

Traditionally in the field of aesthetics the genres of tragedy and comedy have been depicted in antithetical opposition to one another. Setting out from the hypothesis that antitheses are aspects of a deeper unity where one informs the construction of the other's image this thesis questions the hierarchy of genre through a form of ludic postmodernism that interrogates aesthetics in the same way as comedy interrogates ethics and the law of genre.

Tracing the chain of signification as laid out by Derrida between theatre as *pharmakon* and the thaumaturgical influence of the *pharmakeus* or dramatist, early modern comedy can be identified as re-enacting Renaissance versions of the rite of the *pharmakos*, where a scapegoat for the ills attendant upon society is chosen and exorcised. Recognisable *pharmakoi* are scapegoat figures such as Shakespeare's Shylock, Malvolio, Falstaff and Parolles but the city comedies of this period also depict prostitutes and the unmarried as necessary comic sacrifices for the reordering of society.

Throughout this thesis an attempt has been made to position Shakespeare's comic drama in the specific historical location of early modern London by not only placing his plays in the company of his contemporaries but by forging a strong theoretical engagement with questions of law in relation to issues of genre. The connection Shakespearean comedy makes with the laws of early modern England is highly visible in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Taming of the Shrew* and the laws which they scrutinise are peculiar to the regulation of gendered interaction, namely marital union and the power and authority imposed upon both men and women in patriarchal society. Thus, a pivotal section on marriage is required to pinion the argument that the libidinated economy of the early modern stage perpetuates the principle of an excluded middle, comic *u-topia*, or Derridean 'non-place', where implicit contradictions are made explicit.

The conclusion that comic denouements are disappointing in their resolution of seemingly insurmountable dilemmas can therefore be reappraised as the outcome of a dialectical movement, where the possibility of alternatives is presented and assessed. Advancing Hegel's theory that the whole of history is dialectic comedy can therefore be identified as the way in which a society sees itself, dramatically representing the hopes and fears of an entire community.