

Book review on shakespeare and the comedy of forgiveness

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



In the introduction to Hunter's *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*, the author announces his intention to combat oversimplifications that have arisen over the past few decades with regards to the scholarship of Shakespeare, wherein the attitude of Shakespeare himself at the time of his writing would actually reflect the politics and intent of the work itself (e. g. *King Lear* having a sad ending indicating Shakespeare being despondent at the time of its composition). " This study... will be an attempt to investigate one feature - the denouement in forgiveness - which is common to five of the later comedies" (Hunter 2). In this way, Hunter is unique, in that he seeks to differentiate Shakespeare's plays from the normal categories of 'problem play,' 'romance,' and so on, and investigate their actual endings, calling them 'comedies of forgiveness.'

In essence, Hunter describes the thematic and dramatic basis for the concept of forgiveness as an ending, as opposed to merely advocating defeat of the oppressor in the beginning of a story. In the course of creating drama, one must have a person who personifies the conflict the other characters face in the story - thus making an oppressor. This oppressor is called the *humanum genus*, and for one reason or another he or she oppresses their lover or their family in some way, and requires forgiveness by the end of the play. However, in order to defeat the conflict and live happily ever after, the oppressor must be defeated in some way, which can undercut the pleasantness of comedy. Therefore, a compromise is reached in the form of forgiveness; by the protagonist forgiving the antagonist, the antagonist themselves can participate in this success as well, and revel in victory and happiness along with the rest of the cast. This way, the conflict is

eliminated while not having to sacrifice the happiness or well-being of the oppressor (Hunter 4). This is the essence of forgiveness in Shakespeare's plays, which Hunter recounts in expressive and incredible detail.

In Chapter 2, "Forgiveness of Sins in the Medieval Drama," Hunter notes the importance of forgiveness as an incredibly important tenet of the medieval drama. "The forgiveness of sins is necessarily a central concern in the religious drama of the Middle Ages" (Hunter 10). From the Bible to pre-Renaissance literature, the Middle Ages were chiefly concerned with avoiding God's judgment, which inherently involved being forgiven. Because of the mysteries' role in determining divine mercy, Europe in the Middle Ages was obsessed with avoiding hellfire and brimstone through worthy actions; this meant that, if they did do wrong, forgiveness needed to be within reach. Hunter uses Scripture, particularly the Psalms and the *Ludus Coventriae*, to illustrate just how important these attributes were to the English in the medieval era and how its importance applied to Shakespeare's adaptations. "Shakespeare, in constructing his comedies of forgiveness... either selected a story in which the sin/contrition/forgiveness pattern was already present... or he altered his narrative source so as to create such a pattern" (Hunter 40).

In Chapter 3, "Pre-Shakespearean Comedies of Forgiveness," we gain some insight into the previous entries to this particular genre, before Shakespeare contributed his own to the fold. These works all follow the same structure of yearning for forgiveness: "In both the religious and secular moralities of the sixteenth century, the medieval pattern of a *humanum genus* figure subjected to temptation and succumbing to it, only to be forgiven and saved,

continues to be discernible as the commonest basic structure for these plays" (Hunter 42). The transition from religious to secular forgiveness occurs here, as Hunter describes Shakespeare's comedies of forgiveness as ones where God has disappeared " as a physical presence, from the scene" (48). Hunter, here, notes the " one of the main concerns of the writer of secular comedies of forgiveness is the avoidance of crime, for the crimes which are pardoned in these plays invariably turn out to have been committed only by intention" (48). Thus, pre-Shakespearean authors would typically have their evil characters only intent or think their crimes, as in Thomas Gutter's *Commodity of the moste vertuous* .

In Chapter 4, Hunter delves into his first of five 'comedies of forgiveness,' *Much Ado About Nothing* . Here, he notes his thesis statement for all of the comedies he wishes to cover; in these works, " the *humanum genus* figure offends the woman who loves him and is forgiven by her" (Hunter 87). The heroes of these stories apparently are unable to " trust love absolutely," and therefore appear to drive their heroine to death, only for the hero to be forgiven when they turn out to be alive. In the case of *Much Ado* , Claudio has fallen in love with Hero, who is then misled by Don John to distrust Hero and fear her having an affair with another man. When he hears that Hero has died he begs for forgiveness for his sins, and the natural condition of the world has been restored - Shakespeare then asks his audience to join him in forgiving Claudio.

In Chapter 5, Hunter turns this same perspective of forgiveness to *All's Well That Ends Well* , in which the love of Bertran and Helena is constantly

countered by their disparity in social position. " In *All's Well that Ends Well* , the world of comedy is threatened not so much by strife as by mutability," says Hunter, noting the constantly dying world Shakespeare presents in the play, and the need to overcome differences in order to perpetuate it through romance (107). In this play, the gender of the person needing forgiveness is reversed, as Bertram imposes conditions on Helena in order for her to be worthy of marrying him; " Shakespeare has altered his story in a very basic way. Instead of a clever wench who must prove herself worthy of an aristocratic husband, we have an unworthy husband who must be made worthy of his wife" (Hunter 112).

In Chapter 6, Hunter takes a break from examining the plays to discuss the apparent disparity in quality between his romances; inevitably, students of Shakespeare are asked to account for the debatable quality of *Cymbeline* from the author of *King Lear* and *As You Like It* - " to account for the peculiarity we imagine that something peculiar had happened to Shakespeare" (Hunter 132). Hunter, instead of going through these circular argument, argues that they should be considered " as documents in the history of Shakespeare's art" in which his own consideration of comedy had changed, not his consideration of the world (112). In between his earlier and later comedies, he worked on *Promos and Cassandra*, *King Leir* and *Pericles*, all works that deal directly with forgiveness of wrongs and a unique atmosphere of romance in which forgiveness was necessary . This is where his primary thesis lies: the later romances are not mistakes or disordered

messes but " a meaningful pattern of sin, repentance and forgiveness" that must be recognized in order to fully benefit from their reading (Hunter 141).

Chap 7

Chapter 7 sees Hunter examine one of Shakespeare's less well-regarded plays, *Cymbeline*, which is typically seen with a bit more critical eye than many of Shakespeare's other romances: Posthumus and Imogen's relationship is the one that primarily focuses on the 'forgiveness' angle that Shakespeare is said to emphasize in this play: " Posthumus is the central, *humanum genus* figure of the play... his jealousy is at the heart of the play's 'radical theme' and ... the total effect of *Cymbeline* depends absolutely upon a sympathetic understanding of Posthumus' contrition and an emotional involvement in his forgiveness" (Hunter 143). In essence, by understanding what Posthumus is doing wrong by being as jealous as he is, and that Imogen is the forgiver in an almost-saintly way. " Imogen is sometimes, then, seen as the deity who bestows her grace upon her worshiper, sometimes as the worshiper who adores her god" (147). In this way, the forgiveness of Posthumus by Imogen is directly likened to the medieval tradition of seeking forgiveness by God for one's sins.

In Chapter 8, Hunter focuses largely on the treatment of forgiveness in *The Winter's Tale*. In this play, King Leontes is absolutely the *humanum genus* character, as he is jealous and pernicious, as well as prone to revenge, attempting to poison Polixenes and imprisoning his wife for potentially carrying Polixenes' child. While many critics claim that Leontes is meant to

be a true villain rather than a nuanced attempt at portraying someone who is childish and flippant, Hunter supports this latter assertion while still noting the cruelty of man and his fate in the face of evil: " In Leontes, Shakespeare is presenting us with a human mystery and he is presenting it *as* a mystery. His genius enables him to see and dramatize one of the most puzzling complexities of the mind: the presence of hate within love, and the constant danger that love will succumb to the desire to hate" (Hunter 188).

While the *humanum genus* figure in most of Shakespeare's comedies of forgiveness are the victims of societal norms, temporary lusts for power or misunderstandings of gender politics, Hunter argues that Leontes is vilified a bit more than those others: " But the villain is Leontes himself... Leontes is his own calumniator the most completely unexcused of all Shakespeare's *humanum genus* figures" (Hunter 190). Shakespeare's overall negative portrayal of Leontes as capricious and jealous is meant to finally cement the premise that " human nature is inherently evil - or rather, 'of a mingled yarne, good and ill together'" (Hunter 191).

The attempts at forgiveness come mostly through the character of Hermione, his wife, who continually tries to reach out to Leontes and make him see the truth: " Hermione's love is more, or represents more, than romantic love, for like Helena's and Imogen's Hermione's love is a manifestation of God's love for *humanum genus* " (Hunter 191). Typically, this is also accomplished through divine intervention and a desire to 'get good' with the gods, but Hunter does not see this to be the case with Leontes: " For Leontes, this is the terrible truth about his own sinfulness and

it should bring him, through self-knowledge, to contrition. But in his wrath, Leontes blasphemes by rejecting the word of the gods" (Hunter 193).

The gods, feeling capricious themselves and lashing out as Leonte's rejection of their offer of forgiveness, show what happens when a *humanum genus* character does not see the light when given the chance: " The death of Mamillius is the gods' punishment of Leontes' sins, and particularly for his final sin of blasphemy. Leontes, in his wrath, has tried to destroy all the manifestations of the gods' grace except one - his son" (Hunter 193). This is further evidence of Leontes' particular selfishness, as he does not quite reach the level of forgiveness that he needs to, thus necessitating these other pushes to rescind his sins: " The gods will punish Leontes by keeping his daughter from him... Shakespeare, by deliberately altering the method of Perdita's exposure, has insisted on presenting us with this further example of the pitiless methods by which heaven achieves its purposes" (Hunter 195-196).

Hunter, in examining *The Winter's Tale* , differentiates it from other comedies of forgiveness by acknowledging that Leontes is particularly unrepentant. This was, evidently, Shakespeare's attempt to subvert somewhat the comedy of forgiveness and portray a slightly more cynical outcome of these kinds of situations: " The world which Shakespeare creates in *The Winter's Tale* includes ... death, and any view of the play which fails to include it must be a partial view" (Hunter 202). Shakespeare is seen to use this play to advance his statement about the human condition, in which we are inherently evil and we are full of malice given the right temperament and

circumstances. At the same time, he hesitates to paint humanity with a broad brush and state categorically that the world should be a worse place than it is: " Both happiness and misery, 'both joy and terror' are human possibilities, and he insists upon the reality of both" (Hunter 203). With inherent evil comes inherent goodness, and this constant conflict is what Shakespeare implies drives us toward forgiveness. However, unlike his other plays, that forgiveness does not take as quickly in *The Winter's Tale* - this forgiveness only comes at the end, when a miraculous turn of divine intervention brings Hermione back to life, and Leontes is forgiven for his sins.

In Chapter 9, Hunter evaluates *Measure for Measure* under this same forgiveness criteria. In this play in particular, " the offense of *humanum genus* is against, not love, but law" (Hunter 204). The character of Angelo is directly responsible for the upending of society by instituting new social ethics that are not in the interest of the greater good; his institution of laws against sex outside of wedlock is shown as not only negative and dangerous, but also hypocritical as he sleeps with Isabella to circumvent the law, trading it for sexual favors. The *humanum genus* character is exemplified in different characters at different points, from Claudio's need for forgiveness of his crimes, Isabella's need to get Claudio forgiven for his crimes, and Angelo's forgiveness for his abuse of the law. All these characters eventually receive justice by the pleading and accepting of forgiveness from others by proxy: " The charity which makes possible the happy ending of *Measure for Measure* has as its source the knowledge and acceptance of our common humanity" (Hunter 226).

In Chapter 10, Hunter examines *The Tempest* as yet another comedy of forgiveness. As Hunter argues, the play itself can be seen as a romantic comedy of forgiveness, but this time " *The Tempest* deals with the theme of forgiveness and the theme of romantic love in two separate actions. The erring *humanum genus* figure is not the romantic hero, his crimes do not include a rejection of romantic love, and romantic love is not the motive for his forgiveness" (Hunter 228). In this case, the *humanum genus* figure is Alonso, as he has deposed Prospero from his dukedom and tried to kill Miranda and Prospero alike. This crime is the central focus of many of the actions of the other characters of the play, though it is not seen onstage, instead we hear about it from many different perspectives and constantly throughout the work. Ariel is then the character who manages to restore forgiveness to Alonso by making him confront his demons, though Alonso at first is driven toward self-destruction. Antonio's own evils are also forgiven, if only because " evil cannot... be finally and completely destroyed" (Hunter 241).

In his concluding chapter, Hunter notes that the insertion of comedies of forgiveness in Shakespeare's plays is a " last appeal to the complex of beliefs and attitudes which make up the Christian concept of forgiveness," as well as emphasizing paradoxically that " the source of human mercy is seen as the sense of common humanity, the knowledge of shared weakness" (Hunter 242-243). The *humanum genus* characters who require forgiveness in these plays are forgiven by their lovers, their governments, their leaders and Godlike figures alike, thus likening the forgiveness of Man with the

forgiveness of God. " The world of Shakespeare's comedies of forgiveness is one where hate and love are opposed to one another in a precarious balance which only just permits the ascendancy of love and order" (Hunter 245). The behavior of the *humanum genus* character threatens that good through hate, jealousy or cruelty of some form, and it is the goal of others and that character to recognize their own faults and seek/grant/accept forgiveness from God or their fellows.

Hunter's examination of the role of forgiveness in Shakespeare's plays is a detailed, thoughtful and thorough one, in which many of Shakespeare's more controversial and oft-overlooked plays are given proper explanation and explication as comedies of forgiveness - not as an excuse for perceived poor quality, but merely to explain the consistency of these themes and their presence. " All six plays share, as one of their major concerns, an insistence upon the necessity of forgiveness as an essential condition of human happiness. Charity, born of self-knowledge and of a recognition of evil as inherent to human nature, is the virtue which they primarily exalt" (Hunter 205). This is linked all the way back to the medieval tradition of the emphasis on forgiveness from God for our sins; Shakespeare effectively evolves this desire for forgiveness and places it in the hands of fellow human beings, who carry " the goodness of God" inside them and in their potential (Hunter 245).

Works Cited

Hunter, Robert Grams. *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* . New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.

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