**“Distinguishing Form”: Shakespeare, Perspective and the Heartlessness of Comedy**

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For all the variety within English Renaissance comedy, one thing that both early modern and modern critics tend to agree is that comedy is motivated by an ordering impulse. “[C]omedy … beginneth with turbulent and troublesome matters, but it hath a merry end” (Northbrooke 104); a comedy is “a problem-solving story, ending in resolution and order normally symbolized by marriage” (Leggatt 3).[[1]](#endnote-1) In comedy, most if not all problems can be solved and mistakes undone, which puts it in contrast to Shakespearean tragedy, where problems are typically insurmountable, mistakes irrevocable, and human suffering often “not only irreparable but […] also neither compensated nor even effectively consoled” (Kastan 10). Comedy is thus often seen as a comparatively optimistic and even benevolent form, celebrating the capacity of people to survive adversity and, in the process, create a more well-ordered society for themselves.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Of course, any discussion of comedy as a dramatic form is rendered more difficult by the fact that the term ‘comedy’ has two quite separate meanings: a work that is intended to make spectators laugh and a work that has a happy ending. In the early modern period, literary theorists were eager to make clear distinctions between the two definitions—in large part, because of the contemporary suspicion regarding the ethics of laughter. As Philip Sidney puts it:

[O]ur Comedians, thinke there is no delight without laughter, which is very wrong, for though laughter may come with delight, yet commeth it not of delight: as though delight should be the cause of laughter, but well may one thing breed both together: nay, rather in themselves, they have as it were, a kind of contrarietie: for delight we scarcely doe, but in things that have a conueniencie to our selves, or to the generall nature: laughter, almost ever commeth, of things most disproportioned to our selves, and nature. […] For example, we are ravished with delight to see a faire woman, and yet are far from being moved to laughter. Wee laugh at deformed creatures, wherein certainely we cannot delight. Wee delight in good chaunces, we laugh at mischaunces.

(Sidney, K2v)

For Sidney, and the many others who shared his views, laughter was related to cruelty. We laugh, he suggests, at people to whom we feel superior and for whom we have contempt.[[3]](#endnote-3) By contrast, a true comedy should aim to produce “delight”: happiness at the good fortune of characters with whom we sympathise; a sense of joy at seeing proportion, beauty and order returned to a previously disordered world.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Shakespeare clearly did not share Sidney’s views: his plays show an awareness of the ways in which laughter can unite people as well as divide them, and so mirth within his works does not necessarily indicate either the characters’ or the audience’s mean-spiritedness (see Sokol 2008, 1-22). Moreover, even when the spectators are encouraged to laugh at a Shakespearean character (as opposed to laughing *with* them), that is not necessarily incompatible with feeling sympathy. John H. Astington, for example, notes how both Rosalind and Viola lament the confusions and difficulties that their cross-dressing has brought upon them, but comments that, ‘The general point is that however anguished these sentiments may be from the individual character’s perspective […], for the audience they are, and should be, funny’ (Astington 77). We can commiserate with Viola and Rosalind but nevertheless find their predicaments amusing, secure in the assumption that these are comic characters and that all will therefore ultimately end well for them.

Nevertheless, most modern critics still make a distinction between the kinds of comedy designed to delight us and the kinds of comedy designed to make us laugh: in other words, the kind of comedy represented by the ending of plays such as *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *The Winter’s Tale* and the kind of comedy represented by specific incidents within these plays, such as the gulling of Malvolio, the confused interactions of the bewitched lovers in the forest outside Athens, and the role-shifting roguery of Autolycus. The audience’s laughter at the latter may or may not involve a Sidneyan sense of contempt (we may feel it towards Malvolio but not towards the victims of Puck’s trickery, for example), but whether allied with sympathy or not, that laughter involves an appreciation of the ways in which human beings may make themselves absurd, by committing errors of judgement or stumbling into ludicrous situations. The latter are thus designed to make spectators laugh at the human capacity for confusion, foolishness and misconduct while, by contrast, the former—the plays’ endings—are intended to delight them with the spectacle of social integration and inclusion. The endings of these plays are therefore comic but not, by-and-large, funny: they take seriously the importance of social harmony, and any laughter they invite is the laughter of shared joy. However, in this essay I aim to challenge the perspective that sees the ‘elevated’ comedy of delight as being quite separate from the ‘low’ comedy of laughter. Through a consideration initially of *The Winter’s Tale*, but then also moving on to include Shakespeare’s earlier romantic comedies and problem plays, I will argue that the kind of ‘delight’ provoked by the end of much Shakespearean comedy often in practice discourages a sense of true sympathy towards its subjects, and, indeed, may seem to share some of the heartlessness that Sidney saw as inherent in the comedy of laughter. Comedy is not, by this reading, necessarily a benevolent genre, and its ordering impulse should not necessarily be read as a purely benign one.

It may seem perverse to focus on *The Winter’s Tale* as an example of Shakespearean comedy since the play notoriouslylacks formal unity in almost all respects. Not only does it break the classical unities of time and place, in covering sixteen years of action and the hundreds of miles between Sicily and Bohemia, but it also appears to defy any unity of genre. It opens with tragic events—King Leontes’ extreme and apparently unmotivated jealousy of Hermione, which leads to the banishment of his daughter, the death of his son Mamillius, and the apparent death of his wife—but these tragic beginnings are then followed by a comic sequence in which the broken family unit is largely brought back together, with the lost daughter Perdita restored and Hermione revealed to be not dead but merely in hiding. It is therefore not a tragicomedy, in the commonly accepted contemporary understanding of that term,[[5]](#endnote-5) but neither is it tragedy (since it has a happy ending) or comedy (since it involves death).

 Nevertheless, there are good arguments for reading *The Winter’s Tale* as a play which is fundamentally comic in its overall structure. Death was seen as being incompatible with early modern comedy because it was irreversible: a mistake that could be put right by the play’s end. It was therefore typically treated as something that comic plays needed either to ignore altogether or else work to outsmart, as Portia does in the Act 4 courtroom scene of *The Merchant of Venice* when she forces a comic ending on the potential tragedy of Antonio and Shylock. However, *The Winter’s Tale* manages to get around this problem—the deaths of Mamillius and also of the courtier Antigonus—by introducing a series of symbolic substitutions. At the play’s end, Perdita’s lover Florizel appears at Leontes’ court as, effectively, a substitute for the dead Mamillius. This point is made clear through Leontes’ comment that Florizel and Perdita (whom he does not yet know to be his daughter) remind him of his own lost children: “I lost a couple that 'twixt heaven and earth / Might thus have stood, begetting wonder, as / You, gracious couple, do” (5.1.131-3). Similarly, Paulina comments that, “Had our prince [Mamillius], / Jewel of children, seen this hour, he had paired / Well with this lord [Florizel]. There was not full a month / Between their births” (5.1.115-8). Mamillius is not, by this reading, dead and gone forever but is rather replaced. Similarly, in the play’s last moments, Leontes attempts to replace the dead Antigonus. The latter’s widow, Paulina, seeing the happy reunion of Leontes and his family, comments that she now, “an old turtle, / Will wing me to some withered bough, and there / My mate, that’s never to be found again, / Lament till I am lost” (5.3.133-6). However, Leontes will not accept so downbeat an ending. He insists,

O peace, Paulina!

 Thou shouldst a husband take by my consent,

 As I by thine a wife…

 I’ll not seek far—

 For him, I partly know his mind—to find thee

An honourable husband. Come, Camillo,

And take her by the hand…

(5.3.136-145)

If comedy is about problem-solving, then such substitutions overcome the ‘problem’ of death: Leontes is given a new son; Paulina is given a new husband; the family units are restored and social harmony can reign once more.

 Although *The Winter’s Tale* is unusually generically mixed, even for Shakespeare, we can see him using a similar technique in more conventionally structured comedies: for example, in *Twelfth Night*. In that play, the “turbulent and troubled matters” of the play principally involve people falling in love with those who do not love them back, or who are of the ‘wrong’ gender, but by the end of the play, all is resolved by a similar series of substitutions. The problem of Olivia’s love for the non-existent Cesario is solved by the appearance of Sebastian as an identical substitute; the problem of Orsino’s unrequited love for Olivia is solved by his discovery that there is an available replacement in the form of Viola. Indeed, as has often been noted, the idea that these female characters can be seen as acceptable duplicates of each other seems to be present in their very names: “Viola” and “Olivia” are, by Elizabethan standards, anagrams (Sohmer 89-93).

Moreover, although no deaths occur during the course of *Twelfth Night*, the comic pattern of the play seems to have the potential even to erase at least some of the deaths that we are told occurred before the play began. Before we meet Olivia, we learn that her brother has died and that in consequence she has devoted herself to seven years of mourning:

…like a cloistress, she will veilèd walk

And water once a day her chamber round

With eye-offending brine—all this to season

A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh

And lasting in her sad remembrance.

(1.1.27-31)

In this way, Viola and Olivia are closely linked not only through their names but through the fact that both spend the majority of the play believing that they have lost a brother; and so when Viola gets her brother back in Act 5 so too, in a sense, does Olivia. For her, Sebastian can serve not just as a replacement husband, but also a replacement sibling. Orsino has, in fact, made this idea semi-explicit in Act 1, when he remarks that:

O, she that hath a heart of that fine frame

To pay this debt of love but to a brother,

How will she love when the rich golden shaft

Hath killed the flock of all affections else

That live in her...

(1.1.32-6)

Orsino imagines that the love Olivia bestows on a dead brother is proof of the even greater love that she will be able to bestow on a living husband, and ultimately Sebastian comes to fulfil both roles, as both symbolic brother back from the dead and new romantic partner. The delight that ends such comedies is thus the delight of seeing the creation of order from disorder and loss turned into gain: the lost brother turned into the greater prize of a found husband.

By this logic, one could argue that, despite the early modern reluctance to include deaths in a comedy, such events may actually enhance the ultimate effect of delight. The more terribly characters have suffered, the more joyful is their happiness at the end; the more intractable the problems they face, the more pleasure there is in seeing them resolved. We might, at this point, remember that the story of Christianity itself can be read as a comedy, with its promise that the original ‘mistake’ of Adam’s fall can be put right, and that what is damned can be redeemed, via its own form of symbolic replacement. As Robert Maslen puts it, Christianity “involves the invention by God’s son of an ingenious way to circumvent the severe judicial system propounded in the Old Testament, by substituting himself for sinning humanity in a kind of stupendous practical joke” (Maslen 105). The Fall thus becomes, through Christ’s sacrifice, the *felix culpa*: the apparent tragedy that ultimately leads to triumph. The ending of *The Winter’s Tale* does not enact quite this kind of comedy: it is fundamentally earthbound in its preoccupations, and Hermione’s resurrection is a purely secular one. As Cynthia Marshall notes, scripture has it that after death, Christians will no longer be husbands or wives but instead simply “Angels of God in heaven”, but Hermione’s return from death, by contrast, “restores” rather than removes her “human attachments” (42). Nevertheless, death remains potent as a comic device: the ultimate challenge to be overcome; the greatest opportunity to display a sense of comic optimism even in the face of human mortality.[[6]](#endnote-6)

 However, there is also, needless to say, a sense of tension alongside the delight in the ending of *The Winter’s Tale*. It is difficult entirely to forget the sixteen years of suffering and stasis that Leontes brought upon himself, his wife, and his kingdom, before he was allowed to reach a point of redemption, and similarly, we may be uncomfortably aware that Mamillius and Antigonus have not literally been brought back from death, and so remain as the tragic collateral damage from Leontes’ folly. There is a sense, therefore, that what might seem to be a happy ending from one perspective may in fact be far from such from another.

 This idea of perspective, that the same event may appear quite different depending on how one looks at it, has, in fact, been a concern throughout the play. As I have noted, the basic structure of *The Winter’s Tale* is that of three acts of tragedy followed by two of comedy. However, even within this scheme, comedy (in the sense of things that are laughable) and tragedy seem to be hard to keep separate and distinct, and it is striking how much in practice one keeps threatening to turn into the other. For example, the scene in Act 2, within the tragic half of the play, in which Paulina berates Leontes for his mistreatment of Hermione, comes very close to being comic. As Hartwig comments, “the scolding shrew berating (unjustly in the formula) a poor, exhausted man” is a stock comic scene (16), and is only the gravity of the context that might move the audience of *The Winter’s Tale* to treat it more seriously on this occasion. Meanwhile, in Act 4, within the play’s comic half, the encounter in which King Polixenes loses his temper at his son Florizel because of Florizel’s romance with Perdita flirts with tragedy, especially in the way that it recalls Leontes’ original furious rejection of Hermione. *The Winter’s Tale* is thus a strange mix of comedy and tragedy throughout—or rather, a strange mix of comedy that comes close to being tragedy and tragedy that comes close to being comedy—and consequently, critics have suggested that Shakespeare’s aim may have been to create a play that works along the same lines as the anamorphic art that was popular in the 16th and 17th centuries: an object that can be viewed from multiple perspectives, each one giving a different image.[[7]](#endnote-7) The play is both comic and tragic simultaneously, depending on how one looks at it.

 The comic (again, in the sense of involving what is laughable) perspective might be described as the perspective of long distance. Charlie Chaplin is reputed to have said that “Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long shot” (qtd. in Wallace 211), and *The Winter’s Tale* seems to bear the truth of this out. From a distance, even the ‘tragic’ first three acts can seem comic: a king, out of the blue, starts constructing insane conspiracy theories, misunderstanding and misinterpreting all he sees. At the end of Act 2 scene 2, Antigonus makes clear how easily one could put a comic spin on these events: Leontes announces, “We are to speak in public; for this business / Will raise us all,” while Antigonus mutters in an aside, ‘To laughter, as I take it, / If the good truth were known” (2.2.199-201). If one engages emotionally with the events that take place in the first three acts, taking the perspective of the cinematic “close up”, then they are tragic, involving terrible suffering and loss. However, if one views them from a state of greater comic detachment, they may seem simply ridiculous.

Autolycus is the character in the play who most clearly and relentlessly exemplifies this comic perspective. Autolycus, who first appears in Act 4, is a vagabond, a masterless man, and he takes nothing seriously, not even himself. As he says in his opening speech, “I have served Prince Florizel, and in my time wore three-pile; but now I am out of service. But shall I go mourn for that, my dear?” (4.3.13-15). His status as a man free of all commitments, obligations and attachments means that he is cheerfully disengaged from the play’s main action, and so is able to view all the other characters’ activities with a comic eye. He can even turn other people’s tragedies into comedies, as he does when he provides a parody of the rage of Polixenes:

He has a son, who shall be flayed alive, then ’nointed over with honey, set on the head of a wasps’ nest, then stand till he be three-quarters-and-a-dram dead, then recovered again with aqua-vitae, or some other hot infusion, then, raw as he is, and in the hottest day prognostication proclaims, shall he be set against a brick wall, the sun looking with a southward eye upon him, where he is to behold him with flies blown to death.

(4.4.784-92)

Moreover, in his tendency to address the audience directly, Autolycus invites us to share this attitude, to become complicit with him in laughing at those who make mountains of grief out of the molehills of supposed infidelity or filial disobedience. Through the lens of Autolycus we are invited to see the ridiculousness in the other characters. The Clown who helps him when he pretends to have been mugged is mocked for his simple-minded gullibility; the people who buy his peddler’s wares are dismissed as fools wasting good money on worthless trinkets; and Prince Florizel, seeking to flee Bohemia with Perdita, is reduced to a petty criminal, “about a piece of iniquity, stealing away from his father with his clog at his heels” (4.4.679-80). Of course, while we may laugh at Autolycus’s humorous compulsion to reduce everything and everyone to lowness, we are unlikely to find his judgements so compelling that they truly change our mind about how to view these figures. As Sokol notes, there is always the chance that the humour of ridicule may backfire, producing a possible “counter-reaction of sympathy” for the joke’s target (2008, 8)—and this counter-reaction seems particularly likely in the case of Autolycus’s mockery of the Clown and Florizel, when their actions so obviously stem from the noble motives of generosity and pity in the one and virtuous love in the other. Nevertheless, Autolycus is important as a character who works to remind us that other perspectives are always possible, showing the comic potential within even the most potentially moving or upsetting material.

Autolycus’s refusal to care about human misfortune may seem some way from the ordering impulse that creates the comedy of delight. Indeed, one could make an argument that, if anything, he is more akin to a spirit of *dis*order within the play, given also his fondness for shape-shifting role-play. However, as I commented at this essay’s start, Autolycus’s humour and the delight created by the play’s ending do in fact seem to have a common root, in that they both require us to distance ourselves, to take the “long shot” perspective, in order fully to appreciate them. It is a comic impulse that seizes Leontes when he tells Paulina that, rather than devoting her life to mourning the loss of Antigonus, she should accept the hand of Camillo as substitute. Comedy asks us to look forwards, not backwards; to embrace new life rather than mourning the old. This does, however, also necessitate that we do not think too hard about the exchange that is being made. Instead, we must accept, in the case of Camillo and Antigonus, that one middle-aged man is essentially as good as any other. Meanwhile, the replaceability of Mamillius was made clear as far back as the play’s opening, in the exchange between Archidamus and Camillo. The two begin in praise of praise of the prince, but soon move to comment that, “If the King had no son [the people of Sicily] would desire to live on crutches till he had one” (1.1.45-6). From this perspective, Mamillius himself, as an individual, does not matter at all; all that matters is that Sicily has a male heir, with all the promise of social continuation that that brings. There is therefore, within this comic perspective, an uncomfortable requirement that we blind ourselves to the actual distinctions between human beings and agree that the important thing is the big picture: the creation or recreation of the social unit (man and wife, parents and children), which can enable the continuation of the community. Just as there is a coldness in Autolycus’s humour—a sense of callous indifference to the suffering of others—, so there is a coldness and indifference at least potentially inherent in the voice that asks us to see the end of *The Winter’s Tale* as that of a comedy.

Naturally, *The Winter’s Tale*, with its fine awareness of the comic and tragic perspectives, is fully cognisant of this problem. It is notable that, while the replacements for Antigonus and Mamillius work to make the comic picture more complete, the real delight that audiences feel is grounded in the fact that Leontes is granted not just *a* wife but *his* wife and not just a replacement daughter but *his* daughter. Individuals in this play clearly do matter, and are not simply interchangeable types. However, our awareness of this fact serves to bring back the problem of death, and the losses that cannot be recovered. Hermione and Perdita can only return because they were never really dead at all, and the recognition of how inappropriate and inadequate it would be to try to replace either of them reminds us once more of the actual and irrevocable deaths of Mamillius and Antigonus. Moreover, this may, in turn, lead us to wonder how truly joyful the reunion between Hermione and Leontes can be, given the suffering he has cost her and the sixteen years of her life that have been wasted as a consequence of his actions. Notoriously, although Hermione is described as embracing Leontes after she descends back into humanity, she says nothing directly to him, and so her emotions regarding him remain opaque. As Michael Bristol puts it, “It is not altogether clear that the embrace of husband and wife in the final scene can be adequate compensation for Hermione for the loss of her son or for the time that she has spent waiting for the return of Perdita” (Bristol 139). To enable a *fully* comic (in the sense of happy) ending, we must read nothing into her silence and instead assume that she should be seen at this point as a type of the faithful wife, who has forgiven her abusive husband just as Patient Grissel forgives hers in the folk tale. We must not think too much about how a real person in her situation might be feeling. In essence, it appears as if the more one thinks about the individual *qua* individual—the specific life, the specific emotions a person might experience—, the less comic the play becomes.

The comic insistence that no loss is irreparable is, of course, undeniably joyful from one perspective. As *Twelfth Night*’s Olivia discovers, new love can offer a way out of the life-denying stasis of mourning, and in *The Winter’s Tale* we may therefore to at least some extent share Leontes’ desire that Paulina embrace life rather than death and take a new husband rather than devoting her remaining days to grieving her lost one. However, in counter to this, one striking aspect of the end of much Shakespearean comedy is the way in which comic order is itself seen as having a kind of brutality, in its apparent indifference to the desires of the individual, or to the distinctions between individuals. In *As You Like It*, Phoebe falls in love with Ganymede but ends the play by marrying Silvius, after making a promise to Rosalind/Ganymede that “if you do refuse to marry me / You'll give yourself to this most faithful shepherd” (5.4.13-14). Just as *Twelfth Night*’s Sebastian works as a substitute for Cesario (who is not dead, but only because ‘he’ never existed in the first place), so Silvius works as a substitute for the equally non-existent Ganymede. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the initial, impossible situation between the four lovers is resolved by the fact that at the play’s end, Demetrius is never released from his enchantment. He continues to love Helena rather than returning to his former love for Hermia, and so the original Demetrius is, effectively, replaced by a doppelgänger, identical in all respects except for the issue of where he places his affections. No one cares what Demetrius might ‘really’ want; all that matters is that he fulfils his part in the wider comic scheme. Meanwhile, in both *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well That Ends Well*, happy endings are engineered via the device of the bed-trick: another type of substitution that traps Angelo and Bertram into having sex not with the women they think they want but with the women that their play’s scheme suggests they *should*. Thus forced into sexual union with Marianna and Helena, they have no recourse at the plays’ conclusion other than to accept these women as their wives. Meanwhile, within those same plays, Isabella and Diana come under similar pressure to submit to the ordering impulse of comedy. Both of them seem to desire to remain unmarried—Isabella starts her play by intending to become a nun, while *All’s Well*’s Diana announces, “Marry that will; I live and die a maid” (4.2.75)—yet at their plays’ conclusions, Isabella is proposed to by the Duke and Diana is instructed to “Choose thou thy husband” by the King (5.3.329).

It is no coincidence that we typically label these latter two dramas ‘problem plays’ rather than true comedies: both modern critics and audiences alike have difficulty in seeing their endings as fully ‘delightful’, given the way in which they force apparently unwilling people into romantic pairings. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the lovers are inherently somewhat underdeveloped, ‘flat’ characters, with little to differentiate them beyond their gender (see Kott 111-112). Since there is no particular reason for Demetrius to love Hermia rather than Helena, it does not feel problematic when he ends up with the latter rather than the former. By contrast, the characters of *Measure for Measure* are far more distinctly drawn, which makes it far harder to accept the final pairings-off as truly happy, given how much they seem to go against the previously clearly articulated preferences and desires of many of their participants. Nevertheless, the difference between these two playsis one of degree rather than kind: in both, the more we are concerned about individual rights and agency—the more we view the characters as if they were actual people, who might have real thoughts and desires, rather than manipulable puppets—, the more we may be reluctant to see the plays’ endings as straightforwardly ‘delightful’.

I am not arguing here that Shakespeare does not, on some level, intend the endings of plays like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Winter’s Tale* and even perhaps *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well* to delight their audiences. There is certainly much that is pleasing about the neatness with which characters fall into place and the whirligig of time is seen to bring in not only its revenges but also its restorations, its renewals and its rewards. We are, from one perspective, shown the world as we would like it to be: a place of providential orderliness, where no child or sibling is ever permanently lost and there is a Jack for every Jill. However, it is also important to note the ambivalence with which Shakespeare typically treats this comic neatness. It is a commonplace of Shakespeare criticism to note that his comedies often feature loose ends, in the form of characters like Malvolio, who refuse to participate in the general festivity and harmony of their plays’ endings. However, it is also important to note that even the characters who achieve happy endings often do so at what seems to be the cost of their individuality—and, with it, their capacity to evoke our full sympathy for them, or indeed interest in them, *as* individuals. For the ending of *Twelfth Night*,or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or *Measure for Measure*, or *The Winter’s Tale* to feel fully comic, we must see the central characters as to some extent blandly generic: eager to marry, eager to move on from previous losses, eager to forgive and forget all previous suffering. Olivia must not object when she realises that she has married a man she barely knows; Viola must not mind the fact that her new husband threatened to kill her only a few moments previously; Isabella must not remember that she once wanted to be a nun; Helena and Hermione must not dwell upon the mistreatment they previously received from Demetrius and Leontes. Thus, to fully embrace the agreeable tidiness of these endings, we must also take an emotional step back from their characters, viewing them not as we would real people, but rather simply as comic types. The ‘low’ comic perspective represented by Autolycus has a flattening effect: he can laugh at other characters because he refuses to acknowledge their humanity. Perhaps ironically, to experience a sense of comic pleasure at the conclusion of many of Shakespeare’s plays, the audience must do something similar.

Word count: 5603

1. Leggatt’s claim that Renaissance comedy typically ends in a marriage, however, needs some qualification: although this is true of Shakespearean comedy, it is far less consistently the case in the comedies of many of his contemporaries, such as Lyly, Jonson and Dekker. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Comedies do, of course, vary in the extent of their optimism: some suggest that there are limits on the extent to which society can truly be made orderly, and/or suggest that even within an orderly society, there will remain dissident characters who cannot be reconciled to the new social harmony. Consider, for example, Shylock, or Volpone and Mosca in Jonson’s *Volpone*, who are treated as unredeemable, incapable of reform, and therefore can only be dealt with by being expelled from the play or contained and punished. For more on the way in which early modern comedy’s orderly endings may nevertheless involve some sense of continuing tension or anxiety, see Hart 75-106. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sidney does not wholly deny that laughter may have some place in a comedy, but suggests that it can only be justified if it has a social function, enabling that “that delightful teaching which is the end of Poesie” (K3)—presumably by encouraging spectators to reject the laughable, ridiculous behaviour of those they see on stage. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Some early modern theorists concede that there might be such a thing as good-natured laughter, produced as a side-effect of delight, but nevertheless, most still treat laughter as inherently related to cruelty and superiority. For a summary of contemporary attitudes to laughter, see Skinner. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John Fletcher argued that although tragicomedy might “bring some [of its characters] neere” to death, it could not actually kill them (¶2*v*). Some later critics have attempted to deal with this apparent problem of classification by inventing the new dramatic category of the ‘romance’: a term which suggests such plays’ kinship to the popular prose romances which similarly mingle comic and tragic events and often cover great swathes of time and geographical space. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Linda Bamber discusses Viola’s remark in Act 1 of *Twelfth Night*—“My brother, he is in Elysium. / Perchance he is not drowned” (1.2.3-4)—and comments that here, “Viola speaks in the true illogical spirit of comedy when she goes straight from her brother’s death to the hope for his life” (131). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Examples include Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), with its stretched skull that lies across the carpet, and William Scrots’ similarly stretched and distorted profile of Edward VI (1546). Some critical discussions of *The Winter’s Tale* as exploring anamorphosis have focused solely on Hermione’s ‘statue’ in Act 5: either alive and dead depending on how one looks. See, for example, Senasi 59-60. Others, however, suggest that the play as a whole can be read as an anamorphic work. See, for example, Sokol 1994, 7-8.

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