CHAPTER FIVE

Tragedy and Comedy as Ethical Responses to John Rocker

Jeffery L. Bineham

On December 23, 1999, news services in Atlanta reported the following: “John Rocker went to bed Tuesday night a brash, young baseball star. He awoke Wednesday morning a pariah” (Stinson 1999, December 23). Rocker’s status as outcast was precipitated by Sports Illustrated’s publication of an article in which Rocker calls a female driver a “stupid bitch,” castigates Asian women with “Look at this idiot! I guarantee you she is a Japanese woman” (she wasn’t), and ridicules New York for its “Asians and Koreans and Vietnamese and Indians and Russian and Spanish people”: “How the hell did they get in this country?” He complains about the presence of “some queer with AIDS and ”some 20-year-old mom with four kids,” he calls one Hispanic teammate too old to make a play and another African American teammate “a fat monkey,” and he says that his manager lied to the media when he told them that he had instructed Rocker not to provoke fans at Shea Stadium (Pearlman 1999, pp. 60, 62). For the next three months the Atlanta media spewed forth innumerable articles, letters, talk shows, interviews, and editorials about the words Rocker had spoken, how people should interpret them, and the punishments or rewards to which Rocker should be subject. This situation provides a helpful case study for those interested in the kinds of public reactions proffered in response to a violation of social protocol.

We should see the Rocker case, therefore, as representative of the many cases in which public figures make remarks about race or
gender that violate societal norms. This analysis should provide insight into how we might understand reactions to former Cincinnati Reds owner Marge Schott’s racist comments, former Los Angeles Dodgers executive Al Campanis’s statement that African Americans do not have the skills needed to manage a team, or former New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath’s repeated efforts to kiss a female television reporter. This analysis should also provide insight into how rhetoric frames cases that involve violations of legal standards, such as the Kobe Bryant rape trial or the Pete Rose gambling fiasco. And if we do not confine the Rocker case to the sports world, this analysis can provide insight into violations within the political arena, such as Jessie Jackson’s referent to “Hymie town” or Bill Clinton’s sexual escapades while in the White House. Perhaps most important, if the Rocker case contains examples of rhetorical forms that recur over time, then understanding those rhetorical forms positions us to understand future situations of similar ilk.

John Rocker was a pitcher for Atlanta’s major league baseball team from 1998 until 2001. He became a nationally known sports figure because of his performances in the 1998 and 1999 postseason series, in which he demonstrated exceptional pitching talent and a propensity to engage in shouting matches with opposing fans. Jeff Pearlman says that during the 1999 series against the New York Mets, “Rocker was a one-man psycho circus. He spit at Mets fans. He gave them the finger” (1999, p. 62). He was traded to Cleveland during the 2001 season, to Texas in 2002, and to Tampa Bay in 2003, where as of this writing he evidently has finished his career. But the particulars of Rocker’s career as a baseball player or as a public figure are not as important as what he represents as a rhetorical phenomenon. Rocker the individual will fade from view quickly. When we contextualize Rocker as an example of how rhetoric frames transgressions perpetuated by public figures, however, he can teach us something of lasting value.

This chapter is ostensibly about public responses to Rocker’s numerous faux pas. I focus exclusively on those responses published in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution (Atlanta’s major newspaper) between the publication of the Sports Illustrated article and the beginning of the baseball season approximately three months later (by which time the issue had run its media course, although it did surface at several times during the season because of further Rocker blunders). But a theoretical question underlies my interest in this event: How might various publics learn ethical principles from the discourse of popular culture (in this case, the discourse of one popular urban newspaper)? I am interested not only in those principles by which we might discern “right” actions from “wrong” actions, but also and most particularly in those principles by which we judge those who do violate widely recognized social mores. What lessons does the Atlanta Journal and Constitution present to its readers about the degree to which responsible social institutions (Major League Baseball, the Atlanta baseball club, the Atlanta community) should sanction or punish John Rocker?

I suggest in this chapter that the judgments urged upon Rocker exemplify tragic and comic ethical responses. The first section of the chapter explains tragedy and comedy as ethical responses articulated in the realm of popular culture. The second section examines how specific discourse from the Atlanta Journal and Constitution develops these tragic and comic responses. The chapter’s conclusion identifies some implications of these responses and reiterates how tragedy and comedy are instructive concepts whenever we seek to understand public responses to the violation of social norms.

Tragedy, Comedy, and Ethics

Kenneth Burke states that while “all animals communicate in one way or another … only human animals can tell one another Stories, ranging from the most trivial comments or gossip to Stories about geology, archaeology, celestial mechanics” (1984b, p. 331). Since any story is a type of drama, it makes sense that for Burke “the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man’s relations to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor” (p. 263). And Burke states that one question lies at the heart of his philosophy of dramatism: “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (1969a, p. xv). This seemingly simple question entails three rather complicated concerns: it calls attention to issues of definition (what people are doing), it calls attention to
issues of motive (why they are doing it), and it calls attention to issues of language (what is involved when we say those definitions and motives). These issues arise for anyone who attempts to understand a controversial action, but they are especially important for the critic who wants to understand how the discourses of popular culture dramatize a problematic situation.

Burke emphasizes that definitions and motives are dependent upon language. That is, "what people do" and "why they do it" are functions of the dramas into which we cast those actions and incentives. "For the things that happen to us," he writes (1970, p. 169), "do not acquire their identity from themselves alone, but also reflect the character of the way in which we confront them" and dramatize them in story. Tragedy and comedy are two common dramatic forms by which we make sense out of "what people do" and "why they do it." As such, tragedy and comedy are symbolic responses to situations. They encourage particular types of interpretations and, in so doing, implicitly advocate different standards for action and judgment. They thus embody different ethics.

In this section of this chapter I examine how the forms of tragedy and comedy provide particular perspectives toward ethical judgment in society. I proceed in two steps. First, I explain the characteristics of tragedy and comedy to demonstrate how they might frame situations in ways that contain definitions and motives. Second, I assess how the tragic and comic frames are also statements of ethical principles. This will prepare us for the chapter's second section, where the Rocker case illustrates how these two frames play out in the rhetoric of popular culture.

**Tragedy and Comedy**

Central to Burke's conceptions of tragedy and comedy is the idea that people are mysterious to one another because, as a general condition of human existence, they embrace different modes of living (1984b, pp. 276–78). People participate in different professions, they belong to different social classes, they adopt different beliefs and values, and they enjoy different hobbies. As active audiences of popular culture they attune to different media organizations and to different messages, and even when the same or similar artifacts of popular culture garner the collective attention of a public, that public's subgroups are apt to construct different meanings for those artifacts. As people experience their daily lives amid the ubiquitous influences of popular culture, they construct universes of discourse and meanings that serve to facilitate identification with some collectivities and to establish distinction from other collectivities.

Mystery arises from these differences. For Burke (1969b, p. 115), mystery is a kind of "strangeness" within which the estranged are "in some way capable of communion." Sometimes mystery manifests itself in hostility or division between individuals or social groups. Sometimes mystery is a function of identification with one range of meanings and the consequent though quiet disassociation from another set of meanings. In any case, humans orient themselves to mystery through the creation and maintenance of symbolic hierarchies that provide systems of meanings, practices, and values that enable people to relate to one another. When people identify with a common hierarchy, they transcend some of the mysteries that envelope and divide them. A church is a hierarchy that orders relationships so that its parishioners can transcend mysteries evoked by different political commitments, different employment situations, and different levels of socioeconomic status. A corporation is a hierarchy that orders relationships so that its members can transcend mysteries evoked by different religious beliefs. Any society contains multiple hierarchies. Some of those are embedded in the structures of a given society; they are established conditions of our experience, sets of assumptions into which we are born, and while we might on rare occasions critique those hierarchies, they usually serve as fundamental and unquestioned assumptions. In other cases people consciously select the hierarchies toward which they will direct their allegiances.

When someone violates the standards of a social hierarchy, the members of that hierarchy work to repair the violation through their definitions of the transgression and the imposition of punishment upon the transgressor. The dramatic genres of tragedy and comedy describe two symbolic forms that people use to deal with wrongdoing and thus to repair a hierarchy. These symbolic forms contain
different explanations of who the transgressor is, the kind of hierarch-
chy the transgressor has violated, the punishment the transgressor
should receive, and the desired result of that punishment.

In tragedy we attribute wrongdoing to an essential character
defect. Transgressors are evil people whose actions represent their
quintessential nature. In tragedy what one does is a product of who
one is, so the essence of tragedy is character. Tragic protagonists act
autonomously, unhindered by situational constraints, and antago-
nists assume “demonic proportions” and appear responsible for all
evil in the world (Appel 1997, p. 384). So tragic characters suffer
not simply because of their circumstances—“the gods hate them,
or they are shipwrecked, or wounded in battle”—but because of
actions they have chosen to take as a result of some character flaw
or “inadequacy” (Freeman 1999, p. 252).

That flaw is a deficiency in their humanity, and their violation
is against eternal principles of justice and virtue. A tragedy is “less
satisfactory” to the extent that it emphasizes the personal charac-
ter of an individual rather than the ethical principle that character
represents (Williams 1966, p. 34). Burke (1968) writes that “tragedy
is based upon the firm acceptance of an ideology” (p. 162) and that
it requires a sense of “intimate participation in processes beyond
oneself” (p. 200) and a “calamitous persistence in one’s ways” (p.
201). The purveyors of the tragic form, then, describe a human world
that is subject to a transcendent moral order. Tragedy emphasizes
“crime” against an established ideology that cannot be questioned,
because its source is beyond the pale of human communication; it
is God or the gods, or some other natural or supernatural arbiter of
fundamental principles.

Central to tragedy is the dispensation of the tragic victim. In
tragedy wrongdoers are banished and possibly condemned, both
to protect society and to separate those whose evil nature we can-
not redeem. Such punishment is reasonable within the tragic frame
precisely because the dysfunctional person has violated the eternal
moral order and because that violation, since it emanates from the
person’s essence, forecasts the inevitability of future evil actions.

But the tragic victim pays for more than his or her own impiety,
for tragedy requires its central villain to act as a scapegoat for the rest
of society (Burke 1984a, p. 39). Burke (1984b) states that the scape-
goat is a formula whereby the sins of a people “could be transferred
to the back of an animal, the animal was then ferociously beaten
or slain—and the feeling of relief was apparent to all” (p. 16). As a
dramatic frame, tragedy involves the symbolic (though sometimes
literal) killing or expulsion of a scapegoat upon whom a society has
placed the responsibility for collective impieties. The victim must
be identified with those whom it would purify so that it can as-
sume their iniquities, their violations of a hierarchy, and then suffer
the symbolic alienation that atones for the impieties of those who
attack it (Burke 1969a, p. 406). We burden the scapegoat with our
ethical shortcomings and then drive it from our midst because in
tragedy the violations that the victim represents are irreparable and
call for the destruction rather than the rehabilitation of that victim
(Williams 1966). The goat is not simply uneducated or uninformed;
the goat suffers from willful disobedience and heresy against the
established hierarchy (Duncan 1968). The appeal of tragedy is thus
located in guilt and fear. Because we banish or destroy the goat, we
disclaim responsibility for its transgression and thereby maintain
our purity and save ourselves from punishment.

Burke notes that the scapegoat mechanism is an instance of
“trained incapacity” or “rationalization” or “error in interpreta-
tion” (1984b, pp. 11, 14, 17). It is, in other words, an inability to see
beyond an established ideology. But Burke also suggests that the
scapegoat is necessary: ”some variant of the scapegoat principle is
required, as soon as you turn to consider the sacrificial element in
ethics” (p. 1viii). Tragedy offers a symbolic form that assuages guilt
and resolves social tensions. It emphasizes the maintenance of a
fixed moral code and each individual’s responsibility to adhere to
that code. It brooks no violation of communal standards. Tragedy
thus often resolves itself in tears and anguish. That resolution re-
results, nonetheless, in an affirmation of the values that bind people
together and a condemnation of unethical actions that do violence
to relationships and to individuals.

Within the tragic frame, then, the transgressor is evil in nature
and has violated an ultimate moral order; the required punishment
is sacrifice or banishment, and the desired result of that punish-
Comedy is a matter of ridicule, or of the ridiculous, and it thus requires an object for society to ridicule rather than a victim for society to sacrifice. So while tragedy requires the scapegoat, comedy requires the clown. The clown must be like us in some important ways or we would not recognize him or her as a clown, for that sense of likeness provides the common values by which we deem the clown ridiculous. In tragedy the goat acts in accordance with its role, but in comedy the clown violates the expectations of its role. And those violations provide the grounds by which “we must show that he is inferior, either to the ordinary, or at least inferior to what has been thought or claimed about him, by himself or others” (Olson 1968, p. 12). The likeness of the clown to other characters in society draws our attention to shared customs and ideals, and the unlikeness of the clown renders it appropriate for derision and ridicule.

While tragedy attributes wrongdoing to a dysfunctional human nature, comedy attributes wrongdoing to a mistake in judgment. Transgressors are otherwise good characters who do something wrong while in difficult circumstances. Their flaws are of error or ignorance, and their violations are against the social values that bind us as a community rather than against the eternal laws of God or nature. In a comic frame the clown is not evil. Our ridicule of the clown might occur for many reasons, but we never mock the clown because we think it is malevolent. Whatever vices the clown thrives upon, they are products of error or ignorance rather than wickedness, and the clown can function therefore as an example rather than as an enemy (Carlson 1988). Indeed, even though the vices that the clown represents are destructive of social order, comedy emphasizes that those vices are frequently the excesses of virtues. Arrogance might be the excess of pride, for example, or foolishness the excess of courage. In comedy, consequently, we can “correct the abuse in the name of a social norm of conduct” (Duncan 1968, p. 175). Because the clown is not evil, the possibility exists for correction and reconciliation.

Also, because the clown is not evil, that correction can feature dialogue and reason rather than castigation and elimination. Hugh D. Duncan (1968) notes specifically that “the social appeal of comedy is based on belief in reason in society” (p. 60). Within the comic frame, a community does punish and renounce a clown, but that is only temporary, and the community then “uses reason to correct” the vices that caused the castigation, recognizes that all human beings are imperfect (Carlson 1986, p. 448), and ensures that reunion can occur “through dialogue” (Toker 2002, p. 63). The ethical standards of tragedy and comedy differ most significantly on this central point: tragedy features excommunication, while comedy features communication. At worst, that communication shames the clown into conciliation (hence the emphasis on ridicule), but it never condemns the clown as an outcast.

Comedy thus emphasizes instruction rather than sacrifice. Its goal is to dramatize the “quirks and foibles” of human experience (Burke 1984a p. 42) and to call attention to the fact that we are all fools in need of humane instruction. Comedy thus encourages multiple perspectives and requires a willingness to see beyond established ideologies. Comedy emphasizes “stupidity” rather than crime and requires “fools” rather than villains to do its work. “The progress of humane enlightenment,” Burke writes, “can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken. When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy” (p. 41).

Given this emphasis, it is no surprise that comedy is the symbolic form most conducive to social improvement (Toker 2002). The clown represents the vices and errors of the community and serves as the symbolic vehicle by which those impieties are rejected, but society ultimately recognizes the clown’s humanity and welcomes it back into the social order (Carlson 1986). The theme of comedy is inclusion, and its end is to reconcile the widest range of characters, to recognize the humanity even of those whose values exist on the
margins and are most subject to repudiation. Northrup Frye (1957) calls this comedic theme "grace" (p. 166). Burke sees in it the promise for a lasting society, and Carlson says that it "reduces social tension" and invokes a balanced worldview (Carlson 1988, p. 310). Comedy encourages a hopeful vision for the resolution of social ills and for the restoration of community ties that have been damaged or severed. In comedy wrongdoers are censured and rehabilitated, both to provide restitution to society and to forgive transgressors and restore them to the fold. Since all humans are subject to error, all should be open to the possibility for reconciliation and for the creation of harmonious relationships based on the reclamation of common values. This is comedy's message and the appeal of its symbolic form.

Within the comic frame, then, the transgressor is guilty of error or ignorance and has violated a social compact; the required punishment is instruction or ridicule, and the desired result of that punishment is reconciliation to the social order.

Two weeks before I wrote these words, a fifteen-year-old boy from a small town near where I live appeared in court to face charges that he had taken a handgun to his high school and shot to death two fellow students. No doubt exists that he pulled the trigger. Some, including his lawyer, have raised questions about extenuating circumstances. In his court appearance, the boy, John Jason McLaughlin, was certified to stand trial as an adult, a decision that could result in life imprisonment. The media reported different reactions to the decision. The town’s mayor stated that some people believe McLaughlin should face the tougher penalties possible in the adult system. Others prefer a different resolution. "I wish it could be solved in some different way that would promote both justice and healing," the mayor said (Burcum 2004, p. A13).

This case provides a clear illustration of the dramatic frames I have explained above. As tragedy, it looks like this: McLaughlin is an evil person whom we must isolate from society as a punishment for his crime and because no hope of rehabilitation exists. Given that his actions stemmed from his flawed and unchangeable nature, we must protect the public from future evil actions. When we ostracize him, we emphasize that he is not like us, and we thus see his isolation as a movement toward social stability and the common good.

As comedy, the case looks like this: McLaughlin is an otherwise good person whose criminal actions were stupid and wrong. Those actions stemmed from a set of circumstances—he was taunted, bullied, and suffered from mental illness—within which he made horrible choices. While we must hold him accountable for those choices, we recognize that they do not make him a monster, and that the proper response is to provide a means for redemption and rehabilitation. We will censure but not ostracize him, and in so doing we maintain our connection to him and include him within the circle of humanity.

If we opt for the tragic frame, we proclaim our belief that we can be free of the evil that we see in McLaughlin. By isolating him we purify society. If we opt for the comic frame, we admit that within all of us exists the potential to make horrible mistakes. By forgiving McLaughlin we recognize the imperfections of society and we learn from his situation. One thing is clear in a case like this: whenever someone violates the protocols of society, we must render an important decision. The frame we choose reveals more than our attitude toward the perpetrator; it reveals also who we are as a people, for it pronounces a particular set of ethical standards.

Ethics

Because they are dramatic forms, tragedy and comedy are well suited to expression in the rhetoric of popular culture, and they provide a coherent set of principles by which to assess human action. Burke notes that "each of the great poetic forms stresses its own peculiar way of building the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of his time" (1984a, p. 34). They provide a common orientation, a system of interpretations about the past, present, and future, and any system of interpretations is essentially a classification of events into "because of," "in spite of," and "regardless of" categories (p. 36). These classifications have a decidedly ethical bent, as illustrated in Burke’s own example: one might say that a person was hurt in an
accident because of his or her wickedness, or regardless of his or her wickedness, and that attribution is an assessment of the person’s character.

Any symbolic frame contains an implicit "program of socialization" (Burke 1984a, p. 170). That is, when we decide why people act as they act we also decide how we should relate to them. The relationships among characters in dramas and in our lives are products of the formal situations in which we place those characters. Thus, a tragic situation calls forth a particular set of roles, and a comic situation calls forth a different set of roles. So as Burke notes, to characterize a situation as a tragedy requires the identification of an appropriate victim and the identification of characters who will perform the requisite sacrifice (1966, pp. 486–87). The formal properties we attribute to the situation construct a set of expectations for how we will relate to one another as a community. Duncan (1968) develops this same idea when he writes that in both tragedy and comedy the actors voice those virtues that a society's "guardians" hope will elicit loyalty from individuals and the community; the presentation of these symbolic forms thus preserves the polity (p. 98).

While tragedy and comedy are both ethical orientations that revolve around character and community, they are decidedly different orientations in that they encourage community members to practice different types of relationships with one another. Tragedy constructs community upon enduring principles that set forth absolute standards for knowledge, conduct, and governance. It calls for obedience to eternal truths and castigates those who act in ways that separate humans from the gods. Comedy constructs community upon principles that regulate our social relationships with one another. It calls us to communicate with each other, and it censures those who act in ways that separate people from people, social group from social group (Duncan 1968). Tragedy, in other words, deals with comprehensive forces; comedy deals with social forces. And in keeping with these general principles, the central figure in a tragedy is ultimately isolated from society, while the central figure in a comedy is integrated back into society (Frye 1957).

In sum: tragedy and comedy are symbolic forms that evince different ethical principles for the construction of character and community. Tragedy features evil and the scapegoat while comedy features error and the clown; tragedy excommunicates the central character from a community while comedy incorporates the central character into a community; tragedy is about retribution while comedy is about correction. Punishment and rectitude are the bases for an ethic of tragedy, as it renders moral judgment against the wicked in an individual. Instruction and humility are the bases for an ethic of comedy, as it renders social judgment against the absurd in a community. As I will demonstrate in what follows, the Rocker case illustrates how the dramatic forms of tragedy and comedy encourage these different standards for ethical judgment.

Public Responses to John Rocker

Tragic and comic themes appear in works of popular culture just as surely as they do in works of great literature. And while Burke says that literature is equipment for living, in the world of popular culture all types of symbolic action can function as equipment for living. The mainstream press provides a rich source of discourse that people regularly attend to and that they use to construct meanings for their experiences. In the Rocker case specifically, the plethora of newspaper coverage was one source of this equipment, and it provided audiences with clear and different ethical visions. This case is of particular interest because it contains a "double plot" with both tragic and comic characteristics (Burke 1966, pp. 400–1). It thus illustrates some differences between these dramatic forms.

Tragic Responses

A tragic character must be of superior status, and if that status does not derive from moral excellence, as it often does for tragic heroes, it can derive from the character’s "worldly rank" (Brereton 1968, p. 37) or from "the situation in which he finds himself" (p. 18). Rocker’s position as an athlete, and his central role as the subject of a *Sports Illustrated* feature, provide the symbolic resources required
to establish him as a tragic figure. And indeed a tragic theme is evident in many of the responses to Rocker. The responses that develop this theme exhibit two characteristics. First, they present Rocker as representative of society at large. And second, they call for Rocker’s sacrifice. These responses thus feature the scapegoat motif.

For Rocker to function as a scapegoat requires that the views featured in the Sports Illustrated essay be characteristic of his thinking rather than the result of a misstatement or misunderstanding. Brereton (1968) notes that a tragic character’s ignominious act might well be devoid of evil intent or based in ignorance rather than malvolence, but the act will not function tragically unless people attribute it to the character’s personality. Predictably, Rocker claims a distinction between what he said and what he believes. His initial public statement reads, “Even though it might appear otherwise from what I said, I am not a racist” (Stinson 1999, December 23). And in an interview Rocker states that “I have been definitely grossly misrepresented,” that it “wasn’t my intent” to offend anyone, and that we all “say things we really don’t mean.” When asked whether he is a racist he responds, “Absolutely not. If I were a racist, A, would I want a black guy to come into my house? B, would I invite him to my house? I’ve done that three times over” (“What Was Said” 2000). Rocker’s denials of intent notwithstanding, much of the public discourse explicitly connected Rocker’s comments to his character. One essay notes that Rocker “laid open an unseen aspect of his character” that was marked by “deep irascibility” (Stinson 1999, December 24), and another essay quotes an Atlanta community leader as saying that “Rocker deserves to be fired because his comments were not spontaneous. He had plenty of time to think about what he was saying during the 7-hour interview” (Roedemeier 1999). A front-page article asserts that the Sports Illustrated interview demonstrates Rocker to be “an angry young man at best, and at worst ... an obscene bigot” (Stinson 1999, December 23). In these accounts, Rocker’s mistake was to reveal an unseemly part of his character rather than to misspeak in a fashion that contradicted his character.

Perhaps most notably, baseball commissioner Bud Selig mandated that Rocker undergo a “psychological evaluation” in order to
determine “whether Rocker’s behavior is rooted in a psychological problem” (Head 2000, January 8). For some this implied an excuse for Rocker’s behavior: it resulted from “illness,” not from conscious intent. Psychologists such as Alvin Poussaint of Harvard’s medical school argued that to recognize racism as a mental illness will lead to “guidelines for recognizing racism in the early stages so we can provide treatment”; but others claimed that such a label enables “racists to escape responsibility for their actions” (Head 2000, January 23). But in either case, grounding Rocker’s actions in his psyche attributes an agent-centered motive, and thus sets the stage for the next step in the establishment of Rocker as scapegoat.

Any scapegoat must represent the sins of society, and numerous public statements construct Rocker as that representation. Some comments allude to images typically associated with the world of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer in order to situate Rocker’s words as representative of the South in particular. “Yes, Atlanta is the perfect place for John Rocker. And when his arm gives out he can always go back to Macon ... and spend his days fishing barefoot along the quiet banks of the Ocmulgee River” (Fitzgerald 1999). A letter writer notes that Rocker’s remarks “do much more than reveal his own bigotry”; they “will fuel old stereotypes of White Southerners as ignorant racists” (Ross 1999). Another warns that “Atlanta cannot afford to turn its tolerant cheek” to Rocker because he represents the city’s “own burden”: “our history of racism and the reputation of Southern ignorance.” Rocker’s words “proved true every redneck stereotype that ever existed (Hsu 1999). Callers to talk radio shows “commonly branded Rocker as typical of the South” and “said he was indicative of stereotypical Southern attitudes” (Schneider 2000). Rocker thus represents the history and culture of the antebellum South.

The scope of his representation, however, is not limited to the historical. The day after the story broke, an article stated that “Nothing about Rocker’s manifesto on diversity should shock or surprise. Ballplayers are just a scratching, spitting reflection of society” (Hummer 1999). One letter states explicitly that Rocker represents the impieties even of those who condemn him. “People around the world have spewed hateful remarks at Rocker for his statements...
Don’t they realize that they are just like John Rocker, filled with the same bigotry and hatred?” (Nagelhout 2000). Another writer connects Rocker’s comments to specific political views prevalent “in various parts of the country”: the use of “English-only” in public documents and institutions, or opposition to government benefits for illegal immigrants (Holloman 2000). Andrew Young asserts that Rocker stands in for the administrative hierarchy of major league baseball itself, which “drove off its top two black executives recently. They had to pick on Rocker because they couldn’t face their own problems” (Rogers 2000, February 2). The most powerful tragedies include a character who represents the broadest cross-section of people and orientations, and in Rocker we have a character who reflects the views of society in general and Southern culture specifically, of those who like him and those who despise him, and of those who hold fairly common views on important political issues in the United States.

Ironically, while many of these statements are in Rocker’s defense—they indicate that he simply spoke what others believe but won’t say—they set him up to be the sacrificial goat. One letter writer states, “Don’t fire Rocker. He only said what a lot of us are thinking” (“The Vent” 2000), and another writes, “Three cheers for John Rocker who tells it like it is” (Oudkirk & Kenyada 1999). A columnist suggests that many of Rocker’s critics are not shocked by his words; “they are peeved that he left the shadows to share their thoughts in broad daylight.... At least Rocker isn’t a fraud” (Moore 1999). Another column asserts that “John Rocker is society in miniature.... He only spoke the sentiments of many white Americans” (Aniwodi-El 2000). And a letter in response suggests that Rocker “spoke the sentiments of many Americans of color as well” (Palmer 2000). The prevalent theme in this discourse is that Rocker’s attitudes are not aberrant; only his willingness to speak them publicly sets him apart.

But rather than work as apologia on Rocker’s behalf, this discourse sets the conditions for his symbolic sacrifice, for it frames Rocker to become a scapegoat. And indeed numerous examples carry out the sentence of banishment. One letter writer states that “it would be better to never win another World Series, or even another game, than to allow such a person to remain a member of the Braves” (Upadhyay 1999), and another writes that “failure to punish Rocker upholds his actions” (Charles 2000). The president of an Atlanta group called Concerned Black Clergy states that “John Rocker needs to be traded. Send him to Montreal or wherever, make him a foreigner.... Trade John Rocker and make all of us happy” (Donsky 2000). Columnist Mark Bradley (1999) writes, “John Rocker should have no place on the Atlanta Braves. He has dishonored the organization. He has offended everyone with a functioning mind. He has stamped himself a buffoon. Get rid of him.” And Bradley states further that “the SI story wasn’t a mistake but a revelation, a deeper glimpse into a troubled heart.... Better to lose with dignity than to win with a lout. Get rid of him.”

One characteristic of sports culture is that teammates support one another. As one writer states, team members “will forgive all manner of mayhem and larceny,” so the reaction of Rocker’s mates was surprising: “Rocker is now a full-blown outcast. A contagion” (Hummer 1999). One teammate stated that “you might as well put him on the trading block, because the respect factor is gone” (Stinson 2000, January 7b). For some community activists in Atlanta, Rocker’s punishment should transcend his status as a member of the baseball team. “Trading or suspending him will not be enough ... the activists said. They want him out of baseball for good (Roedemeier 1999). These statements call clearly for Rocker’s tragic excommunication.

Other discourse is even more explicitly tragic, as it links Rocker’s banishment to redemption and ethical standards. Michael Langford, a community activist in Atlanta, asserts that Rocker might find “some room for redemption, but not as an Atlanta Brave,” and he notes further that Rocker is “a cancer within this organization that must be removed” (Roedemeier 1999). And letter writer Thomas Miller maintains that “major league baseball has a long tradition of being, more than any other professional American sport, the standard of sportsmanship and ethical behavior.... Rocker has made himself an embarrassment to baseball.... There is no place in
major league baseball for the racism and wholesale discrimination he has exhibited in this article” (1999, emphasis added). Georgia state representative Tyrone Brooks “thinks the Rocker episode has placed Atlanta at a moral crossroads” and that anything short of condemnation communicates that Rocker’s comments are acceptable (Schneider 2000). The statements cited thus far combine to play out a tragic response to Rocker. They link him to the community and portray him as one who must be punished and then banished from that community. His role as scapegoat provides both a means of redemption and a sense of rectitude for those who attend to the discourse of tragedy.

Comic Responses

A markedly different ethical vision is prescribed in comic responses to Rocker. That vision is evident in the themes that these comic responses develop. First, Rocker is characterized as a fool rather than a villain. He is someone who did something stupid, not someone who is fundamentally flawed. Second, the comic statements issue a call to humility and a willingness to see beyond one’s own perspectives. And third, the call for people to identify with Rocker as a fool who can learn new ways results in an emphasis on forgiveness rather than banishment.

Comedy’s focus is on extreme characters who invite ridicule. To ridicule someone “we must exhibit the sheer absurdity of taking him seriously at all” (Olson 1968, p. 13), and we can do this by a focus on speech that is “unpredictable and outside the expectations of social decorum” or that exhibits “excess or defect” that is “out of proportion, disharmonious, and incongruous” with standard social norms (Charney 1978, pp. 52, 69). A comic fool is one who violates social mores out of ignorance but who with proper teaching can learn to follow those same social mores. Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig made clear that Rocker’s comments were a “breach of the social compact” that makes major league baseball “an American institution” with an “important social responsibility” (Rogers 2000, February 1). Rocker describes himself as a fool or a buffoon. In his first interview after the *Sports Illustrated* article, ESPN’s Peter Gammons quoted Rocker’s most controversial statements to him and asked what he would think about a person who said such things. “I would think this guy is a complete jerk,” Rocker said. “I shot my mouth off and said a few things that’s absolutely not me” (“What Was Said” 2000). Rocker thus attributes his own statements to the persona of the mouthy buffoon or the obnoxious clown. Indeed, he explained his “fat monkey” reference to a teammate as “clubhouse humor,” an explanation that the teammate rejected (“Braves’ Simon” 2000). Eddie Perez, a teammate who did accept the “clubhouse humor” explanation, said that he didn’t take Rocker’s comments seriously because he knew of Rocker’s clownish demeanor. “I know how stupid you are, [always] joking around,” he told Rocker (“Perez Says He” 2000). Others also describe him in these terms. One fan writes that “the Braves should stick with Rocker” because every team sports its “mavericks,” “flakes,” and “crazies” who “make amends” for their mistakes and are then restored to the fold (Schwartz 2000).

The fool is redeemable. One *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* columnist writes that while “Rocker is clearly suffering from good, old-fashioned, hayseed ignorance,” she will not call him a “dangerous idiot” because “we all make mistakes, tiny or grotesque. And the point of mistakes is to learn from them” (Vixana 2000). A second columnist states, “Contrary to general opinion, Rocker is not stupid. He just did something stupid (Bisher 2000). The fool is called to humility, to go before his teammates “where damage control would be more humanely administered,” where he “eats humble pie” and is thus reunited with rather than excommunicated from the community. Such excommunication would in this vision be counterproductive, because “you don’t find the solution in another clubhouse of strangers, staring and wondering what kind of monster have we among us” (Bisher 1999). Rocker should be the foolish example, not the evil goat.

Rocker is an example because his case teaches the moral lesson that people should understand multiple perspectives. An opinion column by Cynthia Tucker (2000) connects Rocker to the lessons of *Star Trek*—that humankind should strive for “harmony” and be “united,” that it should “set aside its ages-old history of interne-
cine conflict”—and notes that he illustrates a common human flaw: “our hearts remain gripped by an instinctive fear of the other—anybody who looks different, worship differently or speaks a different language. In our prejudices, we remain our primitive selves.” In Rocker, and in historical examples from Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Africa, and the United States, Tucker finds depressing prospects. But “there is still the hope,” she says, that humans will “learn to live together in peace.” And she offers a reaction to Rocker that characterizes the comic promise of forgiveness and reconciliation. “Here’s a new millennium wish in that direction: Live long and prosper, John Rocker.” The kind of understanding Tucker envisions requires a comic faith in reason and communication. As the situation played itself out and Rocker was reunited with his teammates, the club hired a diversity expert to conduct mandatory sessions with everyone from minor league rookies to the team’s president, Stan Kasten. “We had a lot of dialogue,” said Kasten. “We could heed the advice of a person who’s been through an experience like this before,” said third baseman Chipper Jones. And in a clear statement of the comic perspective, the leader of the sessions remarked, “We assume that most people want to do the right thing and that many are pretty ignorant about how to go about doing that” (Joyner 2000).

One of the most widely quoted essays on the Rocker affair is by former Atlanta mayor and Martin Luther King associate Andrew Young. Young’s op-ed piece, titled “Rocker Has Chance for Redemption” (2000), expresses a desire for reconciliation and a call for people to see beyond their own perspectives and to learn from their mistakes. Young asserts that Atlantans should address Rocker’s attitudes “with humor, truth and reconciliation” in order to “help one another broaden our perspective and vision and to see our life together with new possibilities.” For Young, the Rocker case provides an opportunity to “learn something about dignity and restraint,” and not just for Rocker but for the entire community. “Rocker experienced a rage and frustration that were real,” Young writes. “He was irrational and explosive and when that happens, all of your deep-seated prejudices and insecurities come to the surface. And let’s not kid ourselves, we all have them.” So “we should offer Rocker a support system” because he is “young enough to change, young enough to be redeemed, young enough to learn those lessons with help from his teammates and the rest of the Atlanta community.” Young offers a clear comic vision based on the values of humility, forgiveness, and education.

Through his essay Young establishes himself as a comic hero, in juxtaposition to Rocker’s role as a comic fool. The comic hero, Duncan notes, warns us against the advice of “tragic guardians who act as messengers of the gods to visit doom on those who disobey their commandments” (1968, p. 99). To counter the move toward tragedy, the comic hero exposes the vices of all the dramatic players. In so doing, he or she shows that all are guilty of error and thereby invokes a “principle of social order” (p. 82) that calls the players back into relationship with one another. Young’s essay clearly exhibits these characteristics.

Numerous letter writers endorse Young’s call. One writes, “We as a community should offer Rocker a face-saving way out of his own ignorance. Certainly then our children might learn . . . the values of forgiveness, repentance and redemption” (Ajanaku 2000). Another writer agrees with Young and states, “Instead of punishing John Rocker, let’s help him enlarge his world (Parko 2000). And a third, who wrote even before Young, says, “I truly believe that with his re-education and love, [Rocker will] respond in positive ways that will benefit everybody” (Byirt 2000). The president of the Atlanta baseball club, Kasten, characterized Rocker as a “remorseful” player who made “a horrible mistake” and wanted to make amends. “Under those circumstances,” Kasten pledged, “I’m not going to abandon a player or an employee or a friend” (Stinson 2000, January 7a). Later Kasten stated that “the object should be to get John to a place where he’s accepted by his teammates and by his community” (Rogers 2000, February 1). Consistent with the comic form, these statements call for the clown to be reunited with his community. He is castigated and then welcomed back.

Perhaps most significant, many of the teammates whom Rocker had explicitly criticized or insulted (or at least angered) expressed publicly their forgiveness. Randall Simon, the player Rocker called a “fat monkey,” said, “We are all sinners and we all make mistakes
sometimes, and we are all forgiven the sins we have done. So why not forgive the man and give him another chance and hope that chance will be appreciated, so he can go about his business and try to treat people better?” (Stinson 2000, March 2). Andres Galarraga and Eddie Perez, both of Hispanic descent, said they accepted Rocker’s apology and were willing to forgive him because he deserved “a second chance” (“Perez Says Rocker” 2000) and because they “want the team to be together” (“Perez Says He” 2000). Brian Jordan tied reconciliation to education: “We all make the mistake of, instead of getting to know someone, you judge them first, then get to know them later when it’s too late…. It’s a shame it had to come down this way, but it’s all part of the learning process” (Rogers 2000, March 1). And team owner Ted Turner captured the comic perspective well both in meaning and in pun when he said, “He’s just a kid … I think he was off his rocker when he said those things…. He’s apologized. I don’t think we ought to hold it against him forever. Let’s give him another chance. He didn’t commit a crime” (Hyland 2000). Turner’s statement frames Rocker as a fool rather than a criminal, affirms that Rocker can learn from his mistake, and advocates forgiveness. These are the prevalent themes of a comic ethical vision.

Implications: Certitude and Tolerance

Comedy censures those who separate men from each other; tragedy destroys those who separate men from the gods.

—H.D. Duncan

Kenneth Burke states clearly the formula for tragedy. It starts with some “unresolved tension” that exists in a society and reduces that tension to a “personal conflict.” It features a character who “carries this conflict to excess,” places that character in a situation that exacerbates the conflict, and introduces other characters who “help motivate and accentuate his excesses.” Those excesses lead to the character’s downfall, and the tragedy then establishes that this downfall will provide “a promise of general peace” (1966, P. 94). The formula for comedy is similar except that the central character’s downfall is a precursor to reconciliation, and the promise of peace includes the reconciled clown.

This paper demonstrates the existence of these formulas in public responses to John Rocker. He symbolizes unresolved social tensions, particularly about race, and his comments in Sports Illustrated portray those tensions in terms of Rocker’s personal conflicts with individual representatives of various ethnic groups. Numerous letters, editorials, and articles published in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution accentuate Rocker’s excesses, often by featuring his relationships with additional characters, especially his teammates. Tragic responses call for Rocker’s downfall and excommunication. Comic responses call for his rehabilitation and reconciliation. Thus, upon the announcement of Rocker’s $20,000 fine and twenty-eight day suspension (penalties that an arbitrator reduced significantly), Hank Aaron stated, “A month? Marge Schott lost her (Cincinnati Reds) ballclub for making racial remarks. I think Rocker’s extremely lucky. I thought it would be longer”; and Andrew Young stated, “To take a problem child and kick him out is not the answer. I think that the purpose of discipline is to correct and rehabilitate” (Stinson 2000, Feb. 1).

To some, the extent to which this case remained a focus of public discourse is baffling, especially when compared with other more troublesome ethical violations. One commentator asked, “Can anyone explain why this case, involving a young kid who just throws a baseball, has remained in the public eye for weeks—while far more serious examples of noxious speech go virtually unnoticed, uncondemned, and unpunished?” (Matthews 2000). Rocker’s status as a celebrity athlete accounts partially for the ongoing notoriety of his plight. But voyeuristic motives do not explain adequately the symbolic resources expended on this situation. Although I doubt that most people who attended to or participated in this rhetorical situation consciously used the concepts of tragedy and comedy to interpret the various responses to Rocker, I am convinced that this case became a phenomenon of popular culture because its audiences realized that it teaches something about ethics. The identification of tragic and comic themes contributes to an understanding of how
the discourse of popular culture proffers ethical codes, but beyond that identification, we can draw particular implications from the analysis of this discourse.

Edwin Black’s discussion of the second persona and Philip Wander’s discussion of the third persona provide a set of concepts that help to explain the ethical functions of discourse about the Rocker episode. Black (1970) notes that we can extract from any discourse “a corresponding form of character” (p. 110) that tells us something not only about the persona of the implied author, but about the persona of the implied audience as well. Because that implied audience represents an ideology, we are able to render ethical judgments of the “potentialities of character” we find in rhetorical discourses (p. 113). Early in this chapter I argued that tragedy and comedy are symbolic forms that evince different ethical principles for the construction of character and community. They urge upon popular audiences a second persona; they call us to embrace a particular type of character and thus to be a particular type of community. Wander’s (1984) concept suggests that any discourse also negates a range of personas. The third persona refers to “a being whose presence, though relevant to what is said, is negated through silence” (p. 210), and this persona is also evident in the Rocker situation.

Despite the plethora of tragic and comic responses that revolve around the issue of race, for example, a peculiar silence exists about Rocker’s ostensibly homophobic statements. Except for a handful of comments, no one said anything in response to Rocker’s comments about AIDS or about gay and lesbian people. The statements issued by Major League Baseball, by Andrew Young, by Rocker’s teammates, and the apologies issued by Rocker himself all dealt with the racially charged quotations in the *Sports Illustrated* article. No one directly involved mentioned the homophobia exhibited in Rocker’s statements. That silence says something about the kinds of social tensions that attract attention and ethical evaluation in popular culture. It helps to establish the range of topics about which we can still safely deliver words of derision or condemnation.

In addition to the meanings that tragedy and comedy produce about specific issues (race, for example), they produce even more important meanings about the criteria we might use to render ethical judgments in our communities. As the furor over Rocker began to subside, several contributions to the Atlanta newspaper called attention specifically to the ethical codes that had emerged in this case.

One writer described the comic responses to Rocker as a trivialization of “the larger ramifications of his comments” and as a contributing factor to the “cultivation of hate” that “motivates white men to chain and drag black men to their deaths behind their pickup truck” and “justifies police firing 41 rounds of ammo at an unarmed African immigrant.” Rocker’s apparent reconciliation to the team and to the Atlanta community, he wrote, “speaks volumes about the pervasive nature of racism in America, racism that is validated, sustained and encouraged by indifference” (Mahone 2000). Although the Atlanta baseball team eventually traded Rocker, comedy prevailed as the immediate response to Rocker’s faux pas. He was ostracized but then reunited with the team, which restored symbolically the hierarchy of the ball club and of the broader community represented in the discourses that shaped this situation. But that comic principle extracts a cost. As Sam Mahone’s essay admonishes, an emphasis on harmony and reconciliation can ignore the individual’s responsibility for wrongdoing and create indifference to ethical violations that do real harm to real people. Tragedy, Mahone implies, leaves no doubt about public judgments.

Others saw value in the comic theme. A letter emphasizes that the central challenge of the Rocker case is to recognize one’s own propensity for error. “John Rocker’s original, unexamined views are only too typical in a society that finds stereotypes much easier to deal with than real individuals who are unlike one’s self. As a liberal, I have found myself accusing conservative Christians of embodying intolerance, until I realized that I was doing just what I detested—labeling others” (Miller 2000). Comedy requires one to recognize the darkness in one’s own heart, not so that one becomes beholden to guilt or shame, but so that one recognizes the connections among all people and the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. We all play the clown sometimes. But tragedy enables us to direct our attention to the violations of others without recognition of our own complicity in those violations. In Burke’s words, “if
one can hand over his infirmities to a vessel, or ‘cause,’ outside the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within” (1973, p. 203).

The tragic and comic visions are not tied to particular political or religious perspectives. But they do have specific implications for those who embrace the two visions. A tragic vision features a certain moral code and demands that people face the consequences of their actions. It establishes a sense of certitude and hierarchy, and it implies sacrifice or banishment as the means of redemption when a person or a society violates that hierarchical code. A comic vision, however, features tolerance of diverse moral codes and asks that people understand those who do not act in accordance with any one specific code. It establishes a need for multiple perspectives and it implies humility and humane instruction as the means of redemption.

When Joseph Lowery, former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, says that Rocker’s punishment is not sufficient and that “the Braves still have to act to show that they have zero tolerance for this kind of behavior,” he advocates an ethic of tragedy (Payne 2000, emphasis added). When Hosea Williams, a pastor in Atlanta, says that “Jesus could forgive . . . his hanging on Calvary . . . Martin Luther King Jr. could forgive the Ku Klux Klan . . . Why can’t we forgive this young man?” he advocates an ethic of comedy (Payne 2000). The choices are both clear and complex. Are we served better by an ethic of certitude that demands consequences for the violation of social mores? Or are we served better by an ethic of tolerance that demands forgiveness for the violation of social mores? Perhaps a recognition of these different ethical visions will enable us to choose the most fitting response for each case in which someone violates the recognized protocols of our society.

Note

1. I accessed all of the letters, editorials, and articles from the Atlanta Journal and Constitution through LexisNexis. Page numbers refer to the print version of the newspaper. As the references section indicates, all of these documents appeared during the three-month span between late December 1999 and late March 2000, and none of them is more than a single page in length. I have therefore limited the contents of the in-text citations to the author’s last name and year, except in those cases where a date is needed to distinguish among multiple entries by the same author.

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