honest manhood and simplicity - we get a result of happiness, goodness, tenderness, pity, piety.²⁴

Washington Irving likewise describes the comic aspects of Goldsmith's character and actions by employing *odd* and *eccentric*

²¹ *Barnaby Rudge*, ch. 2. New York: Dodd Mead ed., 1944, p. 17.

²² *Sketches by Boz*, London: Oxford Illustrated ed., 1973, p. 439.

²³ Ch. 57, “The Emigrants”. Philadelphia, Penn.: Franklin Lib. ed., 1980, p. 740.

²⁴ William Thackeray, *The English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century in The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincot, vol. 23, pp. 194-196.

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interchangeably.²⁵ Shakespeare also speaks of the *odd* as an object of laughter as when the Lord proposes the prank to dress up the drunken tinker Sly as a Lord:

But I am doubtful of your modesties,
Lest, over-eyeing of his odd behavior-
For yet his honor never yet heard a play -
You break into some merry passion.²⁶

Such frequent use, then, of the words *odd* and *eccentric* in describing the laughable seems to indicate that the laughable often falls under one of the main forms of the ugly, the unsymmetrical or disproportioned.

The laughable also comes many times under the third main form of the ugly which is the unlimited or excessive. Margites, the hero of the mock heroic poem attributed to Homer, gets his name from the Greek word μάργος which can mean: (1) raging mad, (2) greedy, gluttonous, (3) lustful; all of which indicate something excessive or unlimited. Falstaff also is greedy, gluttonous and lustful. The laughableness of Falstaff (apart from his wit) is very much tied to the excessive or unlimited. Thus the Prince says to Poins after the trick they have played on Falstaff:

Away, good Ned. Falstaff sweats to death
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.
Were't not for laughing, I should pity him.²⁷

And Mrs. Ford says about Falstaff:

What tempest, I trow, threw this whale, with so many tuns of
oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor? How shall I be revenged on
him? I think, the best way were to entertain him with hope, till
the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease.²⁸

²⁵ Cf. Washington Irving, *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*, in *The Works of Washington Irving*, author's revised edition, New York: G.P. Putnam's and Son, 1868, vol. VII, p. 448.

²⁶ *The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, i.

²⁷ *Henry the Fourth*, Part One, Act II, Sc. ii.

²⁸ *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act II, Sc. i.

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The word *humour* is often used in discussing the comic or laughable, and in Ben Jonson and others, *humour* is often understood to be tied to some kind of excess. Thus Asper, in the Introduction to Jonson's *Every man Out of His Humour* speaks of humour thus:

.....in every human body,
The choler, melancholy, phlegm, and blood
By reason that they flow continually
In some one part, and are not continent,
Receive the name of humours. Now thus far
It may, by metaphor, apply itself
Unto the general disposition:
As when some peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his effects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluxions, all to run one way.
This may be truly said to be a humour.

And turning to the audience, Asper continues :

.....Now, gentlemen, I go
To turn an actor, and a humourist;
Where, ere I do resume my present person
We hope to make the circle of your eyes
Flow with distilled laughter.²⁹

Thus when Master Ford is dominated by jealousy to excess in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Evans says about him:

This is very fantastical humours and jealousies.³⁰

And when Master Ford tries once more to get his friends to follow him to the supposed exposing of his wife's affair:

Ford: Will you follow, gentlemen? I beseech you,
follow: see but the issue of my jealousy. If I
cry out upon no trail, never trust me when
I open again.

Page: Let's obey his humour a little further.³¹

²⁹ Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of His Humour*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966, vol. III, pp. 431-436.

³⁰ Act III, Sc. iii.

³¹ Act IV, Sc. ii.

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Congreve, speaking of Morose, one of Jonson's characters, says:

Why, It is his excess of this Humour, that makes him become
Ridiculous, and qualifies his character for Comedy.³²

And we again find the word *humour* when Mercutio makes fun of Romeo for his excess:

Benvolio: He ran this way, and leap'd this orchard wall.
Call, good Mercutio.

Mercutio: Nay, I'll conjure too.
Romeo! humours! madman! passion! lover!
Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh:
Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied;
Cry but "Ay, me!" pronounce but "love" and "dove."³³

The laughable, then, is often something unlimited, immoderate or excessive.

We have shown to some extent the truth of Aristotle's statement that the laughable is a part of the ugly. For the laughable is especially spoken of in regard to one or more of the three main forms of the ugly - the disordered, the unsymmetrical and the unlimited or excessive.

The second part of Aristotle's brief text on the laughable, at the beginning of Chapter Five of the *Poetics*, seems to be a sort of definition:

The laughable is some mistake and shame free from pain and not destructive, as some mask that is ugly and distorted without pain is laughable.³⁴

Aristotle uses two words for the genus in this definition: *mistake* (error or failure - ἀμαρτία) and *shame* (disgrace, ugliness, deformity - αἰσχρότης). The second of these words we have already

³² Congreve, Letter to Dennis *Concerning Humour in Comedy* (1695), in *The Complete Works of William Congreve*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1964, p. 164.

³³ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Sc. ii.

³⁴ *Poetics*, 5, 1449a 34-37.

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seen in the above text where he says that the laughable is a part of the ugly or shameful. Now we must examine this new word, *mistake*, in the genus of the definition - why it is added and whether it is a key to understanding the laughable and comedy.

The previous text we have explored³⁵ set out from the character in comedy (as was done also in Chapter One of the *Poetics*), but this new text defines the laughable more fully as the object of comedy. Comedy as well as tragedy is more a likeness of action than a likeness of character. Now although the shameful or ugly can be applied both to action and character, *mistake* is more fitting to action (and words) than to character. Hence, the addition of *mistake* in the genus of the laughable is to bring out more fully what is laughable in action. But it is now necessary to manifest that what is laughable in action is a mistake. This does not mean, of course, every mistake. There are also tragic mistakes. That is why Aristotle will add the differences *free from pain* and *not destructive* to separate the comic mistake from the tragic mistake.

We can manifest that the laughable in action is a mistake, ascending from the lowest to the highest kind of comedy. Joseph Addison has a very good passage on the low common humour of the West European peoples :

There is a set of merry drolls, whom the common people of all countries admire, and seem to love so well that they could eat them, according to the old proverb; I mean those circumforaneous wits whom every nation calls by the name of that dish of meat which it loves best. In Holland they are called Pickled Herrings; in France, Jean Pottages; in Italy, Maccaronies; and in Great Britain, Jack Puddings. These merry wags, from whatsoever food they receive their titles, that they may make their audiences laugh, always appear in a fool's coat, and commit such blunders and mistakes in every step they take, and every word they utter, as those who listen to them would be ashamed of.³⁶

³⁵ Cf. *Poetics*, 5, 1449a 32-34.

³⁶ Addison, *The Spectator*, Number 47 (1711), in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 243-244.

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Addison not only notes how these “merry drolls” make people laugh by the “blunders and mistakes” they make, but also how these blunders or mistakes are such that the common people would be “ashamed of” making them. It can be seen, then, how the two words in the genus of Aristotle’s definition of the laughable, namely mistake and shame, and their order fit perfectly the laughable in these forms of “low” but very natural comedy. Puck’s humour, involving deception and mistake, is somewhat on this level as well:

I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon, and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal:
And sometimes lurk I in a gossip’s bowl,
In very likeness of a roasted crab;
And, when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her wither’d dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,
And “tailor” cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the whole quire hold their lips and laugh;
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there.³⁷

If we ascend, now, to the highest forms of comedy, the relevance of the word *mistake* or *error* can immediately be seen even in the titles of some famous comedies. Goldsmith’s great comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*, which has had such a long successful career on the stage, was originally named *The Mistakes of a Night*; and this is still given as a sub-title or alternate title. And if we think of Shakespeare’s first comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*, and how it is to some extent based on Roman models, we can see how naturally the word *mistake* or *error* comes to mind when thinking of the laughable in the plots of comedies. Charles Knight has preserved a wonderful account by Brown of a good performance of *The Comedy of Errors*:

³⁷ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act II, Sc. i.

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Until I saw it on the stage ... I had not imagined the extent of the mistakes, the drollery of them, their unabated continuance, till, at the end of the fourth act, they reached their climax with the assistance of Dr. Pinch, when the audience in their laughter rolled about like waves.³⁸

But any examination of the genus in Aristotle's definition of the laughable which utilizes Shakespeare's plays should draw upon what is perhaps the best comedy of the Poet, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In his Supplementary Notice to this play, Knight quotes Warton that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is "the most complete specimen of Shakespeare's comic powers"³⁹. The plot of this play is built around so many mistakes: the mistakes of Falstaff in his apparent encouragement by the merry wives, Ford's mistaken jealousy about his wife, and the deception of almost all in the secret marriage of Anne Page. In some ways, the mistaken jealousy of Ford is the funniest because Ford is so sure of himself. As Ford says about Page (the husband of the other merry wife):

Has Page any brains? hath he any eyes? hath he any thinking? Sure, they sleep; he hath no use of them. Why, this boy will carry a letter twenty mile, as easy as a cannon will shoot point-blank twelve score. He pieces out his wife's inclination; he gives her folly motion and advantage; and now she's going to my wife, and Falstaff's boy with her! A man may hear this shower sing in the wind; and Falstaff's boy with her! Good plots! they are laid; and our revolted wives share damnation together. Well; I will take him, then torture my wife, pluck the borrowed veil of modesty from the so seeming Mistress Page, divulge Page himself for a secure and wilful Actaeon; and to these violent proceedings all my neighbours shall cry aim. [Clock Strikes] The clock gives me my cue, and assurance bids me search; there I shall find Falstaff. I shall be rather praised for this than mocked; for it is as positive as the earth is firm, that Falstaff is there. I will go.⁴⁰

Shakespeare's genius in making Ford so confident that he will be vindicated in his jealousy and the credulity of Page exposed,

³⁸ Knight, *Supplementary Notice to The Comedy of Errors*, Imp. Ed., vol. I, p. 129.

³⁹ Knight, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁰ *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act III, Sc. ii.

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makes Ford's mistake the more laughable. And when he arrives on the scene of the apparent affair, Ford's assurance makes his mistake all the more enjoyable. He says to Page, Caius and Sir Hugh Evans whom he has brought as witnesses:

Pray you, come near: if I suspect without cause, why then make sport at me; then let me be your jest; I deserve it.⁴¹

Falstaff is carried out (concealed) in a clothes-basket by the servants and the merry wives comment a few lines later on the double deception - that of Falstaff in his amorous hopes and that of Ford in his mistaken jealousy:

Mrs. Page: Is there not a double excellency in this?
Mrs. Ford: I know not which pleases me better; that my husband is deceived, or Sir John.⁴²

It is, of course, the excellency of comedy or the laughable that the merry wives are looking for; and the double excellency of comedy is here seen to be the double deception or mistake. This is a striking confirmation of the first word in the genus of Aristotle's definition of the laughable. The second word in the genus (*shame*) is also touched upon in this scene when Page says a little later to Ford when no Falstaff has been produced:

Fie, fie, Master Ford! are you not ashamed? What spirit, what devil suggests this imagination? I would not ha' your distemper in this kind for the wealth of Windsor Castle.⁴³

The second time Ford mistakenly goes to expose his wife with Falstaff is, if possible, even more laughable. Having heard that Falstaff was carried out in a basket, he is determined, among other things, not to let any clothes-basket be carried out without inspection. Again, his assurance and confidence of being at last vindicated make his mistake all the more ludicrous. In the next Act, Ford enters with a whole tribe of witnesses (Page, Caius, Evans, Shallow):

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Act II, Sc. iii.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Act III, Sc. iii.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

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Ford: Come hither Mistress Ford; the honest woman, the modest wife, the virtuous creature, that hath the jealous fool to her husband! I suspect without cause, mistress, do I?
Mrs. Ford: Heaven be my witness, you do, if you suspect me in any dishonesty.
Ford: Well said, brazen-face! hold it out. Come forth, sirrah! ⁴⁴

Here Ford starts pulling clothes out of the basket being carried out by the servants and throwing the clothes about in a vain attempt to find Falstaff. After this laughable mistake, the other characters again touch upon the second word in the genus of the laughable (*shame*):

Page: This passes!
Mrs. Ford: Are you not ashamed? let the clothes alone...
Shallow: By my fidelity, this is not well, Master Ford, this wrongs you.
Evans: Master Ford, you must pray, and not follow the imaginations of your heart: this is jealousies.
Ford: Well, he's not here I seek for.
Page: No, nor nowhere else but in your brain. ⁴⁵

Shame is brought out strongly again in the planning for the final deception of Falstaff. This is first seen in the following conversation of the merry wives:

Mrs. Ford: Shall we tell our husbands how we have served him?
Mrs. Page: Yes, by all means; if it be but to scrape the figures out of your husband's brains. If they can find in their hearts the poor unvirtuous knight shall be any further afflicted, we two will still be the ministers.
Mrs. Ford: I'll warrant they'll have him publicly shamed, and methinks there would be no period to the jest, should he not be publicly shamed.⁴⁶

And after Ford and Page have been let into the plot for the final deception of Falstaff, Ford says:

But let our plot go forward: let our wives Yet once again, to
make us public sport,
Appoint a meeting with this fat old fellow,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Act IV, Sc. ii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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Where we may take him and disgrace him for it.⁴⁷

The word *jest* is used here by Shakespeare for the comic action. There will be no period or completion to the comic action without the public shame or disgrace of Falstaff's final mistake. We can begin to see, then, the truth in the genus of Aristotle's definition of the laughable: "The laughable is some mistake and shame."

It remains to comment on the difference in the definition of the laughable. One must distinguish between the *comic mistake* and the *tragic mistake*. Aristotle adds as a difference *free from pain and not destructive*. The obvious sense of these words can be seen if we compare the jealous mistake of Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with that of Othello. Othello's mistake is destructive of his innocent wife and, eventually, of himself. Cassio is also destroyed. But after all the mistakes or errors in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Mrs. Page can still propose a good laugh and have that proposal accepted:

Good husband, let us every one go home,
And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire;
Sir John and all.⁴⁸

No one is permanently hurt, let alone destroyed. Even the opprobrium that falls on Falstaff in his deception is lessened by the deception of the Pages in the elopement of their daughter.

When Aristotle says *free from pain*, the Greek word involves a negation of $\delta\delta\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta$ which first means the pain of the body although it can be extended to the pain of the mind. He certainly means to exclude any severe pain of the body which is accompanied by its destruction. But he would also exclude that pain of the mind which comes from a tragic mistake or whose disgrace would lead the one suffering under it to suicide. If we compare the disgrace of Ajax in Sophocles' great play of that name and the disgrace of the comic character Parolles in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, we can see the difference. Ajax' disgrace leads to his tragic suicide, as his wife and brother frantically search for him. But Parolles is able

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Act IV, Sc. iv.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Act V, Sc. v.

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to recuperate rather quickly after his boasted courage and fidelity have been exposed. Parolles is left to himself right after his disgrace, but he can still say:

Yet am I thankful; if my heart were great
'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more;
But I will eat and drink and sleep as soft
As captain shall: simply the thing I am
Shall make me live. Who knows himself a braggart,
Let him fear this; for it will come to pass
That every braggart shall be found an ass.
Rust, sword! cool, blushes! and Parolles, live
Safest in shame! being fool'd, by foolery thrive
There's place and means for every man alive.
I'll after them.⁴⁹

We can see here in passing how the character is selected for the sake of the plot and for either a tragic or a comic mistake. If Parolles' heart were great or he had the heart of Ajax, he would have belonged in a tragic plot. Likewise, if Ford were the man that Othello is, he would not have been suitable for perhaps the greatest of Shakespeare's comic plots.

PART TWO

The above is sufficient for the present to understand what is the laughable. But since *laughable* is what must be substituted for *σπουδαῖον* or *serious* in the definition, it remains to see what must be substituted in the definition of comedy for *through pity and fear completing the purgation of those passions* which is in the definition of tragedy. Surely, comedy will move different emotions than tragedy, as was indicated by the tragic and comic masks represented in the theater. But here we do not have the help from Aristotle that we did in the definition of the laughable.

The natural beginning for an investigation of the emotions or passions moved by comedy is to find the emotion most closely connected with laughter. If we stay close to the comic writers

⁴⁹ *All's Well That Ends Well*, Act IV, Sc. iii.

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themselves, it is not hard to find this emotion. There is an emotion that is commonly coupled with laughter. The clown's song in *Twelfth Night* contains this line:

Present mirth hath present laughter.⁵⁰

Gratiano also couples *mirth* and *laughter* in *The Merchant of Venice*:

Let me play the fool.
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.⁵¹

Another example of the link between *mirth* and *laughter* is found in the following exchange between Brutus and Cassius:

Brutus: I'll use you for my mirth, yea for my laughter, When you
are waspish.
Cassius: Hath Cassius liv'd
To be but mirth and laughter to his Brutus? 52

And the Countess says to Talbot:

Laughest thou, wretch? thy mirth shall turn to moan.⁵³

And *In Love's Labour's Lost* can be found this bit of conversation:

Princess: Here comes Boyet, and mirth is in his face.
Boyet: O, I am stabb'd with laughter.⁵⁴

And later in that play, when Biron gets his penance, he complains:

To move wild laughter in the throat of death?
It cannot be; it is impossible.
Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Sc. iii.

⁵¹ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Sc. i.

⁵² *Julius Caesar*, Act IV, Sc. iii.

⁵³ *Henry VI*, Part One, Act II, Sc. iii.

⁵⁴ *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act V, Sc. ii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Act V, Sc. ii.

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This same connection of mirth with laughter is also found in other comic writers. Heartfree says to Constant, in Vanbrugh's comedy *The Provok'd Wife*:

Now laugh till thy soul's glutt'd with Mirth.⁵⁶

And Sterling complains of Lovewell in *The Clandestine Marriage*:

If my young man here would but laugh at my jokes, which he ought to do, as Mounseer does at yours, my Lord, we should be all life and mirth.⁵⁷

Other examples of the connection between mirth and laughter could be brought forward, but let these suffice. We should now look more carefully at the connection between mirth and laughter. Laughter is, of course, the outward expression of an inward passion called mirth. Hazlitt expresses this relation admirably in his famous lectures on comic writers:

We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not. If we think we must not laugh, this perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater; for by endeavouring to keep the obnoxious image out of sight, it comes upon us more irresistibly and repeatedly; and the inclination to indulge our mirth, the longer it is held back, collects its force, and breaks out the more violently in peals of laughter.⁵⁸

The words *indulge* and *breaks out* signify this connection where the inward is shown in an outward way. Just as inward sadness when indulged can break out in tears, so inward mirth when indulged can break out in laughter. And as tears vent or give a certain relief or outlet to our sadness, so too does laughter give relief to our mirth when it gets too much for us. James Fenimore Cooper brings this out well in the following two examples from *The Pioneers*:

⁵⁶ John Vanbrugh, *The Provok'd Wife*, Act Four, Scene - A Bed-Chamber, in *Famous Plays of the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Mod. Lib. Ed., 1933, p. 389.

⁵⁷ Colman and Garrick, *The Clandestine Marriage*, Act II, Scene - An antechamber to Lord Ogleby's bedchamber, in *Famous Plays...*, p. 672.

⁵⁸ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Comic Writers Etc. of Great Britain*, in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 268.

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Billy Kirby gave vent to his mirth in peals of laughter that he seemed to heave up from his very soul.

Overcome by mirth, the good-natured fellow seated himself on the ground, kicking the earth with delight, and giving vent to peal after peal of laughter.⁵⁹

The phrase “overcome with mirth” is well chosen. We all have experienced being overcome with mirth, just as we have experienced being overcome by sadness or some other emotion. The word *overcome* signifies that the emotion is strong; stronger than us or our reason, at least temporarily. It is especially when we are overcome with some emotion or the emotion is strong, that the outward expression of emotion is seen. But it is possible to have emotion with little or no outward expression. This is true of mirth as well as the other emotions. A less strong mirth may express itself in a smile rather than a laugh.

If comedy is a likeness of the laughable and the laughable moves us to mirth, then comedy must move us to mirth. But this reason is confirmed by the comic writers themselves. Thus at the end of *King Henry VI, Part III*, the new king says:

And now what rests but that we spend the time
With stately triumphs, mirthful comic shows,
Such as befits the pleasure of the court?⁶⁰

There is a contemporary reference to this about one of Shakespeare's comedies in a letter from Sir Walter Cope to Lord Cranborne in 1604/1605:

Burbage is come and says there is no new play that the queen hath not seen, but they have revived an old one, called *Love's Labour's Lost*, which for wit and mirth he says will please her exceedingly.⁶¹

Shakespeare's most famous comic character is Falstaff and he is introduced in *Henry IV, Part I*. That play was entered by Andrew

⁵⁹ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1958, pp. 348 and 453.

⁶⁰ *King Henry VI, Part III, Act V, Sc. vii*.

⁶¹ *Shakespeare of Stratford, Chief Contemporary Allusions to Shakespeare's Plays*, Yale, 1947, III, B, p. 102A .

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Wyse in the Stationers' Register on February 25, 1598, as "The historye of Henry the IIIIth with his battaile of Shrewsburye againt Henry Hottspurre of the Northe with the conceived mirthe of Sir John Falstoff."⁶²

Thomas Heywood also touches upon the connection of comedy with mirth:

If a comedy, it is pleasantly contrived with merry Accidents, and intermixt with apt and witty jests... And what is then the subject of this harmless mirth?⁶³

William Congreve, one of the best of the Restoration comic dramatists, touches upon comedy as moving our mirth when he considers what should or should not be used in comedy. In the Dedication of *The Way of the World* (1700), his last comedy, to Ralph, Earl of Montague, he rejects certain characters as unsuitable for comedy:

Those characters which are meant to be ridiculed in most of our comedies, are of fools so gross, that in my humble opinion, they should rather disturb than divert the well-natured and reflecting art of an audience; they are rather objects of charity than contempt; and instead of moving our mirth, they ought very often to excite our compassion.⁶⁴

In the same vein, Congreve's concern with what he should use to move the audience to mirth is shown in his letter to the critic John Dennis:

Sure the poet must both be very ill-natured himself, and think his Audience so, when he ... hopes to raise their Mirth, by what is truly an object of compassion.⁶⁵

We can see in these quotes from Congreve, the working dramatist's concern with what he should use to move mirth.

⁶² Cf. *Arber's Transcript*, III, 105.

⁶³ Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*, Bk. III (1612), in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 130.

⁶⁴ Congreve, in *Famous Plays...*, p. 423.

⁶⁵ Congreve, *Concerning Humour in Comedy*, in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 208.

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Boswell has preserved for us the observation of Johnson on the success of Goldsmith's comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*:

Dr. Goldsmith's new play, "She stoops to Conquer", being mentioned; JOHNSON; "I know of no comedy for many years that hath so much exhilarated an audience, that has answered so much the great end of comedy - making an audience merry."⁶⁶

Merry is almost a synonym for mirthful, especially when it has an outward expression. But there is a very strong passage from Johnson in *The Rambler* about mirth being in the definition of comedy:

Comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers; though perhaps they might have contented themselves with declaring it to be such a dramatic representation of human life, as may excite mirth ... any man's reflections will inform him that every dramatic composition which raises mirth is comic.⁶⁷

To conclude with an example from the 19th century, there is the phrase of Charles Dickens in his favorite novel, "convulsed with mirth at the comic parts"⁶⁸.

There can be little doubt then that comedy moves us to mirth if it moves us to any emotion, and that Johnson is correct in putting mirth into the definition of comedy. But what is mirth?

The genus of mirth is joy or pleasure. This can be seen from the connection between mirth and feasting and drinking. Thus in *Pericles*:

Prepare for mirth, for mirth becomes a feast.⁶⁹

And in *King John*:

Nor met with fortune other than at feasts,
Full warm of blood, of mirth, of gossiping.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 1773, Oxford ed., 1953, p. 525.

⁶⁷ Johnson, *The Rambler*, Number 125 (1751), in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 254.

⁶⁸ *David Copperfield*, ch. 7. Philadelphia, Penn.: Franklin Lib. Ed., 1980, p. 86.

⁶⁹ *Pericles*, Act II, Sc. iii.

⁷⁰ *King John*, Act V, Sc. ii.

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And the words of Gratiano quoted before connect mirth with wine:

Let me play the fool
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.⁷¹

The Duke of Burgundy, speaking of France, also notes the connection of wine and mirth:

Her vine, the merry chearer of the heart.⁷²

And in *Henry VIII*:

.....and he would have all as merry
As first, good company, good wine, good welcome
Can make good people.⁷³

Smollett has left us an entertaining picture of the connection between feasting and drinking and mirth in his picture of Quin:

In my last I told you I had hopes of seeing Quin in his hours of elevation at the tavern, which is the temple of mirth and good-fellowship; where he, as priest of Comus, utters the inspirations of wit and humour. I have had that satisfaction. I have dined with his club at the Three Tuns, and had the honour to sit him out. At half an hour past eight in the evening, he was carried home with six good bottles of claret under his belt; and it then being Friday, he gave orders that he should not be disturbed till Sunday at noon.⁷⁴

In real life, James Quin (1693-1766) was an actor of the old declamatory school, especially celebrated in the part of Falstaff, and famous for his wit and gourmandise. He retired to Bath in 1751. Comus was the God of festive mirth.

The Greek word for mirth or merriment, εὐφροσύνη, is also tied up especially with feasting and festivity as can be seen in

⁷¹ *Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Sc. i.

⁷² *Henry V*, Act V, Sc. ii.

⁷³ *Henry VIII*, Act I, Sc. iv.

⁷⁴ *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, Westminster: The Folio Society, Richard Clay & Company Ltd., 1955, p. 62.

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Homer.⁷⁵ It is also personified as the Grace who presides at festive meetings.

The association of mirth, then, with feasting and drinking of wine is a sign that it is a form of joy or pleasure. Hence, Shakespeare will couple it with either joy or pleasure, as in *The Tempest*, where Caliban says:

Thou mak'st me merry; I am full of pleasure
Let us be jocund.⁷⁶

And again in *Henry VI*:

Reignier: Dauphin, command the citizens make bonfires,
And feat and banquet in the open streets
To celebrate the joy that God hath given us.
Alencon: All France will be replete with mirth and joy.⁷⁷

The genus, then, of mirth is joy or pleasure.

The difference in the definition of mirth must be taken from its object or cause which is, of course, the laughable as we have explained it above. Mirth is a pleasure or joy whose object and cause is the laughable. We are not defining mirth by laughter. Although the laughable is named from laughter or the laugh, it was not defined by laughter as can be seen from Aristotle's definition of the laughable. If laughter is the outward expression of mirth, mirth would be in the definition of laughter.

That the laughable causes pleasure is a matter of experience. Why it causes pleasure is another question. Three reasons can be given here. First, the laughable is easily seen to be a mistake and such knowing is pleasant. Second, the laughable is not taken seriously and therefore it invites a certain relaxation of our powers and this is pleasant, as is rest. Aristotle seems to touch upon this reason in the chapter on pleasure in the first book of the *Rhetoric*:

Since play and all relaxing are among the pleasant things,
laughter also is among the pleasant things; and it is necessary that
laughable things, whether men or words or deeds, be pleasant.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *Odyssey*, Bk. 20, 8; Bk. 10, 465, for example.

⁷⁶ *The Tempest*, Act III, Sc. iii.

⁷⁷ *Henry VI*, Part One, Act I, Sc. vi.

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Laughable things are pleasant because they relax us and make us playful rather than serious. (Note Aristotle's division of the laughable into men or words or deeds.) A third reason is suggested by a passage quoted by Addison from Hobbes:

Mr. Hobbes, in his discourse of human nature, which in my humble opinion, is much the best of all his works, after some very curious observations upon laughter, concludes thus: "The passion of laughter is nothing less but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonor."⁷⁹

Hobbes seems to be saying that it is pleasant to rise above the mistakes of others, or our own, when they can no longer harm us. Thus my son Marcus laughs when he remembers that at one time he thought that Shakespeare was some beer that his daddy especially liked.

We have seen what mirth is and that comedy moves us to mirth. But should one add that comedy purges or purifies mirth? As there is a catharsis of pity and fear in tragedy, is there also a catharsis of mirth in comedy or by comedy?

Before we can try to answer this question, we must first examine whether mirth can be in need of purification or purgation or catharsis. The words *purgation* or *catharsis* are first used in medicine in regard to the body. Later they are applied to the emotions by a proportion. As there can be something excessive or defective in the body which is in need of catharsis or purgation, so likewise there can be something excessive or defective in the emotions. And this is also true of the emotion we feel towards the laughable. There can be excess or defect here and sometimes it is inborn as Shakespeare observes in *The Merchant of Venice*:

Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time:
Some that will evermore peep through their eyes
And laugh like parrots at a bag-piper;

⁷⁸ *Rhetoric*, I, 11, 1372a.

⁷⁹ Addison, *The Spectator*, Number 47 (1711), in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 242.

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And others of such vinegar aspect,
That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile
Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.⁸⁰

As in the other emotions, the excess or defect of mirth is bad, whereas what is good is found in the golden mean. Biron would seem to be a praiseworthy exemplar in the following passage:

Biron they call him, but a merrier man,
Within the limit of becoming mirth,
I never spent an hour's talk withal:
His eye begets occasion for his wit;
For every object that the one doth catch,
The other turns to a mirth-moving jest.⁸¹

Biron obviously does not have the defect of those with “vinegar aspect”, nor does he go to excess, beyond “the limit of becoming mirth”. Since mirth is a form of pleasure and one associated with eating and drinking, it is not hard to see that mirth is an emotion more in need of being moderated than in need of being strengthened - for men tend to go to excess in that which is pleasant.

We can find several instances in Shakespeare of the need to moderate mirth. Concerned about his servants going to excess in the prank or joke they are playing on Sly, the Lord says:

I long to hear him call the drunkard husband,
And how my men will stay themselves from laughter
When they do homage to this simple peasant.
I'll in to counsel them: haply my presence
May well abate the over merry spleen
Which otherwise would grow into extremes.⁸²

Similarly, Bassanio cautions Gratiano to be more moderate in his mirth:

.....Pray thee, take pain
To allay with some cold drops of modesty
Thy skipping spirit, lest through thy wild behaviour
I be misconst' red in the place I go to

⁸⁰ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Sc. i.

⁸¹ *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act II, Sc. i.

⁸² *The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, i.

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And lose my hopes.⁸³

The jealous Ford thinks that his wife is going to excess:

Some say, that though she appear honest to me, yet in other instances she enlargeth her mirth so far that there is shrewd construction made of her.⁸⁴

But the merry wives intend to show that their mirth does not go to excess, that they are merry without ceasing to be “honest” (chaste or modest). Hence, Mrs. Page says:

We'll leave a proof, by that which we will do,
Wives may be merry, and yet honest too:
We do not act that often jest and laugh;
'Tis old but true, “Still swine eats all the draff.”⁸⁵

On the other hand, it is possible for mirth to suffer from defect. Another instance of this in Shakespeare is when Volumnia says to Valeria about Virgilia:

Let her alone, Lady, as she is now she will but disease our better mirth.⁸⁶

The word *disease* is here applied to the emotion of mirth. Like other emotions, it is possible for our mirth to be sick through excess or defect. As Nerissa says:

They are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore to be seated in the mean.⁸⁷

The comic dramatist or novelist should aim, not only at arousing mirth, but at a mirth that is healthy or free from excess or defect. In this way, comedy can be said to purify mirth or purge it of those unhealthy tendencies that are often found in it. Many comic writers have understood this and practiced it. Nicholas Udall seems to have understood this explicitly:

What creature is in health, either young or old,

⁸³ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act II, Sc. ii.

⁸⁴ *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act II, Sc. ii.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Act IV, Sc. ii.

⁸⁶ *Coriolanus*, Act I, Sc. iii.

⁸⁷ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Sc. ii.

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But some mirth with modesty will be glad to use -
As we in this interlude shall now unfold?
Wherein all scurrility we utterly refuse,
Avoiding such mirth wherein is abuse;
Knowing nothing more commendable for a man's recreation
Than mirth which is used in an honest fashion.

For mirth prolongeth life and causeth health;
Mirth recreates our spirits and voideth pensiveness;
Mirth increaseth amity, not hindering our wealth;
Mirth is to be used both of more and less,
Being mixed with virtue in decent comeliness -
As we trust no good nature can gainsay the same:
Which mirth we intend to use, avoiding all blame.⁸⁸

An experience of Shakespeare's comedies convinces us that he also is aiming at this healthy mirth, as one would expect from the passages on mirth quoted above which indicate there is excess and defect in mirth as well as the mean (which it is no mean happiness to attain). Charles Knight has a delightful image of what it might have been like for students of the Middle Temple to undergo that purification and catharsis of their mirth from Shakespearean comedy:

There is something to our minds very precious in that memorial of Shakspeare which is preserved in the little Table-book of the student of the Middle Temple: "Feb. 2, 1601 At our feast we had a play called *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will*." What a scene do these few plain words call up before us... Here Shakspeare's *Twelfth Night* was acted in the Christmas of 1601... its ever-gushing spirit of enjoyment, - of fun without malice, of wit without grossness, of humour without extravagance, - taught the swaggering, roaring, overgrown boy, miscalled student, that there were higher sources of mirth than affrays in Fleet Street, or drunkenness in White Friars.⁸⁹

And Sir Walter Scott's judgment on Goldsmith (both a dramatist and a novelist) is cited by Thackeray:

⁸⁸ Udall, Prologue to *Ralph Roister Doister* (c. 1553), in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 113.

⁸⁹ Knight, Suppl. Notice to *Twelfth Night*, Imp. Ed., vol. I, p. 315.

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He was a friend to virtue, and in his most playful pages never forgets what is due to it.⁹⁰

The virtue which regulates mirth is like temperance or moderation rather than courage. This is why Aquinas considers it in the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae* under the virtues that have the same mode as temperance. Likewise, the great poet Edmund Spenser, somewhat contemporary with Shakespeare, considers it, and the opposite vice, in the second book of *The Faerie Queene*, which is devoted to “The Legend of Sir Guyon or of Temperaunce”. One passage will indicate why Spenser has put the matter of mirth in the book on temperance:

And by the way, as was her wonted guize,
Her mery fitt shee freshly gan to reare,
And did of joy and jollity devize,
Her selfe to cherish, and her gieste to cheare.
The knight was courteous, and did not forbear
Her honest merth and pleasaunce to partake;
But when he saw her toy, and gibe, and geare,
And passe the bonds of modest merrimake,
Her dalliaunce he despisd, and follies did forsake.⁹¹

We have seen already in several passages from Shakespeare that he also would put mirth among those passions or emotions which are more in need of being moderated than strengthened. And in speaking of Biron who has the virtue concerned with mirth, he has the same roots in English that Aristotle used to name this virtue (*εὐτραπέλια*, or easily-turning, is the Greek word).

However, not every comic writer achieves this purpose of comedy. Thackeray states his preference for Dickens over Sterne in this regard:

The foul satyr’s eyes leer out of the leaves constantly... I think of these past writers and of one who lives amongst us now, and am grateful for the innocent laughter ... which the author of “David Copperfield” gives to my children.⁹²

⁹⁰ Thackeray, *English Humorists of the 18th Century*, p. 326.

⁹¹ *The Faerie Queene*, Book II, Canto VI, XXI.

⁹² Thackeray, *English Humorists of the 18th Century*, p. 325.

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And so we can conclude that good comedy moves us to a mirth that is pure or purged of excess and disorder. But does comedy have an effect upon any other emotion besides mirth?

There is reason to think that comedy is intended also to purge us of melancholy, to expel melancholy from us. These lines from *The Taming of the Shrew* indicate that comedy is not only to move us to mirth, but also to expel melancholy:

Your honor's players, hearing your amendment,
Are come to play a pleasant comedy;
For so your doctors hold it very meet,
Seeing too much sadness hath congeal'd your blood,
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy:
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.⁹³

We must consider then what is melancholy, whether it is a harmful passion, and whether comedy should expel it.

Melancholy is without doubt a form of sadness. Thus the Poet speaks of "The sad companion, dull-ey'd melancholy"⁹⁴ and there is this dialogue between Jacques (called Monsieur Melancholy at one point) and Rosalind:

Jacques: I have a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often ruminations, wraps me in a most humorous sadness.

Rosalind: ... Your experience, makes you sad. I had rather have a fool to make me merry than experience to make me sad, and to travel for it too.⁹⁵

Another place where Shakespeare speaks of melancholy as sadness is in this exchange:

Armado: Boy, what sign is it when a man of great spirit grows melancholy.

Boy: A great sign, sir, that he will look sad.

Armado: Why sadness is one and the self-same thing, dear imp.⁹⁶

⁹³ *The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, Sc. ii.

⁹⁴ *Pericles*, Act I, Sc. ii.

⁹⁵ *As You Like it*, Act IV, Sc. i.

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Melancholy, however, is not the only form of sadness. How does it differ from other forms. We can perhaps find the object which differentiates melancholy from other forms of sadness by contrasting it with the sadness which is close enough to melancholy that it is sometimes confused with it. Tragedy moves us to pity, but some say it leaves us melancholic. But there is a difference between melancholy and pity. Pity is sadness over the misfortune or misery of another, especially when it is undeserved. But melancholy is sadness over one's own misfortune or misery (or over the general misery of the world of which one is a part). Shakespeare touches upon both forms of sadness when he says:

Now by the gods, I pity his misfortune,
And will awake him from his melancholy.⁹⁷

The first person has pity or sadness over the misfortune of another while the second person has melancholy or sadness over his own misfortune.

There is still another form of sadness, envy, which it is useful to contrast with melancholy and pity. It is helpful to consider together the goodness or badness of these forms of sadness. Envy is sadness over the good fortune or success or happiness of another. But there does not seem to be a fourth form of sadness about good fortune and misfortune because no one would seem to be sad over his own good fortune.

These three forms of sadness (pity, melancholy and envy) differ greatly as far as being good or bad. Pity is a good emotion (unless it is excessive) while envy is always a bad emotion. Melancholy is harmful to the one undergoing it (and perhaps to those who must bear with the melancholic person), but it does not seem to involve a perversion of our natural desire as does envy. Shakespeare even has the exiled duke call pity sacred:

True is it we have seen better days,
And have with holy bell been knoll'd to church,
And sat at good men's feasts, and wip'd our eyes,

⁹⁶ *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act I, Sc. ii.

⁹⁷ *Pericles*, Act II, Sc. iii.

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Of drops that sacred pity hath engender'd. ⁹⁸

Pity is substantially the same as mercy although the word mercy may imply some ability to relieve the misery or misfortune of another. Portia's words to Shylock are oft quoted:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.⁹⁹

So if pity is "sacred" and mercy, which is substantially the same as pity, is "an attribute to God himself," pity is then a good emotion unless it is excessive. (Mercy should not eliminate justice, but season it.) Envy, however, is unnatural and diabolic. Gower says in *Pericles*:

That monster envy, oft the wrack
Of earned praise.¹⁰⁰

The word *monster* often has the sense of something unnatural in Shakespeare, as does the Latin word from which it is derived. Envy is opposed to that love which is natural between men who belong to the same species and are by nature political and social animals. And yet how common is this monster, as Henry Fielding observes:

In fact, I have remarked, that most of the defects which have discovered themselves in the friendships within my observation have

⁹⁸ *As You Like It*, Act II, Sc. vii.

⁹⁹ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Sc. i.

¹⁰⁰ *Pericles*, Act IV, Chorus.

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arisen from envy only: a hellish vice; and yet one from which I have known very few absolutely exempt.¹⁰¹

Fielding does well to call envy hellish for it is an attribute of the devil, just as mercy is an attribute of God. Thus we read in the *Bible*:

For God created man incorruptible, and to the image of his own likeness he made him. But by the envy of the devil, death came into the world: and they follow him that are of his side.¹⁰²

Envy then is at the opposite extreme from pity in terms of goodness and badness. Melancholy, we shall see, is also bad, but not diabolic or unnatural as is envy. Likewise, melancholy is not as opposed to friendship as is envy. Envy is opposed to what is *most fundamental* in friendship: wishing well to one's friend. Melancholy, on the other hand, is opposed to the act of friendship which is living together, as the melancholy of Antonio is something of a burden to his friends, as he himself admits.¹⁰³ It is not difficult to see in many ways how melancholy is a passion or emotion that is bad or harmful to the one undergoing it. Melancholy is a sadness which weighs down a person to an inactive state, if not to death:

He made her melancholy, sad, and heavy;
And so she died...¹⁰⁴

This is why the poets attribute melancholy to the heavy elements (earth and water) as opposed to the light elements (air and fire):

But, ah! thought kills me that I am not thought,
To leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone,
But that, so much of earth and water wrought,
I must attend time's leisure with my moan;
Receiving nought by elements so slow
But heavy tears, badges of either's woe.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ *Tom Jones*, Book 17, ch. 5.

¹⁰² *The Book of Wisdom*, ch. 2, vv. 23-25.

¹⁰³ *Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Sc. i.

¹⁰⁴ *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act V, Sc. ii.

¹⁰⁵ Shakespeare, *Sonnet 44*, lines 9-14.

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The other two, slight air and purging fire,
Are both with thee, wherever I abide;
The first my thought, the other my desire,
These present-absent with swift motion slide.
For when these quicker elements are gone
In tender embassy of love to thee,
My life, being made of four, with two alone
Sinks down to death, oppress'd with melancholy.¹⁰⁶

This is why Saturn, the god of melancholy, is called “heavy Saturn” by Shakespeare in *Sonnet 98*. Not only does melancholy weigh down the person so afflicted, but it is also bad for the person who lives with the melancholic person. Thus Lady Hotspur complains to Hotspur:

Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks
And given my treasures and my rights of thee
To thick-ey'd musing and curs'd melancholy?¹⁰⁷

Melancholy, then, seems to be an enemy of life itself:

Sweet recreation barr'd, what doth ensue
But moody and dull melancholy
Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair,
And at her heels a huge infectious troop
Of pale distemperatures and foes to life?¹⁰⁸

But it is as “Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair” that the harmfulness of melancholy is most fully seen. Cassius takes his own life after a mistake engendered by his own melancholy and despair. Messala makes this observation on that suicide and its causes:

Mistrust of good success hath done this deed.
O hateful error, melancholy's child,
Why dost thou show to the apt thoughts of men
The things that are not? O error, soon conceiv'd
Thou never com'st unto a happy birth,
But kill'st the mother that engender'd thee.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, *Sonnet 45*, lines 1-8.

¹⁰⁷ *Henry the Fourth*, Part One, Act II, Sc. iii.

¹⁰⁸ *The Comedy of Errors*, Act V, Sc. i.

¹⁰⁹ *Julius Caesar*, Act. V, Sc. iii.

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And when Enobarbus takes his life, he invokes the moon as mistress of melancholy:

O sovereign mistress of true melancholy,
The poisonous damp of night disponge upon me,
That life, a very rebel to my will,
May hang no longer on me.¹¹⁰

We can listen to Q. Elizabeth giving way to “black despair” and Rivers counseling her against this “desperate sorrow”:

Q. Elizabeth: Ah! who shall hinder me to wail and weep?
To chide my fortune, and torment myself?
I'll join with black despair against my soul,
And to myself become an enemy.....
Rivers: Drown desperate sorrow in dead Edward's grave,
And plant your joys in living Edward's throne.¹¹¹

Such “black despair” is very much in need of being purged. The pious king prays over the dying Beaufort:

O thou eternal Mover of the heavens!
Look with a gentle eye upon this wretch;
O! beat away the busy meddling fiend
That lays strong siege unto this wretch's soul,
And from his bosom purge this black despair.¹¹²

Beaufort, who has led a wicked life, is an extreme case. A lesser melancholy might be relieved by a walk as Hippocrates recommended:

So it is, besieged with sable-coloured melancholy, I did commend the black-oppressing humour to the most wholesome physic of thy health-giving air; and as I am a gentleman, betook myself to walk.¹¹³

Sometimes melancholy is relieved by travel.

There is a virtue which is opposed to this excessive sadness and Shakespeare touches upon this in the conversation of Guiderius and Arviragus about the melancholic Imogen (disguised as a boy):

¹¹⁰ *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act IV, Sc. vii.

¹¹¹ *Richard III*, Act II, Sc. ii.

¹¹² *Henry VI*, Part Two, Act III, Sc. ii.

¹¹³ *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act I, Sc. i.

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Guiderius:I do note
That grief and patience, rooted in him both,
Mingle their spurs together.

Arviragus: Grow, patience!
And let the stinking-elder, grief, untwine
His perishing root with the increasing vine!¹¹⁴

The elder was a tree of evil repute. Its leaves and blossoms have an unpleasant odor and black fungus droops from it. Judas Iscariot is said to have hung himself on the elder.

There can be little doubt, then, that melancholy is a bad emotion, weighing people down and leading them to despair and being opposed to life and the virtue of patience. Hence, it should be driven away or we should be purged of it.

Before we try to answer the question whether comedy purges melancholy, we should distinguish the ways in which emotions are purged. There are three ways, at least.

One way is by bringing them to an excess so that they are exhausted and so die. Shakespeare touches upon this way in the opening verses of *Twelfth Night* where the Duke Orsino says:

If music be the food of love, play on!
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die.¹¹⁵

In this way, some people are relieved of their sadness by crying. But comedy does not move us to melancholy so that it can purge melancholy by bringing it to an excess.

A second way the emotions are purged is by generating another emotion of the same kind but without the excess or disorder of the first. This does not eliminate the emotion but makes it more reasonable. The purpose of this purgation is similar to that of Lucetta when she says to Julia:

I do not seek to quench your love's hot fire,
But qualify the fire's extreme rage,
Lest it should burn above the bounds of reason.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ *Cymbeline*, Act IV, Sc. ii.

¹¹⁵ *Twelfth Night*, Act I, Sc. i.

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Lucetta does not seek to “quench” or eliminate Julia’s passion for Proteus but, rather, to “qualify” or moderate it. But melancholy is a passion that we want to eliminate as far as possible, not to qualify or moderate. Further, if comedy does not move us to melancholy, it cannot move us to a qualified melancholy.

The third kind of purgation is by generating an emotion of a contrary species. Thus Juliet’s mother says to Juliet:

Well, well, thou hast a careful father, child,
One who to put thee from thy heaviness
Hath sorted out a sudden day of joy
That thou expect’st not nor I look’d not for.¹¹⁷

The “sudden day of joy” to which her mother refers is the day of marriage with the Count Paris which Juliet’s father and mother think will drive away her “heaviness” or melancholy. The generation of joy purges us of the opposite or contrary passion of sadness. Good music often purges us of mild melancholy by generating a contrary joy. A wedding-day is a day of joy and mirth, as Theseus says about the newlyweds:

Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth.
Joy, gentle friends! joy and fresh days of love
Accompany your hearts!¹¹⁸

And hence Juliet’s father and mother expect her melancholy to be purged by her marriage. Opposed to the joy and mirth of the wedding-day is the sadness and melancholy of the funeral day. When Juliet is discovered apparently dead on her wedding-day, there is a change to the contrary as noted in these words of her father:

All things that we ordained festival
Turn from their office to black funeral -
Our instruments to melancholy bells,
Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast,
Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change,
Our bridal flow’rs serve for a bury’d corse,

¹¹⁶ *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act II, Sc. vii.

¹¹⁷ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Sc. v.

¹¹⁸ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act V, Sc. i.

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And all things change them to the contrary.¹¹⁹

Theseus looks for mirth in the days leading up to his marriage and again contrasts this mirth with the melancholy of funerals. Hence, he says to his master of revels:

.....Go, Philostrate
Sir up the Athenian youth to merriments;
Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth;
Turn melancholy forth to funerals;
The pale companion is not for our pomp.¹²⁰

The contrariety of mirth and melancholy is brought out not only by the contrariety of joy and sadness, but also by the words “pert and nimble spirit of mirth”. *Pert* means *lively* while *nimble* and *spirit* bring out that mirth is light and active. But melancholy is dead and heavy and inactive. The purgation of melancholy by the spirit of mirth reminds us of Titania’s words to Bottom:

And I will purge thy mortal grossness so
That thou shalt like an airy spirit go.¹²¹

Shakespeare compares spirits to air which is thin and light:

Our revels now are ended: these our actors -
As I foretold you - were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air.¹²²

This fits so well with the extended meaning of the medical word *catharsis* or *purgation*. Melancholy is said to thicken the blood, but mirth prevents this condition or purges the blood of this thickness. Thinning is a common example of purgation in ancient medicine and when we get too thick around the middle, we also need a thinning. Polixenes notes the good effect his young son’s mirth and liveliness has upon him:

He’s all my exercise, my mirth, my matter,
Now my sworn friend and then mine enemy,
My parasite, my soldier, statesman, all:

¹¹⁹ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Sc. iv.

¹²⁰ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act I, Sc. i.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, Act II, Sc. i.

¹²² *The Tempest*, Act IV, Sc. i.

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He makes a July's day short as December,
And with his varying childishness cures in me
Thoughts that would thicken my blood.¹²³

Although the word *spirit* is also used sometimes for melancholy, it is not because melancholy is light or thin. King John speaks of the "spirit" of melancholy to Hubert while emphasizing its being thick and heavy:

Of if that surly spirit, melancholy,
Had bak'd thy blood and made it heavy, thick,
Which else runs tickling up and down the veins,
Making that idiot, laughter, keep men's eyes
And strain their cheeks to idle merriment,
A passion hateful to my purpose.¹²⁴

Many words then are used in bringing out the contrariety of mirth and melancholy. Melancholy is *heavy, thick, lifeless, dark* while mirth is *light, thin, nimble, lively* and, like all joy, mirth may be said to brighten the face. Shakespeare touches upon this contrariety again and again:

He made her melancholy, sad, and heavy;
And so she died: had she been light, like you
Of such a merry, nimble, stirring spirit
She might ha' been a grandam ere she died;
And so may you, for a light heart lives long.¹²⁵

Mirth then will purge melancholy because it is contrary to it. Hence, in Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*, Sir Daniel observes:

"Nay, now, good cousin," replied Sir Daniel, with some earnestness, "think not that I mock at you, except in mirth, as between kinsfolk and singular friends... Tut! ye will not shy for honest laughter; it purgeth melancholy."¹²⁶

And Dromio of Syracuse is described by his master as doing the same for him:

¹²³ *The Winter's Tale*, Act I, Sc. ii.

¹²⁴ *King John*, Act III, Sc. iii.

¹²⁵ *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act V, Sc. ii.

¹²⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Black Arrow*, ch. 1. C. Scribner's ed., 1955, p. 29.

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A trusty villain, sir: that very oft,
When I am dull with care and melancholy,
Lightens my humour with his merry jests.¹²⁷

The contrariety of mirth and melancholy is such that just as mirth can expel melancholy, so too when one becomes melancholic, as does Hamlet, one can lose his mirth:

I have of late (but wherefore, I know not) lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercise: and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you - this brave o'erhanging firmament - this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me, than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.¹²⁸

Hamlet lost his mirth when his disposition became heavy; i.e., melancholic.

If mirth and melancholy are contraries so that one expels the other, and comedy moves us to mirth, it is reasonable to conclude that comedy expels melancholy or purges us of melancholy, at least temporarily.

One witness of this is the very concrete title (as far as purgation goes) of the chief source book of the comic work *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay in the 18th century. It was Thomas D'Urfey's *Wit and Mirth: Or Pills to Purge Melancholy*.

Another witness is Henry Fielding in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* where, speaking of one kind of comedy (which he calls burlesque), he says that "it contributes more to exquisite mirth and laughter than any other; and these are probably more wholesome physic for the mind, and conduce better to purge away spleen, melancholy, and ill affections, than is generally imagined"¹²⁹.

A third witness is Shakespeare himself in a passage we looked at earlier:

Your honor's players, hearing your amendment,

¹²⁷ *The Comedy of Errors*, Act I, Sc. ii.

¹²⁸ *Hamlet*, Act II, Sc. ii.

¹²⁹ *Henry Fielding*, *Joseph Andrews*, p. xxvi.

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Are come to play a pleasant comedy;
For so your doctors hold it very meet,
Seeing too much sadness hath congeal'd your blood,
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy:
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.¹³⁰

Someone might wonder whether mirth is not also opposed to pity and hence whether comedy also expels pity. It cannot be denied that mirth in some way does exclude pity. Prince Hal, for example, after the trick he and Poins have played upon Falstaff, says:

Away, good Ned. Falstaff sweats to death
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.
Were't not for laughing I should pity him.¹³¹

And in *Twelfth Night*, Toby says in the prank they are playing on Malvolio:

Come, we'll have him in a dark room and bound. My niece is already in the belief that he's mad. We may carry it thus, for our pleasure and his penance, till our very pastime, tired out of breath, prompt us to have mercy on him.¹³²

Yet mirth seems to be more directly opposed to melancholy than to pity as the many quotes above witness. Mirth is commonly spoken of as a remedy for melancholy, not for pity. Further, all melancholy seems to be bad while pity has something sacred or divine about it. Hence, mirth should be used to expel melancholy, not pity. Further, a mirth that would exclude pity could be cruel. Hence, the mirth that the comic poet should aim at, should be one that excludes melancholy far more than it does pity. The mirth aroused by the comic poet should perhaps temper pity so that it is not excessive or maudlin, but it should not try to eradicate pity. Cruelty is more directly opposed to pity than is mirth. It would be an excessive or disordered mirth that would lead to cruelty and the elimination of pity.

¹³⁰ *The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, Sc. ii.

¹³¹ *Henry IV*, Part One, Act II, Sc. ii.

¹³² *Twelfth Night*, Act III, Sc. iv.

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That mirth and pity are more compatible than mirth and melancholy is shown by the works of the comic writers themselves. It is remarkable that Shakespeare should have been able to combine comic scenes with tragic scenes in the one play of *Henry IV, Part One*, and yet write such a successful play. But he is perhaps an exception. In those works that have melancholic scenes alternating with comic scenes, such as some 19th century novels, the melancholy interferes with the mirth. Dickens's most comic work is *The Pickwick Papers*, which is free of any melancholy to speak of. But the comedy, in *Great Expectations* and in *David Copperfield*, is weakened, to some extent, in the second part, because of the melancholic element.

Milton confuses pity and melancholy somewhat in *Il Penseroso*, for the effect of tragedy should be pity, not melancholy. Pity leads us to relieve others when we can, while melancholy induces inactivity. Pity and mirth are not opposed as are melancholy and mirth. Pity and mirth keep each other balanced; they keep each other from being excessive or disordered. Pity keeps our merriment from being cruel and mirth keeps our pity from becoming maudlin or excessive and from turning into melancholy. This is why Shakespeare can combine tragedy and comedy with an altogether unsuspected success in *Henry the IV, Part One*. The Greeks followed the performance of three tragedies with a comedy because they realized the need to balance the emotional effect of tragedy with that of comedy. Melancholy and mirth, however, do not balance each other; they destroy each other.

It is difficult for a comic poet or writer to achieve the catharsis he should. In trying to moderate mirth or merriment, he may slip into the melancholic. Or in trying to eliminate melancholy, he may be led into some excess or disorder in his mirth. Dickens and Thackeray are apt to let in some melancholy while Smollett and Sterne and Fielding are apt to go to some excess or disorder in their mirth.

Should any other emotion be in the definition of comedy? We think that one other emotion should be in the definition. This is the emotion of hope which is the opposite of despair. As despair goes

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with melancholy often, so hope (despair's opposite) should go with mirth (melancholy's opposite).

Mirth without hope is incomplete or too transitory. The Poet touches upon the transitory character of mirth in the Clown's Song in *Twelfth Night*:

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter
What's to come is still unsure:
In delay there lies no plenty;
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty!
Youth's a stuff will not endure.¹³³

Good things come to an end, as the proverb says. But man naturally seeks a lasting joy. At the end of *Henry VI, Part Three*, the king expresses this natural longing:

And now what rests but that we spend the time
With stately triumphs, mirthful comic shows,
Such as befits the pleasure of the court?
Sound drums and trumpets! farewell sour annoy!
For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy.¹³⁴

But this "lasting joy" is not possible without hope. This is why the comic writers, whether by art or by nature, have been led so often to end their comedies by marriage or the promise of a marriage. For marriage naturally combines both present joy and hope. There is hope both for the continued happiness of the couple (hence, the fairy-tale ending: "they were married and lived happily ever afterwards") and for the human race which is continued by marriage and what it is ordered to. It is not by chance that Shakespeare has intertwined the secret plans for the marriage of Fenton and Anne Page with the final disgrace of Falstaff. Fenton himself notes how they have become intertwined when he speaks of the plans for the final disgrace of Falstaff and his own plan to run off with Anne to the Host of the Garter Inn who is going to assist him in the matter of a priest to marry them:

From time to time I have acquainted you

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Act II, Sc. iii.

¹³⁴ *Henry VI, Part Three*, Act V, Sc. vii.

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With the dear love I bear to fair Anne Page;
Who mutually hath answer'd my affection,
So far forth as herself might be her chooser,
Even to my wish. I have a letter from her
Of such contents as you will wonder at;
The mirth whereof so larded with my matter,
That neither singly can be manifested,
Without the show of both; wherein fat Falstaff
Hath a great scene: the image of the jest
I'll show you here at large.¹³⁵

The sub-plot of the elopement of Fenton and Anne Page not only adds mirth to this superb comedy (many are deceived who have other plans for Anne, including her parents), but it especially adds the element of hope. And what is remarkable here is that Shakespeare has added a strong element of hope, not only in the marriage of the young people with its inevitable strong current of hope, but by increasing the hope of all the other principal characters in a theatrical tour de force that is stunning. Shakespeare uses the surprise wedding even to relieve the disgrace of Falstaff who can hope for recovery in the midst of the confusion generated by the deception of the Pages. It also helps Ford, who was deceived about his wife, to be able to see the mistakes or deception of the Pages. And the Pages, being easy-going, easily adjust to their handsome new son-in-law who, they realize, will make their daughter happy, and they wish them “many, many merry days!” The final lines of this comedy are worth quoting here. Falstaff’s disgrace was earlier and Fenton has just announced the secret marriage:

Ford: Stand not amaz'd: here is no remedy:
In love the heavens themselves do guide the state:
Money buys land, and wives are sold by fate.
Falstaff: I am glad, though you have ta'en a special stand
to strike at me, that your arrow hath glanced.
Page: Well, what remedy? - Fenton, heaven give thee joy!
What cannot be eschew'd must be embrac'd.
Falstaff: When night dogs run all sorts of deer are chas'd.
Mrs. Page: Well, I will muse no further. Master Fenton,
Heaven give you many, many merry days!

¹³⁵ *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act IV, Sc. vi.

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Good husband, let us every one go home,
And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire;
Sir John and all.

Ford: Let it be so. Sir John,
To Master Brook you yet shall hold your word;
For he to-night shall lie with Mistress Ford.¹³⁶

Another major reason why hope should be in the definition of comedy can be seen if we consider two things. One is that tragedy and comedy are the principal forms of likeness of human life and character in words. The other is that there are four principal passions or emotions.

From the Greeks and Romans, we have received tragedy and comedy as the principal forms of likeness of human life and character in words. Aristotle's *Poetics* follows experience and tradition when it was built around a discussion of these two principal forms. Likewise, when Socrates talks about love with the poets in the *Symposium*, there are two poets present, one a comic poet (Aristophanes) and the other a tragic poet (Agathon). Hence, in our theaters, there is often a representation of the tragic and comic masks.

The four principal passions are joy and sadness, hope and fear. The reasons why these are the principal passions belongs to the consideration of the passions and we cannot enter into those reasons here.¹³⁷ Shakespeare also touches upon these four passions in the words of *King Henry*:

Master lieutenant, now that God and friends
Have shaken Edward from the regal seat,
And turn'd my captive state to liberty,
My fear to hope, my sorrows unto joys,
At our enlargement, what are thy due fees?¹³⁸

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Act V, Sc. v.

¹³⁷ Thomas Aquinas considers why they are the principal passions in his treatise on the passions or emotions, in the *Summa Theol.*, IaIIae, q. 25, a. 4. There is also a consideration of these four emotions being the principal ones in the *Q. D. de Veritate*, q. 26, a. 5.

¹³⁸ King Henry in *Henry VI*, Part Three, Act IV, Sc. vi.

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The line “My fear to hope, my sorrows unto joys” not only touches upon the four principal passions, but also of a change from fear and sorrow to hope and joy. Fear and sorrow go together to some extent and hope and joy likewise. One could say that fear and sorrow or sadness are contrary to hope and joy.

Since tragedy and comedy are contrary; and tragedy moves us to two of the principal passions - pity (a form of sadness) and fear which are contrary to mirth (as a form of joy) and hope; we would expect that comedy would move us to both mirth and hope. Otherwise, one of the four principal passions would not be moved by the two principal forms of likeness of human life and character in words. The plots of tragedy and comedy are often contrary (that of tragedy tending to move from happiness to misery and that of comedy, in the reverse direction; or that of tragedy from good fortune to bad and that of comedy, in the opposite direction). Shakespeare touches upon these four principal passions as they relate to these contrary movements in the plots of tragedy and comedy in these words of Edgar in *King Lear*:

Yet better thus, and known to be contemn'd,
Then still contemn'd and flatter'd. To be worst,
The lowest and most dejected things of fortune,
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.
The lamentable change is from the best;
The worst returns to laughter.¹³⁹

The change from the best (happiness or good fortune) to the worst (misery or bad fortune) involves fear and is lamentable or sad while the contrary change is in esperance or hope and laughter or mirth. Thus as the plot of tragedy moves us both to a form of sadness (pity) and to fear, likewise the plot of comedy should move us both to a form of joy (mirth) and to hope.

We can take Terence as a witness to the importance of hope in Greek and Roman comedy. Terence is praised as a comic dramatist and he took Menander as a model. Congreve, in his praise of Terence, traces the influences on him back to Aristotle:

¹³⁹ *King Lear*, Act IV, Sc. i.

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As Terence excelled in his performances, so had he great advantages to encourage his undertakings; for he built on the foundations of Menander; his plots were generally modelled, and his characters ready drawn to hand. He copied Menander, and Menander had no less light in the formation of his characters, from the observations of Theophrastus, of whom he was a disciple; and Theophrastus, it is known, was not only the disciple, but the immediate successor of Aristotle, the first and greatest judge of poetry.¹⁴⁰

Palmer Bovie, the editor and one of the translators in a recent edition of the complete comedies of Terence, has noted this element of hope in the plays of Terence:

Terence is as much an *anima naturaliter Christiana* as Virgil was - he believed in faith, hope and love. But for Terence the greatest of these was hope.¹⁴¹

Although the hope of Terence is not the Christian theological virtue of hope, Bovie, as a translator and editor and student of Terence's plays, is valuable as a witness to the connection of Terence's comedies with hope.

Antonio Sebastiano Minturno, the Italian Renaissance critic, has emphasized the importance of surprise in the emotional effect of Terence's plays:

But it is typical of the comic poet to give a pleasing and gay ending to his fable, which could not be possible unless he were able to induce surprise; things happening outside of our expectation are considered surprising. I do not know how the plots whose ending is not such can amuse anyone; it is for this reason that the Terentian lovers, when they expect it least ... can begin to enjoy their love. Listen how unexpectedly in *The Woman of Andros* Pamphilus shows that what he could hardly have hoped for happened to him:

Someone may think perhaps that I don't think this

¹⁴⁰ Congreve, *Dedication of The Way of the World to Ralph, Earl of Montague*, in *Famous Plays...*, p. 424.

¹⁴¹ Palmer Bovie, Introduction to Terence's play *The Girl from Andros (Andria)* in *The Complete Comedies of Terence*, Modern Verse Translations, by Palmer Bovie, Constance Carrier and Douglas Parker, Edited and with a foreword by Palmer Bovie, Newark, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1974, p. 7.

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to be true, but I like the idea of it being true.

Chaerea in *The Eunuch* confesses that he achieved such happiness by the will of the gods without really having any hope of attaining it... Chremes in *Phormio* expresses his surprise this way:

O gods, how at times things which one could never dare
to hope for happen inconsiderately and fortuitously.¹⁴²

One can see here a certain likeness between the use of surprise in comedy and in tragedy to move hope in the former and fear in the latter. Tragedy arouses fear in part because the change for the worse comes upon the tragic hero unexpectedly. Solon said: "Call no man happy until he be dead", because one cannot foresee the lamentable reverse of fortune he may still undergo while alive. Hence, Sophocles paraphrases Solon's words at the end of his tragedies. Likewise, when an unexpected change for the better takes place, our hope is suddenly and strongly aroused.

Comedy then moves us to mirth and to hope, purging us of melancholy. Someone might want to add "purging us of despair", since hope is the opposite of despair. But perhaps this is not necessary since melancholy is not always accompanied by despair. Further, if one's melancholy has led one to despair, perhaps one's case is too serious to be cured by comedy. The witness of the comic writers here is important also for they speak often of the comic as driving away melancholy, but rarely of driving out despair. Men often have a touch of melancholy - they need only listen to the news - but despair is not so common a condition.

If comedy moves us to mirth and hope and hence drives away melancholy (and perhaps some mild despair or discouragement), we can see again that mirth is more opposed to melancholy than to pity. Pity, as we have said, is more opposed to cruelty, and melancholy, to mirth. Thus the Duke opposes the apparent cruelty of Shylock to mercy or pity:

Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too,
That thou but leadest this fashion of thy malice
To the last hour of act; and then 'tis thought

¹⁴² Minturno, *The Art of Poetry* (1563), in *Theories of Comedy*, p. 84.

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Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange
Than is thy strange apparent cruelty;
And where thou now exacts the penalty,
Which is a pound of this poor merchant's flesh,
Thou wilt not only loose the forfeiture,
But, touch'd with humane gentleness and love,
Forgive a moiety of the principal
Glancing an eye of pity on his losses.¹⁴³

But just as pity is coupled with fear as the effect of tragedy, so cruelty goes with audacity, the opposite of fear:

But to my charge. The king hath sent to know
The nature of your griefs; and whereupon
You conjure from the breast of civil peace
Such bold hostility, teaching his duteous land
Audacious cruelty.¹⁴⁴

We can counterbalance the “audacious cruelty” spoken of here with the “desperate sorrow” of which Rivers spoke in *Richard III*:

Drown desperate sorrow in dead Edward's grave,
And plant your joys in living Edward's throne.¹⁴⁵

Since audacity is directly opposed to fear and cruelty to pity, “audacious cruelty” is directly opposed to the fearful pity of tragedy. Likewise, since despair is directly opposed to hope and the sorrow of melancholy, to the joy of mirth, who does not see that “desperate sorrow” is directly opposed to hopeful mirth? Hence, the hopeful mirth of comedy is much more opposed to the desperate sorrow of melancholy than it is to fearful pity. It was not necessary for Aristotle to put the exclusion of cruelty in the definition of tragedy as we are putting the exclusion of melancholy in the definition of comedy because cruelty is not as common as is melancholy. Further cruelty is unnatural while melancholy is natural: it is natural to be saddened by one's own misfortunes or the miserable condition of the world, just as one naturally loves oneself and the whole of which one is a part.

¹⁴³ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Sc. i.

¹⁴⁴ *King Henry the Fourth*, Part One, Act IV, Sc. iii, Blunt to Hotspur.

¹⁴⁵ *Richard III*, Act II, Sc. ii, To Q. Elizabeth.

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Comedy, therefore, moves us to mirth and hope, driving away melancholy. We have had occasion previously to speak of Goldsmith's comic powers and to note Washington Irving's admiration of him. To conclude our consideration of the emotions in the definition of tragedy, it is worthwhile to cite an appreciation of Irving and Goldsmith:

We have always fancied that there was a strong resemblance between Goldsmith and Irving... They have the same quick perception of the ludicrous... There is the same quiet vein of humor in both, and the same cheerful spirit of hopefulness... If you would learn to ... make for yourself sunshine where half your fellow-men see nothing but shadows and gloom, read and meditate Goldsmith and Irving.¹⁴⁶

We can now put together the definition of comedy from those parts of the definition which are common to it and the definition of tragedy (these parts are shown in Aristotle's *Poetics*) and from those parts considered in this paper which distinguish or separate comedy from tragedy.

Comedy is *a likeness of an action that is laughable, complete and of some magnitude, in sweetened speech, acted out, moving us to mirth and hope so as to purify these and expel melancholy*©.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted from G. W. Greene's *Biographical Studies*, in Heath's English Classic Edition of Washington Irving, *Life of Oliver Goldsmith*, D.C. Heath & Co., 1904, pp xx-xxi.

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