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Book Review: Love Song For The Life Of The Mind: An Essay On The Purpose Of Comedy

Christopher Brunelle

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Love Song for the Life of the Mind: An Essay on the Purpose of Comedy, by Gene Fendt. Catholic University of America Press, 2007. Pp. xxvi + 324 pages. \$74.95.

CHRISTOPHER BRUNELLE, Department of Classics, St. Olaf College.

This is a good book to read. Fendt elegantly reconstructs Aristotle's lost thoughts on comedy, solves the conundrum at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, and with serious humor articulates the importance and beauty in the works of Plato, Shakespeare, Aristophanes, and Stoppard. Fendt's engaging style may be the best and most important part of his book; just as a play's effect cannot be reduced to a moral message, so a bare list of his conclusions (such as one might find in a review) would hardly hint at the healthy mental pleasures that one experiences in following him to those conclusions.

Fendt begins with an extended, lucid, and persuasive analysis of Aristotle's odd claim (*Poetics* 1454a7) that Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* contains the finest kind of tragic pathos. The oddity lies in the fact that this play has a happy ending, which we usually associate with comedy or tragicomedy; how could *Iphigenia* be a better tragedy than *Oedipus*? Fendt answers the question by articulating an emotivist interpretation of Aristotelian catharsis and mimesis. "Mimesis exceeds cognition by working beneath it and before it" (p. 11); hence the emotionality and irrationality of catharsis, which depends on mimesis. Poetry is neither a hospital nor a classroom (so catharsis is neither 'purgation' nor 'clarification') but a gymnasium, offering us a training ground for our emotions (so catharsis is 'purification'). (Compare Terry Pratchett on the value of fantasy: "Like an exercise bicycle it takes you nowhere, but it might just tone up the muscles that will.") Tragic catharsis is thus a useful exercise not just for the emotionally infirm but also for the virtuous, whose already "well-ordered emotions are given a free and unimpeded run such as the world does not much offer as it is" (p. 82). Euripides' *Iphigenia* offers the most useful kind of catharsis to all audiences because its fearful events are imminent rather than completed (good and evil are still in play, and our passions are raised) and its protagonist is both virtuous and innocent (so our concern for her is all the stronger); the shape of the plot, then, properly exercises our emotions and the happy ending liberates us from an unpleasant feeling of disgust (pp. 99–101). Tragedy's emotional exercise leads its audience to cognitive clarity; we benefit from watching Euripides' *Hecuba* as King David does from hearing Nathan's story (p. 77) or Prince Hamlet does from hearing the speech of Hecuba (pp. 82–83).

Those of us who prefer Euripides to Sophocles will be pleased to see the neglected *Iphigenia* championed so strongly. Still, Fendt's emphasis on the emotional power of catharsis and on plot structure alone requires a nearly total silence on many other issues, such as Euripidean irony (in the audience and between the characters) or the proper use of *deus ex machina*

(contrast *Iphigenia* with *Orestes*) or language itself; there are few quotations from *Hecuba* and none at all from *Iphigenia* (perhaps I missed one, but the book has no *index locorum*). Euripides is unlikely to have been the only dramatist to create a tragedy on this plot. The *Poetics* refers (1455b9–10) to a version—probably also a tragedy, to judge from Aristotle’s phrasing—of Polyides the Sophist. Yet no one has ever dared to claim that Polyides might have been the equal of Euripides, because plot, even coupled with character, has never seemed sufficient to explain the power of a play. Fendt rightly argues against such formalism (pp. 29–31), yet, in focusing on the audience’s experience of catharsis, he leaves many of our other experiences out of account. (He also occasionally neglects the separation between category and example; Aristotle never says that *Iphigenia* has the best plot, only that it has the best kind of plot.)

Fendt’s emotivist interpretation of catharsis leads to the central aim of the book, the creation and substantiation of an Aristotelian theory of comedy. Except for the emotions that they exercise, tragedy and comedy are identical in having as their final cause the catharsis of the passions, either pity and fear (and similar pains) or sympathy and eros (and similar pleasures). Comedy’s aim “is to purify our desires of their murderous deficiencies or ridiculous excesses in eros and sympathy and to enlarge the field of our desire and sympathy to include our brother and the fool” (pp. 188–189). Plato’s *Phaedrus* is a fine comedy because it produces in us and in *Phaedrus* himself the three effects of relaxation, catharsis, and intellectual pleasure (pp. 155–156). But much finer is *As You Like It*, because the eight protagonists of Shakespeare’s comic community offer a wide array of passions (and hence of resolutions and hence of audience catharses), because the resolution that spills out from the inset forest of Arden into the outer world of the characters so perfectly mimics the resolution that ought to spill out from Shakespeare’s play into our own world; and because the melancholic Jaques, in his final blessing upon and renunciation of the completed world of desire, offers “a sublime comic catharsis” (p. 192), raising us even above the satisfaction of every *eros*. Here Fendt sees a bit of Schopenhauer within Shakespeare—but no Shakespeare within Schopenhauer, because comedy and tragedy, being mimetic by nature, cannot be reduced to proofs, insights, or morals. Dramas work on the emotions, not the mind (p. 132).

The complex relation of drama and morality leads Fendt to some of his most worthwhile pages (pp. 206–235). With the help of Aristotle, Kant, and the aesthetics of anchovy pizzas, Fendt argues that art can neither be reduced to a moral message nor exist for its own amoral sake; rather, “the idea that the purpose of dramatic art is catharsis does not require that the aesthetic be reduced to the ethical, though it notes that the aesthetic cannot exist without the ethical” (p. 228). Aristotle begins the *Poetics* by separating poetry from language that makes truth claims, and “since mimeses do not aim to represent reality, the impossible (what theoretical reason *would* deny the truth of) is a legitimate poetic trope, so is the immoral

(what practical reason *would* deny the truth of) The immoral and the impossible are legitimate here only because, and only when, they better serve the cathartic purpose of the art" (p. 218). Again, mimetic art is a crucial tool for the health of the soul, because it provides an emotional playground; there, within the play, we can and we must let our passions run freely and suffer "in a world without existential import" (p. 174). The play is indeed the thing. One cannot treat Shakespeare's green Arden as a template for our own dirty and more difficult world, but "the play shapes our desire to include the good of others, and, indeed, our sympathetic reaction to the characters begins the practice of that virtue, even if the play itself accomplishes nothing further in the so-called real world. If we do not have this right desire, or if it is not sufficiently strong or active—if we do not take joy in its success—we will never act to achieve that good except via force of law" (p. 189). Still, if *As You Like It* inculcates in its audience a desire for greater real-world equity (p. 188), it's hard not to agree at least in part with Plato and others who fear art as a tool for social change. Those in power usually want to stay there—but the point, Fendt hopes, of comedy and tragedy is not to raise the consciousness of the proletariat into armed rebellion but through mimetic passion to raise *everyone's* consciousness. "The *whole society* must change, and change its passions—that is the point the comic *komos* makes clear: we are all responsible for the whole" (p. 189).

Fendt's final chapter starts by demonstrating the place of art in political society, argues very fetchingly for state support of the arts (p. 255), and concludes with a delightful interpretation of Stoppard's *Arcadia*, which goes beyond anything in Aristophanes, Shakespeare, and perhaps even Plato in its catharsis of all the pleasures, even the highest of all: the love of the life of the mind. By leaving the best for last, Fendt's book enacts its own teachings; we, having read and appreciated the earlier chapters, now desire to see their values endorsed through analysis, and we end up, desires satisfied, in *Arcadia*. Or almost: love of contemplation may outrank bodily *eros*, but if Shakespeare can incorporate physical desire within the nobler forms, why would carnal love between Thomasina and Septimus *harm* the admittedly higher love that they already share? C. S. Lewis likewise argued that sex is to heaven as chocolate is to sex, but that doesn't mean that lovemaking suffers from Hershey's Kisses.

Plato ends his *Symposium* with Socrates claiming that a tragedian can also be a comedian, and Fendt ends his book with an epilogue showing how this is so: namely, through an emotivist interpretation of catharsis, with tragedy purifying our fear and pity, and comedy (including the *Symposium* itself) purifying our desire and sympathy (p. 286). Not that Fendt would put it so drily himself; like Plato, his pace is lively and his humor is enticing and philosophically persuasive. If you only want one juicy interpretation of Plato's dialogue, these two dozen pages are a fine choice; you'll learn why Alcibiades is truly laughable, why our laughter at him is good and healthy (we're laughing at and thus being freed from

the Alcibiades within ourselves), and why our unfulfillable desires and human insufficiency may be “our highest perfection. For what is wonder but the recognition of incapacity before a beauty that neither judges nor condemns?” (p. 301).

My quibbles are mostly minor. The bibliography is by no means exhaustive, and in a book with a classical focus I have never before seen an index with more references to Rube Goldberg than to Kenneth Dover. Typos are mainly confined to the short Latin and Greek quotes. Fendt grinds his axe too sharp against some critics of Euripidean gender hierarchy (pp. 93–97); at the end of *Hecuba* the title character is indeed no role model, but Polyxena’s death, through its very courage, can still support the androcentricity of the world. Aristophanes’ *Clouds* ends not with the usual booze and off-color songs but with arson (p. 185), and it is not true that “one of the casualties of war was comedy, outlawed from 440 to 437” (p. 148); though there seems to have been some Athenian legislation concerning comic ridicule of public figures during this period, neither did the genre perish nor was Athens at war. Curiously, Aristotle’s reference to certain cannibal tribes near the Black Sea (*NE* 7.5) is put to vivid use on several occasions, yet Fendt never points out that these cannibals may not have existed; Aristotle only claims that they are *said* to exist. By attributing his examples to hearsay Aristotle specifically keeps the cannibals in the realm of the mimetic (stories are told of such people, and we needn’t think that these people exist for their story to be useful), and the distinction between the narrated or mimetic world and the outer, lived world is a distinction that Fendt himself usually likes to maintain.

But those minor blemishes hardly detract from Fendt’s copious mimetic and didactic rewards. Undergraduates may find it hard going, but any reader who enjoys extended analytic metaphors, aesthetic optimism, and meaningful humor will appreciate the journey and the goal.