

Gene Fendt

Love Song for the Life of the Mind: An Essay on the Purpose of Comedy.

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In this book Fendt takes on the challenge essayed by so many before him: to reconstruct the contents of the lost book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on comedy. He then tests the reconstruction on an assortment of plays, both ancient and modern.

Fendt makes the bones of the reconstruction sound simple and obvious: whereas tragedy, for Aristotle, aimed at the catharsis of pity and fear, comedy should aim at the catharsis of desire and sympathy. Both tragedy and comedy are grounded in the 'pre-rational or arational anthropological fundamentality of mimesis' (144-5); each prompts different types of catharsis in audience members according to their degree of virtue; and each, ultimately, aims at 'happiness'. However, no single element of Fendt's proposed reconstruction is either simple or obvious.

Fendt opens with an extended discussion of notions of mimesis, its 'fundamentality', and its direct relation to the passions. From there we move to catharsis (56). But what does this notorious term mean to Fendt? In his note on key words (xx), he warns us against constricting its sense, and explains that he will leave it untranslated; but that does not excuse him from giving an account of the notion. The sense of 'purging' is almost entirely ignored. At first, Fendt seems to settle on 'purification'; but later, he supplants it with 'intellectual clarification' (83). These are two very different things, especially if one is arguing (as Fendt intermittently is) for the separation of passions and intellect and the ontological primacy of passions (not least through their connection with mimesis).

So by the time we reach the notion of 'catharsis of desire and sympathy' as the aim of comedy, we are already on a shaky footing. Fendt uses 'desire' interchangeably with 'eros', and never qualifies the scope of either: we shift between erotic desire and appetite more generally. Ultimately, he wants to show that our desire can be refined into a yearning focus upon the divine, however the divine is defined, e.g., 'the one', wisdom, knowledge, God (all offered at different junctures). It can be refined, in other words, into some version of Aristotelian *theoria*. As for 'sympathy', its main purpose in the equation seems to be to link comedy into a communitarian, rather than solitary, context—unsurprising in a performance genre, but complicated in a move towards *theoria*. The unresolved tension is clear, for example, when Fendt explains that catharsis relates to different types of culture and to different ethical levels in the audience, physical, moral, and religious; the 'vision' of the highest, religious, level is 'of a noncompetitive, infinitely

sharable, but intimate and personal good' (199), *theoria*. The paradoxical juxtaposition of 'infinitely sharable' with 'intimate and personal' gives the game away.

The notion of 'sympathy' works better as a move towards 'happiness' ('the target is happiness', 177). 'Happiness' is used interchangeably with *eudaimonia*, whose multiple senses are, again, never explicitly discussed. If 'the target' is both *eudaimonia* and *theoria*, how do they relate to each other? We never learn. Fendt just asks, 'what if there is a good that is by its very nature more divine, more final and more self-sufficient than the moral virtues which are the good of both the individual and the polis [and] which may be achieved by an individual *only as an, and for that, individual?* . . . Individuals are not the foundation of politics, but they are its hoped for result; and a properly organized state will aim to achieve this divine happiness' (252-3; my emphasis).

Fendt makes much of the contrast between the trivial (*phaulos*) and the serious or weighty (*spoudaios*) as epitomizing the difference between comedy and tragedy (e.g. 115-16). Two of his three main test cases—Aristophanes' *Acharnians* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*—are declared 'a mimesis of an insignificant, unimportant, or worthless action' (119); *As You Like It* is further dubbed 'about as perfect an example of the art form as is possible' (181). Both plays are discussed somewhat impressionistically—for example, the neat summary of the couples at the end of *As You Like It*, as exemplifying the 'physical, moral, and religious' spheres isolated above, would be less neat if Fendt recognized the presence of the fourth couple, Phebe and Sylvius. But, in the end, the fundamental *phaulos/spoudaios* contrast is vitiated by Fendt's paean to his third major test case, Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*: 'In this play . . . an eros for the life of the mind is raised and purified in us, an eros for our own highest and most divine life, buried in the life of the more usual and demanding desires' (261). In other words, *Arcadia* is praised above all for its ability to deal with *ta spoudaia*, serious things. 'We fall mimetically into joy from the joy we see' (279)—the joy of enjoying knowledge for its own sake; '*et hoc dicimus Deum*' (sic) ('and this we call God', 281). The confusion between individual contemplation and the individual's full flourishing within the polis remains. And nowhere are we offered a reading that resists the pull from the trivial to the serious. Fendt, in fact, has tipped his hand on this: 'It is no wonder that drama was a religious ritual for the Greeks, *that species of human being that is a permanent embarrassment to every lower type*' (200; my emphasis). That Fendt can read Aristophanes so piously, without really acknowledging the 'lower types' portrayed therein or the unabashed delight in their vulgarity and lechery, suggests that his vision of comedy will be partial at best.

In a spirit of purported 'merriment' (284), Fendt concludes with an epilogue on Plato's *Symposium*. It is a joyless and homophobic reading of that great *jeu d'esprit*. Not only are the interlocutors, with the exception of Socrates, repeatedly referred to as 'pederasts'; who knew that the results of reunion in Aristophanes' delightfully absurd myth on the origins of erotic love were only 'pederasts, lesbians, adulterers, and loose women: not individuals who even form families, much less cities' (291)? Readers both

ancient and modern might be surprised by this gloss. Suddenly, it seems, the sociality of the polis is more important than solitary *theoria* after all.

It is clear that Fendt believes passionately in ‘the life of the mind’; he just fails to provide a cogent argument for us to join in his particular ‘love song’. His work reiterates timeworn cruces in the interpretation of Aristotle rather than suggesting solutions. If we are not already convinced by the notion of catharsis, we shall not be more convinced by reading this book; if we find problematic the contrast between the sociality of virtues and the solipsism of *theoria*, the problem is not resolved. Augustine’s objection that theatrical mimesis produces merely the desire to repeat the emotions rather than the desire for virtuous action (discussed and misunderstood, 216-17) still stands. The perplexed would be better occupied simply returning to their Aristotle. Or, for that matter, their Aristophanes.

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