

“THE DISPOSITION OF NATURES”: ARISTOTLE, COMEDY, AND SHAKESPEARE’S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

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“Poetry,” claims Aristotle, “is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history.”¹ Exactly how tragedy can be such occupies much of Aristotle’s subsequent thought in the *Poetics*, but he is referring here to all dramatic poetry. This is significant; it implies that comedy (the other dramatic genre he discusses) shares tragedy’s capacity for serious speculative thought. Just how comedy might do this, though, receives only a brief treatment in the *Poetics*, despite Aristotle’s apparent intention to give it attention equal to that he allots tragedy. Indeed, it has long been thought that this promised account was written, but (*pace* Umberto Eco) was lost before the sixth century.² There are at least three sources, however, which classicists have for some time identified as offering substantial clues to what Aristotle might have had to say about comedy. These are, in order of significance, the extant *Poetics* itself; relevant passages from other works recognized as part of Aristotle’s corpus; and the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a tenth-century Byzantine manuscript which may be a summary of Aristotle’s lost treatise on comedy. The extant *Poetics*, often assumed to be a work solely on tragedy, actually devotes equal time in its opening chapters to comedy. Two crucial questions left us by the *Poetics* are what Aristotle

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¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Aristotle: “Poetics” I with the “Tractatus Coislinianus,” a Hypothetical Reconstruction of “Poetics” II, and the Fragments of the “On Poets,”* ed. and trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 1451b. Except where otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations of the *Poetics* will be taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by Bekker numbers.

² See Janko, ed., “*Poetics*,” 159.

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saw as the emotions in comedy that, parallel to the "pity and fear" of tragedy, undergo catharsis, and what analogue tragic *hamartia* or "error," so crucial to tragedy's action, might have in comedy (1449b, 1453a). Recently, classicists Leon Golden and Richard Janko have independently provided intriguing answers to these questions by bringing relevant parts of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Nichomachean Ethics* (Golden) and the *Tractatus* (Janko) to bear on the lacunae of the *Poetics*. In particular, Golden builds a surprising but plausible case for *nemesan* or "righteous indignation" as the dominant emotion of comedy, and argues that comic error, unlike tragic, arises from an excess or deficiency of virtue.³ Janko highlights the role that the comic joker and his or her deceptions play in exposing this comic error. His study also implicitly bolsters Golden's significant reinterpretation of catharsis as an "intellectual clarification."⁴

Pressing their findings into the interpretive service of Shakespeare's comedy may well elicit cries of "anachronism!" Indeed, the more obvious way to discuss the relationship of Shakespeare to Aristotle is to survey the commentaries of Robortello, Maggi, Castelvetro, *et al.* (the Cinquecento Italians who, after its thousand year absence, reintroduced the *Poetics* into Western literary discourse), and then attempt to locate in Shakespeare's drama an engagement with their redactions of Aristotle. Shakespeare certainly had at least this sort of second-hand knowledge of the *Poetics*, but the conclusion most easily drawn from such a comparison is that he regularly and boldly contradicted (or just plain ignored) what he knew of Aristotle.⁵

³ Leon Golden, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1992), 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ This is seen in the frequent critical manoeuvre of acknowledging the *Poetics*' analysis of drama only to dismiss it as inadequate to a discussion of Shakespeare. Stephen Greenblatt does this in his essay "Shakespearean Tragedy" even as much of his subsequent discussion unwittingly depends upon the *Poetics*' terms and categories. See *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., *Tragedies*, eds. Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2008), 104ff. Ralph Berry provides another example in *Tragic Instance: The Sequence of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 12-14.

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Ironically, though, the very thing that Shakespeare most appears to reject about the Renaissance version of the *Poetics* – its strongly prescriptive dramatic formulas – is precisely what recent classical scholarship has dismissed as most un-Aristotelian. Even more importantly, the strong emphasis the latter has placed on things often marginalized during the Renaissance – the *Poetics*' deeply exploratory and speculative nature,⁶ the centrality of its argument about plot,⁷ and the complexity of its concept of *mimesis*⁸ – all accord remarkably well with Shakespeare's drama.⁹ In other words, modern readings of the *Poetics* make Shakespeare look much more Aristotelian than do Renaissance ones, and this is what interests me here.

The argument for this similarity need not depend on Shakespeare having carefully studied the *Poetics*, much less twentieth-century extrapolations from it, but only on what I aim to show as the real responsiveness of his comedy to principles that Golden and Janko find latent in the *Poetics*. As with any new theoretical reading of Shakespeare, my approach is not primarily historical (claiming that Shakespeare derived his ideas from some early form of the theory) but comparative, suggesting a set of categories by which we might better understand how his comedy functions. *Measure for Measure* provides a fine example of this. The play evokes in its characters and audience an extraordinary array of emotion in response to the various hoaxes of

⁶ See George Whalley, "On Translating Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Aristotle's "Poetics*," eds. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal and Kingston, Ont: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 21-29.

⁷ See Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's "Poetics"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 138-67.

⁸ See Golden, *Mimesis*, 63-75.

⁹ Renaissance scholars were certainly aware of these central tenets of the *Poetics*, but their oft-noted habit of conflating Aristotle with Horace's *Ars Poetica* and, in the case of comedy, the essays of Donatus and Euanthius, frequently led them to subordinate the *Poetics*' fundamental ideas to ones more peripheral, ultimately resulting in the strictures of neo-classicism so dissonant with Shakespeare's drama. Halliwell (*Aristotle's "Poetics*," 288-308) provides a concise account of the Renaissance's strongly rhetorical approach to the *Poetics*. For the standard exhaustive survey, see Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), chs 9-13.

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Vienna’s Duke. Golden’s and Janko’s hypotheses compellingly illuminate the trick at the centre of the play, the faked death of Claudio. It seems directed at his sister Isabella, but what does the Duke expect it to accomplish? And again, what is the nature of the change wrought in her by the time of Act Five’s judgment scene? In each case, the *Tractatus*’ explanation of the purpose of comic hoaxes, the emotion of indignation and its relationship to pity, and a new understanding of catharsis reveal a play fundamentally concerned to portray, test, and alter “the disposition of natures” of structure and character.¹⁰

I

Aristotle begins the *Poetics* by stating that dramatists represent “people in action,” and “these people are necessarily either good or inferior. For characters almost always follow from these [qualities] alone; everyone differs in character because of vice and virtue” (1448a).¹¹ He then categorizes dramatic genres according to the sorts of characters they represent: “comedy prefers to represent people who are worse than those who exist, tragedy people who are better.” “Good” and “inferior” in the first quotation are Janko’s translations of *spoudaios* and *phaulos*, adjectives which describe respectively a blend of moral and social stature, and its lack. Leon Golden translates the pair as “noble” and “ignoble” in order to stress their antonymic nature, and in turn, “the emphatic distinction Aristotle makes between the noble or good (*spoudaios*) character and action of tragedy and the ignoble or bad (*phaulos*) character and action of comedy.”¹² Aristotle later specifies just what sort of inferiority comic characters possess, stating that comedy is “a representation of people who are inferior – not, however, with respect to every

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.1.166-67. Subsequent quotations of the play are cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number.

¹¹ In this and all subsequent quotations of Aristotle, words within square brackets have been inserted by the translator to clarify meaning.

¹² Golden, *Mimesis*, 67.

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[kind of] vice, but the laughable" (1449a).¹³ "The laughable," he explains, is "a sort of error or ugliness that is not painful and destructive, just as, evidently, a laughable mask is something ugly and distorted without pain" (1449a). That the laughable in a person or action can be an error links comic character and action to those of tragedy, in which the *hamartia* or grave mistake of the protagonist is crucial to the plot. Translators Janko and George Whalley both suggest that like tragic, comic error arises from ignorance: "Plato (*Philebus* 48A-50B) makes it clear that what we find ridiculous in others is their deficiency in self-knowledge."¹⁴ But where tragic *hamartia* has for some time been recognized by classicists to be a *mistake* in action or decision and not, as it has often been misunderstood, a moral "tragic flaw,"¹⁵ comic *hamartēma*¹⁶ must be a mild flaw, because the central feature of comic characters is inferiority or ignobility. Since Aristotle insists that "everyone differs in character because of vice or virtue," a tragic protagonist is thus *spoudaios* because of his or her virtue and a comic character *phaulos* because of vice.

Golden then directs us to Aristotle's familiar concept of virtue as a mean between vices in the *Nicomachean Ethics* for further suggestions of what, in addition to general self-ignorance, might constitute the error of comedy's *phauloi* characters. In the *Ethics*, he says, we find a "virtual rogue's gallery of comic archetypes": the sycophant and the misanthrope, who evince excess and deficiency respectively in the virtue of friendship; the braggart and the self-

¹³ While comedy is concerned with the laughable, it is evident that Aristotle does not mean to contrast it with tragedy as a genre without seriousness or significance. On the contrary, it shares in precisely that characteristic which makes all poetry "philosophical and serious": an interest in the "universals" of human existence (*Poetics*, 1451b). Thus, "comedy in its mature development is, for Aristotle, as equally serious an intellectual and aesthetic experience as tragedy, only directed at ignoble rather than noble human action and character." See Golden, *Mimesis*, 67.

¹⁴ George Whalley, commentary on *Poetics*, in *Aristotle's "Poetics,"* trans. George Whalley, eds John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal and Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997), 62 n. 22.

¹⁵ Whalley's notes on 1453a offers a succinct summary of the interpretive history of *hamartia*. See Whalley, commentary, 94 n. 123.

¹⁶ Aristotle uses this close cognate of *hamartia* to identify comic error.

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deprecating dissembler, who demonstrate excess and deficiency of right self-opinion, and so on.¹⁷ What is particularly important here is the general principle that comic error, being a mild form of vice, will be an excess or deficiency of some virtue. The *phaulos* character of comedy will be imbalanced, and, being an example of the laughable, that imbalance will arouse laughter.

The concept of catharsis receives no direct explanation in the *Poetics*, but has nonetheless precipitated centuries of debate. Following Jacob Bernays, twentieth-century commentators tended to understand the experience it describes as the arousal and purgation of pathological emotion,¹⁸ but this interpretation has been increasingly questioned. Instead, both Kevin Crotty and Richard Janko observe that in the last thirty years, a "consensus seems to be forming that tragic catharsis has to do with the increased understanding, or 'clarification,' of the emotions."¹⁹ Leon Golden's argument for catharsis as "intellectual clarification" was one of the original versions of this general view and is particularly relevant to Shakespeare's comedy. The only occurrence of the term in the *Poetics* is at the famous definition of tragedy, where Aristotle states that tragedy accomplishes "through pity and fear the *katharsis* of such experiences"²⁰ (*i.e.* those pitiful and fearful). While Aristotle does not speak directly about comic catharsis, his use of the

¹⁷ Golden, *Mimesis*, 92.

¹⁸ See Bernays's seminal 1857 paper, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelische Theorie des Drama* (1857), translated by Jonathan Barnes and Jennifer Barnes as "Aristotle on the Effect of Tragedy," in *Articles on Aristotle, Vol. 4: Psychology and Aesthetics*, eds Jonathan Barnes et al. (London: Duckworth, 1979), 154-65

¹⁹ Crotty, *The Poetics of Supplication: Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 15 n. 32. Janko makes a similar assertion in "*Poetics*," vii. In addition to Golden, Carnes Lord, Martha Nussbaum, Stephen Halliwell, and Janko are among those mentioned as holding broadly similar views of catharsis.

²⁰ I here quote Golden's translation of *Poetics* 1449b (*Mimesis*, 66). The term he renders "experiences" is *pathēmata*, which can also be translated as "emotions" (Janko) or "painful acts" (Whalley). There is an openness in Golden's "experiences" which allows for both possibilities. For a brief discussion of the options, see Whalley, commentary, 68 n. 14.

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term makes it appear not to be limited only to tragedy; comedy would accomplish a similar catharsis, but of those emotions which are central to it.

Golden builds a detailed case for his reading of the concept on two points. The first is Aristotle's identification of "'learning and inference' as the essential goal and pleasure of all *mimesis*," or representation.²¹ "Learning and inference" are essentially philosophical acts: the realization of the particular's relationship to the universal. Secondly, we have seen that Aristotle puts forward the catharsis of pity and fear as the end of tragedy. So, if learning and inference are the end of *mimesis* in general, and catharsis the end of tragedy (a particular sort of *mimesis*), it follows that tragic catharsis must be a learning about the "universal nature of pity and fear in human existence."²² Instead of hindering reason, as Plato charged, emotion is a legitimate object of the intellect, and thus able to contribute to self-understanding. Rather than being dryly cerebral or strictly cognitive,²³ Golden's theory of catharsis highlights how "painful emotions such as pity and fear serve as especially potent incentives for grappling intellectually with their cause and effect."²⁴ Tragic catharsis can thus be helpfully (if not exclusively) seen as the "intellectual clarification" of pity and fear, and of pitiful and fearful occurrences. Moreover, the result of this clarification of the nature of emotion and circumstance is frequently "a powerful moral transformation" as the character begins to act on his or her new understanding.²⁵ We can infer from this that if the vice of comedy's *phaulos* character is in some way an imbalance, then

²¹ Golden, *Mimesis*, 21. Golden here quotes *Poetics* 1448b.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Lear (who also criticizes Nussbaum) have both levelled this charge against earlier published versions of Golden's theory. He has refined the one which appears in *Mimesis*, bringing it fairly close to Nussbaum's understanding. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 390-91; and Lear, "Katharsis," in *Essays on Aristotle's "Poetics,"* ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 318-26.

²⁴ Golden, *Mimesis*, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

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catharsis might be the process whereby the character recognizes this imbalance and moves to a proper mean of virtue.

As is evident in my summary, Golden is not consistent about whether catharsis occurs in a play's audience, its characters, or its plot:²⁶ he refers directly to the comprehension of the plot that the audience gradually attains as it unfolds (thereby locating catharsis in both audience and plot), but both his examples identify literary characters²⁷ as those who experience catharsis. For my purposes, the possibility that a play's characters can undergo catharsis is most illuminating; indeed, Martha Nussbaum's example of Sophocles' Cleon suggests that what catharsis an audience experiences is first modeled for it within the drama that it watches.²⁸ Shakespeare, it seems, is especially interested in dramatizing in his plays the reactions that Aristotle's commentators have typically suggested occur within an audience. Of these, the cathartic realization and amendment of a previous error of imbalance are central.

Aristotle's use of the term catharsis in his definition of tragedy implies that it would be equally applicable to comedy, except that the emotions on which it works would be those uniquely aroused by comedy. The *Poetics* does not identify what these might be, but here Aristotle's larger body of work is relevant. Golden points to the catalogue of emotions in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle defines pity in terms very close to those of the *Poetics* (1453a): it is "a certain pain at an apparently destructive or painful event happening to one who does not deserve

²⁶ Commentators have typically located catharsis in the audience; Gerald Else, H. D. Kitto, and Whalley, in the action. For an account of this, see Whalley, "Translating Aristotle's *Poetics*," 27-28.

²⁷ Achilles during his visit with Priam in *Iliad* 24 and Strepsiades in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, upon realizing that he has been duped by Socrates. See Golden, *Mimesis*, 34-37, 95-97.

²⁸ "Just as, inside the *Antigone*, Creon's learning came by way of the grief he felt for his son's death, so, as we watch a tragic character, it is frequently not thought but the emotional response itself that leads us to understand what our values are" (*Fragility of Goodness*, 390).

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it and which a person might expect himself or one of his own to suffer."²⁹ Aristotle then goes on to describe pity's opposite as the feeling of *nemesan*, or "being indignant," which is "in some way opposed to feeling pain at undeserved *misfortune*" (*i.e.* pity) and means "being pained at undeserved *good fortune*."³⁰ Citing E. M. Cope, Golden explains that *nemesan* "represents the "righteous indignation" arising from a sense of the claims of justice and desert, which is aroused in us by the contemplation of success without merit, and a consequent pleasure in the punishment of one who is thus undeservedly prosperous."³¹ It is thus indignation, which Aristotle describes as opposite to pity, that Golden argues is the comic emotion analogous to pity and fear in tragedy.

Two further possibilities are opened up by Golden's suggestion of indignation as the comic emotion. First, in the attempt to clarify his argument, he downplays the clear similarities Aristotle notes between pity and indignation – similarities which are as fruitful in examining Shakespeare as are the differences between the terms. Aristotle explains that "being pained at undeserved *good fortune* arises from the same moral character [as does pity], and both emotions are characteristic of a good character."³² It follows, then, that the closer a comedy comes to portraying painful acts, as do many of Shakespeare's, the more likely it is that the action will evoke pity as well as indignation. Second, Aristotle follows up his definition of *nemesan* by providing examples of those undeservedly prosperous sorts of people that rightly arouse indignation in us. Their shared characteristic is that their prosperity violates the laws of

²⁹ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. George A. Kennedy (Oxford University Press, 2007), 1385b.

³⁰ Ibid., 1386b. *Nemesan* (literally, "being indignant") is a verbal noun derived from *nemesis*; Kennedy suggests that Aristotle may have preferred the former term because "nemesis had often taken on the meaning of 'divine retribution'" (141).

³¹ Golden, *Mimesis*, 92.

³² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1386b.

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"proportion and appropriateness": what they have received is disproportionate to their character or deeds.³³ If we consider that it is likely a comedy's *phaulos* character who arouses indignation in both other characters and the audience, we can then make a link between the imbalance which makes him or her ignoble and the violation of proportion which arouses indignation: his or her disproportion may be not simply one of circumstances but of emotions which lead to, or indicative of, vice.

In his attempt to reconstruct an Aristotelian comic theory,³⁴ Janko carefully points out the significant consistency of the *Tractatus* with the extant *Poetics* and the plausibility of its expansions on it, particularly with regard to how comedy achieves its effect. In an earlier study of the *Tractatus*, Lane Cooper wonders whether the *pathos* or "suffering" so central to tragedy might have its comic counterpart in "the comic incident" or "device" at the centre of many comedic plots.³⁵ Janko bears this suggestion out: the *Tractatus* observes that laughter arises "as a result of (a) diction and (b) incidents."³⁶ In categorizing the different sorts of each, "deception" is listed as the first sort of incident.³⁷ Deceptions, of course, require a joker or trickster figure to enact them. The *Tractatus* not only acknowledges this in its subsequent discussion of the objects of comic laughter but suggests a motive: "The joker wishes to expose errors of soul"³⁸ – precisely those things that Aristotle in the *Poetics* identifies as characteristic of the *phaulos* character, "the laughable," or mild vice. The aim, then, of at least some of the deceptions practiced in comedy is the exposure of the *phaulos* character's vice. The motivation for this

³³ Leon Golden, "Aristotle on the Pleasure of Comedy," in *Essays on Aristotle's "Poetics,"* ed. Rorty, 382.

³⁴ For a brief reception history of the treatise, see Richard Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of "Poetics" II* (1984; repr. London: Duckworth, 2002), 1-4.

³⁵ Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922), 197.

³⁶ Janko, trans. and ed., *Tractatus Coislinianus*, in Janko, "Poetics," 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Aristophanes' *Strepsiades* is once again the example of this.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

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exposure would logically arise from indignation at the imbalanced or disproportionate nature of the *phaulos* character. But unlike the direct abuse of lampoon, the genre out of which comedy evolved and which "details without concealment the bad [qualities and actions] attaching to people," comic deceptions or jokes must be indirect, as Janko points out, because "jokes shade into abuse if they go too far."³⁹ Thus, the *Tractatus* states, "comedy requires the so-called innuendo."⁴⁰

This emphasis on the revelation of error further links the *Tractatus* to the *Poetics* because it recalls the process of catharsis Golden has outlined: by acknowledging his error when the joker exposes it, the *phaulos* character becomes a locus of catharsis. And given that he is only mildly vicious, it is likely that he would then be concerned to correct himself by finding the virtuous mean from which his vice deviates. Moreover, that the comic hoax would directly contribute to the ultimate effect of drama – catharsis of the emotions and circumstances evoked – fits precisely Aristotle's insistence that action and plot are of primary importance. Drama is "a representation not of human beings but of action and life.... Consequently the incidents, *i.e.* the plot, are the end of tragedy, and the end is what is most important" (1450a). As a central comic plot device, the hoax is thus doubly important.

II

The biggest problem with approaching *Measure for Measure* as a comedy on Aristotle's terms is its current critical status as a tragicomedy – a genre unknown (at least by that name) to Aristotle. The *Poetics* states that comic error is "laughable," "not painful or destructive," but *Measure* crucially employs tragicomedy's typical brush with death: Angelo's vice very nearly costs Claudio his life, and Isabella for a time fully believes that it has. Yet Aristotle is not quite

³⁹ Janko, "*Poetics*," 167 n. 7., referring to *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.1128a.

⁴⁰ Janko, *Tractatus*, 45.

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as emphatic in his division of tragedy from comedy as is often thought. When describing what sort of *peripeteia* or reversal of fortune makes for the best tragedy, he insists that it should not show "wicked men [passing] from misfortune to good fortune. This is the most untragic of all...for it is neither morally satisfying nor pitiable nor terrifying" (*Poetics* 1452b). This most "untragic" action is, of course, that of comedy, which in its initial stages is deliberately not "morally satisfying" but productive of righteous indignation. What is interesting, though, is the possibility that the comic action described here can involve not only the mildly vicious but a "wicked" character, and will still produce an effect proper to comedy. As Malcolm Heath suggests, "since [Aristotle] did not regard all painful and destructive events as evocative of fear and pity, he need not have thought that pain and destruction are always inimical to laughter."⁴¹

Indeed, Aristotle goes on to allow in tragedy the "double structure" characteristic of comic action "which ends in opposite ways for the better and worse [persons]," though he sees it as inferior in tragedy because its "pleasure...is more particular to comedy. There the bitterest enemies in the story exit as friends at the conclusion and nobody kills anyone else" (1453a). Two ideas are present here: first, if the best tragedy eschews the comic pleasure of reconciliation, it follows that the best comedy would reject the tragic pleasure found in the emotions of pity and fear produced by destructive error. Second, though, Aristotle also observes that such mingling does occur and even allows for it in tragedy; again, it makes sense that the opposite – some tragic pleasure in comedy – would then also be permissible. So what appears to be Aristotle's earlier proscription of pain and destruction in comedy may actually be a statement of the comic ideal rather than a rule, "a generalization...designed primarily to distinguish comedy from tragedy,"

⁴¹ Malcolm Heath, "Aristotelian Comedy," *Classical Quarterly* 39 (1989): 353.

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and from which a dramatist may deviate.⁴² *Measure for Measure* is thus broadly consonant with Aristotelian comic principles.

To begin with, then, the overarching action of *Measure for Measure* is itself a comic hoax. The Duke of Vienna takes it into his head to leave his city in the hands of the young courtier Angelo. He is from the beginning suspicious of Angelo's apparent virtue, however, and after leaving for a time, comes back to Vienna disguised as a Friar so that he can "behold his sway" (1.3.43). The Duke clearly states his reason for playing this trick on Angelo: he wants to "see / If power change purpose, what our seemers be" (1.3.53-4). This intention to test "the disposition of natures" (as he later calls it⁴³) is in keeping with the *Tractatus*' claim that the comic "joker wishes to expose errors of soul," and it is out of this hoax that the rest of the play's action arises. That the Duke has specific designs for his apparent absence is emphasized by the obvious parallel Shakespeare draws between him and the "testing master" in Christ's parable of the talents, who departs on a journey and leaves his estate in the hands of servants in order to prove their relative worth.⁴⁴

Viewing the Duke as just such a tester is crucial to understanding the reason for another of his hoaxes: convincing Isabella that Claudio, whom he had tried to save, has nevertheless been executed by Angelo's warrant. Throughout most of Act Five, it is clear that he is testing her response to it. Yet, unlike the Duke's dealings with Angelo, the error that he seeks to expose in her is not immediately clear. Critics have most typically suggested that the Duke aims at her

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The Duke actually and ironically attributes this intention to Angelo's propositioning of Isabella when he is trying to extinguish Claudio's hope for release: "Angelo had never the purpose to corrupt [Isabella]; only he hath made an assay of her virtue, to practice his judgement with the disposition of natures" (3.1.164-67).

⁴⁴ Matt. 25:14-30. Louise Schleiner discusses this and several other relevant parables in "Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*," *Publications of the Modern Languages Association* 97 (1982): 227-29.

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"anger and desire for revenge"⁴⁵ or "her chastity-based spiritual pride,"⁴⁶ and that he succeeds in leading her to "humility,"⁴⁷ "charity and forgiveness,"⁴⁸ but have rarely given the question more than passing mention.⁴⁹ I generally agree with these assessments, but Aristotle's interest in the precise nature of comic error encourages a more prolonged look at what the Duke intends to correct in Isabella. Curiously, he is initially transparent with her (apart from his disguise as a friar, of which no one in Vienna is aware), suggesting to her at their first meeting the bed-trick as a way to save Claudio. He only begins specifically to trick Isabella when he discovers that, even after sleeping with the disguised Marianna, Angelo will not release Claudio according to his bargain but has instead hastened his execution. At that moment, Isabella meets him, forcing the Duke to provide an immediate response to her enquiries about Claudio. While he has narrowly managed to save Claudio by sending a substitute head to Angelo to satisfy his request for proof of death, about Isabella he quickly decides, "I will keep her ignorant of her good / To make her heavenly comforts of despair / When it is least expected" (4.3.106-8). Calling this apparently hasty decision "the weakest moment in the play" in terms of narrative structure, N. W. Bawcutt holds that the Duke "is forced by the exigencies of the plot to lie to Isabella and make a feeble excuse for doing so."⁵⁰ Yet even if these words mark a weak beginning for his hoax, Act 5 proves them to be an accurate description of what it finally effects: her despair over Claudio's

⁴⁵ Gregory W. Lanier, "Physic That's Bitter to Sweet End: The Tragicomic Structure of *Measure for Measure*," *Essays in Literature* 14.1 (1987): 31.

⁴⁶ Peter Lake, "Ministers, Magistrates, and the Production of 'Order' in *Measure for Measure*," *Shakespeare Survey* 54 (2001): 179.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁸ Schleiner, "Providential Improvisation," 234; see also Northrop Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 29.

⁴⁹ Lanier's article ("Physic That's Bitter") is a rare exception: he describes the Duke as a figure of comic temperance who moderates Isabella's tragic volatility over the course of Acts 3-5.

⁵⁰ Bawcutt, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, 24.

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apparent execution leads her to pity rather than condemn him, and her anger towards Angelo is similarly converted to sympathy for his human frailty. Like Friar Francis in *Much Ado About Nothing*, who tricks Claudio with the fake death of the slandered Hero, the Duke hopes that the sorrow of loss will cause the object of his hoax to see more clearly and compassionately, disregarding the faults of another. However apparently spontaneous his decision, then, the Duke's statement and intention demand to be taken seriously.

We are still uncertain, though, about what inadequacy in Isabella has motivated the Duke's trick. Earlier, his introduction to her had been by way of her harsh denunciation of Claudio. Now, after he breaks the news of Angelo's further duplicity, Isabella is again enraged: "O, I will to him and pluck out his eyes!... / Unhappy Claudio, wretched Isabel, / Injurious world, most damnèd Angelo!" (4.3.117-20). After calming her, the Duke seeks to re-enlist her aid in exposing Angelo and urges her, "pace your wisdom / In that good path that I would wish it go" (4.3. 131-2). As a reward for this, he promises, "you shall have your bosom on this wretch, / Grace of the Duke, revenges to your heart, / And general honour" (4.3.133-4). Her quick agreement, "I am directed by you," would indicate that his pledge has hit on something that she really wants – vindication of her integrity and vengeance for Claudio's death (4.3.134). In other words, Isabella feels deeply the *nemesan* at undeserved good fortune that Golden identifies as the central emotion moved by comedy. What makes Angelo's success undeserved is its violation of "the laws of proportion and appropriateness" with regard to "wealth and power": his authority is out of all proportion to his moral character.⁵¹ While Claudio doesn't enjoy Angelo's good fortune, as Isabella's brother and in the absence of their father he does have authority over her. This is inevitably vitiated in her eyes, though, by his sin with Juliet – one which she does

⁵¹ Golden, "Pleasure," 382.

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"most...abhor" (2.2.29). So when he asks her to commit a sin similar to his and for his sake, powerful indignation results.

The Duke perceives this in her yet postpones the satisfaction of it until the end of the play. As Friar, he gives her no hint of the feigned disbelief with which as Duke he will greet her accusations against Angelo, a disbelief which for a time actually sharpens her humiliation and augments Angelo's honour. In doing so, the Duke aims precisely at the comic emotion of indignation present in Isabella and the *self*-righteousness in its motivation. When she had earlier visited Angelo to plead for Claudio's life, she had little to lose. Obviously, she goes hoping to save her brother, but his life is already forfeit; the worst that can happen to her is that her suit will be unsuccessful. In this knowledge, she is able to debate the law with a clarity and precision that stand out against Angelo's increasingly lust-heated logic. He rants,

'Tis all as easy

Falsely to take away a life true-made,

As to put metal in restrained means

To make a false one.

(2.4.46-49)

His coining analogy absurdly equates the begetting of an illegitimate child with murdering a legitimate one. Isabella calmly and reasonably responds that this principle may well be "set down so in heaven, but not in earth," allowing Angelo's analogy in the spiritual, heavenly realm (all sins being equal before God), but denying its applicability to one temporal and earthly (2.4.50). After Angelo finally makes her understand the sexual trade he is proposing and dismisses her initial threat to expose him, the indignation she expresses is intense, yet retains the dignity of diction previously indicative of her rational poise:

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O perilous mouths,
That bear in them one and the selfsame tongue
Either of condemnation or approof, Bidding the law make curtsy to their will,
Hooking both right and wrong to the appetite,
To follow as it draws!

(2.4.173-8)

Her later response to Claudio in the prison when he begs that she give in to Angelo's request is anything but poised, however. She explodes,

O you beast!
O faithless coward, O dishonest wretch!
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
Is't not a kind of incest to take life
From thine own sister's shame? What should I think?
Heaven shield my mother played my father fair,
For such a warped slip of wilderness
Ne'er issued from his blood. Take my defiance
Die, perish! Might but my bending down
Relieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.

(3.1.139-50)

Her previously lucid judgment deteriorates when she is under duress in exactly the way Angelo's did: she equates Claudio's quite natural desire for life with grossly unnatural incest, comparing

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an understandable sin with one thoroughly repellent. The reason for the great difference between her responses to the two petitions for her body, it seems to me, is the petitioner. Her indignation towards Angelo is essentially just, arising from her sense of the gross disproportion between his power and his character. Yet one can also perceive in her a subtle satisfaction at having proven her virtue to him. Her conclusion to that earlier speech – “Then, Isabella, live chaste, and brother, die; / More than our brother is our chastity” – evinces a quiet self-satisfaction that prevents outward-looking pity (2.4.185). Pondering exactly this moment and its relation to her subsequent castigation of Claudio, Harold Goddard asks, “Who in the midst of making a speech, performing a part, or carrying a point, realizing with delight that it is ‘coming off,’ has not paused for a fraction of a second to pat himself on the back, and then – it was indeed all ‘off’ in another sense.”⁵² Claudio’s failure to appreciate her virtue and his desire instead that she compromise it precipitate just such a dissolution in Isabella.⁵³ One whose sin she has already described as abhorrent and from whom she expects congratulation for her virtue is instead asking her to lower herself to his level – that of a sinner – and this her sense of self-righteousness will not brook. Her indignation towards him is thus not simply a result of the injustice of her predicament, but of hurt pride. The Friar-Duke’s hoax on Isabella demonstrates that he perceives not only the mingled source of her indignation, but also her ignorance of its quality and its excessive degree. This is what he aims to reveal to her by way of the humiliation he initially puts her through when he returns to Vienna as Duke and by seeing whether she will plead for

⁵² Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 2.57.

⁵³ This subtle pride, I would suggest, is a deeper motivation for Isabella than the abhorrence of sex usually put forward as an explanation by both traditional and feminist critics. See, for examples, Vivian Thomas, *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1987), 177; and Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, “Hamlet” to “The Tempest”* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96.

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Angelo's life with Marianna. His aim in doing so, I would suggest, is not simply to satisfy "a scientific curiosity as to how [she] will behave under stress,"⁵⁴ but to effect catharsis in her, clarifying to her the nature and source of her indignation – and providing her the opportunity to amend these.

This clarification begins in her when she learns of Claudio's purported death: the very thing she vowed in her rage to pray for moves her instead to sorrow and anger at Angelo. Indeed, her later willingness to shame herself by publicly accusing Angelo of sleeping with her must surely be motivated by pity for and forgiveness of her brother. As Friar Francis in *Much Ado* might put it, the shock of loss clarifies within Isabella her feelings for Claudio, revealing her initial indignation toward him as excessive and tempering it with pity, its opposite. While this is a remarkable change from her condemnation of him in the prison, it is not overly surprising; her clarification is aided by the love she naturally bears Claudio. The Duke has a further purpose for his hoax, though. He wants to see if she will experience this sort of catharsis of her feelings toward Angelo, whom she has no reason to pity. The Duke lays out this final part of his fake death plot in his sentencing of Angelo, offering to Isabella the satisfaction of the indignation he has worked to inflate. His judgement is phrased to proffer precisely the vengeance she had earlier been eager to take:

...as he adjudged your brother,

Being criminal in double violation

Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach

Thereon dependant for your brother's life,

The very mercy of the law cries out

⁵⁴ Anne Barton, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 581.

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Most audible, even from his proper tongue,

"An Angelo for Claudio, death for death."

(5.1.404-10)

In response to this, Marianna brings the Duke's hoax to a climax by begging Isabella to plead with her for Angelo's life, and I wonder if she hasn't planned this ahead of time with the Duke. He responds that Marianna's request is "against all sense" because of what Isabella has suffered at the hands of Angelo. By reiterating that "he dies for Claudio's death," the Duke leans heavily on what to Isabella is the fact of Claudio's death to ensure that her response is fully grounded in her knowledge of Angelo's supposed act (5.1. 434, 444). The resulting tension is exquisite: Marianna asks Isabella a third time to kneel, indicating that her first two requests have gone unheeded.⁵⁵ Finally, she agrees, and asks the Duke:

Most bounteous sir,

Look, if it please you, on this man condemned

As if my brother lived. I partly think

A due sincerity governed his deeds

Till he did look on me; since it is so,

Let him not die.

(5.1.445-49)

Remarkably, she makes no mention of Marianna here at all, but bases her request on her own pity for Angelo. In the true sense of "sympathy" as "shared" or "common feeling," she can sympathize with his initial zealousness for the law and believe that "due sincerity governed his

⁵⁵ Peter Brook's 1950 Stratford-on-Avon production famously had Isabella (played by Barbara Jefford) "stand silent for a long as she thought the audience could bear before dropping on her knees to plead for Angelo." See Bawcutt, introduction, 37.

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deed" of punishing Claudio. His subsequent falling off from his high ideals when "he did look on me" she can understand as a common human weakness.

This sympathy derives from the earlier catharsis of her feelings toward Claudio. She had earlier acknowledged Angelo's assertion that not only men but "women are frail, too" (2.4.125). Her hasty agreement – "Nay, call us ten times frail, / For we are soft as our complexions are, / And credulous to false prints" – was ostensibly self-deprecating, but subtly distanced her from the sex she judged and from the charge of weakness (2.4.129-31). Claudio then asked her much more pointedly to identify with human frailty by committing his sin to save his life, and she violently refused. But her remarkable willingness in the first part of Act Five at least verbally to associate with sin by shaming herself comes about, I would suggest, because of the catharsis of her self-righteous indignation towards Claudio, brought about by the Duke declaring him dead. And here she goes even further, sympathizing with the most morally repugnant person in the play. That Isabella only "partly" thinks this reveals the immensity of the task of feeling such sympathy, rather than simply indicating half-heartedness or mere acquiescence under duress. Katherine Maus aptly calls this "a more subtle and exacting asceticism" than that Isabella originally desired to practice in the convent, an "asceticism of the spirit" rather than only of the body.⁵⁶ No small part of her still resists identifying with a man like Angelo, yet her experience with Claudio has convinced her that she must. Northrop Frye points out that "the woman who earlier had stated her intention of praying for Claudio's death pleads for Angelo's life on the ground that he is less villainous than self-deluded."⁵⁷ In words suggestive of the process of catharsis Isabella has undergone, he concludes that it was just this sort of "charity...that Isabella

⁵⁶ Katharine Eisaman Maus, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., *Comedies*, eds Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2008), 847.

⁵⁷ Frye, *Myth of Deliverance*, 29.

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had dimly in mind when she first wanted to be a nun."⁵⁸ Christy Desmet thinks that "the act of kneeling therefore deprives Isabella...of autonomy and control";⁵⁹ rather, it is a supreme act of will that counters judgement with pity in a manner exemplary of the theme that runs throughout the play. This change in her might itself be the "heavenly comforts" which the Duke wanted to make for her out of "despair": for her earthly sorrow at the loss of Claudio she gains a spiritual compassion and clarity she did not previously possess. Genuine *nemeses* is not wholly set aside – she offers no protest when Angelo is forced to marry Marianna – but it is tempered and purged of its earlier taint of self-righteous pride.

But Isabella goes on to demonstrate that the catharsis of indignation has also reinvigorated her reason. The Duke's charge against Angelo is as curious as it is precise. Angelo is not, as we might expect, to be executed for propositioning Isabella, sleeping with Marianna, or breaking his promise to release Claudio, but for presuming to sentence Claudio while himself guilty of Claudio's crime: "as he adjudged your brother." This distinction is crucial. Because the knowledge of his own guilt inspired no mercy in Angelo for Claudio, says the Duke, Claudio's sentence will be turned upon him. But after kneeling, Isabella goes on to make a remarkably precise legal argument on Angelo's behalf:

My brother had but justice,
In that he did the thing for which he died.
For Angelo,
His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
And must be buried but as an intent

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Christy Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 154.

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That perished by the way.

Thoughts are no subjects,

Intents, but merely thoughts.

(5.1.449-55)

Angelo's planned blackmail does not, in a technical sense, succeed, she points out. As a result, he is not guilty of judging Claudio while himself "in double violation / Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach"; his intention never becomes action, and thus cannot be judged. Hunt complains that Isabella "reasons syllogistically" and thus misses the Duke's lesson that "mortal frailty gives forgiveness its edge in a competition with the application of talionic law," but his claim overlooks the difference that Isabella perceives between personal Christian ethic and state law.⁶⁰ Marianna had previously asked the Duke to pardon Angelo and been rebuffed, and Isabella sees that, similarly, her own personal forgiveness of him is hardly grounds for a state pardon. She thus picks up the charge, "he dies for Claudio's death," and throws it out of court, so to speak. Just as her subtle spiritual pride when challenged earlier had clouded her reasoning, here her humble and generous pity sharpens and enlivens it. Rather than obfuscating justice, as many critics have charged,⁶¹ the technical loophole that she shrewdly finds enables an exoneration which the strictures of the law could not allow. She goes beyond what the Duke expects by

⁶⁰ Maurice Hunt, "Being Precise in *Measure for Measure*," *Renascence* 58.4 (2006): 259.

⁶¹ Like Hunt, Marcia Riefer also criticizes Isabella's logic as "twisted" and her argument as mere "specious legalism." Barton (Introduction, 582) concurs: "That Angelo has not slept with Isabella, as he intended, is true. He has, however, slept with Mariana outside the bonds of holy matrimony, even as Claudio did with Juliet. How, then, can Isabella claim that her brother 'had but justice' when he has died (as she thinks) for exactly the same sin, fornication on a pre-contract, committed by Angelo with Marianna?" While true, both critics miss the subtlety of Isabella's argument – a subtlety necessary to legal dispute: she speaks here of Angelo's intended crime against *her*, not his wider guilt. She requests pardon of his crimes as they relate to her and her brother (though still on legal grounds), not to others like Marianna. See Riefer, "Instruments of Some More Mightier Member": The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35.2 (1984): 166.

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arguing against the very charge that might be expected to arouse her indignation, not pity. When he grimly answers the Duke's charge against him, Angelo finally does what he had earlier promised Escalus he would if guilty of Claudio's crime – submit to death. Here, Isabella does what she promises Angelo she would do if she were judge, but forgets in her irrational malice toward Claudio.⁶²

As I have already suggested, this change in Isabella strongly corresponds to Golden's account of Aristotelian catharsis. In its light, the Duke's much-maligned marriage proposal might be most properly seen as Shakespeare's concluding comic trope for his surrogate dramatist, rather than something psychologically motivated (whether from love or a desire to subjugate). The Duke's offer comes at the very end of the play:

Dear Isabel,

I have a motion much imports your good,

Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,

What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine.

(5.1.537-40)

He explicitly makes his offer conditional upon her "willing ear," and it embodies by means of antimetabole the same ideal of mutuality and reciprocity that mark Shakespeare's other comic matches: "What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine." This offer appears "abrupt, naïve, even tasteless"⁶³ only if one has read the Duke and Isabella primarily as psychological portraits, and it certainly disallows the possibility that his proposal "recapitulates Angelo's harassment."⁶⁴ Rather, his proposal is a fitting recognition of his and Isabella's comic complementarity: she is

⁶² Kamaralli ("Writing about Motive," 59) also makes this point, but thinks that Isabella remains true to her promise throughout the play.

⁶³ Hunt, "Being Precise," 252.

⁶⁴ Maus, introduction, 847.

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initially an object of his hoax, his pupil, but takes up the challenge that it poses so successfully that she is able to outdo him in the end by arguing down his charge against Angelo.⁶⁵ The Duke recognizes this in both the content of his proposal and in its couplet form, which links it to the play's other similarly-patterned affirmations of balance.

III

N. W. Bawcutt muses that, while *Measure for Measure* "is full of striking themes and concepts" like justice and mercy, sexual morality and its regulation, and the line between public and private, these "are not part of a logical structure intended to eliminate inconsistencies and to work rigorously towards a definable conclusion ('Shakespeare is showing us that...')." ⁶⁶ Verna Foster puts her finger on the trouble this dichotomy can create when she observes that "modern scholars have wished for a resolution of the characters' moral difficulties commensurate with the intellectual effort that has gone into their articulation. Instead the problems set up are countered by comedic intrigue."⁶⁷ The Duke's dominant role in these and his obvious resemblance to a comic dramatist make plausible Frye's assertion that *Measure for Measure* is at heart "a play about the relation of all such [issues] to the structure of comedy"; it is a "comedy about comedy."⁶⁸ Consequently, moral categories and the moral character of those in the play primarily serve larger dramatic categories; as Lever argues, "*Measure for Measure*...is concerned with error, not evil; with correction, not retribution.... It is in the nature of the play that Isabella's personality, like the personalities of Claudio and of Angelo, should seem neither 'good' nor

⁶⁵ Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew* seems an early prototype of this sort of pupil-turned-wife when she not only submits to Petruccio's demand that she recognise old Vincentio as a 'gentlewoman,' but lavishly calls him a 'Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet' (4.5.29, 37). Like Isabella, she not only enters into the joke but becomes an equal participant in its playing (I here cite H. J. Oliver's 1982 Oxford edition of the play).

⁶⁶ Bawcutt, introduction, 45.

⁶⁷ Verna A. Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 58.

⁶⁸ Frye, *Myth of Deliverance*, 24, 25.

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'bad', but basically self-ignorant."⁶⁹ From this standpoint, then, to foreground the dramatic categories of the hoax, indignation, pity, and catharsis when interpreting the play is a direct way to get to its heart. Shakespeare's interest in Isabella is thus only secondarily in her rigidity, legalism, and pride, and their subsequent conversion to mercy, forgiveness, and humility; his primary concern seems to be the indignation that drives comedy towards resolution and its relationship to the emotion of pity that tragedy pairs instead with fear.

Part of Shakespeare's unique genius lies not simply in the way his comedies can produce these emotions, but his dramatization of them in his characters. He puts them into situations that we might expect to arouse either one emotion or the other, and then sees if it might be possible, or even more deeply fitting, for that same circumstance to arouse both emotions at once. To do this, the dramatic situation must necessarily be extreme, especially for a comedy. Brian Gibbons describes how the particular conventions of tragicomedy serve this end: the hybrid genre "stresses the peaks and troughs of the emotional trajectory proper to romance" and "accelerat[es] the development of experience proper to tragedy" in order to exert "a maximum of stress" on the characters in the play.⁷⁰ Yet these very extremes of emotion are at the same time a constituent part of Aristotelian comic error as Golden theorizes it: characters diverge from a virtuous mean in both action and feeling. Shakespeare seems especially interested to investigate the possibility left open by Aristotle of painful error and feeling within comedy, but without leaving behind comedy's particular character types and plot devices. Even in its moments of pain, *Measure for Measure* does not cease to function as a comedy. Indeed, it is the comic hoax that is used to fake tragic action and induce pain in its objects. In a strange way, emotions heightened in response to

⁶⁹ J. W. Lever, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1965), lxxxii.

⁷⁰ Brian Gibbons, introduction to *Measure for Measure*, updated ed., The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46.

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a mock tragedy are better comprehended by those who feel them than those arising from the real but less intense events of their lives. Extremity of experience cures extremity of character, bringing about the realization of the need to respond to a given situation with finely balanced, rather than exclusive and extreme emotions. In all of this a remarkable symmetry emerges between the disparate emotions evoked by these plays, the clarification of these effected by the comic hoax, and the larger genres of comedy and tragedy employed by Shakespeare. The real benefits of Aristotle and recent work on his comic theory are to suggest the categories that reveal this symmetry to our eyes.