

Job as a work of Laughtears and Learning:

Comedy, Pain and Audience Empathy

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Abstract

Contemplating the ideas of Job and comedy in the same sentence, if this is even possible, will inevitably raise questions regarding genre and tone. In this article, we will initially discuss the reasons why resistance might emerge to the idea of comedy in Job. We will then go on to consider various theories concerning comedy. Finally, we will explore the ways in which comedy is helpful for analyzing and interpreting Job. The key contribution of this article is to highlight how comedy helps audiences to recognize the lack of empathy in the advice given to Job by his friends and reveals the problematic nature of their retribution-centered advice. This is an important and instructive pedagogical tool for audiences: through the swift changes between what is deeply tragic and what is comedic, the audience's emotional engagement with Job increases. Through watching the friends' lack of empathy, the audience have the pedagogical space to call into question their own attitudes and values when faced with the pain of others. This opens up a space for the audience's self-reflection and growth by enabling them to critique, rather than assume the authority of, well-established traditions. It opens up space for the audience's subjectivity and for attunement towards recognizing the pain of others.

Keywords: Job, comedy, pain, genre, tone

Most readers will resist the idea that Job may be thought of as comedy. There are four good reasons for this. First, given that Job is part of a corpus of scripture with significant reception history, any deviation from mainstream approaches to it appears strange. The character of Job in traditional reception is an exemplar of piety and patience. For example, the New Testament epistle James refers to Job as a model of "endurance" (Jas. 5:7-11). Christian exegesis until the fourth century "focused on Job as a pious sufferer, a model of steadfast faith, and a type of ... Christian martyr" (Seow 2013, 110-248). Job is interpreted in a Christological way, partly owing to the mention of the *גאל* "redeemer" (Job 19:25). Christological responses gained traction partly because of their afterlives in liturgy, music, and visual art. More recently questions about evil, suffering, and justice occupy our imagination when we think about Job, partly because of post-holocaust interpretation (Tollerton 2012). Without denying the seriousness or value of these approaches to Job, it is also worth remembering that scholarship is not pre-scripted by reception history, and ideas that deviate from mainstream assumptions should not be simplistically dismissed without, at least, some critical consideration.

The second reason for possible resistance to the idea of Job and comedy is because Job appears within Christian and Jewish canons. Perhaps this is why it generates a tendency to be rather po-faced. As Radday argues, the biblical material is often smothered “with reverence” (Radday 1990, 34). Likewise, Landy has argued the “reverence accorded the Bible is a hindrance” (Landy 1990, 99). Therefore, however well-intended, a blanket approach to all canonised texts that is solemn may be inadvertently foreclosing the possibility of detecting comedy in Job.

The third reason why there may be resistance to comedy in Job is because comedy and humour are understudied, and as a consequence misunderstood, amongst scholars focusing on Biblical texts. As Morreall argues, comedy is “treated in academic circles as frivolous” (Morreall 1983, xi). This is a problematic premise; given that laughter is ubiquitous to human behaviour, surely there is a case for engaging with questions related to comedy?

A fourth reason why there will be resistance to Job as comedy is because of the way laughter is regularly treated negatively within the Bible (Ps. 2:2-5; 2 Kgs 2:23). Even Morreall, who has contributed constructively to academic dialogue about humour and comedy, comments that:

When laughter is mentioned in the Bible, it is associated with one of three things. In descending order, they are hostility, foolishness, and joy. In the Bible when someone laughs, it is usually an expression of hostility, contempt, or scorn. Laughter is at a person, and that person’s reputation and social standing are diminished by the laughter. . . . The second most common kind of laughter in the Bible is the irresponsible and irrational laugh of the foolish person. . . . Abraham and Sarah’s laughter . . . did show two serious shortcomings: the intellectual inability to imagine the maker of heaven and earth performing a simple miracle, and a lack of trust in God. In the Bible, the opposite of the laughing fool is the sad wise person. The Book of Ecclesiastes has this advice: Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad (Morreall 2008, 212–213).

While it is commendable that Morreall has attempted to find specific examples to illustrate his case, the arguments are not particularly robust. No insights from biblical scholarship are used to make the case, which is constructed merely from a cursory and shallow reading of the biblical text in translation. Having explained why it may be worth carefully considering the possibility of Job as comedy, despite the likely initial resistance to the idea, it is now necessary to examine any relevant scholarly publications that engage with comedy when examining Job.

The idea that Job might be thought of as a comedy is not new. Whedbee argues that although “at first blush, many will recoil from the suggestion that Job is comedy” we should not identify comedy with “laughter and light humour” but instead notice that comedy “can be profoundly serious” as “one of the most compelling strategies for dealing with chaos and suffering” (Whedbee 1977, 219–220). Whedbee provides an analysis of Elihu as a comical figure, but argues more

generally that the role of Job's friends is portrayed as "a magnificent caricature of the wise counsellor" so that "in ridiculing" Job they "become ridiculous" (Whedbee 1977, 10, 11).¹ Pelham makes a similar argument, highlighting how Elihu is a particularly comedic figure and argues that Job "protests a bit too much to be taken seriously" (Pelham 2010, 96). Pelham suggests that Elihu is a type of buffoon whose foolishness reflects back on Job and his friends because of his misappropriation of their language. Likewise, Pelham notes that God's role is also comedic as he attempts to distance himself from Elihu's speeches because they compromise his dignity. This is because "if God is repeating what Elihu has said" it implies "that God has not noticed that Elihu is a buffoon" (Pelham 2010, 102). In both of these approaches, we have a critique of Job's friends and an acknowledgement that comedy can be a useful device for uncovering their problematic advice, and for dealing with pain.

Keller makes a similar argument to Whedbee and Pelham, arguing that Job is a "tehomie" comedy (or creation comedy). Keller suggests that Job is comic not in the sense of "a joke but a laughter of resistance ... as an uncommonly sophisticated challenge to the dominant piety" (Keller 2003, 124-125). Keller suggests comedy emerges in Job partly because of its structure which "exhibits Bakhtin's definition of parody as "intentional dialogized hybrid" (Keller 2003, 126). Keller, argues that:

Through parody...the Joban poet resists a hardening theological anthropomorphism that in the combined context of an urban and exile-prone monotheism was already tending to reduce nonhuman nature to a background effect. It is often suggested that the poet was challenging the deuteronomic account of Israel's history, whereby the people's colonization by neighbouring superpowers could be rendered meaningful as divine retribution for the people's sins. This strategy of blaming Israel made God ultimately responsible for all the horrors. In the guise of punishment and test, God became the ruler and eventual micromanager of all history. With every disaster God would have to be re-justified, the people re-blamed (Keller 2003, 136).

This is a very helpful argument because of the way it demonstrates the difficult nature of following a conception of deity that is grounded in retribution. This reduces Yahweh to being an accountant whose job is to balance out people's sin with retribution. Although it is not necessarily the case that this is a "deuteronomic" idea, it is nevertheless a compelling argument.² Finally, Claassens argues for comedy in Job, suggesting that his suffering is a type of tragic laughter (Claassens 2015). Claassens suggests that the "act of choosing to laugh instead of weep is ... a subversive form of protest" so that humour in Job challenges and resists the

¹ A similar approach, where comedy and tragedy are connected is in Frye's work, where he describes Job as "the great reservoir of comedy" (Whedbee 1977, 219 cf. Frye 2000).

² Ideas about retribution are often understood to be "deuteronomic" but many other parts of the Hebrew Bible and directly related primary evidence beyond the anachronistic confines of the later canon contain ideas that link the deity Yahweh with retribution. For instance, the idea that bodily punishment follows sinfulness is common across a range of primary evidence (Southwood 2022, 94-96).

ideological frameworks of the friends (Claassens 2015:148). This is a very compelling argument because it addresses a key problem in Job: suffering. The function of tragic laughter is to survive, therefore to provide “a means of maintaining one’s subjectivity and dignity in the midst of dignity-denying circumstances” (Claassens 2015, 154-155). This is particularly helpful argument because of the key somatic nature of Job’s predicament. The dysfunction of Job’s body, permitted by Yahweh, is a very personal form of dignity denial, and, because it is visible, it is followed by stigma and shame (Job 2:4-6). Katherine Southwood has recently made a sustained argument, using medical anthropology and sociology to explore Job’s corporeal dysfunction and suggest that Job is a comedy undermining the problematic moralising advice continually offered by Job’s friends (Southwood 2021). However, the focus was on somatic pain and the reactions it elicits socially, so this argument did not delve into critical theory concerning what was meant by comedy.

All of the scholarship we have outlined concerning Job and comedy is helpful, but it all lacks a concrete grounding in critical theory relating to comedy. It may be instructive to develop this grounding for several reasons. First, to establish conceptually nuanced insights into what comedy is and how it functions. Second to have access to a more differentiated analytical language to increase the clarity of our arguments about humour and comedy. Third, to develop a more refined frame of reference regarding how comedy and suffering might relate. Therefore, in this article we will seek to answer these points and to demonstrate how pain and comedy in Job prompts audiences to think about pain from a more empathetic perspective in a way that other genres may not. To address these points, we now turn to explore comedy in greater depth.

Comedy

The word “comedy” comes from the Greek κωμῳδία, wherein the etymology is understood as coming from the words κῶμος (“revel”) and ᾠδή (“song”). In this sense, comedy refers to dramatic performance.³ This notion of comedy fits well with the way this article approaches Job; as a play to be performed in front of an audience.⁴ Obviously, however, the rather narrow definition of comedy as Greek

³ This is the case with the Old Comedy of ancient Greece. For example, the often political comedy of Aristophanes was performed as plays (Cartledge 1990; Silk 2000; Heath 1987).

⁴ Although it is not the main argument of this article, the idea that Job could be performed is taken seriously here. Much of the Biblical material could potentially have been communicated through performance. For example, there is an explicit reference to the reading out of the law in Nehemiah 8. Goodblatt notes this and other texts which he deems “performance texts” (Nehemiah 9; 2 Kings 23; Deuteronomy 31, and 1 Maccabees 3, Goodblatt 2006, 43-46). Note also the disproportionately print-orientated hermeneutic in our study of the Biblical material and the importance of taking orality seriously (Ong 1988, 174; cf. Schniedewind 2004; Vayntrub 2019; Kelber 1997). After all, as Niditch argues, “Biblical literature, is traditional literature having more in common with Homer’s *Odyssey* than a Faulkner novel” (Niditch 1996, xvii). Indeed, as Whedbee argues, “At least as far back as Theodore of Mopsuestia, scholars have observed affinities of Job with Greek drama” (Whedbee 1990, 218). Kallen, for example, argued that Job was dependant on Greek tragedians, particularly

dramatic performance does not account for the way that the term has evolved over time. Anthropologists observe that while all human beings laugh, the reasons we find things amusing varies across the world, and this raises particular difficulties when it comes to language (Sciama 2016; Apte 1985). Nevertheless, several long-acknowledged theories of laughter exist. Morreall groups these into three theories (Morreall 1987, 5-6). These include the incongruity theory, (where incongruence brings laughter); the relief theory (the idea that we laugh when tension that has been building is relieved); and the superiority theory (we laugh at characters who we feel are fools).⁵ We could speculate that these things exist in Job. Indeed, dramatic irony, wherein the audience knows what Job's friends do not, is a key part of the way that the superiority theory may be at work. Job as innocent and aspirational, yet (from the perspective of his friends) "punished," is incongruent. The happy ending may be understood as classic relief theory wherein the audience can reappraise the sum of the text as less disturbing or stressful as Job survives. However, noticing comedy in Job cannot be reduced to a simplistic application of theory to text, what might make Job a comedy and what function does comedy play?

Jackson helpfully outlines comic theory, identifying several features of comedy. These include: comic characterization through stock characters, misdirection, benign violations of norms both practical (e.g. social inversion) and linguistic (e.g. wordplay, puns, double entendre, sound-play), buffoonery, confronting taboo topics playfully, overdone repetition, hiddenness and surprise, satire, parody, and irony, which can all be part of the comedy. Likewise, Jackson outlines the comic plot and U-shaped, arguing that:

Comedy's opening scenario is a harmonious one; society is in a state of integration. Enter into this situation some challenge or test that jeopardizes the harmony, and the plot begins a downward movement. Then, as the plot is descending to its lowest point, something or someone acts on it, changes its direction and causes it to swing upwards. At comedy's ending, a new situation of harmony and integration is established, a harmony that typically includes the integration or reintegration into society of the "not hero". Importantly, this re-established society is not merely a reproduction of the old one, but is instead a new and rejuvenated one. This newness is proclaimed in the comic "happy ending" and frequently marked with celebration, "festivals of freedom and hope": marriage, birth, feast, carnival (Jackson 2012, 17–18).

Euripides (Kallen 1918). There may be similarities between Job and Aristophanic comedy given that the latter toys with authoritative customs and includes parodies of religious rites, just as Job undermines widespread, and possibly also authoritative, notions of simplistic retribution. Finally, regarding Job and performance, it is worth noting the American playwright and poet, MacLeish, who composed a modern free verse retelling of the story of Job as a three-act play (MacLeish 1959).⁵ However, we should acknowledge that there are problems with these theories. For example, as Eagleton points out with regard to the superiority theory, are we really "motivated by a malign urge to do others down?" (Eagleton 2019, 39). Likewise, is the relief theory of laughter too physiological? Is incongruity too descriptive because of designating what we laugh at rather than why we laugh?

Job conforms to this comic plot and has plenty of the features that Jackson outlines. For example, one can hardly miss the polysemy and word-play or the overdone repetition through the infinitely long-winded speeches. But, of course, identifying these things is always going to involve a level of subjectivity and be a matter of interpretation.⁶ Furthermore, returning to the question of plot, just because something has a plot that conforms to the comedic such as a Shakespeare play with marriages at the end, that is not enough evidence to say that it *is* comedy. So equating plot with comedy may help, but only to a certain extent. In addition, the other features of comedy that Jackson outlines are not reducible or confineable only to comedy, but exist in other genres too. Also, this doesn't answer the question about how comedy functions in Job.⁷

A Bakhtinian approach to comedy in Job might be helpful given the ideas of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body (Bakhtin 1984). In carnival hierarchical structures, reverence, piety, and etiquette are thrown off and the normal constraints and conventions are suspended. In this set of circumstances produced by carnival, there is satire and parody, and status and social distinctions are erased. Instead, the vulgar and the crude are enshrined. The aim is directed towards social change by uncovering the fact that the difference established through power and hierarchy or between king and peasant are arbitrary and relative. A Bakhtinian reading of Job is certainly possible, as has been demonstrated by Hyun (Hyun 2013). Job's body represents a complex view of suffering that is at odds with the assumptions about retribution that his friends make. Thus, Job represents a satirical and parody-filled breaking-down of traditional structures, conventions, and piety. Job's comments about his own body are regularly detailed and vulgar, for example featuring divine violence (Job 6:4 9:17-19; 16:7-9, 12-14; 19:7-12; 30:16-19). However, the theory stops short of being truly helpful. Carnival, burlesque, satire, and parody can be understood, to some extent, as attacks against the status quo. This may *appear* to be revolutionary. The problem is that it only seems to be revolutionary because, once the carnival is over, once that pressure valve is released, then society returns to normal. If anything, this upholds the status quo, as a licensed activity that the repressed are permitted to have. Thus, dissent is portrayed as possible, yet in reality it is not. Given that in Job we have such a thorough rejection of the idea of simplistic retribution, a Bakhtinian reading of comedy in Job that ultimately only maintains the status quo would seem rather at odds with the level of Job's protestations.

⁶ We should note here that all Biblical scholarship involves some level of interpretation therefore a degree of subjectivity is something that perhaps should be acknowledged more widely.

⁷ The question assumes the functionalist method, but this is one method among many. Douglas, taking a functionalist approach, suggested that the function of jokes illustrates their importance beyond the joke itself as subverting the social order (Douglas 1968; Radcliffe-Brown 1940). In contrast with this, a symbolic-interactionist approach emphasises the importance of ambiguity in dialogue and the way in which it is negotiated to construct meaning. A phenomenological approach to comedy "conceptualizes humour as a specific... 'mode' of perceiving and constructing the social world" (Kuipers 2008, 373-378). The conflict approach understands comedy, or humour, as a political weapon that is concerned with power relationships.

Any analysis of Job as comedy must take seriously the question of pain in Job. So, how do comedy and pain relate? Landy suggests that a “transformational link” exists “between the comic, the tragic, and the uncanny” (Landy 1990, 104). But how does the transformation occur? Perhaps one helpful avenue for thinking about this is through research that exists on trauma and tragedy. Zupančič’s contribution to comedy is helpful here, through her argument that comedy emerges from a “short circuit” of representation and difference, through which to better understand and recognise reality. She argues that there is a paradoxical realism in comedy. However,

tragedy confronts us with the Real; it always gives the Real this or that face, the face of this or that tragic split that resonates with something in our own imagination: we experience it through the play, we can feel it. Comedy, on the other hand, does not confront us with the Real, it repeats it (Zupančič 2008, 179).

Comedy’s role in tragedy and pain could potentially be very instructive. Through repeating, rather than confronting, people with reality comedy plays a role in enabling us to recognise it albeit in a gentler way.

This can be subversive. As Biddle explains, through “the recognition of incongruity, humor points out that the emperor has no clothes” (Biddle 2013, 6). But alongside encouraging a recognition of reality, comedy is also potentially a mechanism for resilience in the midst of pain and trauma.

Comedy’s role within pain and tragedy can be especially when affiliative humour and comedy are involved, since they can be used adaptively and in a non-hostile way to enhance social relationships (Kuipera 2012). After various psychological tests, Martin even concluded that there is “quite consistent empirical support” for the “observation that laughter” or more specifically “the positive emotion of mirth” actually “reduces pain” (Martin 2007, 326). Examples of this can be found in the face of extreme suffering, where laughter and comedy provide a means of human communication that goes beyond language. For example, Bussie reports a holocaust survivor’s recounting of her experience on arrival to Auschwitz:

When they cut our hair in Auschwitz, that was something terrible... They cried after long hair and I started laughing and they asked, “What are you out of your mind, what are you laughing about?” I said: “This I never had before, a hairdo for free?”... I started asking them: “who did your hair?” (Bussie 2007, 50).

In this example, Bussie demonstrates the way that laughter can simultaneously affirm contradictory thoughts and emotions. Comedy in the midst of pain and trauma has a paradoxical role, therefore, acknowledging the reality of trauma, yet also offering the possibility of survival through the defiance involved in reframing things. This is because the internal logic of comedy and trauma are rather similar: they both involve incongruity and a violation of our expectations. However, comedy creates openness, creativity, and social connectivity; trauma instigates anxiety,

rigidity, and isolation. This may be a helpful critical framework for thinking about the relationship between comedy and pain in Job.

Comedy and Pain in Job and the Key Role of the Audience

A helpful neologism that might be appropriate here is Joyce's term, from *Finnegans Wake*, that Job is a play potentially evoking the "laughtears" of the audience.⁸ Joyce coins this term suggesting that man suffers so much that he has to invent a new word to describe how he feels (Joyce 1939). This is helpful for illustrating comedy's key role in suffering and also for highlighting the complexity of talking about comedy in Job. Although Job engages with the depths of suffering, the way this approached is not always sentimental and bitter. Sometimes, for example, a comic tone plays out through parody. For instance, Job's sarcastic doxology, for example, where he darkly mimics Psalm 8 (Job 7:17-20). This is a comedy of resistance, about defying simplistic attributions of accountability that so regularly occur in the Psalms (indeed, Psalm 37 is a key example of this).⁹ Here in Job we have bodily experience pitted against ideas about retribution. Job's bodily experience is not, according to Job, brought on by some wrongdoing or other. Rather, the problem is with the deity. Given the fact that the audience is told from the first verse that Job is innocent and has been made aware Yahweh has allowed the Accuser to strike Job, the character Job is, ironically, quite *right* about this assigning of responsibility. Therefore, the very premise of Psalm 8 is comically overturned, pushing the notion of the deity from a caring guardian of the Psalm to an obsessed guard, with the unflattering title "Watcher of Men."¹⁰ Here the audience is faced with a reality that subversively challenges simplistic notions of retribution. This is not frivolous comedy. Through repetition, realities about agency and responsibility are played out in front of the audience. Comedy is key here because it prompts greater emotional engagement with Job's tragic situation. For any audience members who maintain a strict view of divine retribution as found in other parts of the biblical material, comedy functions as a pivotal "you are the man!" moment of self-recognition and learning (2 Sam. 12:7-8).

One, perhaps slightly unexpected resource that demonstrates how swiftly line between comedy and pain can be traversed in bodily suffering is from medical

⁸ Morreall writes that "For the Greeks, as for Shakespeare, the world presented in comedy was the same world presented in tragedy, and no subject was off-limits to comedy, not even the gods" (Morreall 1999, 3).

⁹ For example, the claim towards the end of the Psalm "I have been young, and now am old, / yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken / or their children begging bread" (Ps. 37:25). The colloquial English phrase "you should get out more!" may be one way to use humour to resist the view of the world presented by the Psalmist here.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note the way the Old Greek tones down the vehemence of Job's protestations. The Greek reads: εἰ ἐγὼ ἥμαρτον τί δύναμαί σοι πρᾶξαι ὁ ἐπιστάμενος τὸν νοῦν τῶν ἀνθρώπων διὰ τί ἔθου με κατεντευκτὴν σου εἰμι δὲ ἐπὶ σοὶ φορτίον ("If I have sinned, what am I able to do unto you? You who understands the mind of men? Why have you set me as your accuser? So that I am a burden to you?"). This changes the deity from being a relentless surveyor of Job to one who understands men, and pushes responsibility for Job's condition away from the deity.

anthropology. A valuable resource here are patient illness narratives. Lambek and Antze's research into these narratives helpfully highlighted, among current patients, some of the key questions concerning responsibility and agency that emerge in Job. Lambek and Antze argues that irony "contextualizes and compromises naïve notions of agency" in social responses to illness (Lambek and Antze 2004, 10). Therefore, they suggest that irony functions not to displace or conceal suffering during illness but to recognise the reality of the human body. They argue:

there is often a fine line between tragic and comic interpretations of the recognition of the limits of moral agency. Irony can serve as a transfer point between tragedy and comedy. . . . what turns irony in one direction or the other? When does the despair of Job give way to what Laura Bohannan . . . memorably called a "return to laughter"? With respect to illness, one can abhor or appreciate the Rabelaisian effects of bodily or mental breakdown and the collapse of personal agency. Why not celebrate the carnivalesque or grasp the comic dimension of suffering? When is the situation seen as one of tragic linear inevitability and when of comic indeterminacy? (Lambek and Antze 2004, 13).¹¹

What is interesting in this quotation is how comedy and pain both point towards the question of agency. This is because illness causes people to doubt one's stewardship of the body. A key issue here is the transfer point between the tragic and the comic. This is a crucial transfer point in Job too, often situated in the character's own, sometimes rather graphic, descriptions of corporeal suffering as divine violence. This transfer point, from cruel inevitability to comic indeterminacy, as described by the holocaust survivor's example earlier, is all important for audience engagement and growth. Perhaps audiences would have related to Job's situation in some sense, given the trauma induced through the Babylonian exile (2 Kgs. 24-25; 2 Chr. 36; Jer. 52; Babylonian Chronicle)? The psychological and emotional fracturing that was induced by the event should not be underestimated (Crouch 2021; Carr 2014; Smith-Christopher 2002). Under the crucible of exile, the theology of divine retribution may have been an explanation emphasising the people's wrongdoing. Ezekiel, for example demonstrates a theology of Israel's judgement and absolute responsibility "as though Ezekiel wishes these things upon his own people" (Joyce 2008, 17). Perhaps it is this kind of theology that Job is enabling audiences to recognise and reconfigure?

Comedy in pain invites a reframing of events that draws us closer to the reality of things. This can be noticed in Job when the character moves from conveying his tragic and deeply disturbing somatic experiences to communicating about his pride. Through the characterisation, audiences are invited to reflect on their own values; especially if see parts of themselves in Job (as noted, in a fashion similar to "you are

¹¹ Today, even in a modern biomedical context where lots of information about the causation of pain is available there is still a tendency to connect illness and responsibility in unhelpful ways that blame people who are ill. Given this, the advanced and progressive nature of Job is clear.

the man!” in 2 Sam. 12:7-8)? Consider, for example, the ruthless and extended deity attack metaphor that occurs in Job 30:16-19.

And now my soul is poured out within¹² me;
 days of affliction have taken hold of me.
 The night racks my bones,
 and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.¹³
 With violence he seizes my garment;
 he grasps me by the collar of my tunic.
 He has cast me into the mire,
 and we have become like dust and ashes (Job 30:16-19).¹⁴

Here is a truly tragic scene of cruelty and aggression. Job’s “being” (נפש) is poured out, an expression similar to that found in Laments (Lam. 2:12). The character is depicted as “afflicted” (עני), a term which has a semantic range covering illness, somatic distress, misery, poverty, and humiliation. The description of night that “racks” Job’s bones is also interesting; the word נקר can mean pierce, creating the implication that Job is under attack by an enemy with arrows, perhaps consistent with other parts of Job where the character reports such torment directly (Job 6:4; 16:12-13).¹⁵ The description of Job’s “garment” being “seized” (*hithpael* חפץ) is also tragic. The verb can refer to “disguise,” so perhaps the idea of disfigurement is intended given the highly symbolic role that clothing can play in Job, as Quick highlights (Sam. 28:8; 1 Kgs 20:38; Quick 2022). Finally, the mention of “dust and ashes” is resonant and tragic. Dust and ashes regularly occur together, functioning as a hendiadys, to emphasise human mortality and frailty (Gen. 18:27; Job 42:6). They can also appear separately, often as signs of mourning (Ezek. 27:30; Olyan 2004:29-35).¹⁶ This is deeply tragic, shocking, and, difficult to read. Job calls himself, at the end of the attack, a companion of ostriches and brother of jackals; this is a scene filled with pathos. The low and booming howl of the ostrich evokes human sobbing, and the high-pitched wails of the jackal evokes human weeping.

However, the juxtaposition between this scene and the one immediately beforehand in chapter 29 creates comedy. Here we see a Job who proudly highlights his former status and importance (Job 29:7–25). The scene painted by Job of his former interaction with the councillors is rather self-promoting and hyperbolic. In Job 29, Job presides above the community both in status and wealth. Job says he

¹² Literally, the Hebrew עלֵי reads “upon me,” but this is too literal (Clines 2006, 952).

¹³ LXX has νεῦρά μου διαέλονται, “my sinews are dispersed,” which is quite a departure from the Hebrew and surprisingly graphic.

¹⁴ One can also hardly fail to notice the connection between dust and ashes here, and the mention of them in Job’s responses to Yahweh during the whirlwind speeches where Job “consoles himself” (assuming the reflexive sense of the *niphal* נהם) “concerning dust and ashes”, or human frailty (Job 42:6). As I have argued elsewhere, Job’s responses to the deity are ironic. He submits “but only grudgingly with a backhanded, and not so subtle, dose of rejection and disappointment” (Southwood 2021, 173; cf. Southwood 2022, 107-109). With dust and ashes, he consoles himself, yet dust and ashes are what the deity attack renders him.

¹⁵ Arrows are sometimes associated with destructive diseases (Deut. 32:23-24; Ps. 91:5-6).

¹⁶ Refer to note 14.

sits “as a king” and like a god he claims to “tabernacle” (שכן) amongst them (Job 29:25; cf. Exod. 25:8; Jer. 7:3). Thus says the Job, the light of his face would shine on the councillors following which he lists his gracious and charitable activities (Job 29:24; 29:12, 15–16; cf. Num. 6:25). Note the incongruence of the character talking so very proudly about himself with such allusions of grandeur while sitting amongst the ashes.¹⁷ How are the audience to react to this? It is difficult to ascertain. What does shine through, however, is Job’s high opinion of himself. Indeed, the airs and graces only highlight that even in his suffering Job does not count himself among those vulnerable Others that he lists. The poor, the orphan, the blind, the lame, the needy, Job does not count himself amongst these types of people. This is problematic. It exposes the weaknesses in Job’s supposed uprightness and innocence. The sheer indignity of the sanctimonious Job having become like one of “them” is what he grieves about and that is perhaps part of the reason for this hyperbolic comedy. Does it matter that Job himself is sometimes the object of the comedy? No: we don’t have to operate in over-simplified binaries of “either Job is right or the friends are right.” In displaying a lack of empathy here for those who are suffering and less fortunate, Job shows how similar he is to his friends. For audiences looking on and realising that perhaps they are not so different from Job this is an opportunity for growth. Job’s flaws are exposed, as are those of his friends. A mirror to reality is held up through the juxtaposition of pain with comedy, wherein a pivot point between them allows the audience to see things from a different perspective.

The point of the comedy in Job is about the lack of empathy. It is a question about the ethics of interaction. For Job, it is no longer possible to uphold crude macarisms about the joys of being disciplined by the almighty. As Eliphaz says “happy is the man whom Eloah reproveth. Do not reject the disciplining of Shaddai” (Job 5:17). The audience knows this advice is wrong-headed. Note here the absence of “moral witnessing” among Job’s friends.¹⁸ However the key to the comedy is the fact that the way that the audience function here is as the moral witnesses. Job’s pain cannot be theorised away by a committee of friends who are learned in the art of reducing life’s complexity to a set of maxims. This is because pain poses ethical problems and demands a recognition of the other. As medical anthropologist

¹⁷ It is hardly surprising that his puffed-up and lordly soliloquy is met with laughter (as is reported in Job 30:1).

¹⁸ Moral witnessing may be defined as the offer of personal and family support in face of the burdens of illness, bearing witness to the moral experience of suffering, providing suffering with a coherent meaning, and preparing for a socially appropriate death and for religious transcendence are universal features of societal responses to suffering. (Kleinman et al. 1992, 13).

Another way of putting this is that Job requires what Goffman calls a “circle of lament” wherein consolation is found not in an answer, but in respectful companionship (Goffman 1968, 20). This is because often, when facing suffering, the question “why me?” is not only a question, it is a lament. Therefore, answering the question and providing reasons, as Job’s friends do, at length, is rather tone-deaf. Not only that, it is also theologically cowardly simplistically to assign responsibility and agency without pause for thought.

Throop, who went to Yap - a small island in Micronesia - to experience responses to pain, discovered:

In confronting the suffering of another, we may be compelled to reorient our attention to the other as a subject and not an object of experience, as a complex self-interpreting being and not a simple determinable thing. The other's unassumability as a suffering subject may bring forth a shift away from interpreting the other as a mere token of a type (Throop 2010, 223).

Enabling the audience to recognise the friends lack of empathy and to broaden their own horizons of empathy are one reason why comedy is a helpful tool for thinking about Job. Comedy is part of the iconoclastic way that Job draws audiences into thinking about pain and empathy. Comedy acts in a sophisticated way by creating a safe space for audiences to question the idea of retribution behind which perhaps at the time of composition, a weight of tradition must have stood. Evidence of this is the regularity of the friends' allusion to it. As Newsom points out "When Eliphaz introduces an argument" he speaks of it "not only as something he knows to be true but as something that Job and every other person would share as part of a stock of shared knowledge" he and the others do not "actually quote a tradition, yet their speech is thickly populated with the commonplaces of Israelite moral discourse, which, they appear to believe, lend their speech a kind of overwhelming obviousness" (Newsom 1993, 128). Job also admits, that "I have intelligence as well as you...who does not know such things as these?" (Job 12:3). Comedy allows audiences to be at once critically detached but at the same time emotionally involved in engaging with the problem of simplistic retribution which is cited by his friends to explain his suffering. Audiences become emotionally involved because in Job and his friends they may see, given the authoritative status of tradition, a reflection of themselves and a challenge to change.

Conclusion and Implications

Comedy and pain go hand in hand and easily slide from one mode into another. At the heart of the comedy is an attempt to showcase the deep flaws associated with the retribution-centered advice provided to Job by his friends. This advice, in response to seeing Job's physical condition is filled with incriminating assumptions about Job. Job's overblown protestations of innocence, in response, feature a violent deity who is responsible for Job's suffering, thus emphasizing Job's lack of choice or agency. Dramatic irony is an organizing principle for the play. Because from the very first verse the audience to the play are told of Job's innocence, the increasingly blame-filled and blustery pontifications of his friends that are delivered to Job with such confidence are completely undermined (superiority theory). The audience, therefore, is the key to the comedy. Note again the fact that much of the advice given by Job's friends rests on the assumption of his guilt. For example, Eliphaz asks "who that was innocent (נִקִּי) ever perished, and where were the upright (יֵשֶׁר) cut off?" (Job 4:7). Similarly, Bildad asserts that "if you were pure (זָךְ) and upright (יֵשֶׁר) then surely

he would cause himself to wake for you” and suggests that “God will not reject a blameless (טָמֵא) man” (Job 8:6, 20). Zophar goes even further, suggesting that although Job says his “insights are pure (טָמֵא)” he must be wrong. Therefore, Zophar advises Job to “prepare his heart and stretch out his hand towards Shaddai” (Job 11:4, 13). Here retribution-centered ideas here are pitted against corporeal experience but it is a *dialogue de sourds*: neither party is really listening attentively to the other or taking the time truly to recognize and acknowledge the other. But this repetition is important because this is how comedy holds a mirror to reality (Zupančič 2008). Instead of comfortable resolution, we have an often uncomfortable, windy and verbose set of dialogues wherein the audience witnesses baffled characters trying to account for suffering. Paradoxically, however, these characters remain totally certain that their own views are correct. Crowning all the hot air and puffs of advice (הַבֵּל)¹⁹ is a grandiose and gusty theophany from a whirlwind. The audiences’ moral witnessing is the entire point, however. Comedy, therefore, is a weapon used against a set of values and mode of interaction where retribution-centred piety is simplistically, and rather arrogantly, applied to suffering. If, therefore, it is possible to talk of comedy in Job, there is potential to revisit the dialogues, ask new and interesting questions about the body, suffering, illness, responsibility, blame, and empathy.

One final important point needs to be made with regard to genre. Job is often considered to be “wisdom literature” not comedy, though the title is contested.²⁰ We sometimes talk about genre creating a horizon of expectations and this is helpful because the emphasis is on us not the texts themselves. Genres in Biblical scholarship are anachronistic forms of interpretation imposed upon ancient material as a handy way of putting texts into groups. No scribe ever sat down and thought to themselves “now I must add to the making of many books, with my very own contribution to wisdom literature.” Texts themselves evolve more organically, and it is more likely that scribes had a general literary awareness of other works than an idea of a genre that conforms neatly to our own categories. This is why Derrida is often evoked when people use the language of “participation” within genres or family resemblance (e.g. Newsom 2003, 12). Additionally, genre is particularly problematic in Biblical studies, because scholars sometimes think of genre as static. However, this is not the case because:

genre is always defined against a constellation of neighbouring forms, and exists in a dynamic tension with them. What is more, these forms are not given a priori, but emerge historically; nor do such forms reach a stable or final condition, what

¹⁹ Job 16:2; 19:2; 21:34 cf. 13:12.

²⁰ Many of the genre categories that we use have ended up causing more confusion than help. For example, how does the term apocalyptic apply both to Revelation, but also to Enoch, works which are significantly different (Collins 1979)? Similarly, perhaps more relevant to the subject of this paper, “wisdom literature” is notoriously a difficult and contested category (Kynes 2019; Weeks 2015, 161-177; 1994, 132-156; Sneed 2011; Vayntrub 2016).

Aristotle called their telos, at which point they are no longer subject to further evolution. Rather, every new composition in the genre produces an alteration in it, with the result that it is constantly subject to change and deformation, and at a certain point may lose its identity and come to constitute a new form (Konstan 2012, 29).

Genre categories cannot and should not be thought of as somehow “containing” texts. If we are to productively think about genre we need to escape the type of unhelpful rigid thinking that settles on “Job is X” or “Job is Y.” Texts – especially complex and multifaceted texts such as Job, sometimes described as “polyphonic” when it comes to genre – can be grouped into *multiple* and *overlapping* genres and have *secondary* genres. As Zahn argues, “texts can participate in multiple genres simultaneously” (Zahn 2012, 177). So, Job might be a dramatized lament, but that should not prevent it being comedy, it could be a litigation, but doesn’t prevent it having sapiential elements.

So, when we think about Job and comedy, perhaps the best question is not “what type of a thing is it?” as if somehow the label, reductively describing one feature of the text, could solve the many problems of interpretation. Instead, this paper is interested in how the category “comedy” opens up new questions and helps us to think about those parts in the dialogues where retribution is undermined. Perhaps a better question for unleashing the potential of comedy for interpretation of Job is “what does the comedy do”? In answer, as we will demonstrate, using comedy to think about Job highlights the ways in which audiences are made to think about and examine their own perspectives about suffering, blame, and empathy.²¹ Audiences are implicated in the comedy. Job is a play, or text, that insists its audience remain balancing on the tight-rope between what is tragic and what is comical, and this is a tension that runs throughout the dialogues and a tension through which a transfer point fostering openness, creativity, and social connectivity. Like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, what is intended by the term “comedy” is not “a laugh a minute” but something much more serious. Therefore, if we entertain the possibility of talking of comedy in Job we should not imagine it in an oversimplified way that lacks nuance and depth, as sometimes happens when the term comedy emerges. Instead, in Job, the comedy we have is profoundly serious. Audiences must continually straddle between the comic and the tragic, what is humorous and what is traumatic. Incongruity provides a transfer point or pivot point that elicits different reactions, the comedic allowing the possibility for growth, the traumatic and tragic foreclosing this possibility. For audiences at the time, who might well have seen themselves in the advice the friends provide to Job, these dialogues which can regularly flip between what is comic and tragic encourage emotional engagement. This is

²¹ Bevis cites Wittgenstein to make a very similar point, claiming that “a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of *jokes*” This is perhaps because jokes are one way of inviting us to think about what we know—and what we think we know (Bevis 2013, 4).

important because it also provides an opportunity for learning and formation to emerge.

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