

# JUSTICE AND DRAMA: CONFLICT AND ADVOCACY

DANIEL LARNER\*

In an earlier essay on “Justice and Drama” subtitled “Historical Ties and ‘Thick’ Relationships,”<sup>1</sup> I explored the possibility that our ideas about justice might be formed or influenced by our experience with drama. In that essay I worked with a variety of images of justice found in contemporary drama, examining the roots of dramas in still older drama and seeking analogs in contemporary theories of justice.

In a second essay titled, “Teaching Justice: The Idea of Justice in the Structure of Drama,”<sup>2</sup> I inquired about the possibility of an inherent, fundamental element of our experience of drama that implies an experience of justice. I concluded that Essay by noting that the structure of drama, particularly the contemporary tragi-comic mode, was integral to our sense of justice:

The action of a civil society is what on stage is known as comedy—that form of drama which displays how individuals grow and learn, and how societies integrate youth and age, the conventional and the rebellious, the ordinary and the odd, into community. This reforming seldom looks . . . radical [in comedy]. . . . But let me suggest that the ironic, tragi-comic vision is an invitation . . . to see the deeply radical in the conventional, the revolutionary in the reformed. . . . Might we look afresh at the monumental problems and inequities of our system of justice, and its equally monumental striving for fairness and truth, and see them transformed in their collision? . . . . If so, this is a dramatic process, one we inherit from that art of the stage, where only outsides make insides, only external forms and invented constructs make meaning, where life grows and thrives, and has meaning, only under artificial light. Living teaches us about justice. So do philosophic and religious traditions, and science. Beyond this, to the next moment, to the next realization of failure or disaster or opportunity or possibility, to the “virtual history” of everything we might want to find in the future, and even to the next great conception, so does drama.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the structure of drama and process of teaching justice appear to be intricately interwoven.

In this essay on justice and drama, I turn from the structure of drama to its action. If justice is intricately interwoven with the

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\* Professor of Theatre, Fairhaven College, Western Washington University.

<sup>1</sup> 22 Legal Stud. F. 4 (1998).

<sup>2</sup> 23 Legal Stud. F. 201 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 209-210.

structure of drama, what effect can the actions of the protagonists have on what we apprehend as justice within the fabric of the play? Whether protagonists cause the conflict or find themselves in the middle of it through no fault of their own, their actions from that time on, their particular advocacies, are crucial to the meaning of the play, especially with reference to issues of justice and what is at stake in coming to understand those issues. In this essay I attempt to show how the advocacy of the tragi-comic hero makes the case, within the play, for this importance, this "stake" which drama helps us hold in our understanding of justice. Questions of responsibility and intention in the law, the ways the questions are asked, the forms they take, the actions by which they are pursued and through which they are at stake in trial are, as we shall see, very closely akin to what is at stake in tragi-comedy, and the mode of action in which the drama is played out. In drama, as in the courtroom, the highest stake is often in what we know, in what we can see that is right, real, true, or just.

Let me begin with *King Lear*. Lear is at Dover (where we left him in the previous essay), just after he has returned, howling, with the dead Cordelia in his arms. Kent, his faithful servant, banished early in the play, has followed Lear in disguise and now reveals himself. When he does so, Lear says, "I'll see that straight" (V.iii. 288 ). Most simply, this is an old man, in the throws of extreme loss, and grief, trying to grasp something long forgot, out of context with his present woes. But it is more than that. Lear is coming "straight" (soon) to see his past, to understand who the people around him really are, to grasp the face beneath the mask, to recognize Kent, who has returned justice for injustice, his loyalty to Lear maintained in spite of Lear's sentence of banishment upon him. Not only does Lear come to see himself, the "foolish, fond old man," but also the abyss that opens before him with the murder of Cordelia. The ranting monarch, throwing off the "lendings" of authority, asks the "justicers" to heap rain, cold and lightning on him, to make his outer pain match his inner agony. He intones: "And thou, all-shaking thunder,/ Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,/ Crack Nature's moulds, all germains spill at once,/ That makes ungrateful man" (III, ii, 6-9). He wants the heavens somehow to affirm the vision of justice he sees by destroying humanity, just as he was destroyed by his ungrateful daughters.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As the Elizabethan's saw it, nature is reflected in the structure of society, itself a natural phenomenon. Its harmonies are those of Justice, a kind of "natural law." Lear's logic is that if humanity is "ungrateful" in its social setting (e.g. daughters to fathers), it is unnatural, and should be destroyed.

Before Lear comes to the heath, driven out by his daughters, his "all-licensed" Fool has been constantly picking at him. As Lear discovers that each of his older daughters will mistreat him at will once he has surrendered his power, the Fool teaches Lear about his foolishness, his miscarriage of justice, by making him the goat of a series of tiny, rhyming farces. By using increasingly wounding metaphors of nature, he pushes Lear to the brink of madness. Eggs, for instance, seen as the essence of life (the yolk) and the protection of the family (the shell), serve as symbols in the fool's epigrams and doggerels for Lear's mind, his house, his kingdom, and his sanity. As Lear's mind, like the egg, begins to crack, and Lear meets himself as "a bare, forked animal" on the heath, when he is forced to the lowest, most desperate condition of mankind, the Fool disappears. It is as if the Fool is the driving force of Lear's vision, the emblem of his willingness to go even over the edge of sanity, to breach his kingly ego and his hurt fatherhood and see himself as merely man. Once Lear has done this, the Fool is no longer necessary. The Fool was the comic prosecutor. Once Lear brings himself to trial on the heath, he is his own prosecutor and the Fool is inside him.

What is at stake here is the whole fabric of the kingdom, stuffed, by this renaissance resurrection of feudal sensibility, into the body and mind of the king. When the blind Gloucester first meets Lear at Dover, he can smell "authority" about this man, in spite of Lear's disordered, maddened, rag-torn, wretched state. What Lear embodies in Gloucester's vision is nothing less than the traditional social fabric of comedy. A comic fabric is one in which we muddle through from separateness to togetherness, learning, accommodating, giving up obsessions and both giving and gaining social acceptance. In its purer forms, the comic action is protected from horror, disease, chaos, and death. In its tragicomic forms, even the most everyday action could be deadly. For Lear, it is love, practiced at the beginning of the play in a form that is artificial and foolish, which, because he is deceived in it, seems to him to smash the mold of nature. But he does not yet see that his own foolishness gave his daughters the opportunity to deceive him. Then the Fool starts his work.

As the play marches on, from the heath to Dover, through the murder of Cordelia, Lear's death, and the salvage of the kingdom by Edgar and Albany, we are watching the price paid for the mending of the colossal tear Lear ripped, and his older daughters widened, in the fabric of the world. The largest price is the exaction of Lear's vision, his hugely courageous view of "The Justicers." Ironically, it is not their malevolence or their ineluctable might, but their indifference, their arbitrary inscrutability which is most upsetting, most dangerous.

Maddeningly, they neither value nor devalue human beings. We are nothing in their sight. He sees the gods as indifferent, a hair's breadth from absent. As Gloucester observes, starting his own blind journey on the heath, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;/ They kill us for their sport" (IV, i, 36-37).

The darkness this leaves, the abyss this creates is huge. Only Lear, it seems, has the courage, the size, to look into this darkness, to penetrate the abyss and see what is there. On the heath Lear is, he thinks, "a man more sinned against than sinning" (III, ii, 58-9). He tries to provoke the gods into doing injury in order to get them to come out of hiding, to pay attention to the "handy-dandy" tossings of the human lot, to the agony of what he will describe, near the end, as the "wheel of fire." He is trying to test justice and bring the "Justicers" themselves to court, to discover if "there is any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts" (III, vi, 75-76). But once in Dover, his "great rage" calmed, he expects nothing, but his vision is still acute, searching. After he is reunited with Cordelia, even after they are captured and are about to be taken off to prison, he is calm, but defiantly observant. In prison, he declares, they will be "God's spies," seeing how the world works from a divine view, and "take upon's the mystery of things" (V, iii, 16-17). They will be judges. But alas, even this does not come to fruition.

The abyss opens before us again when Albany and Edgar are speaking with the defeated Edmond, who lies dying, and Albany shouts out, "Great thing of us forgot!" (V, iii, 237), suddenly remembering that Edmund has put his writ on the life of Lear and Cordelia, and that writ must be recalled before it is too late. But it *is* too late, and Lear comes in, huge and looming, weak and staggering all at the same time, like Creon with his dead son Haemon in his arms, carrying the body of Cordelia. A titan even in old age and extreme illness, he has killed the guard who murdered her, and now is howling his grief, seeing around him only "men of stones."

Like Richard II (V, 5), who sees that any man "with nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased/ with being nothing," Lear begins to see the "nothing" of a world in which we are forced to make and sustain our own goodness, and protect ourselves against evil. At the same time he sees the love that he should have perceived in the "nothing" of his youngest daughter's reply to his foolish question at the beginning of the play. And indeed, in the end, as Lear expires, exhausted, looking with his last breath for life in his daughter's face, Edgar and Albany, who have found out, challenged, and vanquished the evil, are now left to rebuild the kingdom from nothing. They are sure they will never "know so much" as those who have left them—Kent, Gloucester, Lear, Cordelia. But they

must rebuild anyway, remaking Justice with a wisdom maimed by what has been lost.

In Shakespeare, somehow, the magnificent tragic action always has comic dimensions. The Fool's disappearance marks the end of the comic world Lear shattered with his stubbornness and blindness. And at the end, the social fabric makes a temporary closure, as with Edgar and Albany, over the tragic wound. Macbeth is vanquished by Macduff, and the wound in nature is cauterized. Richard III dies at Bosworth Field and the rightful king takes his place. Hamlet cleanses Denmark, too late for anything but his story and his vision to survive, but Fortinbras, who has Hamlet's voice to be the next king, comes in to pick up the pieces. Anthony's intervention and victory in battle salvages Rome from the noble conspirators in *Julius Caesar*. In another play, a shattered Rome re-integrates with the death of the magnificent ingrate, Coriolanus, who has held his own glory above the polity. Even Othello's society re-knits, through the act of the same hero who has fractured it, when Othello takes his own life.

In our time, tragedies have become rare. But comedies can contain serious tragic elements, presenting us with the need for comic frameworks strong enough to bind together a society seriously threatened with disintegration. While there are isolated examples of plays with this characteristic that may be culled from eighteenth and nineteenth century drama, the dawn of the twentieth century ushers in an era in which plays that flirt with the boundary between tragedy and comedy will be seen to have the keenest penetration, the sharpest portrait of a complex and equivocal reality.

In George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1906), a play which is structured like the most conventional of romantic comedies, most of the second and third acts are disguised trial scenes in which the sensibilities, common assumptions, and accepted moral, political and social standards of the English nation are impeached. Each of them is overthrown, found deficient in justice, productivity and good sense. The "Prince of Darkness," the world's largest and wealthiest arms manufacturer, Andrew Undershaft, is the chief prosecutor. He pierces the pettifoggery of conventional propriety, of self-serving political and religious rhetoric, of the cant of class and of national character. He pierces it first with his pen, writing a huge check to the Salvation Army, not out of kindness, but out of good business sense: "My dear," he tells his daughter, "I never ask for what I can buy." This act shatters Barbara's faith. She sees the Army's acceptance of his huge contribution, earned by selling armament (the evil instruments of war and destruction), as treachery to the cause for which she labors—the

salvation of souls from violence and evil. But Undershaft has challenged her earlier to visit him in his armory as he will visit her in her Salvation Army shelter. Now, when he observes her distress, he encourages her to renew her faith by taking up his challenge: "Dare you make war on war?" If she and her fiancé, Dolly, believe war is bad, and they want to do something about it, they must have the power to act. And the power, says Undershaft, resides in his factories, and in the clean, well-educated, civil lives of his employees. It resides in the conviction that with the power to do good comes the power to do evil. It insists that while the world has learned to scrap its obsolete machines, it must also learn to scrap its obsolete moralities. To seize the power to beat swords into ploughshares, one must have the power to make the swords in the first place, because nothing else will be equal to the task.

In a turnabout, Dolly and Barbara become the prosecutors, Undershaft the defense. They want to convict him of immorality, of gross injustice, of facilitating the worst acts of the most unscrupulous and dangerous people on earth: the power hungry dictators, and the commercial warmongers. He challenges them to see that this power, which is the power that, well beyond Parliament, governs the British nation and controls its actions, is the power they must have the courage and conviction to wield. That courage, he thinks, will be good for business. They think it will be good for society. The verdict they reach is that they will proceed together, despite their differences, to take up the challenge. They will be Undershaft's heirs, make war on war, and march onward, with the workers (as in the 1936 film of the play, with Rex Harrison, Wendy Hiller, and Robert Morley, which Shaw helped to direct) into the sunset of social justice. The comic fabric is knit up. Justice hangs in the balance.

In Peter Nichols' *Joe Egg* (1967),<sup>2</sup> we watch as two beleaguered parents deal with what is a permanent, implacable, daily tragedy in the center of their lives: their daughter, Joe (Josephine) is so severely handicapped she cannot make any apparent response to anything they say or do. Bri suspects she is a "vegetable." Sheila is sure she is not, and that she understand Joe's responses. They each begin the play by making their separate cases to the audience, as if we were on the one hand friends and confidants, and on the other hand the judge and jury. Bri is a hapless school teacher, in need of attention, self-deprecating and self-pitying, turning his pain into a manic, compulsive humor, unequal to the continuous burden of caring for a child who cannot respond to him. His leaping imagination constantly fills her in, fills her

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<sup>2</sup> New York, Grove Press, 1967.

out, makes her into what she is not as he conducts both sides of every conversation for her, and beats his feelings into the dust with these flailings. Sheila is a calm caretaker, a lover of plants and animals, a sustainer of life. But while she can occasionally play Bri's games with him and enter into his fictive dialogues with Joe, she is not very good at relishing his imagination, at entering into his discontents and salving his hurts. Neither is he good at reassuring her, at understanding her connection with Joe, at appreciating the ways Sheila's needs are met by Joe, or at accepting that their daughter, whatever she may be, is inextricably a part of their lives. Sheila wants a supporting helpmate for a lifetime's caring she would not dream of abrogating. Bri wants Sheila to devote to him more than the same attention she gives to her many plants, her numerous pets, and most of all to Joe.

This play is important because it takes ordinary people and, having thrown them into an ineluctable agony, helps us understand as they swim for the comic shores of social stability and acceptance, no rescue in sight. Among those around them, some, including Freddie, a friend, and Grace, Bri's mother, try to help, to find sensible solutions and remedies. But Bri and Sheila resist in their own ways. Sheila will not put Joe in a home or special school, and they will not try to adopt another child. Nor will they stop joking their way through the difficulty of their permanent predicament. Bri reinforces this in front of company, but we can see how it is eating him away.

In the end, Bri gives in to his worst weaknesses. In desperation, he keeps Joe out in the cold too long and brings her in nearly dead. She is revived only by concerted effort at the hospital, and when she is brought home, Sheila shows she has learned something from the incident. She declares that she will put Joe in a home for a month each year so she and Bri can have some time alone together. Bri, who has only learned more about how desperate he is, resolves to leave her, but while he tells us, he does not have the guts to tell Sheila of his decision. When she tells him of her plans to arrange time for them to be alone together, she is caressing him, inviting him to bed, and urging him to call in sick so he can stay in bed with her and not have to work tomorrow. He is clearly very uncomfortable with this, but says he will run out to the phone box right now and call the school. He adds that though it is just a few steps away, he will take the car so that, in case the box is in use, he can get to another one quickly. She continues to invite him to bed, and as she adds a routine request to carry Joe upstairs after he's returned from the phone, he leaves. We hear the door slam just as we do when Nora leaves Torwald in Ibsen's *Doll's House*. But in this case Sheila does not know what has happened. The play ends with her

talking to the fish and the bird, noting that they've been fed: "Daddy fed you? He is good—What a Daddy!—Aren't we lucky?"

The irony is bitter. Comedies often end with eating, or with couples going off to bed. In this case, the wrong creatures have done the eating, and there will be no bedding—the marriage has shattered. We know that Sheila's feeling that she has once again salvaged an impossible situation has only a few more minutes to live. Throughout the play the two protagonists have kept us informed about their private thoughts, addressing us directly, making their cases. Are we to judge? Are we to refrain from judgment? That these two people are flawed and have their weaknesses is unquestionable. But are they evil? Hardly. They are on the tragi-comic knife-edge, part of a family whose capacities, flaws and difficulties many of us can say we share. They are a part of the comic fabric. But what threatens that fabric, in this case, is not the simple social problem typical of comedy (for instance, marrying successfully out of one's station or class, or avoiding divorce), but a permanent sore in the flesh of the family, a kind of cancer that is eating away at the souls of our heroes. The efforts of the well-intentioned Freddy, his wife Pam, and Bri's mother, Grace to close the fabric around the wound are not enough. Balancing on the knife-edge, Bri falls off the other side. With Joe's survival, he leaves, and the fabric is broken. The justice we were asked to find as we were directly addressed by Bri and Sheila in the beginning of the play is simply not available. There are no remedies in law, no responsibilities to be assigned that can simply solve the problem.

This British play draws not only on Ibsen, but also on Shakespeare's use of soliloquy and Thornton Wilder's use of narrative on stage. In asking us to watch the failure of an ordinary man, it leans at least a little on another American play, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In Miller's play there is no direct address by the protagonists, but the setting is equally comic. That is, this play is about a man in his family, with problems to solve. Will he solve them? Will he muddle through and find a way? Within this structure, as in his early work, *All My Sons*, and in his later masterpiece, *The Crucible*, justice is the subject matter. Willy Loman is guilty. He is guilty of raising his son Biff with delusions of athletic grandeur. He is guilty of distorting the value and reality of being "well-liked" into the be-all and end-all of success in life. He is guilty of hotel-room, on-the-road infidelity. He is guilty of being a limited man who cannot respond to changing circumstances and changing demands, and who, when failure comes upon him, cannot turn around and face it. But the whole context of the play, with its impressionistic apparitions and dream-recalls, its memories and confronta-



tions, is like a plea for understanding, and for the justice that comes with it. Willy was not perfect. Willy caused pain. Willy worked hard and supported his family. Willy loved his wife and his sons and raised his children the best way he knew how, giving them his ideals, principles and dreams. Whatever was Willy's due, the play seems to suggest that life has cheated him of it, that in spite of everything he does not deserve the emptiness he takes with him when he makes his exit. Why doesn't Miller's play take a turn like Shaw's, who, in *Major Barbara*, has Undershaft bring Barbara out of what he calls her "tinpot tragedy" by challenging her to recover? Barbara has youth, and the opportunity to remake her circumstances. But life, like the city surrounding his now-lonely little house, is closing in on Willy and there's nothing left and nowhere to go. He leaves by the only route he knows—his car and the road. Who has responsibility for this man? Who can judge him? At the same time, who can avoid judging him? The real subject of this play is the kind of transfiguration of values that only drama can engineer, and that, in our time, only tragi-comedy is big enough to bear. It asks us to solve an unsolvable question of justice, and in doing so clarifies the stakes. The play helps us see what our sense of justice is, and what it might be.

In 1954, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*<sup>3</sup> was sprung on an unsuspecting and unprepared audience. In its first few years, it met with much incomprehension and protest. Then, as the comprehension grew, the play ascended to the status of a classic. Its heroes, Vladimir and Estragon, known as Didi and Gogo, are hardly the enlarged spirits of traditional tragedy. On the contrary, they belong to a long Irish tradition of stories about two adventurers, in this case two bums, on the road. But gradually we have come to see in them comic echoes of those tragic heroes in a radically stripped-down, existential universe. They are waiting for someone named Godot, who never comes. They cannot escape the utterly barren landscape in which they live, the beatings they endure at night by nameless antagonists ("And they didn't beat you?/ Beat me? Certainly they beat me./The same lot as usual?/The same? I don't know"), the aches and pains, the near starvation, the horrible uncertainty of not knowing what happened yesterday (or even if it was yesterday), much less what will happen tomorrow. They pass the time in games, passing their hats, trading insults, arguing about memories, about food, about who came yesterday, about anything at hand.

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<sup>3</sup> New York, Grove Press, 1954.

Things decay. The single leaf on the single tree in the landscape is gone in the second act. Pozzo and Lucky, a traveler and his servant, who come in the first act and, in effect, entertain them (however painfully) for a while, show up again in the second act, but they are much aged and decayed. The messenger from Godot claims, each time he comes, that he was not the one who came previously. The world is at odds with normal notions of time, continuity, and persistence. We give birth, as Didi puts it, astride a grave. Each time one of these impasses occurs, each time each argument or event expires, Didi or Gogo says they should leave. This is what follows: "Let's go./We can't./Why not?/We're waiting for Godot." And they invent something else to do, to pass the time. At the end of the play they go through a ridiculous vaudeville routine trying to commit suicide, an idea they considered and dropped near the beginning of the play because it might not work as intended and one of them would be left alone—their little society would be destroyed. This time they consider suicide by using Gogo's belt to hang themselves. The only result is that Gogo's trousers, unbeknownst to him, have dropped to the floor—a classic vaudeville turn. Getting them up makes another routine. At the end of each of the acts one of them says, "Well, shall we go?" and the other says, "Yes, let's go." Then the stage direction appears: *They do not move.*

In this absurd, reductive fabric, Gogo and Didi are a family, a couple. They quarrel, they fall out, but they stay together. Even Godot's absence cannot tear them apart. They are stuck with life, with its routine, with its stagey, theatrical, comic structure embedded in the tragic, inescapable framework of decay and death. There is nowhere to go. They choose to live. Except for the fear of being alone, they can find no reason why: no love, no faith, no dream, no justice, no hope. From the beginning, they see the world before them as a "bog." But in this grimness, this existential hell on earth, what comes through the comedy is the choice; through the entrapment, freedom; through the arbitrariness and indeterminacy, fairness and justice. Gogo and Didi are very much like cartoons. Watching their near destruction and survival is like seeing the wolf chase the road-runner. The wolf is smashed yet again after his latest failed attempt to catch his prey (who is, after all, uncatchable), yet somehow he revives to chase again. It is unfair, but hilarious. Life is re-asserted; and in that reassertion the idea of justice gets reformed, yet once again.

In Saul Bellow's *The Last Analysis* (1965),<sup>4</sup> his main character, Bummidge, who is a comedian, will perform a presentation of his own

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<sup>4</sup> New York, The Viking Press, 1965.

life, from birth forward, from inside out, a summation of his hard-won study and understanding, his self-taught psychoanalysis, his autodidactic philosophizing. He calls it "laughter in decay."<sup>5</sup> Earlier in the play, talking about his material, he says:

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  
clowns to thought. . . .<sup>6</sup>

In 1852 Karl Marx begins his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* this way: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

At some point between the advent of science and its current cultural conflicts with the world of religion, between the closing of the frontier, the acceleration of technology, and the discovery that we are trapped on planet earth with a serious set of ecological crises descending upon us, between the advent of the information age and the understanding that our knowledge is not all we need to save us—somewhere in these sets of deepening entrapments, which are also huge social challenges (that is, we will either solve them together or not at all), is the heart of tragi-comedy. And it is also in the contexts of these same dilemmas that justice must be worked out, defined, and practiced.

While it is a cliché that justice may be hard to find in the law, if we look at justice as a messy set of situational decisions, laced inevitably with compromises and contextual re-definitions, we see the tragi-comic context for justice emerge. I do not believe we are in the throws of an inevitable, entropic historical process, as tempting as Beckett and Marx may be. This coming of age of the tragi-comic form is a kind of maturation, a development of an understanding that first emerged in Homeric times when the idea of justice was symbolized by the balance. Every argument tips the balance, every value weighs each argument differently. In an era in which values are unstable, what keeps the balances of justice from swinging wildly and erratically?

In the first place, of course, there are times in our century when we have witnessed erratic swings. Lives have been, and are being destroyed, even whole cultures. But civil society has also been strong and growing in our time. The effort to charge the tragic sensibility with

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 35.

comedy, and at the same time to leaven the comic compulsion with tragic ideals, has helped us keep our balance and preserve continuity in our sense of justice. We can see this balance re-articulated in those arguments of the feminist movement which advocate the importance of relationship, cooperation, and mutual problem-solving. Whatever current stability the law and our sense of justice enjoy is sustained by the same culture that has brought tragi-comedy to the center of our sensibilities.

In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a woman engineers the overthrow of the government of Athens by occupying the treasury and organizing the women of Attica to deny the men sex until they stop their war with Sparta. In a final brilliant move, Lysistrata organizes her cadre of women to enlist the women of Sparta too. As erections grow, the war shrinks, and finally stops. Lysistrata's purpose in disrupting business-as-usual is to prevent destruction, bring peace and harmony with Sparta, and bring the society back together. This is a war (the "Peloponnesian War") in which Athens had just suffered a huge and shocking defeat—the destruction of its whole fleet in Sicily in 414, the year before the play was written. And we now know that in spite of that defeat, and of Aristophanes' efforts, Athens will continue to pursue the war through ten more years of futility, defeat, waste and painful deterioration, and will lose, disastrously, when the city itself falls to the Spartans in 404. The conservative Aristophanes, who objected to almost everything new (including the activities and views of Socrates) wants the war stopped, wants the culture preserved, even with its flaws (which he can continue to write comedies about). If it is laughable to think (given the time and place) that the women of Athens could have pulled this off, it is not so laughable to think of the justice of their doing so, and of the balance and sanity they could have restored to Athenian life. The play itself is full of the irony of this hypothesis and the pat, conventional celebrations at the end of play reinforce the bitter recollection that the events of the play are a fantasy. The satire bites all the harder for this dark conclusion, and I think that was Aristophanes' intent.

It was also his intent, it seems to me, to highlight the striking courage and originality, the political and social genius of the play's fictional heroine, who raises her voice in ways that would be wholly extraordinary in her time. The effectiveness of her advocacy is enhanced by the circumstances in which the drama was originally staged: a religious festival in honor of Dionysis, the god of many names, the god of contradictions: male/female, life/death, sobriety/drunkenness, obedience/abandon, reverence for the old/reverence for the new,

identity/self-immolation. It is as if Aristophanes has engineered an invitation from the god to listen to voices heard before but ignored, clamoring for a radically social reshaping of justice.

Once again we see how integral the development of cultural conceptions of justice are to the very fabric and essence of the drama, and how, for more than two thousand years, we have found the essential forms of those ideas in the tissues of our drama where its tragic and comic sensibilities collide, conflict, and connect.

