

WHERE?

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
ISABEL BADER THEATRE, 3RD FLOOR

WHEN?

OCTOBER 6, 2023

The Comedy of Tragedy

10 - 11

Organizer
Opening Remarks

Martin Revermann
*Juxtaposition of Tragedy
and Comedy in Ancient Greek
Theatre*

12 - 13

Eva Heubach
*Dante's Divine Comedy - of
Tragedy*

Katrin Truedstedt
*Orphelia's Laughter:
Tragedy, Comedy, and the
Politics of Appearing*

13 - 14

Valentin Wey
*The Equivocity of Tragedy
in Hegel*

Colby Chubbs
*Tragedy and Comedy, Left
and Right, Heine and Marx*

14 - 15

Rebecca Comay (Moderator)
Roundtable Discussion



THIS EVENT WILL BE HELD IN PERSON AND ONLINE.
FOR ACCESS TO THE ZOOM-LINK PLEASE CONTACT
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The Comedy of Tragedy



From their earliest conceptualizations, comedy and tragedy have been construed as two interrelated categories. As Plato programmatically states in one of his late dialogues, *Nomoi*, it would be “impossible to understand the serious side of things in isolation from their ridiculous aspect, or indeed appreciate anything at all except in the light of its opposite.” Unsurprisingly, in his subsequent discussion – and famous critique – of theatrical representation, Plato first gives an outline of comedy and then proceeds to describe tragedy. The underlying assumption is that what Plato claims to be true for *any* dichotomy would also hold for comedy and tragedy: the *one* can only be grasped in the light of the *other*.

This structure of a supposed interdependence of Comedy and tragedy, as it is spelled out so explicitly in Plato’s critique of representation, can also be traced in the well-known critique of this very critique, namely in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, albeit in a particular form: while the *Poetics* contains the most influential definition of tragedy to this day, an extensive explanation of comedy is famously missing – yet is presumed to be in a lost and by now legendary second book of the *Poetics*. It is precisely this quasi-mythical (non-)existence of an Aristotelian theory of comedy that has led critics, time and again, to try deducing one nonetheless, basing their claims on the scattered remarks that are to be found in the text as we know it and, significantly, in direct opposition to Aristotle’s explanation of tragedy. Indeed, it seems that the question of tragedy necessarily elicits that of comedy (and vice versa), as if one involuntarily has to be construed as the other of the other, its negative, as it were – a negative, which, in the case of Aristotle, only appears as a negative, not present and yet ubiquitous in the presence of its very absence.

However, this interrelatedness of comedy and tragedy is not only to be observed on the level of their earliest (and ongoing) conceptualizations but also – beginning with their very emergence in Antiquity – in the realm of theatrical performance itself. Thus, the classical tragedies of ancient Greece were notoriously followed by Satyr plays, just as the whole festival of Great Dionysia culminated in a day of five comedic plays which traditionally brought the competition to an end. From their inception onwards, tragedy and comedy are thus veritably ‘baked’ into each other, appearing as two sides of the same coin – a coin that, to stay with the metaphor, would eventually always ask for its reversal, inevitably demanding to be flipped over from one side to the other. Yet, how are we to understand this reversal? Does tragedy necessarily elicit comedy as a way of alleviating the emotions, that is, as a way of dealing with an otherwise overwhelming intensity of the tragic? Does comedy present a resolve, an overcoming, and in this sense a transcendence of the tragic? Or, on the contrary, is comedy to be understood as an intensification of the tragic and thus as a space in which tragedy can be preserved?



In light of these questions, it is essential to remember that the two categories' most stable defining feature consists itself of a reversal contained in and thus shaping their very core. For, although comedy and tragedy both have, throughout history, remained highly influential categories, their characteristics and definitions have been notoriously shifting and thus difficult to pin down. Even such apparently clear-cut criteria as the representation of either noble or ignoble individuals or the use of a high as opposed to a low style - as mentioned already in Aristotle's *Poetics* and Classical Latin rhetorics of, for instance, Horace, Quintilian, or Diomedes - are not consistently applied. What is more, from the Middle Ages onwards, the categories were no longer invoked solely for dramatic writing designed for scenic realization but, particularly in the case of comedy, also for epic texts. Within this historically highly mutable and heterogeneous field there is, however, one feature that is to be found with remarkable consistency, namely that of a continuous development and reversal depicted by and within each of these categories: Whereas the tragic plot is defined by a development leading from an unproblematic beginning to a bad ending, thus inducing a characteristic reversal from happiness to unhappiness, the comic plot is defined by a process leading from a bad beginning to a cheerful ending, thus resulting in a complementary reversal. Upon closer examination, however, the question may arise as to how complementary or opposing these two poles of a bad and a good ending truly are. For, although comedy and tragedy seem to espouse and follow strictly contrasting paradigms, the two poles are less easy to differentiate if one considers, for instance, the alleged purifying purpose of tragedy as defined in the Aristotelian dimension of catharsis (a cleansing effect on the part of the spectator that would eventually lead to a good outcome of tragedy's bad ending); or, on the other side of the coin, the (ever since Plato) repeated warnings of comedy's potentially dangerous effects (as an undermining of important moral norms that would eventually lead to a bad outcome of comedy's cheerful ending).

Lastly, the categories of comedy and tragedy describe not only manners of action but also modes of thought. As such, they represent key concepts in which modern philosophy has repeatedly sought to grasp the significance and structure of historical processes - an endeavour most prominently epitomized in Marx's by now proverbial saying about history's double nature, always occurring twice, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." Of particular importance in this context surely is the predilection of German Idealism - or German philosophy *tout court* - for the category of tragedy, which has led Peter Szondi to the conclusion that "the concept of the tragic has remained fundamentally a German one," clearly identifying in Hegel "the most tragic of them all," since it is, as Szondi points out, "in Hegel [that] the tragic and the dialectic coincide." However, while much attention has been given to instances of the tragic and tragedy in Hegel's thought, the simultaneous significance of comedy has long been overlooked. For not only does Hegel offer readings of ancient tragedies of, for instance, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, but also detailed discussions of Aristophanes' comedies. What is more, the transition from tragedy to comedy is directly related to his (in)famous notion of the end of art. After all, it is comedy that figures as the very last artform and, thus, not only as the dialectical agent in the (supposed) dissolution of tragedy but of art in general, dissolving itself in the name of philosophy ... or so the story goes. Yet, is the history Hegel is telling with this peculiar sequence of transition one of progress or of decay? In other words: Does Hegel himself have to be read as a tragedian or, as Bertolt Brecht once put it, as "one of the greatest humourists of all," pointing us to the everpresent possibility of the whole philosophical endeavour being nothing but a comedy?

Eva Heubach