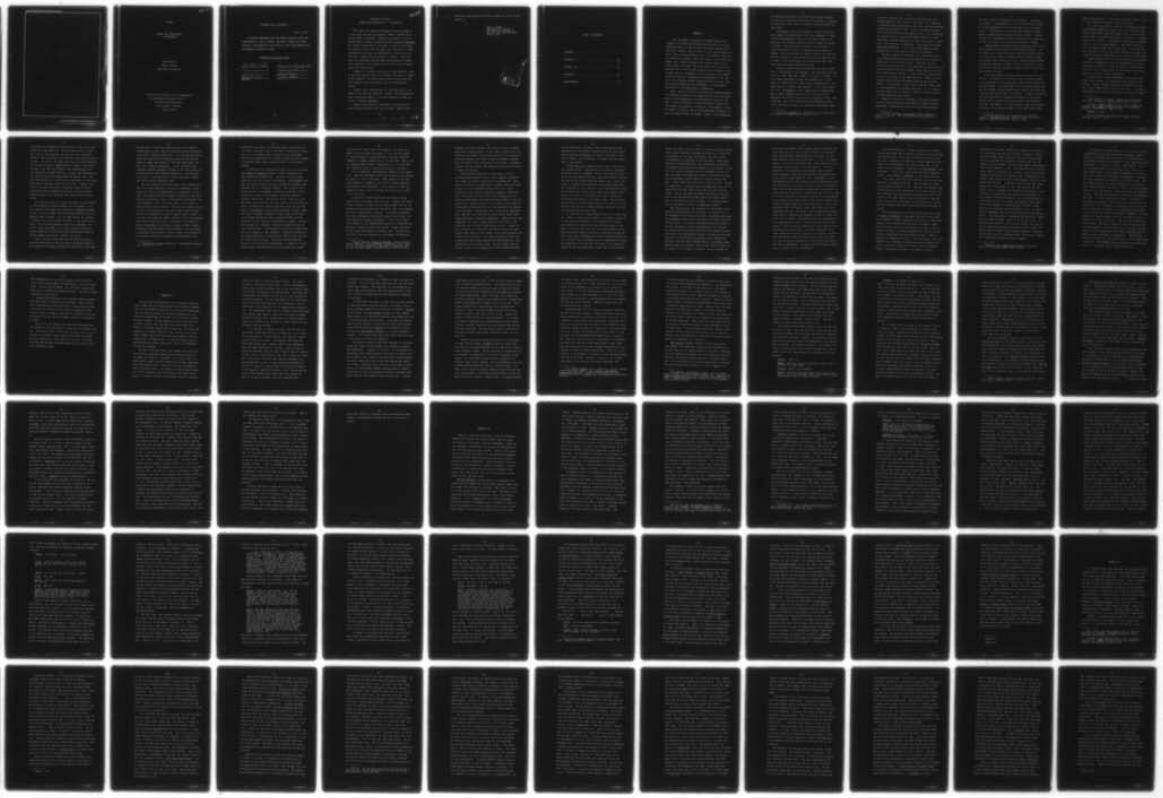
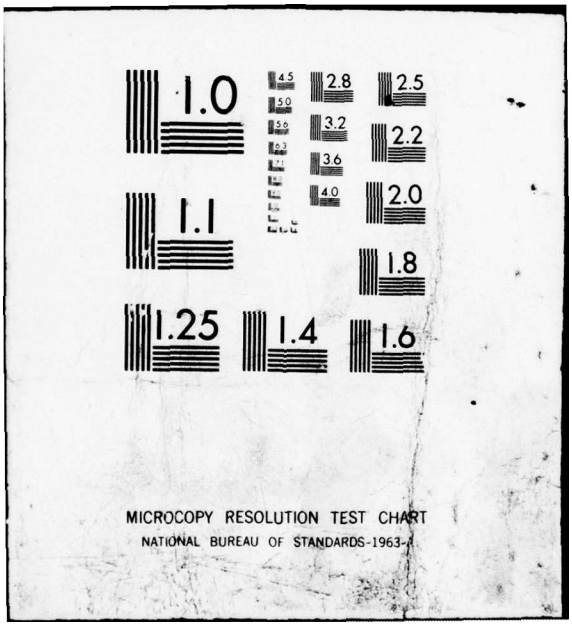
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THESIS

COMEDY AND CHRISTIANITY: A COMPARISON

Submitted by

John E. Dubler

Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring, 1978

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

May 5, 1978

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY JOHN E. DUBLER, ENTITLED "COMEDY AND CHRISTIANITY," BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

COMEDY AND CHRISTIANITY: A COMPARISON

The number of theories of comedy have been growing at a rapid pace, but the old question, "What is comedy?," remains largely unanswered. Chapter one presents a view of comedy which is based on Edmund Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac. The central observation in the model is that if the reader or playgoer is left with the sense that the hero in a drama overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life and is not overcome by them, then the drama is a comedy. Three elements are extracted from the model and developed in subsequent chapters as the foundation of the similarity between comedy and Christianity.

Chapter two presents the first of these elements, which is that the central figure in the drama--the hero--is aware of his identity. The comic hero confronts the limits that life imposes on him, and finds a way to overcome those limits.

Chapter three investigates the joke that heals as opposed to the joke that destroys. Comedy, like Christianity, moves toward the former. It is the function of comedy to create a healing atmosphere.

Chapter four examines how comedy, like Christianity, moves toward overcoming the void of death. Comedy faces

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that void, and through the 'narrow escape into faith,' overcomes it.

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Spring, 1978



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Chapter I

With the number of theories of comedy growing like crabgrass, we might have expected that by now all the old questions about the subject would have been crowded out of the lawn. However, some of them are alive and as healthy as ever. What is comic and what isn't, for example? What are the elements of comedy in the first place, and do those elements remain static throughout the literary ages, or are they subject to change? Why do we laugh until we cry, or why don't we? Poets and philosophers from Aristotle to the present day have attempted to solve the puzzle that comedy presents, providing considerable enlightenment on the subject, but certainly without laying the issue to rest. Comedy resists restriction and containment, but meaningful definition is not impractical or impossible.

When I speak of solving the puzzle that comedy presents, I am speaking in terms of the comic view of life, the world view, or the metaphysical and philosophical nature of comedy. I am not attempting, in this criticism, to deal with the content or structure of particular comic dramas, or with any number of factors, such as the psychology of comedy, or even the subject matter of comedy. Rather, I am considering

the spirit of the comic; that which distinguishes between the way comic characters deal with and view life, as opposed to the way any other class of dramatic characters does the same thing.

Fortunately, from the standpoint of those who must do the reading, and unfortunately from the standpoint of those desiring enlightenment, there are not many volumes or authorities that stand by the way to aid or hinder the critic of comedy. What does exist, however, is very useful. In order to establish a point of departure for my views on comedy, I have summarized the views of some of the great exponents of comedy. Without desiring to do injustice to any of them, a brief examination of the directions that they have taken will help illuminate my path.

Aristotle indeed laid the groundwork for twenty centuries of scholarship in the Poetics. The prevailing wind has, until our time, been that comedy is inferior to tragedy. We see, through Aristotle's eyes, the characters in a given drama as either better or worse than we ourselves are. The comic man is, of course, the inferior. At the end of Chapter II of the Poetics we find "Comedy aims at representing men as worse, tragedy as better than in actual life."[1] Therefore, the comic figures are not necessarily "bad," just ludicrous. And so the wind has blown at differing velocities from breeze to gale, for even today the weather vanes

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[1]Aristotle, Poetics, tr. by Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 18.

of comic criticism point into that prevailing wind that buffets comedy as the "inferior" art form. By no means am I suggesting that scholarship on the comic world has remained static since Aristotle's day. We have continued to build, but on the foundation which Aristotle laid. That foundation, the recognition of a separation between common and noble characters, provided comedy with a shell into which it might grow. Comic figures are ludicrous - they appear with their weaknesses uncovered. It is a shell which depicts human weakness and at least tacitly calls for correction.

Molière suffered at the hands of his seventeenth century contemporaries because he believed that the function of comedy was to correct men's vices. "Nothing," he said, "will reform most men better than depiction of their faults."[2] Moliere practiced what he preached, taking direct aim at the moral hypocrites of the day. I think that his views provide us with a good step in the right direction. Human vice and weakness must be identified before they can be overcome. However, the depiction of man's faults does not always lead to the reformation that Molière envisions. It is a slap on the head rather than on the back, and it is prone to generate more resentment than healing.

Baudelaire entered the argument in the mid-nineteenth century with the postulate that comedy is linked to human debasement, beginning with the fall of man from paradise.

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[2]Molière, "Preface" to Tartuffe [1669], Haskell M. Block, tr. and ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1958), p. 4.

Laughter is born of arrogance and superiority. "Laughter is satanic:" says Baudelaire, "it is thus profoundly human. It is the consequence in man of the idea of his own superiority."[3] Certainly such a view has been adequately propagated in psychological speculations about comedy. Laughter is seen as an expression of man's superiority over other men or over the natural, and from hence springs all comedy.

George Meredith and Henri Bergson ended the last of the latest century on the same note that Moliere sounded. Comedy takes aim at human folly--but they went one step further in saying that in order to create the whole effect, comedy must provide the corrective as well. Meredith distinguishes between the laughter of satire, which is essentially a slap in the face, and the laughter of comedy, which is less raillery and more foolery.

Enter the twentieth century and with it true comic confusion. The concern of the fifties with absurdism prompted a re-examination of the traditional distinctions between comedy and tragedy. For Christopher Fry the bridge between comedy and tragedy is precariously narrow, and we find ourselves first on one side and then on the other. In Fry's conception, the comic character is eminently qualified for the tragic script, but he crosses to the comic side of the bridge at just the right moment. For Wylie Sypher comedy and tragedy are twins, not on opposite ends of the bridge, but walking

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[3]Charles Baudelaire, "On The Essence of Laughter" [1855], in The Mirror of Art, Jonathan Mayne, tr. and ed. (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1955), p. 139.

hand in hand across it. The comic and tragic views of life do not, according to Sypher, exclude each other.[4]

Yet, from that sense of the lack of traditional differences between comedy and tragedy that we get from Fry and Sypher, come some interesting observations. It is Fry who writes that "in tragedy every moment is eternity; in comedy eternity is a moment. In tragedy we suffer pain; in comedy pain is a fool, suffered gladly."[5] The comic characters slip the bands of death and "affirm life." It is Fry that sees the Book of Job as "the great reservoir of comedy," an insight which has prompted much of my reaction in this area.

Sypher suggests that the irreconcilables of the modern existential atmosphere can only be approached on the basis of "faith--or comedy."[6] Given the choice, I would have to take both: in my consideration of the problem I have found them to be related, nearly inseparable.

Another shift in the consideration of the comic came about in the sixties, as reflected in the writing of Eric Bentley. Tragedy immerses itself in the destructive element, while comedy takes "terror by the hand . . . accepts the obstacles life places in your way, and confronts them!"[7]

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[4]"The Meanings of Comedy," Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1956), p. 250.

[5]"Comedy," Vogue (January, 1951), rpt. in Robert W. Corrigan, ed., Comedy Meaning and Form, (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 15.

[6]Sypher, p. 254.

[7]Eric R. Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 301.

As is the case with all the other writers whom I have mentioned, I find that I am more concerned with what is not discussed in the comic theory than what is. Comedy certainly confronts the obstacles of life, but confrontation and acceptance are not the same thing. It is not merely a method of coping with disaster, but altogether overcoming it. In this wise I find myself most closely aligned with Nathan Scott, Jr., whose "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape Into Faith,"[8] I find to be refreshingly sound. Comedy for him is a reflection of Christianity which delivers us from the "woe of being alive."[9]

It is at this point that I wish to make my own tracks in what, while it is not a trackless expanse, is certainly an unpaved road when it is compared to the super highway which is the sum of the writing on tragedy. I am limiting myself to modern comedy and its relationship to Christianity. It is my assertion that the comic hero overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life. The tragic hero is overcome by the same. Like Scott, I believe that comedy is the key to being delivered from the woe of being alive, in much the same way as Christianity delivers one from the same problems, with the added promise of eternal life. In tragedy, if victory is to be found, it is on the other side of death. In comedy, victory may be found on either side.

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[8]"The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape Into Faith," The Christian Scholar, Vol. XLIV (Spring, 1961), pp. 9-39.

[9]Scott, p. 37.

In order to expose some of the elements of the Christian faith which are prevalent in modern dramatic comedy, I will begin with a model which will provide a common perspective which may be applied to other comedies. A convenient peg on which to hang some initial observations is Edmond Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac, a comedy, first produced in 1897, and set in France, in the year 1640. It is drawn around the life and love of the adventurous but ugly Cyrano, and is an excellent example of the framework which I intend to apply to modern comedy. The model will concern itself with only one factor: that the reader or playgoer is left with the sense that the hero or heroine overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life and not that those misfortunes overwhelm him. Corollary to that is the proposition that the hero or heroine of any comedy must be an "overcomer" in life, or circularly, that the overcomers in comedy are the heroic characters. By "the outrages and misfortunes of life," I mean those unfavorable circumstances which attend our lives. They are the things which, through no apparent fault of our own, bring some degree of disaster to an otherwise stable life. Whether expected or unexpected, the outrages and misfortunes of life are in opposition to the direction that one would have desired to take in his life. They prevent us from being what we want to be, or accomplishing what good we want to accomplish. The comic vision is that which finds a way to see them in colors other than black. However, such a vision is at the same time

realistic about misfortune and man's association with it. It recognizes man's limitations in dealing with the misfortunes of life. It is capable of seeing life for what it is, while making the best of what it sees.[10] These postulates will, of course, be explored in more depth, but the model will not be widened to take in other theories. For example, I do not propose to forge a complex model which asserts that "comedy overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life and reaffirms the importance of life," and so on. We will examine several of the things that specific comedies do, without attempting to tack on additional provisos which we then assert must be a part of all comic drama. That the comic hero overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life, and the tragic hero is overcome by them provides us with a sharp instrument. Any attempt to include more definitive information within this framework, such as "comedy overcomes and amuses," blunts the cutting edge and renders the instrument ineffective.

If ever so briefly, the question of definitions must be addressed. What I wish to avoid is a series of restrictive and immobilizing rules to be applied to comic drama. Therefore I have segregated the dramatic world into halves of a great egg: one half I call comedy, and the other anti-comedy. The criterion for separating the yolk from the white will be the single observation that anything comic moves toward

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[10]Cyrus Hoy, "Comedy, Tragedy, and Tragicomedy," The Virginia Quarterly Review 36 (Winter, 1960), p. 117.

overcoming the outrages and misfortunes of life, while anything anti-comic does not. The anti-comic world in some way leads to the discovery that man must die: the comic world in some way leads to the discovery that man will live forever. Of course, the comic hero will not become immortal in the purely physical understanding of death. Spiritually speaking, the comic hero comes to the understanding that even death has no power over him. He will live eternally in the Christian sense of everlasting and eternal life. Not that everlasting life is solely the inheritance of the comic; anti-comic figures may share in it as well. However, the path of the anti-comic world inexorably leads to the exploration of man's encounter with death, while the comic pattern leads to the discovery that death is but an empty threat.

My intention here is to place the model of comedy within this bicameral division; Comedy and anti-comedy. I do not intend to do tragedy the injustice of addressing myself solely to it or to those whose criticism promotes it as the superior form of drama. Nor, for that matter, do I desire to dissect the various forms of comedy. I see satiric, romantic, and farcical elements in most true comedies, and wish to apply the model to all those elements without becoming embroiled in restrictive definitions which would delineate comedy from satire, romance, and so on.

While I want to steer clear of the Scylla of the restrictive definition on the one hand, I am equally leery of the Charybdis of inexact meanings and mutations on the other.

By mutations I mean such dramatic tags as tragi-comedy, comedy-drama and the "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." As William G. McCollom points out, all such hybrids are mutants which spring from otherwise stable and healthy concepts of comedy and tragedy.[11] Like most mutations, they have their inherent weaknesses. I will avoid the word "tragedy" wherever possible, because of the wide variety of assocations that have attached themselves, like barnacles, to her hull. The same thing is true of the word "comedy," but I find no more convenient word.

For the concept of the comic hero as the overcomer in life to be truly effective, he must be vulnerable to some threat, so that he may demonstrate his capability to overcome. The modern situation comedies, especially those produced for television, such as "The Beverly Hillbillies" and its predecessor, the "I Love Lucy Show," do not offer a serious threat to be overcome. For Lucy, the biggest threat in life is not getting her own way on some trivial matter, and all the characters in such a "comedy" seem to exist in a vacuum, where they are wholly innocent of the consequences that their actions may bring. In comedy, there must be a serious engagement in the drama in terms of life's values. Therefore, the model deals with overcomers, and any dramatic production which does not offer a threat or challenge to be overcome could not be properly considered within the

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[11] The Divine Average (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve, 1971), p. 5.

confines of the model. If the misfortunes and outrages of life never even come close to the hero or heroine of a drama, then it is in another class of dramatic work altogether. The test of presentation of a threat will be the only grounds of excluding drama which otherwise might be classified as comedy.

If the tenets of the foregoing model are to be accepted, then Cyrano de Bergerac becomes a useful illustration of their meaning and application. The play is set in Paris, where the first act opens in a playhouse. The playgoers are from all walks of life, from the pickpockets to Roxane, the debutante who is universally admired. The principal characters are all in attendance, including De Guiche, a cold, calculating colonel of the Gascons, Christian, Roxane's handsome young suitor, and Cyrano, who has come for a purpose quite apart from all the rest, namely to insure that an actor, one Montfleury, whom he dislikes, does not take the stage in La Clorise, the play which is about to begin. When the house is packed to capacity, Cyrano jumps to the stage and frightens Montfleury away, forthwith finding himself engaged in a duel with one of De Guiche's lackeys. Cyrano, the poet-warrior, composes a "Ballade Extempore" which he calls "Thrust Home." He composes the lines at the same time that he is engaged in the swordplay. Timing his attack and his poetry perfectly, he delivers the "Thrust Home" just as his rapier finds its mark. His reason for starting the fracas in the first place?--Montfleury, it seems is "a lamentable actor, who mouths his verse and moans his tragedy,

and heaves up--'Ugh'--like a hod carrier, the lines that ought to soar on their own wings."[12] But the real reason is that Montfleury is courting Roxane, and from Cyrano's viewpoint is wholly undeserving of the privilege. Why is he so concerned about Roxane? Because he too is in love with her, though for fear of rejection he dare not express it.

His one seemingly insurmountable problem is his appearance. The size and shape of his nose, which at first appears as though it will be the cheap, comic gimmick of the play, soon emerges as a symbol of the conflict between physical and spiritual attractiveness. It is a matter of the true identity of man--is he to be known and loved for his body, or for his soul?

In Act II we find Cyrano alone with Roxane, hoping against hope that Roxane could love him. However, the cause of her interest in Cyrano is not Cyrano himself but the information he can provide about Christian, who, as it happens, has just joined Cyrano's regiment. De Guiche's promotion to colonel brings him into direct contact with Cyrano, and they emerge as complete antagonists. In Act III, Cyrano finds himself in the uncomfortable position of speaking and writing to Roxane on Christian's behalf, though the source of the words and letters is unknown to her. He pours his whole soul into the adventure to win Roxane for Christian;

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[12]Edmund Rostand, Cyrano de Bergerac, trans by Brian Hooker (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1923), p. 25. Further references to the Hooker translation will be given by page number, parenthetically within the text.

meanwhile she never suspects that Cyrano is the one behind Christian's winning words. In the closing lines of Act III, Christian and Roxane are hurriedly married in an improperly witnessed ceremony, in order to ward off further intervention in Roxane's life on the part of De Guiche. De Guiche, however, has his revenge, and immediately orders Christian's regiment into battle.

Cyrano and De Guiche are at odds again in Act IV. De Guiche shows himself to be a fairly cowardly commander, and Cyrano, of course, cannot resist lecturing him. Meanwhile, to fulfill a promise made to Roxane, Cyrano has been seeing to it that Christian writes every day. Since Christian is not clever or ambitious enough to write every day, Cyrano does the job for him, even transporting the letters across enemy lines each day before dawn at great personal risk. Cyrano's letters are so winning that Roxane is transformed by them and falls in love with what she assumes to be Christian's sensitivity, wit, and power of expression. This time she is in love with his soul and no longer cares about Christian's attractive appearance. Unable to bear the separation any longer, Roxane drives to the front to see Christian just in time to hold him as he dies. Before he does, however, both Christian and Cyrano come to the realization that Roxane is not really in love with Christian any longer, but with Cyrano. Of course she does not know anything about that as she embraces the dying Christian. But Christian's is the tragic death. He has nothing left for which to live. He is conquered by life and embraces death

in what amounts to a suicide. Cyrano realizes that the possibility of the beautiful Roxane loving the ugly Cyrano might constitute disloyalty, at least in his eyes, to his fallen comrade, so he continues to conceal the true authorship of the letters.

Fifteen years pass between Acts IV and V, and the secret remains intact. Roxane mourns the death of Christian the entire time in a nunnery. Cyrano, whom she has really loved, and who prefers only her, visits her weekly, bringing her news of the outside world and amusing her. Cyrano continues to conceal the authorship of the letters and would have continued to do so had not an old enemy dropped a heavy log of wood from a second story window onto Cyrano's head. Cyrano, too proud to take death lying down, stands with sword drawn and Roxane in his arms at last. The well kept secret comes out in the waning moments of Cyrano's life and the play concludes with Roxane realizing that she has twice lost the only man she ever loved.

It is not at all a happy ending, but it is a comic ending. How is it that Cyrano becomes an overcomer and why is it that he is not overcome by the assassination attempt, even though it is that in fact which brings Cyrano to his death? I believe that there are five identifiable factors which reveal the nature of Cyrano as overcomer and the comedy as that which overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life: The hero never surrenders and is contemptuous of those who compromise in any way with the enemy; he is capable of looking at the same situation in which the anti-comic sees

defeat and seeing victory; there is reconciliation for wrong-doers rather than their destruction; there is an element of timelessness in the play, and finally, the hero is not threatened by the imminency of his own death. These five aspects are easily distilled into three major characteristics which are the essential elements of comic drama. First, that the central character does not surrender his will or what may better be termed his "spirit," and that he is capable of optimistic vision combine to identify him as the hero. Comic drama must first have a clear cut hero. Second, the capability to reconcile with the opposition gives us in comedy the joke that heals rather than the joke that destroys. Third, the timeless element and the fact that the hero is not threatened by death combine to produce the effect of overcoming the void of death. All three elements will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

That the hero does not surrender is illustrated in the conflict between Cyrano and De Guiche. De Guiche, who in the beginning of the play is the cold, calculating and grasping archenemy of both Cyrano and Roxane, has power over both of their lives. De Guiche's adulterous designs on Roxane, the war, Christian, and his own appearance, all comprise at various times the threat which must be overcome by Cyrano. De Guiche is the commander of Cyrano's division and can and does order both Christian and Cyrano to war, separating Christian from his newly espoused Roxane, even before their wedding night is fulfilled. He is proud, but not brave, as he explains to the cadets of Gascone: "I was in danger of

being shot or captured; but I thought quickly--took off and flung away the scarf that marked my military rank--and so being inconspicuous, escaped among my own force, rallied them, returned again and won the day!" (p. 139). To Cyrano, however, the scarf is much more than a rank insignia--it is emblematic of the spirit of the man himself. It is not something to be discarded or surrendered under pressure. Cyrano responds: "Henry of Navarre being outnumbered, never flung away his white plume" (p. 139). Surrender, or any self-deprecating act which seeks to avoid confrontation with the forces of error, is seen in Cyrano's eyes as cowardice. "Now if I had been there--your courage and my own differ in this--when your scarf fell, I should have put it on" (p. 139). De Guiche accuses him of boasting, but he is not--and proves it by producing the scarf which he had earlier retrieved by venturing behind enemy lines quite unassisted. Cyrano, who possesses pride and bravery, seeks ways to make the world compromise with him. De Guiche, who is proud but not brave, finds ways to compromise his beliefs in order to avoid conflict with the world. The overcomer does not surrender to the circumstances of life. In this case, De Guiche's and Cyrano's sense of what was appropriate action under the circumstances were poles apart. In other situations and in other dramas the situation may not be so distinct, the differences between right and wrong are not always so clear-cut, but the comic figure will be moving away from surrender toward independence. He moves away from becoming dominated by either fate or circumstances.

The comic figure is, it seems, gifted with a curious vision that allows him to perceive almost any situation from the positive side. He is not necessarily an eternal optimist nor a polyanna, but there is a quality about him that seems to be manifested in his landing right side up each time he is cast headlong. "Have you read Don Quixote?" asks De Guiche. "I have--and found myself the hero," responds Cyrano. "The windmills, remember, if you fight with them . . . may swing round their huge arms and cast you down into the mire," concludes De Guiche. "Or up--among the stars!" is the vision of Cyrano (p. 74). The very circumstance that flings one down to the mud may be, to the comic figure, only the instrument that catapults him up among the stars. The vision of the comic figure is not earth bound; it sees beyond, around, over, or through the circumstances to victory. The very obstacle that would defeat him becomes the path to success.

Another characteristic of comic drama that can be seen in Cyrano de Bergerac is that while the comic vision seems to be capable of seeing through the obstacles, it eventually becomes less concerned with the faults of others. Quite often the comic vision is unrestricted and clear in the beginning, but when it comes to examining the sins of the opposition comedy dons the rose colored glasses. Comedy is prepared to accept man as he is. It is conscious of all the deception and treachery of which man may be convicted, but is more anxious to settle out of court than to prosecute. Comedy is prepared to forgive. De Guiche is, in the

beginning, effectively snubbed by the cadets of Gascone as only servicemen can know how to snub a commander. Roxane, who has brought food to the front for the starving cadets as well as herself for Christian, suggests that they not share it with De Guiche. "If De Guiche comes," quips Roxane, "he is not invited" (p. 153). De Guiche does come, and the cadets hide the precious food. However, when De Guiche subsequently shows only the slightest sign of changing his attitude, their opinion of him changes abruptly, and he is welcomed into the fold. "A Gascon in spite of all that lace!" spouts one of the cadets (p. 157), and even his old foe Cyrano joins in unfeigned approbation and allegiance. Comedy moves in the direction of drawing the detractors in. I grant that De Guiche also makes a move in the direction of reconciliation, but the climate and atmosphere that makes such a move possible is established by the comic forces. They are the ones that invite De Guiche to eat. No apologies are demanded, nor is De Guiche lectured on his past behavior. The whole matter is forgiven and forgotten. Comedy does not demand revenge. There is no eye for an eye. As Northrop Frye observed, "The action of comedy, like the action of the Christian Bible, moves from law to liberty."[13] Getting even in comedy is only getting together. The whole concept here is one of laughing "with," rather than laughing "at" a particular person or group of people.

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[13]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 181.

The element of timelessness is the fourth distinctive characteristic which is recognizable in Cyrano. Because comedy is liberated from the effects of circumstances in the present, because it is capable of seeing beyond the circumstantial, it lives in a world of timelessness. It is not an unreal world, or a never-never land. But it is a world where death is only another circumstance to be overcome and not the final overcoming circumstance. Certainly the comic characters are aware of the effect of time. The sun rises and sets. The earth rotates on its axis once in each twenty-four hours and so on. They are born, they marry, they grow old, and they die. But they are not the hostages of time. They are not governed by the relentless ticking of the clock. In this sense they are closer in character to the Christian concept of God, who is not subject to the constraints of time, although he is perfectly aware of the effect of time and its passing. De Guiche warns the cadets in Act IV that the attack of the enemy is imminent. As they prepare for battle he goes on to say that they may be attacked in as little as an hour. "Oh--an hour!" mutters one of the cadets, and they all return to their cards and dice. It is anti-comedy, and not comedy that is conscious of time. Comedy is not concerned with the ticking time bomb that is drawing closer and closer to destruction. Comedy breaks through the barrier of time into eternity. True comedy lives in eternity. Anti-comedy lives in time which is always running out. In comedy, time is always running on.

The timelessness of comedy liberates the comic figure from the fear of death. He is one subject to fortune rather than one who is subjected to fate. The comic figure does not accept whatever happens to him as his destiny. Instead, Cyrano forges his own fortune. Regueneau says of him "His sword is one half of the shears of fate!" (p. 13). If that is so, I submit that the other half is his spirit. He is not one to resign himself to some immutable predetermined course for his life whether he liked what it happened to be or not. Indeed the most startling realization of the play comes when we see that Cyrano is well aware that Roxane really loves him, that is, she is in love with his spirit or his soul, and does not love Christian for what he is at all, but refuses to breathe one word of it to Roxane. He refuses to tell her, not because it is his fate; if anything, it would seem that fate had thrust him together with Roxane. He refuses to tell her because he regards his silence to be a matter of loyalty to his fallen comrade. The point is that he does not see himself subject to fate. Cyrano does not fear fate or even his own death. "Now let me die, having lived" says he, and later "what is death like I wonder? I know everything else now . . ." (p. 111). He regards death only as another world to be explored. He has thought about death and knows how he wants to die . . . with "steel in my heart and laughter on my lips" (p. 113). Even when that glorious death is denied him and he is victim of an ignominious assassination, he refuses to submit to death as his

conqueror, rather, he conquers it. In the last lines of the play, he struggles to his feet and invites the "old fellow" --as if he were a longtime acquaintance--to come. "He shall find me on my feet--sword in hand" (p. 195).

Knowing how to die as well as how to live is part of the comic model. If we approach that statement from the Christian viewpoint, then what the comic hero "knows" is that death has no power over his spirit; therefore he does not fear it. Death is gracefully acceded to because it is not the end of existence, but only a change in medium from body to spirit. Act V, set in the autumn of the year and in the autumn of Roxane's and Cyrano's lives finds them watching the falling leaves. Roxane speaks first: "Perfect venetian red! Look at them fall." Cyrano responds, "yes they know how to die. A little way from the branch to the earth, a little fear of mingling with the common dust--and yet they go down gracefully--a fall that seems like flying!" (p. 185). It is more a relief than a pain; it is like flying and not falling. Comedy is capable of making the leap of faith, past death into eternity.

One may accept death with assurance because of an awareness of one's fate, and a belief that it is inescapable, but Cyrano accepts death with assurance because of an awareness that it is not at all the cessation of existence.

> Yes, all my laurels you have riven away
> And all my roses; yet in spite of you,
> There is one crown I bear away with me,
> And to-nite, when I enter before God,
> My salute shall sweep all the stars away
> From the blue threshold! One thing without stain,

> Unspotted from the world, in spite of doom
> My own--That is--My white plume (p. 195).

It is Cyrano's indefatigable spirit--his white plume--that he bears always with him. It is like Henry of Navarre's white plume. He refuses to fling it away. Death cannot deprive him of it. Comedy is victory over the outrages and misfortunes of life and ultimately the victory over death. It is the victory of the resurrection. As Cyrano says, "I have won what I have won . . . I am Lazarus!" (p. 114). It is a rebirth. Roxane comments "How many things have died . . . and are newborn!" (p. 190).

Being assassinated is certainly not the most heroic way to die. Cyrano overcomes the ignominy of such a death by refusing to focus on the injustice done him. Indeed, the assassin is only mentioned briefly, and Cyrano does his best to hide the wound from Roxane. Instead, Cyrano focuses on the next step in his life - and it is a step that will be like flying. One may take away his laurels, but it is impossible to deprive him of his spirit. He knows that he is only embarking on another adventure. It is his step of faith. He will stand before God that very night. Death, therefore, is inconsequential. It is only another in a long chain of circumstances with which life brings us in contact. Cyrano is not limited by this circumstance any more than he was by the enemy lines that stood between him and Roxane. These, then, are the limitations that confront Cyrano: His appearance, De Guiche, his frustrated love for Roxane. All of them comprise the outrages and misfortunes of his life.

The assassination is the final outrage, but Cyrano overcomes all of the outrages and misfortunes. He is not overcome - even by his own death. The anti-comic forces find that life is limited and defined by death. The comic forces recognize no such limit.

Comedy and Christianity are certainly closely related. Both are loath to compromise or surrender. Both perceive the circumstances of the world with a vision that is quite apart from the vision of those who are governed by fate. Both are quick to forgive, and quick to reconcile; both are unconscious of time and its ravages; neither is threatened by death.

Not all of the elements that have been discussed here are present in the same number or degree in all dramatic comedy. That which helps to delineate the model is not as important as the model itself: comedy must leave the reader with the impression or the sense that the hero or heroine overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life and not that he is overcome by them.

Chapter II

We have drawn the dividing line in dramatic works between comedy and anti-comedy based on the following assumption: if the reader or playgoer is left with the impression that the hero or heroine of the drama overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life and is not overcome by them, we have a comedy. If the reader is not left with that impression, we have what has previously been termed anti-comedy. Therefore, knowing who the hero is, and having the capability to discern whether or not the hero is an "overcomer" become some of the most important issues in the examination of a dramatic work. If the work clearly has an identifiable hero whose actions are those of an overcomer, the play is a comedy.

The use of the word "hero" may engender some reactions that are not altogether appropriate or germane insofar as the model for comedy is concerned. If the word "hero" is understood to imply complete superiority of moral character, then those holding such a view will not find a plethora of heroes in modern drama. If, however, the word is used only as a term to identify that person who is the center of attention of either audience or playwright, then all dramatic

works will have at least one heroic figure. The middle ground in this case is more sound. The hero demonstrates some sense of moral rectitude, but he may not exhibit a morality which is congruent with Christianity. Twentieth century heroes, for example, are not by any means paragons of Christian morality. The hero and morality are linked here only in the sense that the hero is an overcomer, and not that there is any assertion of his complete moral superiority. The requirement that the hero overcome some difficulty will exclude some dramatic works from the field of comedy. The model excludes those dramas whose so-called heroes encounter no problem to be overcome, or whose heroes are at a stalemate with the problem.

It is helpful to identify the hero, and the basis for doing that in the model which I am advancing, is his level of self-awareness. In this respect, the heroes of comedy and anti-comedy are alike. For example, both comic and anti-comic heroes have a greater sense of self-awareness, than the other characters in the play. They are sure of their own identity, they are aware of their role or function in life, even if their sense of what that is might be changing. They know or find out what they are supposed to do with themselves in life. I have termed this problem the "who am I?" question. Heroes know or discover the answer to the question; non-heroic figures do not. Both comic and tragic heroes confront the limits that life imposes on them in one way or another; they are presented with a

challenge to be overcome, or a threat to their existence as a person. It is at this point that the comic and anti-comic heroes part company. The anti-comic is overwhelmed by the forces that he encounters, while the comedian finds a way over, around or through the force of opposition, becoming an overcomer.

In evaluating the nature of comic and anti-comic heroes, we must once again draw upon the past as a means of erecting a realiable yardstick for measuring the future. Volpone, by Ben Jonson, and The Duchess of Malfi, by John Webster, both dramas of the English Renaissance, lend themselves well to the exploration of the problem. I use them not because they are good examples of the parallels that exist between comedy and Christianity--Volpone is ill-adapted to Christianity, and The Duchess of Malfi is a classic example of tragedy -- but because both plays have heroes who are tested on the matter of their true identity.

Ben Jonson's choice of the name "Volpone" for his eponymous hero gives us some insight into Volpone's character and personality. Volpone, or "the fox," is cultivating relationships with several wealthy town fools in order to deprive them of their wealth. His technique involves playing the dying oldster who has no heir upon whom he may bestow his riches. The fools fairly trip over each other in their pursuit of the presumed legacy, bearing gifts to Volpone consisting of their own precious heirlooms, treasures with which only the uncircumspect would readily part. Volpone

encourages each of the fools in turn to bring gifts in hopes that he might be designated heir. The scheme works so well that Volpone decides to feign not only sickness but death, in order to watch the avaricious heir-presumptives scramble for their inheritance. Mosca, his able, but perhaps too cunning, parasite, agrees to the scheme and at the same time seizes the opportunity to pursue a plot of his own. After naming himself heir, Mosca refuses to acknowledge that Volpone is alive, even when Volpone has had his fun and wants to return to the world of the living. Finally the matter is taken before the town magistrates. It is there that Mosca's obstinate and uncompromising attitude forces Volpone to unmask, revealing his true identity and motives from the beginning. The magistrates sentence everyone who has been involved, and Volpone loses his fortune, but not his life.

Though the play is genuinely satiric in its treatment of greed and the greedy, Volpone presents us with a hero that has all the characteristics of any that we will find in modern dramatic comedy. He can certainly be categorized as an overcomer in comparison to the other characters in the drama. The vices which possess Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino, their greed, jealousy, envy and backbiting, are the elements which provide the fuel for Volpone's game. His game is not a means to wealth, though he certainly does not find the byproduct of his efforts objectionable, rather the game is for him a means of entertainment. He enjoys playing

the game of life. Even though his own avarice is his eventual undoing, he has, for a time, mastered it. He is so confident in his approach to life that he is not afraid to feign death. It is but another way of exploring the world, even another way to take advantage of it. Nor is he overwhelmed by the sentence of the magistrates for his misdeeds, and the loss of his fortune. Somehow we expect that the old mountebank will survive.

The key element in all of this is Volpone's final assertion of his true identity. Though the others may be confused concerning his identity, in the end, he is not. It is a question of his level of self-awareness. The higher that level is--the better that the hero of either comedy or anti-comedy can answer the question, "who am I?"--the more heroic they are. In fact, it is only when Volpone begins to lose his sense of self-awareness that Mosca begins to dominate him. When his sense of who he is diminishes, his advantage over Mosca and the rest of the world begins to melt away. When the game gets out of hand, Volpone re-asserts his true identity in order to regain predominance. There is no vacillation: "I am Volpone," he defiantly tells the magistrates, "and this is my knave" (pointing to Mosca).[1] He is aptly contrasted in the play with Sir Politic-Would-Be, who

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[1]Ben Jonson, Volpone, Act V, scene vii, line 88, Russell Fraser and Norman Rabkin, eds., Drama of the English Renaissance (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976). Further references to Volpone are given parenthetically with the text.

virtually denies his own existence by crawling into a tortoise shell when pursued by his opposition. The pressure of the action, or the heat of the situation is that which probes the character of a dramatic figure for an answer to the question "who are you?" The hero responds by rising to the occasion and asserting this identity. Those who are not heroes attempt to evade the consequences of what their name or identity would require of them. They are the De Guiches, who tear off their rank insignia in the heat of battle. They are in the throes of an identity crisis, not knowing or perceiving their proper role or function--not knowing what to do with themselves. Quite apart from questioning who he is, Volpone is confident enough to take advantage of varying identities. He is sick man, mountebank, and this time, probably carrying things a bit too far, he is a dead man. However, when the time comes to challenge the usurping Mosca there is no question: he is Volpone.

The Duchess of Malfi, though it serves the world of anti-comedy, still provides us with an apt illustration of the qualities of and qualifications for the hero. Thinking that her husband and children have been murdered by her evil brothers, the Duchess resigns herself to her fate: "She's sad, as one long used to't: and she seems rather to welcome the end of misery than to shun it."[2] As it happens, her

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[2]John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi, Act IV, scene i, line 4, Russell Fraser and Norman Rabkin, eds., Drama of the English Renaissance (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976). Further references to the play are given parenthetically within the text.

husband and son are still alive, but the Duchess goes nonetheless to her tragic fate at the hands of Bosola, the mercenary henchman of her brothers. She dies with beauty and dignity and nobility, even though her death is by strangulation and not the block. But her fate has overcome her. There is no allusion to victory over the grave. She prays, but God does not answer. She is mastered by the lot that her fate has dealt her, "I account this world a tedious theater, for I do play a part in't 'gainst my will" (IV, i, 83). There is poise and self-control in her death, but defeat and not victory. One message of the drama is that man, whether duchess or domestic, is born to die. They are resigned to, rather than enamored with life.

The Duchess steels herself against the worst that her fate has in store. The fact that fate masters her and that she does not master her fate places the drama at antipodes with that which is comic. However, the character traits of the Duchess place her within the boundaries of the dramatic hero or heroine. She knows her identity. Her wicked brothers even use psychological tortures against her in an attempt to drive her insane--that is, to deprive her of her identity.

> Duchess. Who am I?
>
> Bosola. Thou art a box of worm seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy . . .
>
> Duchess. Am not I thy Duchess?
>
> Bosola. Thou art some great woman sure; for riot begins to sit on thy forehead (clad in gray hairs) twenty years sooner than on a merry milkmaids . . .

Duchess. I am Duchess of Malfi still.

Even in the face of death, the Duchess is confident of at least one thing: She knows who she is. Fate has dictated to her a lot that cannot be overcome, and she accepts her lot, though it is against her will. Nonetheless, we extol her as we do all those who are confident of their identity. Here is one of the central differences between comedy and anti-comedy. The most tragic of all is he that knows his purpose in life, but can do nothing about it because of his "fate." The writers of comedy make their heroes to know their identities and to become those who turn fate into fortune.

If the heroes know the answer to the question "who am I?"--that is, "what is my significance in life?"--then, given the nature of twentieth century man and his identity problem, we might expect that twentieth century comic heroes would be very difficult to isolate and identify. Such is certainly the case with Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. Gogo and Didi are never sure of the time of day, month or year, nor do they know him for whom they wait, nor are they sure whether they should love, tolerate or hate each other, and they are not even sure whether they can stand themselves. Pozzo probably comes the closest in his own demented way to having the greatest consciousness of who he is, but it is not self-consciousness of heroic proportions. His self-awareness depends on the service and homage of others. He knows who others think he is, but that only gives him an

image to live up to and not a living self-image. He would like to sit down, but no one has invited him to be seated. "But how am I to sit down now without affectation, now that I have risen? Without appearing to--how shall I say--without appearing to falter."[3] His actions, in fact his whole existence depends upon others, and that is one reason that he desires to keep such a tight reign on them. Without them he would lose his existence. Lucky certainly has no real sense of who he is. Docile slave one minute and extemporaneous genius the next, he has no identifiable personal stability. Fortunately, the list of characters is short enough that we have already exhausted them, with the exception of the boy who acts as emissary for Godot. Could he be the hero? He has but a handful of lines, but at least they are all coherent.

The only plausible conclusion concerning a hero in Waiting for Godot is that there is none. Could it be a comedy nonetheless? If we remain with the model that comedy must leave the reader or playgoer with the sense that the hero or heroine overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life, then applying it to Waiting for Godot causes a problem in terminology. The outrages and misfortunes are well represented, but there is no hero to overcome them. Waiting for Godot falls short for that reason. Or for those who tout it as a successful drama, it succeeds for that reason.

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[3]Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954), p. 19.

What Waiting for Godot does present is death in animation. The characters endure the living death. The absence of a clear-cut hero in the drama reduces its humanness. What appears to be life is in reality only animated death. Pozzo and Lucky, Gogo and Didi are walking dead men. With no hero there is no human focus. If we may assume that to be human is to be alive, and to be alive is to be human, then the play propagates death and not life.

There must be a hero in dramatic comedy, or the challenge of life will be lost by default. The despair of life, the anguish, the torture and the disappointment are confronted, but if they are confronted without a hero, they are intensified and not overcome. If we see only the void that opposes life and the living, and see no man who is self-possessed enough to see a way over, under around or through the void, then we see anti-comedy and not comedy. Waiting for Godot is capable of confronting the void of death but not of overcoming it.

Other twentieth century drama does not necessarily present problems in hero identification which are any simpler. It is difficult to perceive the quality of overcoming the outrages and misfortunes of life in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? On the surface, the play appears to be a hopeless case of marital problems which, it would seem, could not even be settled by divorce. Indeed, when grim faced George walks in with the shotgun, points it at Martha's head and pulls the trigger . . . we think the worst.

But instead of a bullet, a Chinese parasol pops out. Bang! "I've never been so frightened . . . never," Honey confesses. But George leans over to Martha and says, "you like that, did you?" To which she replies, "Yeah . . . that was pretty good."[4] The scene captures the play in miniature. We are coming in close contact with the raw nerves and psychological tensions, even coming close to death. But after that close brush with death, those who have experienced the threat are so much more alive. The hero, in this case George, confronts the very limits of life and death in order to gain a better understanding of them.

Does George know who he is? Does he understand his role and purpose in life? More than anyone else in the play he does. Martha is caught up in a world of the imagination, a complex game that has created another identity for her, including the false identity as a mother, something she lacks in the real world. She escapes into that world, aided by the anesthetic effect of alcohol, to avoid the painful realities of her own life. George is much more self-possessed. He is the one who moves to shatter the dream world--to break the hold of the illusory and force both of them to face reality together. "It's very simple," says George, "when people can't abide things as they are, when they can't abide the present, they do one of two things

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[4]Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 58. Further references to the play are given by page number parenthetically within the text.

. . . either they . . . either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they set about to . . . alter the future" (p. 178). Martha's method of coping with the future was to try to escape from it. George breaks his pattern of escape into the past and alters the future by shattering the portion of the dream that is most important to Martha, their imaginary twenty-one year old son. Quite within the rules of their complex game playing, George invents a telegram--"Martha? I have some terrible news for you. (There is a strange half-smile on her lips) It's about our . . . son. He's dead. Can you hear me Martha. Our boy is dead" (p. 181). According to Martha's confession to Nick, there is only one man that has ever made her really happy and that is her husband George. She listens to him and accepts what he has to say because she recognizes a strength in him that she does not have within herself, nor has she seen similar strength in anyone else. Despite all the harsh grating conflict in their marriage, it is George who delivers them from the game of illusion. "Truth and illusion, who knows the difference, eh, toots? Eh? (p. 201), says George. The answer is nobody--except he who has asked the question. George is self-possessed enough to be able to recognize the difference between truth and illusion, and to be the overcomer of it. Throughout the play, George never loses control. He is producer, director and star player in a production that requires both cunning and precision. His confidence in his identity is unshaken; his status as the hero is unchallenged.

George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion provides us with yet another perspective on the problem of the comic hero. Is Liza Doolittle a flower girl, or is she a duchess? The questions for Liza are first, does she actually undergo a character change at the hands of Professor Higgins, and second, does she realize who she really is at any time in the play, beginning or ending? Before she becomes part of the laboratory at Wimpole Street, Liza is not portrayed as being dissatisfied with her station in life. Indeed the question of becoming someone else has only vaguely presented itself in her hope of someday working in a flower shop. Otherwise, she is mainly concerned with the present and that she be regarded by herself and others as a respectable girl. "I'm a respectable girl: so help me, I never spoke to him except to ask him to buy a flower off me," she boo-hoos in Act One.[5] She has a curious forced dignity: "I won't be called a baggage when I've offered to pay like any lady" (p. 18). Like Pozzo, her self-respect depends upon the respect of others. However, after the experiment has proven itself a success, Liza has ceased to question her respectability, but now questions the future. "Why didn't you leave me where you picked me out of--in the gutter. You thank God it's all over, and that now you can throw me back again there, do you?" (p. 64). She becomes desperate with

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[5]George Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion (1916; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 6. Further references to the play are given by page number parenthetically within the text.

anxiety: "What am I fit for? What have you left me for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?" (p. 65). In other words she has moved from a certain knowledge of her role and position in life to a new position where she confronts uncertainty and must (in order to become the heroine) successfully answer the question "who am I?"

Alan Jay Lerner's answer to Liza's question of "What's to become of me?" is to create a romantic ending for the musical version, My Fair Lady. She is to live happily ever after with Higgins and Pickering. Higgins has grown accustomed to her face. The Higgins of My Fair Lady regards her prospective marriage to Freddy as an "infantile idea" but the Higgins of Pygmalion sees it as only another alternative that she faces, with the best possible choice being to take up permanent residence with him and Colonel Pickering. My Fair Lady resolves the problem by encouraging us to think of them as a match. Pygmalion leaves the question open.

Is Liza secure in the knowledge of who she is? The encounter with Higgins the day after she is passed off as a duchess indicates that she has regained a measure of her self-respect. "Your calling me Miss Doolittle that day when I first came to Wimpole Street. That was the beginning of self-respect for me" (p. 79), she confides to Colonel Pickering. Later Liza observes that "the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated" (p. 80). Higgins points out that he treats

everyone like flower girls and means nothing by it other than to exercise his passion for consistency. That thought strikes a responsive chord in Liza and we see a change in her personality here. On hearing Higgins' rationale concerning his treatment of other people, she becomes more confident. "I'll go and be a teacher" (p. 87), she says, teaching the world what Higgins has taught her. Higgins is outraged and threatens her. Suddenly Liza realizes that she is a person of worth. "Oh when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself" (p. 88). Higgins rises to the challenge, "By George, Eliza, I said I'd make a woman of you, and I have. I like you like this." She has indeed changed from a sniveling slipper fetcher, to a woman whom Higgins admires. "Five minutes ago you were like a millstone round my neck. Now you are a tower of strength: a consort battleship. You and I and Pickering will be three old bachelors together instead of only two men and a silly girl" (p. 88). The question of what Eliza will or will not do in the future is not the point, however. We have emerged with a heroine who has changed--moved up to a position of strength--and become one who knows her position and role in life. The comic heroes are not a millstone about anyone's neck. They are building blocks and not stumbling blocks. The heroes of comic drama then are self-possessed. They are not necessarily independent, they may need other people, but

they do not lean on them for their true identity. They do not encumber the other players.

The question arises then, is it possible to have a comedy when there is no identifiable hero. It is a question that may be peculiar to the last half of the twentieth century. It seems to me that we are living in an age which is particularly anti-heroic, and dramatists have been reflecting the mood. This difficulty is not just in the sense of finding a hero who is a "paragon of morals," but it is getting harder and harder to find someone who is simply aware of his identity. For that reason it is becoming more difficult to find modern comedies. The comic hero must know who he is, he must be forging his own fortune in order that he be able to lead the way in overcoming the misfortunes and outrages of life. If he is incapable of setting the course and direction of his own life, if he does not understand his purpose in life, his reason for existence, it is hardly likely, save by chance alone, that he could demonstrate any serious capacity to overcome the difficulties that life presents.

Could we then have a comedy that does not present a serious challenge to be overcome? I believe that life must be challenged in order to be appreciated. There must be a certain element of risk in order for the comedy to be taken "seriously." I use the word advisedly. Comedy can be serious business. True comedy does not encompass that which offers no challenge to be overcome and it does not encompass

drama that presents a challenge which overwhelms the hero. Comedy is inconceivable without the hero to do the overcoming.

Chapter III

There is a joke that heals and a joke that destroys. Comedy moves toward the former and away from the latter. Its function is to create a healing atmosphere. Those who are involved in overcoming the outrages and misfortunes of life are those who are being healed. The more characters that are afforded the benefits of the medicinal atmosphere the better, while those left outside the pale of healing should be as few as possible. Without becoming unduly embroiled in the psychological issues of laughter, it would be beneficial to examine the concept of "laughing with" rather than "laughing at," for it is that which is at the center of the joke that heals.

The Last Analysis, by Saul Bellow is ultimately concerned with the comedy that brings about healing rather than the comedy that destroys or cuts down. The drama is placed in a large studio on New York's west side. Bummidge, a distinguished man nearing sixty years of age, is the central character. He is a comedian who has turned philosopher. The action centers on Bummidge's plan to stage a closed circuit TV performance of a play, which, we will learn as the play unfolds, will provide the crucial test of his "comic

theory." Bummidge uses all his friends and relatives in the play within the play. Some of them are loyal and true, such as Imogen, his devoted and doting secretary, and Bertram, the "ratcatcher." The others are only interested in themselves, money, or both. Bummidge has been a millionaire but is now near bankruptcy. All but Bertram and Imogen see his promise of a comeback as a chance to gain new wealth. Bummidge is treated as half-mad by the disloyal friends until the success of the play within a play in Act II; then he is hailed as a genius. He will have nothing whatever to do with their newfound loyalty and improvises a huge net to trap them. The ratcatcher is accorded the privilege of disposing of them. The play concludes with Bummidge victoriously proclaiming the establishment of his school--"The Theatre of the Soul," --which he hopes will be the solution to the degenerate state of comedy in the twentieth century.

If Bummidge thinks that comedy will be the solution to man's suffering and pain, it is because he sees the comic world suffering at the hands of the anti-comic world, especially under the dominion of the world of farce which he considers to be the imposter, posing as the true comic solution. Comedy, the liberating force in life, is his way of minimizing the pain and suffering that he sees. He observes that all people, or at least all of the characters in the play, are suffering in one way or another and trying to find ways to cope with that fact. "The forms--" comments Bummidge, "The many forms that suffering takes. The

compulsion to suffer. But for each and every one of these there is a method to evade suffering. Delusion, intoxication, ecstasy, and comedy."[1] There seems to be an abundance of men who are advocates of each approach to evade suffering except for a notable absence of those who espouse comedy as the answer. Therefore, Bummidge sees any artist who creates true comedy--and by true comedy he means that which creates healing, reconciliation, or "the laugh with" --as a purveyor of salvation for mankind. He who can offer the best form of healing and reconciliation for man's suffering and pain will be creating the best comedy. Therefore, the artist whose sphere is comedy is the one who must provide the solutions, solutions that delusion, intoxication and ecstasy are incapable of providing. "I'm not solely a man, but also a man who is an artist, and an artist whose sphere is comedy. Though the conditions may be impossible, laughter in decay, there is nothing else for me to do but face those real conditions" (p. 712). Bummidge accepts the challenge of trying to prove that comedy can successfully cope with those "real conditions."

The laughter in decay is not the laughter that will produce a healing. It is the kind of laughter that is the false solution--another escape into the delusion and alcohol category. When that kind of laughter stops "there is still

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[1]Saul Bellow, The Last Analysis, rpt. in Robert W. Corrigan, ed., Comedy: A Critical Anthology (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 710. Further references to the play are given by page number parenthetically within the text.

a big surplus of pain" (p. 714). Or as King Solomon put it "Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness."[2] There is a kind of laughter in which there is no release from pain. Solomon and Bellow are touching the same point. It is a laughter which traps and intensifies pain while producing no healing.

Bummidge's message is not one of escape, but of confronting the problem and overcoming it. Winkleman, Bummidge's authoritative and realistic cousin, who sees comedy as a product rather than a solution, asserts that "The great public is tired of the old nonsense-type nonsense. It's ready for the serious nonsense. This psychological set-up is just the thing for a comeback" (p. 684). But to understand Bummidge's approach as purely psychological is to misread the play. His message is one of "sanity and health" quite apart from the psychoanalyst's couch.

What is the reason for the heavy emphasis on psychoanalysis then? Max, Bummidge's son, is given these lines, "Come clean with me, what's the reason for this analysis? Are you kidding your way to God? What makes a comic think that he can cure human perversity? It'll only take different forms. If you change your vices, is that progress?" (p. 691). Clearly it isn't. It may be only a change for the worse. Are we "kidding our way to God?" Bummidge's answer is no.

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[2]Proverbs 14:13. All scripture quotations are from the King James Version. Future references to the Bible are noted parenthetically within the text.

In fact he finds that much of the kidding that is going on is headed in the opposite direction. He finds it sadistic.

> Bummidge. --Now, when was I weaned?
>
> Velma. Late. On the way to Prospect Park, on your mama's lap. Your feet were dragging on the floor of the street car. You didn't want the breast and your mama said, "all right, I'll give it to the conductor."
>
> Bummidge (to camera). An old gag . . . they're really sadistic threats in comic form (p. 713).

It is not the comic's desire to "kid his way to God." Bummidge reinforces his point in this way: "Everybody is kidding, smiling. Every lie looks like a pleasantry. Destruction appears like horseplay. Chaos is turned into farce, because evil is clever. It knows you can get away with murder if you laugh. Sadism makes fun. Extermination is a riot. And this is what drives a clown to thought" (p. 691). What Bummidge is thinking is that there needs to be a distinction drawn between the anti-comic jokes that destroy and the comic jokes that heal. Destructive jokes do not bring us any closer to a real solution to the problems of life than do delusion, intoxication and ecstasy. What Bummidge is hearing from today's comedians and receiving from today's comedians is laughter that is put to sadistic purposes. It is a sadism that expects us to laugh but gives us no healthy opportunity to do so. It is a play that gives us no opportunity to laugh, except at the outrageousness of the situation. That is the reason for Bummidge's psychological approach. Man's sickness is growing worse in direct proportion to the growing powerlessness of comedy to pose

solutions to man's problems. Comedy has no power to heal as it once did. "Sores and harsh pains, despair and death--these raise loud, brutal laughter" (p. 725). Sick jokes are not healing the wounds, not reconciling enemies. Sick comedy flails the flesh and adds to the problem, creating new, gaping tears. It does nothing to heal. There is no cure in jokes that cut the live flesh. There is no true comedy in them either. Comedy is supposed to excoriate the dead flesh and bind up that which is alive. Comedy is opposed to the kind of joke that makes evil look clever if we laugh. "Extermination is a riot--" an anti-comic laugh riot. Kidding our way to God is not the comic solution that Bummidge is seeking to express.

"What makes the comic think he can cure human perversity?" Unfortunately, Bellow's play does not really answer that question. The fact that there is a type of comedy which is brutal, sadistic and cutting is well established. So is the fact that true "wit and comedy have to be recovered" (p. 725). But how? Winkleman says "I get it. You don't know who you are?" Bummidge responds, "But I do know who I am not. How many of you can say that?" (p. 733). Unfortunately, we get a much better sense of what comedy is not in Bellow than what it finally is. The resolution to the play within a play does not give us much of a clue either. Of course, there is the establishment of the "Theatre of the Soul," but the title is most of what we are told about it. He will give the public a chance to practice his

"Existen-Action-Self-Analysis," but we are never told what that is. The play seems to promise that the school will help man recover from the dehumanizing that he has undergone at the hands of the type of joke that destroys. Bellow renders it this way: "To disown the individual altogether is nihilism, which isn't funny at all. But suppose all we fumblers, we cranks and creeps and cripples, we proud, sniffling, ragged-assed paupers of heart and soul, sick with every personal vice, ratted, proud, spoiled, and distracted --suppose we look again for the manhood we are born to inherit?" (p. 726). To regain manhood is to regain self-control. It is the same thing as knowing who you are. In other words, instead of moving towards the nihilistic disowning of self, you move toward affirming self. That is what the hero does. He knows who he is and knows his purpose in life. True comedy helps us recover our manhood, but the question remains, how? Bummidge, in his last speech says, "what a struggle I've had. It took me so long to get through the brutal stage of life. And when I was through with it, the mediocre stage was waiting for me. And now that's done with, and I am ready for the sublime" (p. 737). We get the feeling that Bummidge has faced up to the void, but not overcome it. He is aware of the problem: there is a joke that heals and a joke that destroys. And he is at least partially conscious of the solution: we must regain our sense of manhood--who we are--in order to have a decent chance of overcoming the void of death. But anti-comedy

faces the void of death too. "What makes a comic think he can cure human perversity?" The Last Analysis has at least part of the answer. The hero must be restored and equipped with a knowledge that true comedy heals rather than destroys. Bummidge places man on his feet and directs him to the void, but the void is not overcome. Real comedy needs to go one step farther and deal with the kind of living that can face the void of death with confidence.

Trevor Griffiths' Comedians provides one of the best insights into the problem of the joke that heals and the joke that destroys. The drama is set in Manchester in East Lancashire. The action takes place in a school, where Eddie Waters, formerly a successful comedian, is conducting a night class for six would-be comedians. Gethin Price is his most promising but most troublesome student. Each of the six is employed, most of them as laborers. In this, the final night of their schooling, they are preparing to try their skills before the audience at a local bingo club, not far from the school. Bert Challenor, a talent agent, is on hand to view their performances. He critiques them at the end of the evening, hiring two of the six, neither of them Gethin Price.

Comedians is largely philosophical with little or no dramatic action to attract the playgoer. Like The Last Analysis, the emphasis on the message is so heavy that Comedians will probably suffer the same fate as Bellow's play: it will be relegated to anthologies and seldom if ever

staged. Griffiths' ideas, however, are spellbinding, even if his drama is not.

At issue throughout the play is the nature of true comedy. The questions are the same as in The Last Analysis. The resolution is that true comedy makes reconciliation and healing possible and does not create fresh wounds.

In Act I, Waters is careful to distinguish between comedy and joke telling. The joke is not the message in comedy. "We work through laughter, not for it. If all you're about is raising a laugh, OK. Get on with it, good luck to you, but don't waste my time," says Waters. Drama that works for the joke is not comedy. The ancient Brothers Menaechmus to the most modern "Sanford and Son" are excellent examples of anti-comedy. They work for laughter and not through it.

Waters objects to working for laughter because the comedian or the playwright that works for laughter invariably raises the loud and brutal kind without creating the medicinal atmosphere of comedy. It is not joke telling that is the culprit, but what lies behind the joke--the motive. "It's not the jokes. It's what lies behind 'em. It's the attitude. A real comedian--that's a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express."[3] When the true comedians look at what the listeners are

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[3]Trevor Griffiths, Comedians (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1976), p. 20. Further references to the play are given by page number parenthetically within the text.

shying away from they see what is hurting and terrifying them. But true comedy must do more than just see it. It must go one step more and be able to overcome the hurts and terrors in order that those in their grip might be liberated. "A joke releases the tensions, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate . . . it has to change the situation" (p. 20). Any joke can cause a catharsis of sorts to take place. There is some release merely in the telling of the joke. A true joke, however, a real comic joke, has to do more than create a momentary cathartic effect, it must change the situation that has made the catharsis necessary in the first place. In other words, it must deal with the cause of the sickness as well as the symptoms.

What Waters is objecting to is the joke that is a distortion of the truth, a joke that plays on a stereotype in order to garner a laugh so that it can stay in business. The joke, in other words, that has the laugh as its only objective. It is a business world joke slanted toward success as measured by the response of the audience. The example that Griffiths uses is a grossly anti-feminine limerick that Price concocted.

> There was a young lady called Pratt
> Who would hang from the light by her hat
> With a frightening cough
> She would jerk herself off
> By sinking her teeth in her twat (p. 22).

This is the joke that destroys and not the joke that heals.

This is the anti-comedy that works for and not through laughter. The class discusses the limerick, wondering if Waters liked it.

> Waters. It's clever. Is it your own?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Price. Look, Mr. Waters, I don't want compliments, just say what you don't like and we can get on . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Waters. It's a joke that hates women, Gethin.
>
> Price. How come?
>
> Waters. It's a joke that hates women and sex. Do I go on?
>
> Price. Why not?
>
> Waters. In the Middle Ages men called the woman's sexual organ the devil's mark. According to Freud, men still see them as shark's mouths, in dreams. When you walk into that arena with a joke, you've gotta know why you're there (p. 22).

Gethin's joke destroys, perhaps unwittingly, but it does destroy. But the purveyor of that kind of joke is not concerned with art or comedy. He's concerned with business. Bert Challenor, the talent scout, is Griffiths' voice in the play for those who work for laughter. He arrives at the school before show time to give the class a "couple of hints." Challenor's philosophy is to supply what the people demand--and what they are demanding, according to him, is escape. The audience can be led by the comedian, but only in the direction that it's going. If they want laughter to escape, then the comedian provides laughter. No thought is given to healing the problem that caused them to want to

escape in the first place. "We're not missionaries," says Challenor, "we're suppliers of laughter." I suppose that the man who writes real comedy is then a bit of a missionary. He is creating a work of art that is an example of overcoming the misfortunes of life. He is purveying a way of living that can not only face death but conquer it. He is sharing a way of life that is better than despair and death. Comedians are not just dispensing placebos that may divert our attention from the real problem for a moment. The kind of joke that only provides an escape from the reality of the problem will end in heaviness when the laughter ceases. The man who writes real comedy is both missionary and physician. Challenor is looking for the businessman-comedian who will supply the immediate demand for escape. That is why he doesn't hire Price. Price, as we see him in the play, is only capable of hatching the joke that destroys. The philosophy of both Challenor and Price falls short of the healing that ought to take place. The real comedian is a missionary-doctor.

But what about that limerick--doesn't that help release the tension and fear that are associated with the subject? Waters goes to the blackboard to explain it. "Pratt. Pratt says twat. Lady, twat. Twat, bad word, unsayable. I've said it, will say it, might say it, <u>hat</u> fooled you, build you up the suspense, cough, cough, jerked herself off, women masturbate, naughty, must say it now, dadadadadadada twat. There!" (p. 22). Did saying it release any of the

tension or liberate any of the sense of fear? Waters' reply to that question is useful here.

> I don't think that it does. I think that it recognizes it and traps it. Leaves it exactly where it is. Doesn't help it on. Doesn't do anything to change it . . . a joke that feeds on ignorance starves its audience. We have the choice. We can say something or we can say nothing. Not everything true is funny, and not everything funny is true. Most comics feed prejudice and fear and blinkered vision, but the best ones, . . . illuminate them, make them clearer to see, easier to deal with. We've got to make people laugh till they cry. Cry. Till they find their pain and their beauty. Comedy is medicine (p. 23).

Waters, however, is not unopposed in his idea that comedy should be medicinal in its effect. Price takes the opportunity of the next joke that the class discusses to make his point.

> McBain. There was this poacher, see. And he shoots this deer. Big 'un. Hat stands in its head an' that. And he puts it over his back--like that--and he's hunking it off when this gamekeeper catches him and says, "Hey, you're poaching," and you man says, "How do you mean?" And he says, "You've got a deer on your back," and he looks over his shoulder and he says, "Get off."
>
> Price. Now, Mr. McBain, you must see that that joke is totally supportive of all forms of blood sports. Besides which it undoubtedly hints at the dark secret of animal buggery or, at the very least, the stealthy buggering of men by beasts of the field and forrest. A comedian, George, would have carried all this out into the open where we could all see it . . . so that we'd all come to realize what should've been obvious from the start, or the Middle Ages, whichever you prefer, namely, deep down we all want [it] up the arse by antlered beasties. (Pause) It's a joke that hates deer, George (p. 25).

What Price is saying is that those who see his anti-feminine limerick as precisely that--an anti-feminine, hateful and ignorant joke, have simply lost their sense of humor. All

the talk about the duty of comedy to provide healing does not register with Price. The fact is that such an approach to comedy can only destroy. It can never be creative or beautiful; it can only raise raucous and brutal laughter. It chucks compassion, beauty, love, concern, truth and anything else that enables comedy to overcome the outrages and misfortunes of life, into a refuse heap of failure, frustration, despondency and despair. The only thing that it is capable of creating is a wounded spirit.

Price's response to the accusation that his limerick is hateful, that it abandons truth and beauty, is to accuse Waters of being incapable of discerning the real truth. Price would say that the truth is not beautiful; reality is ugly. He excuses himself on the grounds that his approach to comedy merely reflects the condition of man. It is, after all, honest. But the mere reflection or recognition of the problem is certainly not the same as the solution to the problem. Price is a primitive surgeon. He sees the gangrenous flesh, and, wielding a machete instead of a scalpel, he hacks away. He is not concerned that his instrument cuts at live flesh, nor with proper anesthetic. It is a painful approach. Price's virtue is that he does not submit to Challenor's business world approach to comedy. His vice is his failure to perfect his surgical technique.

If comedy is to provide the solution to life's problems, then the comedians must show the way over, under, around or through the void of death and not just bring us

into an awareness that the void exists. Anybody can become a tour guide in the void. It takes comedy to overcome it.

What is the nature of the comedy that doesn't hate and destroy, then? Waters is good at pointing out the wrong kind, how about the right kind? Griffiths introduces Mr. Patel, a Hindu night student, an older man, who speaks only broken English. He enters the classroom by mistake and Waters assists him to the proper spot. But before we see the last of Mr. Patel, he leaves us with his approach.

> Patel. You like to hear a joke from my country?
>
> Waters (Frowning). Try me.
>
> Patel. (Laughing, excited) It's very funny, it's very, very funny..A man has many children, wife, in the South. His crop fail, he have nothing, the skin shrivel on his children's ribs, his wife's milk dries. They lie outside the house starving. All around them, the sacred cows, ten, twenty, more, eating grass. One day he take sharp knife, mm? He creep up on a big white cow, just as he lift knife the cow see him and the cow say, Hey, aren't you knowing you not permitted to kill me? And the man say, What do you know, a talking horse (p. 69).

Waters response is "that's Jewish." And it is. It could as well have been the starving Job in the story preparing to slay a pig. But the important thing is that it confronts the problem. It does recognize the void of death, but it does not stop there as the limerick did. It leaps the void. It finds a way. It solves the problem. It bring resurrection and healing and food and medicine. The Hindu will have horse meat for dinner. True comedy overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life.

The twentieth century holds few examples of the kind of comedy that heals rather than destroys. For instance, in an earlier chapter, we identified Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? as a comedy because its hero, George, was able to overcome the problem of the imaginary and devastating life that he and Martha were leading. But in order to save the situation, he uses rather harsh tactics--he "kills" his own "son." But there are real emotions, real feelings, real people involved too. Does Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? flail at live flesh or excoriate that which is dead? If it cuts to the quick can it still be a comedy? In the "Walspurgisnacht," George brutally plays "Get the Guests." After gaining Nick's confidence, he ascertains the true circumstances that forced Nick and Honey into marriage. After finding out, he unashamedly reveals all to Martha in Nick's presence. "Well, how they got married is this . . . the Mouse got all puffed up one day and she went over to Blondie's house, and she stuck out her puff, and she said . . . look at me . . . and so they were married . . . and the puff went away . . . like magic . . . pouf!"[4] Nick himself is not exempt.

> George. Don't you side with her [Martha], houseboy.
>
> Nick. I am not a houseboy.
>
> George. Look! I know the game! You don't make it in the sack, you're a houseboy.

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[4]Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 146.

Has George gone too far? The joke of Honey's hysterical pregnancy may or may not be the joke that destroys. Is his castigation of Nick the sort of comedy that binds up wounds or the sort that creates fresh ones? His brand of comedy may be as Bummidge says, "chaos turned into farce, because evil is clever."

To answer the question that is posed by the nature of the chaos in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?--and I think that chaos is a fair term for it--the limits of the model must be kept in mind. In order to fit the model, the comedy must leave the viewer with the sense that the hero is an overcomer in life and is not overcome by life's misfortunes. If George is in the process of delivering Martha and himself from a fruitless game of imagination that holds a complex and insurmountable grip on their lives, and I think that he is, then he is an overcomer. He is excoriating dead flesh that is preventing a healing. Some will not be able to see George's actions in so positive a light, hence he will not be an overcomer of anything, and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? will be chaos and not comedy to them.

What about Nick and Honey? Are they cut to the quick? I believe that they are. There is no medicine in the comedy for them. Salvation and healing for George and Martha are at the expense of Nick and Honey. It may be that George's harsh approach is the only one that would have done the job. Perhaps George needed to be as extreme as he was just to get at the dead flesh. He may be putting them on the road to

salvation. Even if he was unnecessarily rough, it must be kept in mind that my contract is only for the hero. "If the viewer is left with the sense that the hero is an overcomer in life, and not that he is overcome by life's misfortunes," we have a comedy. The shocking aspect of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is not that some of the characters are not included in the medicinal nature of true comedy, but that they are with such apparent ruthlessness excluded from that healing, and devastated with such apparent cunning. If we view the historical spectrum of comedy, however, it is a rare comedy which does not exclude somebody from the healing. Not all the characters are reconciled at the end of Act V. There is usually someone who is destroyed by the joke and not healed; somebody gets laughed at instead of laughed with. The most striking image that remains in my mind from first having seen Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice on stage was the curtain call. Portia, Jessica, Bassanio, Antonio and the characters with the single exception of Shylock had joined hands at center stage. They were laughing and joking with each other as they acknowledged our applause. Shylock was standing alone in the darkened front left corner of the stage, head slightly bowed and shaking from side to side, his hands knotted into fists in front of his chest. Not everybody was healed. What about Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino, for example, in Volpone? Aren't they subject to some rather cruel treatment? Are they in any way healed by the comedy? Or what about Sir

Fopling Flutter of The Man of Mode by George Etherege? Are his manners so damnable and his personality traits so despicable that he must be excluded from the medicinal nature of that comedy? What about Bummidge's disloyal friends, including his wife and son, who were herded off-stage by the ratcatcher in a huge net? Didn't all these suffer at the hands of the one whom we are calling the hero--the overcomer? Yes, they do suffer. And our natural response is to say, "Right, and they deserved it! They got what was coming to them, and that's part of comedy too." Perhaps so, but what I am saying is that while my contract is only that the hero overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life, the best comedy spreads the medicine around to others. In As You Like It, the hero, Orlando, and the heroine, Rosalind, are the overcomers. But the wicked and elder brother Oliver is not dealt a fatal blow in the process. He is taken into the circle of healing that is created in that play, when he is allowed by the overcomers into the forest of Arden. The comedy cuts away his dead flesh (his desire to oppress his brother) and heals his vision so that he can see the world in the same light as the overcomers. His wounds are healed. He is included rather than excluded.

It is the joke that heals that is inclusive rather than exclusive. This is one way in which comedy and Christianity are related. The Christian and comic methods are medicinal. Jesus did not exclude tax gatherers or sinners from his table. He even allowed a woman who was known to have been

immoral to anoint his head with costly spikenard.[5] James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume a village of the Samaritans who did not receive Jesus, but he said "the Son of man is not come to destroy men"s lives, but to save them."[6] Jesus healed all those who were ready to be healed and included all those who would be included. It is true that he drove the merchants out of the temple with a whip, but, as in the case of George's severe tactics in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, any other corrective probably would have been ineffective. As Frye says, "the action of comedy, like the action of the Christian Bible, moves from law to liberty." Comedy liberates. Christianity liberates. Comedy overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life. So does Christianity. That is why I see them so closely related. I am not prepared to say that if Nick and Honey had been healed instead of destroyed, that Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? would have been a better comedy. I do think that Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? would have been more pure had it healed Nick and Honey. And by "pure" I mean that it would be more toward a comedy which leaves us with a sense of reconciliation and healing, toward the joke that heals rather than the joke that destroys, toward overcoming the void of death.

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[5]John 12:3.

[6]Luke 9:56.

Chapter IV

If comedy is that which overcomes the outrages and misfortunes of life, then those who create comedy become something much more than playwrights. What they create points the way to overcoming the void of death. They are showing, through the hero and through the joke that heals, how to move from merely confronting the problem or the challenge to overcoming it. Therefore, the artist who creates true comedy becomes the central figure in the "salvation through comedy" approach. "I'm not solely a man," comments Bummidge in The Last Analysis, "but also a man who is an artist, and an artist whose sphere is comedy. Though the conditions may be impossible, laughter in decay, there is nothing else for me to do but face those real conditions."[1]

"Comedy," according to Christopher Fry, "is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith."[2] In other words, comedy is not afraid to face

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[1]Saul Bellow, The Last Analysis, rpt. in Robert W. Corrigan, ed., Comedy: A Critical Anthology (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 712.

[2]"Comedy," Vogue (January, 1951), rpt. in Robert W. Corrigan, ed., Comedy Meaning and Form (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), p. 15.

life's real problems. If Bummidge is willing to face "those real conditions," then his brand of comedy is not an escape from the problem but a means of overcoming it. Bellow illustrates the point in Bummidge's dialogue with himself as he plays both patient and analyst:

> Bummidge (Patient). I have to tell you, Doctor, I'm fed up with these boring figures in my unconscious. It's always Father, Mother, or again breast, castration, anxiety, fixation to the past. I am desperately bored with these things, sick of them.
>
> Bummidge (Analyst). You're sick of them. Of course. We are all sick. That is our condition. Man is the sick animal. Repression is the root of madness, and also of his achievements.
>
> Bummidge (Patient). Oh, Doctor, why can't I live without hope, like everyone else?
>
> Bummidge (Analyst). Mr. Bummidge, you are timid but obstinate. Exceptional but commonplace. Amusing but sad. A coward but brave, you are stuck . . .
>
> Bummidge (Patient). No resolution?
>
> Bummidge (Analyst). Perhaps. If you can laugh. But face the void of death . . .[3]

Comedy and anti-comedy face the void of death but only comedy overcomes that void. It is the narrow escape into faith that accomplishes that end. That escape into faith is a move from confusion to order, from powerlessness to power, from defeat to victory. It is a narrow escape from death, perhaps even a living death, into life. If the "void of death" may be understood in terms of its opposing force, then it may be said that the void is the opposite of faith.

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[3]Bellow, p. 686.

The void of death sees no resolution and no victory over the woe of being alive. Faith is, in its vision, entirely unlimited.

That void is fairly plain to see in such a play as Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac; not so obvious in a play like Shaw's Misalliance. Almost everybody in Misalliance is afraid to tell the truth. They believe that if they did they would be in a worse fix than if they continue to play the society game. Society has taught them not to risk marrying a man for love nor to condone "a marriage between a member of the great and good middle class" and the "corrupt aristocracy."[4] Mr. Terleton, the underwear magnate, hates the business life, preferring instead to be a writer. Lord Summerhays has to pretend he's wealthy when he's broke. Bently and Johnny aren't sure what or who they are: future underwear magnates or future lords. Only Lina Szczepanowska, and to a certain extent Hypatia Tarleton, are willing to face the truth.

The lack of truthfulness is the void that must be overcome by comedy in Misalliance. The characters are not being truthful with themselves. They are wearing masks which hide their real identity. When it comes to the matter of their own imperfections, they have become skillful cosmetologists. Without the truth Hypatia must marry Bently, the brainy but

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[4]George Bernard Shaw, Misalliance, rpt. in Robert W. Corrigan, ed., Comedy: A Critical Anthology (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 494.

weak son of Lord Summerhays, and not Joey Percival, whom she really loves. Without the truth Joey must act the gentleman, not chasing Hypatia through the heather. Without the truth Lord Summerhays is blackmailed by Hypatia, because, although he is old enough to be her grandfather, he proposed to her; and without the truth, Gunner, the frustrated clerk who was further frustrated in his attempt to extort the Tarleton's, must acquiesce by signing a statement admitting that he is guilty when he is innocent. Everyone seems to be doomed to doing what they don't want to do, being whom they don't want to be, or marrying someone that they don't love.

The solutions posed to everyone's seeming "misalliance," range from reading as an escape, to reading for knowledge, to chance taking a la Lina (you can't live without running risks) Szczepanowska. Johnny Tarleton comments that his father looks on an "author as a sort of god. I look on him as a man that I pay to do a certain thing for me. I pay him to amuse me and to take me out of myself and make me forget."[5] However, reading for escape, reading for knowledge and chance taking are no more effective in achieving their desired ends than delusion, intoxication and ecstasy were in The Last Analysis. The characters in Misalliance are mastered by and not masters of their own lives.

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[5]Shaw, p. 497.

The truth, however, is at odds with the bands of social constraint which not all are so anxious to abandon. Percival sums it up this way: "If every man who dislikes me is to throw a handful of mud in my face, and every woman who likes me is to behave like Potiphar's wife, then I shall be a slave: the slave of uncertainty: the slave of fear: the worst of all slaveries . . . Give me the blessed protection of a good stiff conventionality among thoroughly well-brought up ladies and gentlemen."[6] The problem is that it is exactly that kind of restraint that has forced most of the players into the void--the social caste system. Percival perceived that the truth would make him a slave to uncertainty and a slave of fear. His fear is that without a "stiff conventionality," his world would be destroyed and himself with it. What he actually fears is death. His own self-destruction is what is at stake. He sees the social caste system as that which preserves his life from destruction. What he does not recognize is that it is in fact that same caste system that has a stranglehold on his life. The lie that all of the characters must live is choking the life out of each of them. In Misalliance, the social caste system is in fact the void that must be overcome.

They are forced to confront the void by Gunner, the destitute clerk, who has secreted himself in the house in order that he might settle an old score with the senior

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[6]Shaw, p. 520.

Tarleton. After Gunner is subdued, he is forced to conform to the rules of society, and for a moment it looks only as if the void of death had acquired one more victim. But after he downs a sloe gin he reveals what he knows about the family. His confession causes a chain reaction, and within a few lines everyone except Tarleton has abandoned the protection of his social order and is liberated by the truth. Hypatia and Percival at least start their marriage on an honest basis; the promise of the closing scene is that it will not be a misalliance.

If a play does not clearly delineate the void of death, then the operation of either the joke that heals or the leap of faith becomes impossible. The comedy, in order to be meaningful, must confront some kind of threat. Neil Simon's The Star Spangled Girl is a good example of a play which does not face up to any void. Andy, the editor of the almost defunct revolutionary rag Fallout, is trying to put off Mr. Franklin, his printer, to whom he owes six hundred dollars. He uses every ruse he can think of to delay Franklin in collecting the debt. But throughout the entire play that is the biggest threat to be overcome. There is no pretention at representing "real life," at least not any of the real problems of life, in The Star Spangled Girl. I do not say that it is not comedy, only that the real function of comedy--to heal and to bridge the void of death never has had a chance to go to work in the play. There can be no resurrection, no leap of faith, precisely because there is no opportunity to die.

What we are faced with then is two types of drama that are incapable of being considered true comedy: one faces the void of death but can do nothing about it, the other is not even aware that the void exists. Waiting For Godot falls short on the dark side and The Star Spangled Girl falls short on the light. In either case the narrow escape into faith (or what for our purposes will be called "the leap of faith") is impossible to demonstrate. Waiting For Godot can see but cannot overcome; The Star Spangled Girl cannot see. My assertion is that comedy embraces both the joke that heals and the leap of faith in overcoming the void. The "joke that heals" is the comedian's technique, it is the material that he uses to overcome the void of death. The "leap of faith" is the comic vision in overcoming that void. Herein are seen the relationships between comedy and Christianity. To understand that statement we need to begin with the Bible. Christianity, as it is represented in the Old and New Testaments, points the way toward overcoming the void of death. The Bible is the reservoir for comedy, the inspiration for healing and finding the way around the obstacle.

The Book of Job provides us with the greatest example of a hero in the act of overcoming the outrages and misfortunes in life because the contrast between the height and depth of Job's life is so great. The outrages that confronted Job are well defined and represented. The Sabeans and Chaldeans destroyed all his property, animals and crops,

and even his seven sons and three daughters were slain. He was beset by the very worst that the natural and supernatural have to offer in life. His wife even said: "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die."[7] But Job himself said: "Though he [God] slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). He could not curse God. But was Job overcome by the misfortunes, dying an afflicted, yet noble man, one who simply refused to curse his maker, or was he an overcomer of them? If he had accepted his wife's advice or even the advice of his well meaning friends he would have been overcome. Instead he chose to trust in a resurrection: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him," and considered the circumstances but a refining: "when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). Even had Job died while the dogs were licking his festering sores, he would have remained an overcomer because he was so confident of his immortality. He may fall, but he will not be destroyed. He is in the same class with Cyrano. He too will stand before God. Job is an overcomer whether he is physically dead or alive. He will never be dead spiritually. The fact that Job does not physically die as a result of his torment and that his possessions are restored to him twofold and he regains his health and his progeny, confirms his position as an overcomer, but does not establish him as

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[7]Job 2:9. All scripture quotations are from the King James Version. Future references to the Bible are noted parenthetically within the text.

an overcomer. He became an overcomer when he realized that he was, spiritually speaking, not subject to death; when he realized that physical death had no dominion over his spirit. I believe that Job became an overcomer when he could say "Though he slay me [physically], yet will I [my immortal spirit] trust in him." He became an overcomer before the happy ending. Cyrano is in the same category: life may indeed deprive him of his laurels yet this physical world cannot quench his indefatigable spirit. He will appear before God spiritually complete.

The next consideration must be whether or not Job is a comedy and Job himself a comic hero. Certainly the situation that presents itself in the story is a real enough threat. There is real pain, anguish and suffering to be overcome. That there was in fact a challenge or threat to be considered was the first element in the model of comedy. The second was that there be a hero or heroine who may be identified as the one who has the greatest sense of self-awareness. Job certainly qualifies as one who is secure in the knowledge of who he is and to what purpose he exists. The third element is that the reader perceive that the hero overcomes the misfortunes and is not overwhelmed by them. Job fills all the requirements. It seems somewhat innately amiss to classify the story of Job as a comedy. Aristotle's guidelines would have unequivocally defined it as tragic. It fits the model, however, and we would certainly have more of a problem in trying to classify it as anything else. We

may someday expect to see the Book of Job included in an anthology of comedy. It serves as a pattern for the spirit of overcoming oppression that we find throughout the Bible and in comedy as well.

Jesus Christ, who in the Christian philosophy is the true fulfillment of the Old Testament Law and the true Messiah, becomes the ultimate overcomer under the outlines of the model. He is the personification of overcoming the void of death. On one occasion an aroused mob brought before him a woman taken in the very act of adultery. The throng dutifully recited the law before Jesus: one found guilty of this sin must be stoned to death. No doubt with rocks in hand they picked up the chant "stone her, stone her!" "Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?" (John 8:5). There was no way out. The law must be upheld, and it was the great teacher himself who had said "think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). The anti-comic solution would have resulted in death, but Jesus saw a way around the void of death into life. "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:17). The crowd began to disperse, beginning with the eldest and continuing until all had departed, leaving only the woman and Jesus. He gave her her very life. "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:10). It is not the purpose of comedy to find a way to condemn someone to death, whether a living death

like that of Gogo and Didi, or a death by stoning. Comedy finds a way to live past death into eternity. Jesus was not willing to condemn. The letter of the law called for death, but Jesus, who championed the supremacy of the spirit of the law over the letter, called for life. He did not come into the world to condemn, but to save. The priority of Jesus and the plan of comedy are alike: to save life rather than destroy it, and to forgive rather than accuse.

On another occasion a man whose right hand was withered was brought before Jesus. It so happened that it was a Sabbath day, and they brought the man to him while he was in the synagogue, surrounded by a company of mostly ill-wishers. The Pharisees were no doubt hoping to find fault with Jesus. The law against working on the Sabbath was at issue insofar as the legalists were concerned, the health of the man with the withered hand was the concern of Jesus. The Lord said, "I will ask you one thing; Is it lawful on the Sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9). The Pharisees are like Percival in Misalliance. They are afraid that the violation of a social custom and caste system, in this case the letter of the law which forbids work on the Sabbath, will destroy their lives. Their spiritual myopia convinces them that exposure to the truth on the one hand, or the performing of a healing on the Sabbath on the other, would cause their values, and hence their lives, to crumble. It takes Gunner in Misalliance, and Jesus in the New Testament - the comic

heroes - to show the way in making the leap of faith: a way over or around the woe of being alive, a way to bridge the void of death. True comedy, like true Christianity, must find a way around or through the void of suffering and death.

The question of the law getting in the way of doing good persistently dogged Jesus. A man who was blind from birth was brought to him and Jesus made clay, anointed his eyes and restored his vision. Again the problem lay in that it was the Sabbath. The matter was quickly brought to the attention of the Pharisees. Their conclusion was that Jesus could not possibly be from God because he did not keep the Sabbath day . . . "How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles?" they said (John 9:16), and great confusion developed. If he was a sinner he couldn't do miracles, and if he was righteous, he would have kept the Sabbath. They decided that it was more important to keep the Sabbath than to be concerned about the miracle and the good done to the blind man.

The Pharisees are the anti-comics that present us with the void of death. They could not have it both ways. The law prevented good from being done. The blind man's parents, too, could see only the void. They were questioned by the Pharisees and said that he was their son, that he was born blind, but how he was healed they could not say. Ask him yourselves, they said, he is twenty-one. "We know that this man is a sinner," they told the blind man, and "we know that

God heareth not sinners" (John 9:24,31). The blind man answered, "Why herein is a marvelous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes" (John 9:30). The Pharisees were attempting to force the blind man back into the social caste system. He had been healed by one who was a sinner. God does not hear sinners, therefore he was not healed by God. Their conclusion was that in order to be a godly man he would have to renounce Jesus and hence his healing. He would have to go back under the letter of the law. The blind man chose life over logic, healing over blindness, liberty over law. He refused to be dominated by the recognized representatives of the law, even rebuking them for their lack of understanding.

The point is that the blind man and the man with the withered hand both had the kind of comic vision that could see around the void of suffering and death. They were not afraid of what would be done to them, so they made a move. One stretched out his hand, the other rebuked the leaders of the synagogue, intimating that the one whom the leaders called a sinner was more powerful than they and their law. This is what I term "making the leap of faith." The hero is confronted with a darkness or a blackness. With Cyrano it was the very impossibility of remaining loyal to the memory of Christian, and yet somehow finding a way to express his love for Roxanne. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? it was George overcoming the impenetratable void of a fruitless game of the imagination. In Comedians it was Mr.

Patel's joke about the Hindu who overcame starvation and death by finding and killing a talking horse. In each case a step had to be taken to overcome that void. Cyrano did not know for sure that Roxanne would accept and not reject him. George could not be sure that by killing his son he would not bring about the death of his wife. The Hindu could not have known for certain that the wrath of the gods would not fall on him for killing the sacred cow. Their belief that good would result from exercising their convictions and taking that step was one of the central ingredients in overcoming each void. I call that step the "step of faith." The situation in which the comic hero finds himself calls for action. He cannot know "by sight" that his actions will bring about the good that he desires (that is, he cannot know empirically), but he <u>believes</u> that it will. That belief is his faith - a element in overcoming the void. The Bible defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Cyrano did not have empirical evidence that Roxanne would not reject him, he acted on faith. And I think that is why Christopher Fry says "Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair: a narrow escape into faith." Without the faith part the escape cannot be made and despair dominates.

I wish to suggest that overcoming the void of death is ultimately only accomplished by making the "leap of faith." I have already suggested that anti-comedy lives in time, which is always running out, while comedy lives in eternity.

That capability of being outside time and in eternity is one part of making that leap. The resurrected man is the timeless man, the immortal man. Christopher Fry points out that, "In tragedy every moment is eternity; in comedy eternity is a moment."[9] The narrow escape into faith that Fry speaks of is an escape from time into timelessness; an escape from death into resurrection.

Even if the outrages and misfortunes of life seem as though they will overwhelm the comic hero, we must know that he "will stand before God." It is Cyrano who calls himself a brother of Lazarus. He is a brother not to death but resurrection. The leap of faith must be provided by the comedy so that the viewers are convinced that even if the hero dies or is killed, that he goes on living. Death is not the end of life for the comedian. There is a resurrection, there is eternal life, there is timelessness.

I see a parallel between comedy and Christianity because both are more anxious to heal than to destroy; both overcome the void of death by making the leap of faith; both assimilate death and affirm life. Essentially, I am on the verge of saying that the nature of comedy is Christian. I stand on the brink of that statement and go no further. The Christian believer makes a leap of faith on the strength of who Jesus is. His faith catapults him over the void into everlasting life. Comedy does the same thing with its comic

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[9]Fry, p. 15.

hero. His "leap of faith" is that which vaults him over the void of death. In the last analysis it is comedy and not anti-comedy that overcomes death. It is Christianity that does the same thing. Both heal rather than destroy. Both make a leap of faith over the void of death.

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