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Behind the Stakes, Between the Lines, Beyond the Pun: A Critical Deconstruction of Humor in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Other Popular Comedies

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Behind the Stakes, Between the Lines, Beyond the Pun:
A Critical Deconstruction of Humor in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's
Dream*, and Other Popular Comedies

by

Jaime Castner Libby

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Humanities.

San Rafael, California

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ABSTRACT

Humor is a powerful rhetorical device employed at all levels of human discourse—from casual banter to political debate. Still, despite humor’s global prevalence, its historical transgressiveness, and its distinct potential both to neutralize and critically engage highly fraught issues, humans do not often pause to ask how humor works. And what does its working tell us about our humanness? This thesis explores the operation of humor in literature and performance, using tools provided by structuralist, deconstructive, and postmodern critical arenas, to reveal how humor’s fundamental structures invite humans to entertain new perspectives and practice empathy. The study considers irony, the performance of stakes, wordplay, departure from form, timing, metatheatrics, and cross-dressing. William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (ca. 1595) serves as a key text, but films and television series including *Star Wars* (20th Century Fox, 1977, 1983), *Young Frankenstein* (20th Century Fox, 1974), and *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963-), are employed among other popular examples to demonstrate diverse types of humor.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is a rhetorical device employed at all levels of discourse—from casual chitchat to political debate, from prime time television to Shakespeare’s Globe. Humor has the unique power to engage highly fraught issues critically and disarmingly; to form the foundations of friendships and flirtations; to put an audience and a speaker at ease; and, humor brings us joy. According to research by the anthropologist Donald E. Brown, along with gossip, hairstyles, feasting, baby talk, wariness of snakes, a preference for sweets, folklore and hospitality, jokes are common to all human communities (435-9). Thus, humor is a remarkably versatile and widespread social adhesive. But how does humor work? And what does the way in which humor works tell us about our humanness?

The humor theorist Sean Zwagerman observes that “humor’s use of multiple meanings, of indirection and implication, its play with language and conventions—in a word, its shiftiness—seems to confound every attempt to contain humor within clear categories” (1). It is difficult to argue with this, particularly in light of the shiftiness of the postmodern concept of the “center,” which is neither universal nor fixed in time. Still, we should not throw up our hands in the face of humor and regard it as an indefinable human phenomenon. Yes, humor has the unfortunate potential to mock and degrade; but, at its best, humor’s essential architecture invites us to entertain new perspectives and to practice empathy.

Humor has the potential to sway and captivate us, and its doing so tells us something of ourselves. Agreeing with the humorist Regina Barreca, Zwagerman goes on to characterize humor as “a force for individual and collective action,” assisted by “the potential laughter holds as a social corrective,” despite its equal potential to be abused or to demean (3, 5). So, if trying the same thing over and over again expecting

to achieve a different result is the definition of insanity, it also comes partway in defining humor. We never tire of watching Puck repeatedly fail at fixing the messy love quadrangle of four foolish mortals, so let us try just one more time to deconstruct humor.

The following pages will explore the operation of humor in literature and performance, using tools provided by structuralist, deconstructive, and postmodern critical arenas, to reveal humor's fundamental structures and inherent transgressiveness. The study includes consideration of irony, the performance of stakes, wordplay, departure from form, timing, metatheatrics, and cross-dressing. William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will serve as a key text, as its rich comedy engages all the aforementioned humorous applications, and it has endured for several hundred years as a favorite on the page, stage, and screen. Other popular examples from diverse performance media will illustrate diverse types of humor.

SUMMARY OF *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*Dream*) was written and first performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in London circa 1595, likely near the time *Romeo and Juliet* was penned and produced, at the height of the playwright's career (Greenblatt 367). Whimsical but relatable, nuanced but accessible, *Dream* has been a favorite of professional theatre companies, community troupes, and elementary schools globally for hundreds of years. *Dream* includes diverse styles of comedy—physical, verbal, base, highbrow, mocking, and admiring—that have endured with extraordinary relevance. Like many of Shakespeare's plays, *Dream* is versatile, and may be staged on a lavish traditional set or within the spare intimacy of a naked black box. The play has been set in a junk heap (The Royal Shakespeare Company, 2005), a Catholic high school (Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2013), the meandering forest glens of Tuscany (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1990), and a family campground retreat (BBC, 2005).

Shakespeare set *Dream* in Athens, Greece. The play begins just days before Theseus, Duke of Athens, is slated to marry his betrothed, Hippolyta. Theseus is visited by a distraught Athenian citizen, Egeus, with his daughter, Hermia, in tow. Also in Egeus's company is Demetrius, to whom Egeus has happily promised Hermia's hand in marriage, and Lysander, who is in love with Hermia and has won her affection. Egeus strongly opposes Hermia and Lysander's union. It is Egeus's hope in visiting the palace that Theseus will hear his testimony and require Hermia to honor the match with Demetrius that has been made on her behalf. To Egeus's satisfaction, Theseus rules that Hermia must obey her father and marry Demetrius "by the next new moon," or else choose between execution and the life of a nun (Shakespeare 1.1.83).

Desperate, Hermia and Lysander concoct a plan to flee Athens and be married in secret. Hermia tells her friend Helena of the plan, and Helena, who is in love with Demetrius, devises her own plan: to inform Demetrius of Hermia's flight, knowing he will pursue her but hoping that he will be so grateful for this "intelligence" that his love for Helena is rekindled (1.1.248).

Elsewhere in Athens, a group of "mechanicals" (local laborers and artisans) meet to rehearse a play. The mechanicals are Peter Quince, a carpenter, who will direct the play; Snug, a joiner; Nick Bottom, a weaver; Francis Flute, a bellows-mender; Tom Snout, a tinker; and Robin Starveling, a tailor. The play is *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe (Pyramus and Thisbe)*, which the troupe hopes to perform for the Duke and Duchess at their wedding celebration. Despite some intolerable grandstanding from Bottom (who holds the misguided belief that he is God's gift to the stage), Quince succeeds in casting the play as such: Flute as the damsel Thisbe, though he has "a beard coming"; Starveling as Thisbe's mother; Snout as Pyramus's father; himself as Thisbe's father; and, Snug as the lion who will appear to kill Thisbe (1.2.39-40). It is later decided that Snout will also portray the wall with a hole in it through which Pyramus and Thisbe "are content / To whisper" (5.1.132-3).

In the Athenian forest, the fairy Puck (a companion to Oberon, the fairy king) is embroiled in a rivalry between Oberon and Titania, the fairy queen. Oberon enlists Puck to help him reclaim Titania's love by administering an elixir extracted from the bud of a magical flower. "The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid / Will make or man or woman madly dote / Upon the next live creature that it sees" (2.1.170-2). Puck seeks out the flower with enthusiasm.

Meantime, Helena pursues Demetrius, who is pursuing Hermia, who is fleeing with Lysander into the forest. Oberon witnesses Helena dotting hopelessly on

Demetrius and takes pity on her; so, when Puck returns with the flower, Oberon tells Puck to apply the love elixir to Demetrius' eyes when he is asleep, so that he may fall in love with Helena. Oberon tells Puck he will "know the man / By the Athenian garments he hath on" (2.1.263-4). Oberon takes the remaining flower's nectar and seeks out the sleeping Titania. To spite her, he has decided to anoint her eyelids and then leave, hoping she will fall in love with some "vile thing" of the forest (2.2.40). Oberon departs, and Titania wakes to the sight of Bottom, who was rehearsing with his troupe in the forest. Puck has transformed Bottom halfway into an ass (donkey). Titania leads him to her bower, where they retire for the evening, to Bottom's delight.

Puck mistakes a sleeping Lysander for Demetrius and anoints his eyes with the love elixir. Thus, when Helena stumbles upon Lysander asleep on the forest floor, fearing he is dead, she shakes him awake and he instantly falls in love with her. Helena takes Lysander's profession of love as a cruel joke, and she runs away. Lysander follows her. Hermia then awakes to find Lysander gone, so she leaves to search for him. The fairies discover Puck's grave error and Oberon tells Puck to bring Helena back; in the meantime, Oberon will anoint Demetrius's eyes.

Helena arrives promptly, pursued by Lysander, who is pursued by Hermia. Helena stumbles now upon Demetrius, who wakes to fall in love with her. Demetrius showers Helena with affection, which she believes is all part of the miserable plot to humiliate her. Helena scorns Hermia for sending Lysander and Demetrius to mock her poor friend. Hermia, confused and dejected, denies any part in this bizarre turn of events, and having now discovered Lysander, she begs for an explanation, to which he responds, "hang off, thou cat, thou burr" (3.2.261). Lysander challenges Demetrius to a duel over Helena, and Helena and Hermia skirmish over both men and their mutually perceived betrayal. Puck exhausts the lovers, baiting them to run in circles

after his disembodied voice, until they all fall asleep. Then, Puck anoints Lysander's eyelids and ensures he will awake beside Hermia.

Discovering Titania in love with Bottom in the shape of an ass, Oberon anoints the Queen's eyes with the love potion and then stands by as she awakes. In love again, the King and Queen share a dance and then leave together, Puck behind them.

Theseus and Hippolyta, on a hunting expedition with Egeus and their hounds, happen upon the four sleeping lovers. Theseus bids his huntsmen wake the lovers with their horns, and Lysander wakes to fall back in love with Hermia. To Egeus's displeasure, Demetrius announces that he is now in love with Helena, and Theseus softens, deciding on the spot that together with himself and Hippolyta, Helena will wed Demetrius and Hermia will wed Lysander.

Bottom returns—transformed back into a man—thinking he has had a dream about fairies and ass ears. At the wedding, the four lovers, Hippolyta, and Theseus prepare to watch the mechanicals' play. The play is awful, and the lovers enjoy it immensely. After the play, the lovers, full of mirth, retire to bed, and Puck bids the audience goodnight.

CHAPTER ONE

O Dainty Duck, O Dear!

The Role of the Postmodern Disrupted “Center” in Constructing Humor

It is no surprise to consumers of literature, film, television, theatre, and the visual arts, that in general humor has been historically transgressive—from darkly comedic WWII propaganda posters of Hitler with his pants down, to depictions of the Prophet Mohammed on the cover of the Parisian satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*; cheeky novelist Jane Austen to witty memoirist David Sedaris; Jon Stewart and Trevor Noah’s *The Daily Show* to Chris Rock’s 2016 Academy Awards hostship; the paradigm-shifting playwright William Shakespeare to the daring Oscar Wilde. Humans wield humor to challenge boundaries and expose the flaws in our humanness. And, oddly, we enjoy it. But how does something as serious as war or racism or religious fanaticism become funny? How and when does condemnable, unamusing mockery become comedy? Postmodern critics Jacques Derrida, Zygmunt Bauman, Linda Hutcheon, and others, come some distance in helping us understand how disrupting the “center” is the foundation of comedic irony.

Derrida refers to “the center”—as it was perceived before Postmodern thought—as a “unique [...] thing within a structure which governs the structure,” “a point of presence, a fixed origin,” whose function was to “orient, balance, and organize the structure [...] but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure” (224). The “presence” Derrida discusses was considered in Classical thought to be inextricably linked with fundamental principles such as a universal essence, transcendentalism, or God, which hold the center of a system in which humans exist. However, in Derrida’s view, it is language that disables this Classical conception of “the center”; in

attempting to articulate a universal essence, transcendentalism, or God, we have discovered its faultiness, because language itself is faulty (225). That is, ideologies popularized and established as “normal” by people in power are both necessary and corruptive in that the very design of a structure requires a hierarchy of values that in turn limits the freedom of thought and creativity expressed by the individuals who operate inside the structure.

Bauman asserts that “truth is [...] a *social relation* (like *power, ownership, or freedom*): an aspect of a hierarchy built of superiority-inferiority units” (11). If we can agree that there is a relationship between the “center” and the “truth,” in that each has a role in organizing the structure in which it resides, and even venture that truth is a *form* of center—in that it is fixed at least for some period and that it privileges those who have defined it—or that the center is informed by the existence of a singular truth, then postmodern criticism can assist us in examining the method by which irony becomes comedy.

To begin, irony is essentially incongruity—the incongruity of text and meaning (verbal irony), of what is and what is expected (situational irony), or of what is known and what is not known (dramatic irony). The center—and, by extension, the truth—are the expected. Irony subverts the absolute concept of a singular truth in that it depends on multiple possible realities. By its very design, all irony requires at least two possible realities—that which is said/is known/is, and that which is not said/is not known/is expected.

For a close look at verbal irony, we turn to the lovers in *Dream*, who sit through a painfully (but, for the audience, delightfully) poor performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* at their nuptial celebration. The real audience knows, of course, that the lovers are entertained only by the play’s awfulness, but the lovers’ words say otherwise. (Also to our amusement, Bottom does not seem to detect their sarcasm.) Of Snout, who

portrays the wall that separates Pyramus from Thisbe, Demetrius comments, "It is the wittiest partition that ever I heard discourse" (Shakespeare 5.1.165-6). The incongruity between what is said (literally, that the portrayal of the wall was amazing) and what is not said (I have never seen a wall portrayed before, but I cannot imagine it gets any worse) disrupts the concept of the stable center by straddling two possible realities (one in which the play is amazing, and the other in which the play is awful). The humor depends on the existence of the center (that is, a singular reality in which language and its meaning are the same, because that is the way language has been designed by humans) and then the assault on that center through incongruous, often oppositional, meaning.

In *Dream*, Bottom routinely commits the unexpected and is thus often situationally ironic. Bottom thinks himself a remarkable performer and praiseworthy; so, when he is transformed into an ass by fairy magic, ironic humor results. Titania, enamored with the ass under the influence of the love elixir, woos Bottom:

I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.
Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note;
So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me
On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee. (3.1.121-125)

A postmodern analysis of this passage reveals the inner workings of its humor. As fairy royalty and a woman of discernible taste, the audience expects Titania to fall in love with another attractive fairy of comparable status (although, to say a human audience expects anything of a fairy adds to the absurdity of the play). This expectedness is the center, based on the singular truth that says (perversely, of course) that individuals of a certain status and appearance are best matched to individuals of equal status and appearance.

First, this moment in the play is humorous because Bottom and Titania corrupt that center by falling in love, which is unexpected and (again, perversely) unnatural, and thus situationally ironic. The particular language Titania uses to describe Bottom is ironic: the braying of an ass is widely held to be the opposite of “gentle,” and large ears (Bottom’s “shape”) are not generally considered appealing. Bottom compounds this irony by calling out the absurdity of the situation when he responds, “methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that” (3.1.126). The situational irony is built on the fact that until this moment (and in all other moments) Bottom believes he deserves limitless praise; but, in this instance, even Bottom (who benefits from Titania’s affections) suspects her affections are misplaced. The audience expects Bottom to accept Titania’s advances without hesitation because the play has established a “center” informed by the singular “truth” that Bottom is a self-important man ignorant of his own shortcomings; instead, Bottom overturns the center when he implies that Titania should reconsider him as a mate. The dramatic irony comes from the simple fact that the audience knows Titania has become infatuated with Bottom under the influence of the love elixir, while Titania and Bottom ignorantly persist in carrying out this affair (were Titania sober, she would be horrified by this match).

These examples illustrate how comedy is in the business of collapsing social hierarchies, as postmodern scholars generally promote the collapse of artistic hierarchies (i.e., “high art” over “pop art”). Centers serve to privilege a select few and disenfranchise many more, which makes adherence to a singular truth unjust. After all, in Hutcheon’s words, “from the decentered perspective, the ‘marginal’ and the ex-centric (be it in race, gender, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogenous monolith [...] we might have assumed” (252). In this way, the device of ironic humor is a liberating one that thrives on non-conformity and effectively dissolves what Bauman terms “a hierarchy

built of superiority-inferiority units.” What is more, irony requires the participation of the audience by requiring it to expect.

Consider *Young Frankenstein*'s Igor, speaking to Dr. Frankenstein: “Wait, master. It might be dangerous...you go first.” The line does not land unless the audience is there to expect Igor to say, “I’ll go first” (*Young*). Bertens suggests that “meaning is the result of interaction; it is not discovered as a given in a text, but it is created in an interactional process between reader and text” (64). Thus the device of ironic humor demonstrates the postmodernist valuing of the role of the reader (or audience) in giving meaning to a text (or performance), which will be addressed more thoroughly in Chapter Four.

A cursory survey of Shakespeare’s plays reveals a distinctive pattern of character dispersal across the genres. Hamlet is one of Shakespeare’s more verbose protagonists, and solitary; of the prince’s many monologues, more than half are soliloquies. The tragedies in general are more myopic, with the effect that the audience feels an intimate connection to the protagonist, even as he or she may plummet into madness. Note also that the tragic plays are often named after their tragic characters (e.g., *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus*), while the comedies are more likely to refer to a situation or theme that is inclusive of all characters (e.g., *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *A Comedy of Errors*, *As You Like It*). The character lists of tragedies are not necessarily shorter (even—or perhaps especially—sad people need many servants), but tragedies’ protagonists command a larger presence than comedies’ protagonists, and comedies tend to be more ensemble. In fact, who the protagonist(s) is/are in *Dream* is open to debate. Of the lovers in *Dream*, Helena and Hermia have more language than Demetrius and Lysander, but almost equally so; Bottom and Puck share comparable stage time; and Titania and Oberon compete with the others for king and queen of the comedy.

Postmodernism offers us the term heteroglossia—a diversity of voices—to describe the comedic character list. Philosophy scholar Mitchell Aboulaflia, reflecting on the work of George Herbert Mead, writes that, “as selves are established through taking the perspective of various generalized others, individuals can gain a distance on their own actions, that is, they can learn to evaluate them with a degree of impartiality” (5). Aboulaflia remarks further that this fair-mindedness may be the result of, among other things, the fact that “the multiplicity of perspectives sets the stage for a healthy skepticism toward any one voice being viewed as the only legitimate voice” (5).

Indeed, it is this heteroglossic quality of Shakespeare’s comedies that disables the hierarchical structures imposed on us by those in power and simultaneously inspires empathy for those (a lowly tinker, in the case of Snout) who are often invisible to the more privileged classes. Comedy is thus a great equalizer. Literary critic Stephen Greenblatt remarks that *Dream* engages a “wide range of cultural materials [...] from the classical heritage of the educated elite to popular ballads and folk customs, from refined and sophisticated entertainments to the coarser delights of farce” (368). Shakespeare’s dramatic protagonists are nearly always highbred aristocrats, while his comedies feature long-winded innkeepers (Mistress Quickly, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), waiting-gentlewomen (Margaret and Ursula, *Much Ado about Nothing*), shepherds (Silvius and Phoebe, *As You Like It*), stewards (Malvolio, *Twelfth Night*), and clowns galore.

This celebration of multiple perspectives (as well as “high language” spoken in verse by the play’s nobility aside the “low language” spoken in prose by the mechanicals) reveals that humor has a unique potential to promote diversity and open-mindedness. That the play treats the nobility and the mechanicals with equal time and comparable (dis)respect suggests humor implicitly demonstrates to us the values of a

pluralist mindset, or an acceptance of coexisting sources of authority. Scholars Rooholla Datli Beigi and Pyeaam Abbasi concur:

[...] The crucial point about Shakespeare's plays is that [...] duality is decentred in his plays when the boundaries between proper and improper languages are blurred and his noble heroes employ an indecent language that is either amalgamated with curse, like Coriolanus' language, or silence and the indirect speech of Titus which can be interpreted in different ways. (54)

Abbasi and Ali Saeedi further observe that this kind of high/low language contrast—and specifically, the practice of blending high and low language—contributes to an anarchic and thus distinctly postmodern play (259). But comedy that is rich with blended high and low language is more than lawless chaos. Aboulafia claims that,

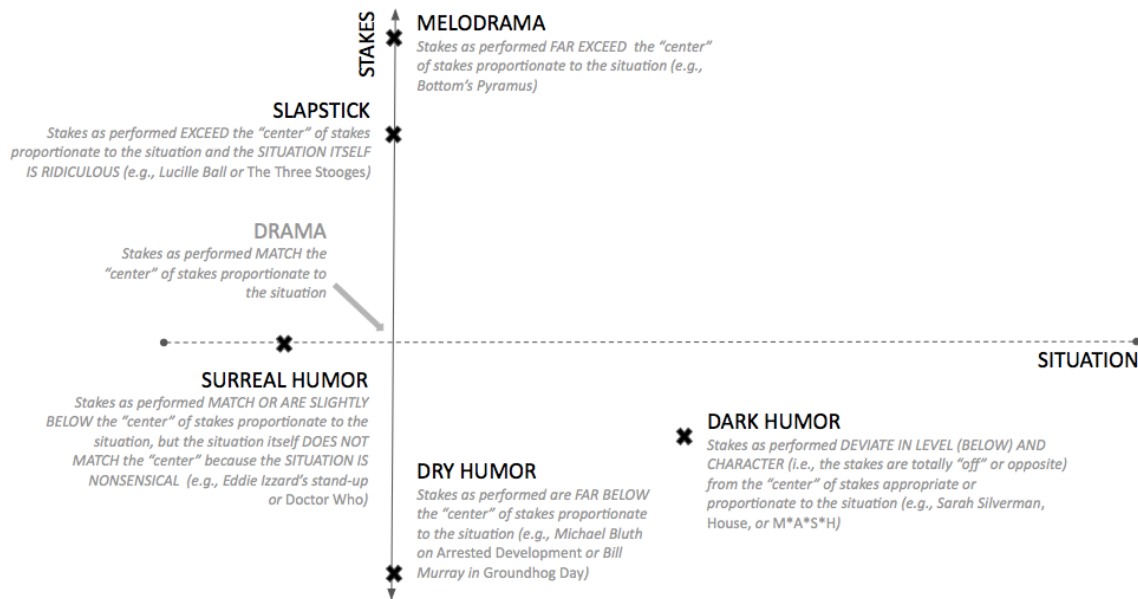
[...] When one regularly inhabits different perspectives and learns to live in sociality—that is, the state of being between perspectives and in transition—the likelihood increases that one will be able to listen to the voices of those who are strangers, and do so in a manner that is relatively impartial and respectful. (8)

Thus, the Shakespearean comedy—and, I suggest, comedy in general—has the distinct potential to challenge our preconceptions and deepen our empathy. Comedy is generally regarded as “light” in contrast to drama, romance, and history, but while comedy may deal in the lightness of fairies, contrived mishaps, and fools' antics, its treatment of its subject is stealthily serious. That we hear far more from “hempen homespuns” in *Dream* than we do in *Macbeth* is meaningful acknowledgment of a disparity between the classes and other systems of privilege (3.1.65). With a diversity of voices and a propensity for disrupting the privileged center (in the vein of postmodern theory), comedy as a broad genre is a liberal experiment.

Now, as promised: How does the disruption of the “center” illustrate how basic irony becomes comedy? It is an adage spoken in the wings of theatres that comedy is

drama with ridiculously high stakes. That is, if you are going to slip on a banana peel and make it funny, you have to be ridiculously bummed about slipping on a banana peel (being mildly peeved will not cut the mustard). To a degree, this is accurate, but it is not thorough.¹ In performance, well-executed drama is the point where a feasible situation (a situation deemed to be central by societal norms—say, the death of a loved one) is matched with proportionate stakes (stakes deemed to be central by societal norms—say, in the instance of a deceased loved one, anything on a spectrum from quiet shock to heavy crying). “Good” drama is where film actors like Meryl Streep, Viola Davis, and Ian McKellan tend to live (though they often vacation expertly in comedy). Alternatively, good comedy happens when, in addition to basic irony, the two factors of situation and stakes are mismatched, as shown in figure 1, which illustrates how some subgenres of comedy are defined by the way in which their performed stakes are mismatched to their situation.

Figure 1. Map of Comedy Subgenres against Stakes and Situation



¹ It is absolutely the case, however, that comedic actors must before all else be genuine, which is why good comedic actors generally transition well to good drama.

The most straightforward example as illustrated above is melodrama, which is no longer a popular form of comedy but remains alive and well in Bottom's portrayal of Pyramus in *Dream*, and on some daytime soap operas (despite intentions to the contrary). Melodrama is drama with the aforementioned ridiculously high stakes (i.e., the stakes in melodrama far exceed the stakes a "normal" person should conceivably demonstrate in response to a given situation), and thus it resides in quadrant I/II of Figure 1. Continuing with the example of a deceased loved one, when Pyramus finds Thisbe's bloody mantle and believes her to be dead, by all central standards he may be deeply saddened, even distraught, but he laments so instantly, largely, and for so long that his distress is read as insincere. It is also off-center to expect anyone genuinely in the throes of grief to be able to compose poetry on the spot. The excessive rhyming and unnecessary apostrophes compound the insincerity because the language comes off as overworked and unspontaneous.

But stay, O spite!

But mark, poor knight,

What dreadful dole is here?

Eyes, do you see?

How can it be?

O dainty duck, O dear!

Thy mantle good,

What, stained with blood?

Approach, ye furies fell.

O fates, come, come,

Cut thread and thrum,

Quail, crush, conclude, and quell. (Shakespeare 5.1.265-276)

This is made all the more humorous—ironically so—because Bottom perceives himself to be an excellent actor. The extended mourning and death scenes in *Pyramus and Thisbe* are clearly a self-made opportunity for Bottom to convince the audience of his acting prowess, but it has the opposite effect: piteous laughter. After Pyramus’s drawn-out death, Theseus comments, “With the help of a surgeon he might yet recover and prove an ass” (5.1.298-9). Hippolyta responds, “Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man,” presumably speaking of Bottom in his pathetic performance, not Pyramus, for whom Bottom’s rendering is intended to stir the audience’s sympathy (5.1.279).

Slapstick is another comedic subgenre that has fallen somewhat out of fashion in the English-speaking world but was once a favorite, particularly in film and television. Such moments in *Dream* include Puck’s attempts to exercise control over the blind lovers, and stage-fraught Snout’s ungraceful rendering of the wall. *I Love Lucy* (disturbing gender and race relations notwithstanding) is also a classic specimen. Slapstick comedy is located on the Figure 1 map in quadrant I above the “center” of stakes proportionate to the situation, and generally the situation is off-center itself as well.

Take the example of Lucy and Ethel’s day at the candy factory. Positioned in front of a conveyor belt of moving truffles, they are instructed to wrap each morsel in paper and return it to the belt before the belt and the truffles exit the room. The factory boss treats candy-making as a life-or-death enterprise, and Lucy and Ethel are suitably convinced she will indeed fire (or maim) them if they fail to succeed in this simple task. Already, the stakes are unnecessarily high; Lucy and Ethel’s fear of the candy boss is mortal as if she were a crime lord. The boss departs, and at first Lucy and Ethel find they keep up easily with the belt’s speed. Then the belt accelerates, which is where the situation goes off-center (the machine has presumably malfunctioned, so Lucy and Ethel are no longer in the realm of ordinary circumstance). As the belt picks up more

speed, the women panic beyond reason and begin stuffing their mouths, hats, and dresses with truffles (particularly the physical expression of ridiculously high stakes is a hallmark of the slapstick subgenre), hiding the evidence of their ineptitude before the candy boss returns (“Job Switching”).

Slapstick may be less popular today simply because its humor relies on the audience being surprised by the characters’ bad luck and clumsiness, but while those two elements of slapstick became progressively ordinary (and predictable) as the subgenre gained momentum and crept closer to the center, the style fell out of vogue. As mentioned previously, a signature aspect of all comedy is its transgressiveness, so as it approaches normality, it loses its humor and is replaced by an alternative mode. Missing the center of expectedness is—counterintuitively—comedy’s lynchpin. Thus, comedic subgenres may defeat themselves just as language may defeat itself in defining its own center.

Dark Humor resides in quadrant IV of Figure 1, in the realm of off-center stakes not just below the expected stakes proportionate to the situation, but wholly inappropriate to the situation. The situation tends to be extreme (many dark television comedies take place in crime-solving FBI offices or forensics labs), and a character’s response to a situation (e.g., viewing the brutally mutilated corpse of a murder victim) is both below the expected proportionate stakes (e.g., the character does not seem troubled at all) and totally opposite (e.g., the character makes a joke about how it is not the worst date she has been on; at least this guy is a good listener). We observe this a great deal in the television show *M*A*S*H*, starring Alan Alda as Dr. Hawkeye Pierce, army captain and surgeon serving in South Korea during the Korean War. Though *M*A*S*H* often strikes an “appropriately” tragic tone, Hawkeye routinely banters lightly with his colleagues over the open chest cavities of wounded comrades. On October 31, dressed as Superman under his doctor’s scrubs, Hawkeye comments, “Halloween

in Korea—bobbing for shrapnel” (“Trick or Treatment”). Viewers expect the stakes in an army surgical hospital to be high, but laugh guiltily at Hawkeye’s unexpectedly low and off-color performance of stakes proportionate and appropriate to an extreme (dark) situation.

Surreal humor occurs when the stakes as performed match or are below the stakes expected proportionate to the situation, but the situation itself is also off-center because it is nonsensical (generally, quadrant III of Figure 1). Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is a paragon of surreal humor, exemplified especially in the absurdist language spoken by the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, and, of course, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum:

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes—of ships—of sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.” (164)

Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum are utterly serious in their recital of the poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” which is unexpected by the reader because the poem’s story is ridiculous. If read by rational humans, the poem would be delivered with puzzlement.

Surreal humor has endured in film and television enjoyed both by children and adults. *Doctor Who* was a popular British television comedy in the 1960s-1980s, was revived in 2005, and continues to air new episodes in 2016. The show’s protagonist, The Doctor, is an alien who travels across time and throughout the Universe in a spaceship called the TARDIS (Time And Relative Dimension In Space) to defend endangered civilizations and generally have a lot of fun. A jolly and unflappable

character, The Doctor greets the monster-faced alien leader of the Sycorax casually with a “Hello, big fella” (“The Christmas Invasion”). After deducing that the Sycorax have been bending human beings on Earth to their evil will using human blood to power a command system, he exclaims, charmingly, “Blood control! Blood control! Oh, I haven’t seen blood control for years!” as if he has discovered a quaint Macintosh SE/30 at a garage sale. An ordinary individual would discover a genocidal alien possessing human beings through “blood control” with horror, but The Doctor coolly assesses the situation and battles the wrathful Sycorax with a smile. Thus, the viewers, as rational humans living in a Sycorax-free world (though *Doctor Who* would have you suspecting otherwise), are delivered both a situation that is unexpected because it is absurd, as well as stakes that are disproportionately low to the situation.

Michael Bluth, portrayed by Jason Bateman on the television show *Arrested Development*, illustrates dry humor expertly, which resides in quadrant III of Figure 1. The Bluths are an extraordinarily dysfunctional, formerly wealthy family whose financial frauds put George Bluth, Sr. (founder of the Bluth Company real estate empire) in prison and leave son Michael Bluth in charge of the business and his family’s affairs. Michael’s mother Lucille is an alcoholic, a withholding parent, and a terrible driver. On the evening of her birthday party, en route to the restaurant, Lucille says to Michael, “I’ll be happy to drive if you want me to,” to which Michael replies with a cocked eyebrow and deadpan tone, “Mom, you’ve already got two strikes on your record. You strike one more person and it’s technically a spree” (“My Mother, the Car”). Presumably, Lucille’s dangerous driving has resulted in the serious injury of two people, but Michael states the facts of his mother’s recklessness with minimal concern and likewise seems undisturbed that his mother is apparently heartless (she responded to him merely with irritated silence). Thus, we have a serious circumstance (chiefly, that Lucille has hit two

people with her car, and, secondarily, that she does not seem to care) and stakes performed extraordinarily low proportionate to the situation.²

Figure 1 shows that (at least) the English-speaking world is on a downward trajectory of performed comedic stakes. The comedy subgenres of quadrants I and II (slapstick and satire, which were popular in Shakespeare's day as they were on the Vaudeville circuit and on 1960s American television) have gone somewhat out of style.³ High stakes comedy has been all but replaced by low stakes comedy, represented in quadrants III and IV. The mockumentary has become the new parody—the Christopher Guest film canon, and popular television shows like *The Office*, and *Parks and Recreation*, among others. Surreal, dark and dry humor are now regular fare.

What does our downward trajectory of performed stakes—and our increasing affinity for verbal and situational humor over physical humor—say about how human beings are changing in the twenty-first century? We are still drawn to exploring the terrain outside the center; but, we prefer exploring how our lack of caring (dry and dark humor) could play out in extreme circumstances. Does this reflect an underlying and rising collective fear of the Apocalypse? Or, is our declining interest in physical humor related to the increasing distance between our mind and our corpus? Has technology played a role in helping us to feel not just invincible but also untethered by the more base nature of our physical form? How might we see humor evolve as the human body becomes more impervious to disease and injury through advances in modern medicine? These are the existential questions humor invites us to consider.

² The line is also funny because, like Igor, we expect Michael to say, "If you get one more strike, they'll revoke your license," because we are thinking of strike in the sense of a citation, but we are delivered something else.

³ *Saturday Night Live* is a good exception, though it is one of few remaining televised variety shows

CHAPTER TWO

It Shall Be Called Bottom's Dream

How Structuralist and Deconstructive Criticism Lift the Hood on the Pun (and Beyond)

The structure of language itself—its quirks, its imperfections, its infinite permutations made possible by innumerable words in myriad languages—is a source of the most basic and pleasing forms of humor. Semiotician and structuralist critic Ferdinand de Saussure popularized the theory of the linguistic sign, which comprises a signifier (“sound pattern”) and signified (concept), which de Saussure acknowledged was an arbitrary construct (66-7). Said plainly, the word “cat” (sign) is composed of the mind’s connection between the sound and/or shape made by the utterance or writing of the word “cat” (signifier) and one’s conceptual understanding of a cat (signified). Postmodern theorist and deconstructive critic Jacques Derrida followed, positing that the existence of the sign—and the arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified—is the root cause of language’s essential fallibility. That is, language is not as reliable in representing finite realities as we tend to think it is. Together, de Saussure and Derrida’s work lifts the hood on the mechanics of the verbal pun, a basic and enduring building block of comedy. We will also observe how that basic formula for the verbal pun can be extrapolated to other non-verbal dimensions of the play and consistently serve as the underlying architecture for humor.

Language is fallible because it depends on an imperfect sign system for its meaning, and we are fallible because we consistently assume language is infallible. From *Dream*, we have the following example from Oberon, whose words it must be noted are consistently misunderstood or misapplied by Puck, which is the origin of much humor within the play.

About the wood go swifter than the wind,

And Helena of Athens look thou find. (3.2.94-5)

The audience knows (even Puck knows) that Oberon means by this that Puck should search quickly through the forest to locate Helena; but, if we take this language out of context, its meaning becomes slippery, fallible. Oberon could be saying that around/near Oberon/Puck (“about”), the forest itself moves (as in the final scene of *Macbeth*?) more quickly than the wind moves, and, on a different note, Puck should seek to encounter someone with a “Helena-of-Athens” look about her. Syllabic emphasis comes a long way in avoiding miscommunication. The slippery quality of language and the application of syllabic emphasis will be further examined in Chapter Four.

Returning to the example of the cat, even in the English language there are several words synonymous with cat, among them the scientific term feline. It is tempting, and maybe even appropriate for this paper, to venture into such loaded terms as kitty and pussy—terms which have lent themselves often to humor and simultaneously to degradation, and which themselves have multiple meanings—but we will stay on track. The word “cat” can of course be translated into numerous other languages, themselves likely to have multiple cat-signifiers; and, the idea of the cat can be performed. So, in this world there are innumerable ways linguistically and performatively to evoke the cat.

Even when two people are familiar with a common language and a common signifier, however, they are likely to have divergent conceptual understandings of what a cat is—they come to the word or the performance with different ideas of the signified. In other words, “cat” can mean different things to different people, and different things to the same person at different times. My cat, Tony, is the size of two toasters placed end to end and he is colored like a creamsicle. He has short fur and golden eyes and he likes to eat banana bread and chew on buttons. Most cats do not fit Tony’s

description; so, the idea that comes to mind when I hear or read the word “cat” will be different from that of my neighbor, whose cat is a Maine Coon with a love of anchovy. And, depending on where one is from or what one’s experiences have been, the “cat” that comes to mind may be an ocelot or a tiger or a snow leopard. Or, it could be a lion.

Bottom the Weaver, Snug the Joiner, and the sad-sweet Helena help us understand the ways in which the sign=signifier+signified formula is a sandbox for humor, linguistically and otherwise. First, the signifier may be connected to multiple signifieds. This is wordplay, or punning. Humor theorist Susan Purdie describes punning as “one particular version of a wider operation in which a cluster of excessive, contradictory significations are evoked, which are all in some way valid, but cannot all be properly ‘fitted’ at the same time to the signifying event” (40). For example, the signifier “ass” has multiple signifieds—it means the hooved animal into which Bottom has been transformed by fairy magic, it is the lewd term for one’s backside, and it is the expletive used to describe someone who is mean or stupid or both. “You see an ass-head of your own, / Do you?” (Shakespeare 3.1.103-4)

Wordplay and punning may be paired with other forms of humor—like irony—for more impact, as with this insult hurled at Hermia by Helena: “You puppet, you!” (3.2.289) To the Shakespearean audience, the pejorative “puppet” would mean counterfeit, but Helena also uses it (or at least Hermia interprets it) as an insult to her height. Thus the polysemous signifier—the spoken/written word “puppet”—is matched with an excess of signifieds—the ideas of both counterfeit and physical shortness. The line is especially humorous (specifically, ironic) because Hermia seems more affronted by the insult against her physical stature than she is by that against her moral character (which is unexpected, because as humans we are inclined to believe that our moral character is of more consequence than our height). The insult leads Hermia

to call Helena, among other things, “a painted maypole,” and escalates the spat to a new level (3.2.297).

Layering wordplay/punning can produce wildly funny language. Upon returning to Athens after a night of romance with Titania, Bottom says to his mortal friends, “I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom” (4.1.207-8). When we break this down, we reveal the humorous layers of this line like the layers of an onion. The ballad “hath no bottom” (using bottom to mean the lowest point in a container) because it is boundless, defying the laws of what Bottom's peers know to be reality. There is no Bottom (using the proper noun) in the dream because the character Bottom was replaced by an ass. Ass is also a synonym for bottom. And as if all this is not enough, it seems poor Bottom cannot escape (in the reality of Athens nor even in the unreality of his dreams) the fact that he is an ass, in any sense (signified) of the word.

Of course the medium of the play accommodates modes of wordplay that are less potent in texts that are merely read, not heard. The homophone, for example, is based on one signifier (the sound of the word), and two or more signifieds (the meanings of the sound). Bottom makes good use of a homophone when he is transformed into an ass and sings,

The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
The plainsong cuckoo grey,
Whose note full many a man doth mark,
And dares not answer “Nay”— (3.1.115-118)

The cuckoo in the lyrics evokes the cuckold, who would answer “nay” to deny allegations that he is a cuckold. To the audience, the sound of the word “nay” also sounds like the word “neigh,” which is the sound an ass makes.

This signified-scrambling approach may also be applied to verbal synesthesia that is the mis-pairing of sensory terms, to yield humor. This is illustrated here, again, by Bottom:

I see a voice: now will I to the chink,

To spy an I can hear my Thisby's face. Thisby! (5.1.190-191, italics added)

Alternatively, the disabled sign=signifier+signified formula may be extrapolated to other dimensions of the play, such as romantic coupling and the conventions of the live theatre. At the top of the play, Peter Quince assigns Snug the Joiner the role of the Lion in *Pyramus and Thisbe*, and here we will return to the example of the cat, specifically to the lion. The word “lion” has popular associations; it evokes such qualities as bravery and such behaviors as loud roaring. Snug, alternatively, is “slow of study” and quiet as a mouse (in fact, he has fewer lines than any other named character in the play) (1.2.56). Thus, when Snug’s portrayal of the “lion” (signifier) betrays our popular notion of how a lion should look, sound and behave (signified), the sign that results from this combination surprises us to amusement (that is, when it is well-executed by the actor). The audience consistently struggles to reconcile the opposing signifieds—the one with which they came to the play, and that new signified which is a lion anxiety-ridden and (from the lovers’ perspective) looking suspiciously like Athens’s go-to fine furniture joiner.

Bottom also embodies this scrambled wordplay formula when he insists he play all of the roles in *Pyramus and Thisbe*: “Let me play Thisbe too,” and, later, “Let me play the lion too” (1.2.43, 1.2.58). If the sign of the character Pyramus comprises a signifier (an actor) matched to a signified (a role), and Bottom is to play all the roles, he disrupts the stable one-to-one relationship of the signifier and the signified. This practice is not absent from other genres (productions of a tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet* will often feature a single actor in multiple small roles), but when this practice of

double- or triple-casting a single actor goes awry (for example, Bottom suggests he play both lovers, which would be a feat of performative acrobatics to be sure), the audience is absolutely tickled. Later, we will discuss the audience's role in contributing to the meaning-making of humor, which is absolutely at play in this moment of *Dream*. Bottom's casting suggestion prompts the audience to imagine a performance of the play in which Bottom will make love to⁴ (Thisbe) and then maim (Lion) himself; thus, the audience creates its own subtext.

The lovers in *Dream* scramble the sign as well. If we consider Hermia and Lysander to be two parts of a seemingly stable whole that is a couple (as the signifier and signified are two parts of a whole that is the sign), then their trading of affections with Helena and Demetrius is another form of corporealized wordplay. Greenblatt reflects on "the speed with which desire can be detached from one object and attached to a different object [in *Dream*]" as the playing out of an "intense, irrational, and alarmingly mobile" treatment of desire (373). Titania and Oberon live by what Greenblatt calls "polytropic desire"; indeed, Titania's affections are as volatile as the lovers' (373). She forsakes Oberon to devote herself to the care of an Indian boy, but gives up both to dote on Bottom in the form of an ass, before returning to Oberon.

It is crucial to note that each of these approaches to humor that scrambles the sign=signifier+signified formula continues to operate under the umbrella of the disturbed center. Indeed, Purdie submits, "Joking confirms our ability to hold on to Symbolic operation in the same moment as it allows us a 'play' of the energies which militate against that" (35). The assumption that "cat"—or house or family or beauty or justice, for that matter—will mean the same thing to the writer/utterer as it does to the reader/hearer is a center. That center may be formally or informally determined by a

⁴ In the Elizabethan sense of the phrase, which is professing love verbally, not physically.

majority or by an authority; either way, humor's leaning toward plurality and away from singularity is notable in that its performance encourages us to examine and even challenge the center. Often, that act of challenging is quite funny. This is the essence of humor's transgressive character.

Regarding Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Beigi and Abbasi suggest that the "Saussurean circle of the language in which every signifier leads only to one transcendental signified is decentred. In other words, because of [Titus's] punning ambiguities, his language is no longer closed and conclusive but open-ended...[and] makes the multiplicity of narrations and interpretations possible" (56). Humor, in the form of punning, calls out and highlights the fallibility of language, thus inviting diverse interpretation. In this way, humor rebuts the notion of a singularity, the claim to a universal human experience embraced by the Enlightenment and denounced by modernism and postmodernism.

Verbal humor is the marriage of two remarkable aspects of the human mind—one, symbolic capacity, is distinctly human, and the other, play, is shared by humans, apes, squirrels, otters, crows, dolphins, and a great many other creatures. Thus, verbal humor bridges in humans the uniqueness of our species with that base nature connecting us to all manner of living things—it is a celebration of that which makes us extraordinary, and a humbling enterprise that acknowledges our parity with non-humans.

The anthropologist Terrence Deacon and the philosopher Tyrone Cashman argue that humans' unique symbolic capacity (i.e., the human brain's evolved potential to comprehend and wield a sophisticated language system for interpreting the world around us) not only provides us with the requisite tools to craft narratives (i.e., tell and receive stories); symbolic capacity endows our species with a sophisticated memory system that in turn positions us to "live in a double world, one virtual, consisting of

symbols and meanings, and one material, consisting of concrete objects and events” (504). Deacon and Cashman posit that “the double world that we live in as a symbolic species leads humans to imagine the world of animals, plants, rivers, mountains, weather, chance, and luck—in other words, the world we regularly and directly experience—as only the surface expression of deeper hidden realities” (504). To Deacon and Cashman, this description of symbolic capacity explains the origins of religion. It also means, most basically, that human symbolic capacity is the gift of imagination. Imagination has given rise to poetry, to song, to landscape paintings and abstract sculpture, to drum circles and live theatre, all of which have united in different ways the sensations of our physical world (e.g., the sound of a rushing river) with our intellectual reality (e.g., the value we perceive in that river’s necessity to its ecosystem, or its rushing as a metaphor for tumult, or ephemerality).

Verbal humor requires our symbolic capacity, but it also requires our curiosity and our tendency towards play, neither of which is unique to our species. Other animals are known to take their play seriously. Essayist Diane Ackerman remarks that, “[play] can be a dress rehearsal for adult life, as when young mammals play courtship games, war games, socializing games, motor-skills games” (4). And while humans are likely to exclaim amidst a company of gigglers, “Stop playing around, be serious! [...] we don’t notice that [play] governs most of society—political games, in-law games, money games, love games, advertising games, to list only a few spheres where gamesmanship is rampant” (11). Research by the anthropologist Donald E. Brown suggests that play, jokes, and polysemy (one signifier attached to more than one signified) are universal to all human communities documented by ethnography and history (435-9). And, because humor is inherently risky, it both conditions us to hardship and provides us with an escape from it. Humor also gives us the means to interpret our reality with more criticism and expectation of nuance. For example,

knowing as we do from ironic humor and from the pun that language is not always successful in capturing our finite realities, we are more wary of a politician's suspiciously worded commitments to fix the gender pay gap, or of the slippery language in a salesman's vacuum warranty.

CHAPTER THREE

Now die, die, die, die, die

The Humorous Abandonment of Poetic Form, Grammar, Spelling, and Pronunciation
...and Everything We Hold Dear

Consider again the words of humor theorist Susan Purdie: “Joking confirms our ability to hold on to Symbolic operation in the same moment as it allows us a ‘play’ of the energies which militate against that” (35). Thus, wordplay, in not conforming to the laws of symbolic operation (the rules of our language system as articulated by de Saussure), liberates its deliverers from confining structures. This liberation is a distinctly postmodern concern and a predominant theme in Shakespeare’s *Dream*. Tension between form and freeplay is indeed rampant in comedy; specifically, *Dream* exemplifies the comedic practice of resisting form both linguistically and performatively, as in what I will term “metric inflation” and self-reflexivity, respectively.

The departure from linguistic forms—in all their arbitrary and fallible glory—often results in humor. Theatre historian Penny Gay notes that this device is aural comedy, in which the “mangling and misapplying of the English language tickles the collective funny bone because of its departure from the norm,” or, the center (4). Hutcheon puts forward that the “increasing tendency towards uniformity in mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge—challenge, but not deny” (246). Indeed, adherence to language constructs (or forms) embodies this tendency towards uniformity, which is challenged in comedic verse drama like *Dream*. Literary theorist Hans Bertens adds that postmodernism “emphasizes performance and form over meaning and content; it seeks to deflate Modernist pretensions as meaningfulness and seriousness” (35). Finally, scholar Charles Russell summarizes that in the postmodern framework, “messages are secondary to the process of

creating those messages” (289). Thus, when language in comedic verse drama oversteps its prescribed form, it unveils its process of creating messages and simultaneously satirizes itself.

An extreme example of resisting linguistic form to expose it as an arbitrary, man-made construct (like language itself) is what may be termed “metric inflation.” This inflation occurs when the meaning of a line is sacrificed to accommodate its form (meter), as in Snug’s “you ladies, you, who gentle hearts do fear / the smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor” (Shakespeare 5.1.214-215). Unlike a great deal of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, these lines remain in iambic pentameter. There is no way Snug can deliver these lines organically. There is no need for the second “you” in the first line; it serves only to complete the second iambic foot and keep the meter on track. The line, sounding ridiculous, reminds the audience that artistic forms are man-made, that they are arbitrary (Saussure and Derrida would say, “like language!”), and that they are meant to be broken, just as all other man-made constructs may be broken (e.g., caste systems and gender roles). Bottom’s “O night, O night! alack, alack, alack, [...] / And thou, O wall, O sweet O lovely wall” and Quince’s “By moonshine did these lovers think no scorn / To meet at Ninus’ tomb, there, there to woo” are further examples, exposing the meter as an absurd construct (5.1.170-172, 5.1.136-137). This over-forced adherence to the meter, as Bertens explains, “emphasizes performance and form over meaning and content” by prioritizing meter over meaning (35). Enter the loquacious Bottom, portraying Pyramus:

Come tears, confound;
Out sword, and wound
The pap of Pyramus.
Ay, that left pap,
Where heart doth hop.

Thus die I; thus, thus, thus.

[He stabs himself]

Now am I dead,

Now am I fled,

My soul is in the sky.

Tongue, lose thy light;

Moon, take thy flight.

Now die, die, die, die, die. (Shakespeare 5.1.284-295)

The extra “thuses” and “dies” are unnecessary, except in the sense that they tell the actor how many beats to take in self-stabbing and then in finally expiring. The audience is delighted by this reminder that the way we have conceived and packaged language in stringent verse is arbitrary, and, by extension, fallible, just as many other proscribed forms in our human experience are arbitrary and fallible.

The total abandonment of correct spelling, pronunciation, and meaning in *Pyramus and Thisbe* is another crown jewel of the play’s language construct rebellions. This device is first introduced in Act I, when Bottom refers to Thisbe as “Thisne,” and then again in rehearsal when he mistakes “odious” for “odorous” (1.2.44, 3.1.70-72). In the wedding night performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, this device is rampant. Flute and Bottom twice again call Ninus’ tomb “Ninny’s tomb” and Bottom says the Lion has “deflowered” Thisbe, instead of, presumably, “devoured” her (5.1.199, 5.1.252, 5.1.281).

Quince is exasperated by these errors, but he is not immune to misusing language himself; he fails to punctuate his prologue correctly, which results in a meaningless flood of incoherence.

Figure 2. Quince's Prologue—Original Punctuation and Corrected Punctuation

<p>If we offend, it is with our good will. That you should think: we come not to offend But with good will. To show our simple skill, That is the true beginning of our end. Consider then we come but in despite. We do not come as minding to content you, Our true intent is. All for your delight We are not here. That you should here repent you The actors are at hand, and by their show You shall know all that you are like to know.</p> <p>(5.1.108-117), with original punctuation</p>	<p>If we offend, it is with our good will That you should think we come, not to offend, But with good will, to show our simple skill— That is the true beginning of our end. Consider, then, we come—but in despite We do not come—as minding to content you. Our true intent is all for your delight. We are not here that you should here repent you. The actors are at hand and, by their show, You shall know all that you are like to know.</p> <p>(5.1.108-117), with corrected punctuation</p>
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Figure 2 demonstrates how the success of Quince's message is contingent on a series of linguistic systems operating in perfect harmony—signifier-signified, followed by punctuation, followed by grammar. Each system relies on the others to produce a prologue that captures Quince's meaning, which is, harmlessly enough, that he and his players come in peace simply to please their audience (this, of course, was unnecessary in the first place, as the lovers could easily have inferred this without a prologue). Thus, the prologue exposes to the audience the flaws in language's inherent structure. This tension between the form and "freeplay" of the language system is the humorous mechanism at work in Quince's prologue. The acknowledgement that language is an arbitrary construct—and the implication then that all man-made systems are arbitrary constructs—both liberates and amuses us.

CHAPTER FOUR

It Will Fall Pat As I Told You

Self-Reflexivity and Metatheatrics for the Laugh

The notion of a sign made of composite parts in language can be extrapolated to other arenas of the human experience, as discussed in Chapter Two. Indeed, de Saussure remarks that, “For any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on convention, which comes to the same thing” (68). *Pyramus and Thisbe* offers an example of self-reflexivity, which, while it is a distinctly postmodern concept, also responds to the notion of the sign of the theatre, which itself is made of arbitrarily determined spaces, objects, behaviors, and customs: a stage, curtains, lights, and seating; roles assumed by actors, words spoken by characters, action directed by a director; costumes and props; beginnings, middles, endings, and applause; programs, showtimes, intermissions, and talk-backs; and, most importantly, the “fourth wall” (the invisible membrane separating stage from audience that represents our suspension of disbelief, our willingness to accept that actors are their characters, and our pretending not to see set changes, among other blindnesses). Thus, the audience receives a story separate from their own experience in which Hamlet does not periodically leave the stage and nosh on an audience member’s intermission snack⁵). *Pyramus and Thisbe* also leverages metatheatrical devices, which call attention to and then abuse conventions of theatre.

Russell avers,

The work of [...] postmodernism is characterized by an emphatic self-reflexiveness. It presents itself as a direct manifestation of aesthetic language

⁵ If Hamlet does do this, of course, we find it funny.

investigating itself as language; that is, the text or artwork points to itself as a particular expression of a specific meaning system, as a construct that explicitly says something about the process of creating meaning. (289)

In performance, the collapse of the fourth wall embodies that self-reflexiveness. The fourth wall exists to suspend disbelief; it requires the actors to play their parts, and nothing else. Bottom and his peers consistently prove themselves unfit for this task, and, in this way, disable the sign of the theatre by dissolving one of its critical ingredients.

Quince's prologue is the first blow to the fourth wall, which makes *Pyramus and Thisbe* self-aware as a play: "Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show; / But wonder on, till truth make all things plain" (5.1.126-7). It is generally the point of dramatic storytelling, and consistent with the sign of the theatre, to unfold a story as it unfolds itself (not to reveal the entire plot in prologue thus rendering the performance redundant). Bottom does this again in direct response to an interjection from Theseus, in the audience: " 'Deceiving me' is Thisby's cue: she is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see, it will fall pat as I told you. Yonder she comes" (5.1.182-185). Again, later, when Bottom's Pyramus is to be lifeless on stage, we have another blow to the fourth wall. Theseus remarks after Thisbe's death, "Moonshine and Lion are left to bury the dead," and Demetrius adds, "Ay, and Wall too," which inexplicably revives Pyramus (Bottom) (5.1.335-336). Bottom speaks directly to the audience, "No, I assure you, the wall is down that parted their fathers" (5.1.337-338).

Snug further batters the fourth wall when he reveals himself to be merely a man in a lion costume, as if his audience would fail to grasp this on its own. Snout commits another offense when he dismisses himself from the stage, announcing that he has "dischargèd" his part as the wall (5.1.202). The term "fourth wall" may not have been coined until the nineteenth century, but it cannot be overlooked that in this play whose

symbolic fourth wall collapses, its literal fourth wall also picks up and leaves the stage. These abuses to the fourth wall epitomize the postmodern concept of self-reflexiveness in that they call attention to the form of the play, and, as Bertens explains, the play thus “points to itself as a particular expression of a specific meaning system” (289). Again, this is humorous because it is transgressive, and transgressive because it is humorous; the play’s self-awareness breaches the sign system of the play as we know it. It also requires the audience to participate in the work’s meaning-making, in that the audience must be there to create need for a fourth wall, and then to witness its fall.

This brings us to a signature element of the comedic play, what theatre historian Penny Gay calls its “most vital aspect”: the audience (2). It is not just for reassuring laughter on which the actors in a comedy depend; comedic players rely on their audience for meaning, for subtext, for context. A Shakespearean play especially so, considering the imaginary membrane separating actor from audience in sixteenth century London was remarkably thinner than today. In Shakespeare’s time, the audience was expected to be both seen and heard (Gurr 84). It was assumed that rowdy guests may throw objects on the stage, but certainly that they would hurl insults at Malvolios and cheer for Henry Vs. Except in the most sober moments of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, in the standing-room-only pit or yard, one was unlikely to be “shushed” by a neighbor in the same way that modern theatre-goers “shush” or deliver a cold stare at un-stealthy whisperers.

A Midsummer Night’s Dream must have a Theseus, a Hippolyta, a Bottom, a Quince, a Helena, a Hermia, a Puck, etc., but just as important, it must have an audience. And that audience must have an imagination (supplied to us, as discussed previously, by our innate symbolic capacity). In comedy, that which is said and that which is not said are engaged in a constant interweaving, resulting in a tapestry made of the explicit language of the play coupled with the audience’s imagination—the

audience's filling-in of subtextual blanks. There is a comedic device that makes this tapestry possible, that sets up the loom, if you will. Comedians may tell you that successfully performed humor really comes down to an actor's agility (arguably, "you either have it or you don't") with that device: comic timing.

Comic timing is essentially the deft placement and delivery of pauses. It requires a clever instinct on the part of a director, and a finely tuned ear and physical control on the part of an actor. When paired with an actor's natural awkwardness, if she is "lucky" enough to have inherited one, it is comedy gold. But why and how do pauses operate in comedy? The answer is twofold.

First, a comedically timed line will not sound like the "center" of how the line is expected to be delivered, in the vein of Figure 1, illustrating that comedy exists anywhere but at the intersection between the situation and its expected, proportionate response. For example, Helena embarks on a rant in the middle of Act III. She perceives she has been betrayed by her best and oldest friend, her dearest confidante, Hermia. Helena believes that Hermia has masterminded a plot involving Lysander and Demetrius with the sole purpose of degrading her (Helena does not know that Hermia is innocent, and that Lysander and Demetrius are under the spell of the nectar from the pansy pricked by Cupid's bow, harvested by Puck, and mistakenly applied to Lysander's eyes and then also to Demetrius's eyes in an attempt by Oberon to fix this messy love quadrangle—phew!). Lysander, Hermia's love, mocks Helena with perceived saccharine enmity: "Fair Helena, who more engilds the night / Than all yon fiery O's and eyes of light" (3.2.188-189). To ice the cake, Demetrius, the object of Helena's wild affection, appears to have joined Hermia and Lysander in praising Helena beyond realistic bounds: "O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!" (3.2.138) (Previously, Demetrius has said, "I am sick when I do look on thee" (2.1.212).) Helena's proceeding rant on Hermia is the result of genuine offense, a mix of utter sadness at

being crossed by her only real friend, and fury catalyzed by humiliation at being ruthlessly teased (or so she believes).

Performed, the tempo of the monologue naturally fluctuates, particularly as Helena appeals to Hermia's sense of loyalty. Slowing down, she asks the delicate question, "Have you conspired, have you with these contrived / To bait me with this foul derision?" (3.2.197-198) Shakespeare signals the actor playing Helena to languish on line 198, whose catalexis (omission of a syllable) decelerates the iambic heartbeat of the text, and a caesura in line 202 firmly applies the brakes. This, then, is followed by a couplet of dismay from Hermia, and then these from Helena:

Have you not set Lysander, as in scorn,
To follow me, and praise my eyes and face?
And made your other love, Demetrius—
Who even but now did spurn me with his foot—
To call me goddess, nymph, divine, and rare,
Precious, celestial? (3.2.223-8)

This excerpt is rich with comic timing possibilities. In contrast to line 198, line 226 contains a heavy feminine ending, accelerating the iambic heartbeat of the text, so that just as Helena is beginning "to call me goddess," she is at peak speed, at the height of madness, which renders any pauses (exercises of comic timing) through "to call me goddess, nymph, divine, and rare" in direct opposition to the breathlessness that preceded them. Helena may be in the throes of rage, but when she pauses between "goddess" and "nymph" and "divine," she is transported back to the perfect moment when Demetrius looked on her with love for the first time, before she began to perceive his praise as insincere. The pauses in line 227 bring Helena's high-speed chase to an unexpected crawl disproportionate to her fury, as she undoubtedly shares a lingering glance at Demetrius while together they reminisce about his waking up just minutes

ago to behold her “lips, those kissing cherries” (3.2.141). Helena even—in another example of Shakespeare’s comic genius—makes a couple of suggested additions to Demetrius’ flattery: “precious, celestial?” To achieve a laugh, Helena’s performance does not just need to be genuine, it requires the audience to participate in expecting one delivery (a continued, fast-moving rant) and then receiving another (an abruptly halted, pause-heavy reflection).

The second explanation for how and why pauses operate in comedy is again related to the audience’s participation in the meaning-making of the play, by imagining the subtext—or thought process—behind a pregnant pause. A good example is the optional pause in Puck’s response to Oberon, who has asked his fairy servant in Act II to collect a pansy flower—“maidens call it love-in-idleness”—which Oberon once observed Cupid’s arrow prick by accident, missing the moving target of a passing votaress (2.1.168). Oberon commands, “fetch me this herb,” and Puck answers, “I’ll put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes” (2.1.173-176). The optional pause made especially possible by the enjambment between lines 175 and 176 is comical because, if Puck pauses here, the audience is invited to imagine that he is literally calculating the time it will take him to circumvent the globe. The advanced math that this fairy must be doing—the pythagorean, trigonometric calculations he performs during this pause—culminate in a surprisingly precise estimation: “forty minutes.” The humor in this pause requires the actor playing Puck to be serious and allow the pause to do its work; it requires the audience to imagine Puck multiplying Pi by two times the radius, carrying the one, and determining his relative velocity.

From pauses we turn to pure silences—or, in the case of George Lucas’s *Star Wars*, breaks in human language to accommodate robotic beeps and trills (R2-D2) or

pinnipedean wailing (Chewbacca)⁶. R2-D2 and Chewbacca include viewers in the meaning-making of the film by participating in half-English conversations, with no subtitles to translate the non-English lines. It is incumbent on the viewer, based on C-3P0 and Han Solo's surrounding language, to interpret R2-D2 and Chewbacca by inference. In *Episode IV: A New Hope*, examples abound. R2-D2 and C-3P0 have just landed on the desert planet Tatooine. Unbeknownst to C-3P0, R2-D2 possesses the stolen plans of the Death Star and a recorded distress message from rebel leader Princess Leia, intended for Jedi knight Obi-Wan Kenobi. R2-D2 holds the key to galactic peace; despite these high stakes, the two droids engage in disproportionately casual banter. Fun keyboard symbols have been added to represent R2-D2's lines, for your amusement.

C-3P0

Where do you think you're going?

R2-D2

% > ..

C-3P0

Well I'm not going that way... it's much too rocky. This way is much easier.

R2-D2

@#

C-3P0

What makes you think there are settlements over there?

R2-D2

#&{+**+}\|>

C-3P0

⁶ Chewbacca's voice is in fact conglomerated recordings of several bears, a badger, a lion, a seal, and a walrus (pinniped) (Madrigal).

Don't get technical with me.

R2-D2

!!~&^%

C-3P0

What mission? What are you talking about?

R2-D2

[**#@\$.>>]

C-3P0

I've just about had enough of you. Go that way. You'll be malfunctioning within a day, you near-sighted scrap pile. [He kicks R2-D2.] And don't let me catch you following me, begging for help, because you won't get it.

R2-D2

[to himself] ^%*;?>/'"!#@__+! (*Star Wars*)

R2-D2 has virtually no body language and merely a series of beeps, squeaks, and whistles to communicate, but we infer his mood by C-3P0's frustrated gestures and rebuttals: R2-D2 is stubborn, righteous, and anxious to deliver Princess Leia's message. We can imagine R2-D2 is saying something like, "I'm going this way...because there are settlements over there...because, dummy, considering the speed and trajectory of our descent from the rebel ship—and the fact that Tatooine's habitable zones are East of this sedimentary formation according to my mapping chip—and since I am the one with the Princess's message because my hard drive is equipped with a holographic memory device...[to himself] Near-sighted scrap pile? Who's the pants-less ninny made of teaspoons with the computing power of a thimble?!" Viewers will interpret R2-D2's language according to their own imaginations, which makes this comedic device distinctly inclusive of its audience.

Lucas employs this device again in conversations between the space smuggler, Han Solo, and his first mate Wookiee, Chewbacca. In *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, Solo and Chewbacca are piloting a stolen Imperial shuttle towards Endor to deactivate a deflective shield protecting the Death Star. The mission is very dangerous, and Solo coaches Chewbacca on a stealthy approach. Again, it is my own sincere intention to capture Chewy's non-human utterances in the lines below.

HAN SOLO

Keep your distance, though, Chewy. But don't look like you're trying to keep your distance.

CHEWBACCA

Braaah ahhhwhah.

HAN SOLO

I don't know...fly casual.

CHEWBACCA

Wah. (*Return*)

As with R2-D2, it is the responsibility of the viewer to give meaning to Chewbacca's utterances, though Chewbacca is afforded more human-like gestures and inflections than the droid R2-D2. We can imagine, based on Solo's language, that Chewbacca is saying something like, "And how am I supposed to do that? ...Whatever." The viewer participates in fleshing out Solo and Chewy's love-hate relationship.

Returning to humans, we revisit Derrida's theory of the fallibility of language, and Deacon and Cashman's theories of human symbolic capacity (and their potential to situate us on different levels of reality and imagination), when considering the comedic marriage of syllabic emphasis and the artful pause. Syllabic emphasis can both change the meaning of language and accommodate the audience's imagination to the point of humor. To illustrate the slippery nature of language through syllabic emphasis,

consider Lysander's words to Hermia at bedtime in the forest: "I mean that my heart unto yours is knit" (2.2.53). Emphasizing various words changes the meaning of the language, as such:

1. I *mean* that my heart unto yours is knit

Meaning, Lysander is attempting to clarify something he said earlier.

2. I mean that *my* heart unto yours is knit

Meaning, no one else is in love with Hermia

3. I mean that my *heart* unto yours is knit

Meaning, Lysander's heart, as opposed to any other organ, is knit to Hermia's heart

4. I mean that my heart unto *yours* is knit

Meaning, Lysander loves no one by Hermia

5. I mean that my heart unto yours is *knit*

Finally, what Lysander means to say: Metaphorically speaking, we are so in love that our hearts have become one. This is the only emphasis that works in the context of Lysander's argument, since he is attempting to persuade Hermia that, being "knit" as they are, the two must share a bed for the night.⁷

We have established that syllabic emphasis can change the meaning of language. Now, add a pause to invoke the audience's imagination, and, if executed correctly, you have humor. Take a line from Helena's tirade delivered to Hermia. Helena has just had a false epiphany and now believes her dear friend Hermia is behind what Helena perceives as a malicious hoax involving the sudden affections of

⁷ In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson usefully performs a similar exercise on the line "time flies like an arrow" (250).

two men—Demetrius and Lysander—who previously detested and overlooked her, respectively.

And will you rend our ancient love asunder,

To join with men in scorning your poor friend? (3.2.216-217)

There are a dozen ways these lines can be emphasized, and nearly every interpretation is sensible. Helena may emphasize the word “will” to make the question genuine (Hermia, are you really going to do this?) or emphasize “scorning” to make the question rhetorical (Hermia, you could not possibly want to scorn your dear old friend). Helena may place emphasis on the age of their relationship (to appeal to Hermia’s nostalgia) or on Helena’s poorness (to appeal to Hermia’s sympathy). However, there is one humorous option that combines syllabic emphasis with a carefully placed pause.

And will you rend our ancient love asunder,

To join with [pause] *men* in scorning your poor friend?

Delivering a pause before “men” implies Helena is trying to find a word loathsome enough to describe Demetrius and Lysander. Through this pause, Helena invites the audience to imagine which insults are flying through her head. To the Elizabethan audience, perhaps: coxcombs, codpieces, boar-pigs, fustilarians, joitheads, moldwarps, or lewdsters. To the twenty-first century audience, perhaps: tools, losers, scum, pricks, ass-hats, mother-fuckers, or shit-heads. Now the audience has participated with Helena in imagining a word horrible enough for Demetrius and Lysander, only for Helena to decide (brought home by syllabic emphasis) that “men” is indeed the worst insult she can muster. The pause/emphasis combination yields an amusing delivery: Hermia, I don’t even care about our friendship, but for your own sake are you really going to stoop to playing with these...[I can’t even find a disgusting enough word—no wait, I can!]*—men?!*

Another popular example of the pause/emphasis device is featured in the film *Young Frankenstein*, a 1974 satire of the horror film genre, directed by Mel Brooks and starring Gene Wilder. In a haunted castle on the top of a hill in Transylvania, sinister hostess Frau Blücher leads Dr. Frankenstein with his lab assistants Inga and Igor up a dank, menacing staircase. Blücher's outstretched hand carries a uselessly unlit candelabra. Halfway up the stairs, Blücher abruptly turns to her three companions and huskily warns, "Stay close to the candles. The staircase can be treacherous" (*Young*). Frau Blücher (played by the actor Cloris Leachman) delivers the warning with a pause/emphasis combination: "Stay close to the candles. The staircase [pause] *can* be treacherous." The cumulative effect is that the emphasis strongly implies it is not just possible that the staircase is treacherous, but rather that the staircase has indeed been treacherous at least once in the past. The pause suggests Blücher is reflecting momentarily on the unspoken accident(s), and invites the audience to imagine what that accident may have looked like. Did Blücher once stumble on the stair and set her severe bun on fire? (Hence the slow ascent and the unlit candles.)

These abuses to the sign of the theatre (in the form of blows to the fourth wall) and invitations for the audience to participate in the meaning-making of the story (in the form of interpretable pauses) reveal the spirit of comedy (in its best, non-offensive form) to be inherently inclusive. Comedy equalizes those who receive it—be they princes or innkeepers—by giving equal weight to all provided subtexts.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Have a Beard Coming

Francis/Frances Flute Embodies the Binary Opposition and Dances on the Spectrum between Male and Female

Humor also participates in corrupting the modern concept of the binary opposition, as *Dream*'s Francis Flute participates in cross-dressing to disable the conventional male-female opposition. Hutcheon asserts that the "concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way [...] to that of differences: to the assertion not of centralized sameness but of decentralized community—another postmodern paradox" (252). Does it not defeat the purpose of dissolving the binary opposition to create yet another binary opposition (in Hutcheon's words, "sameness" against "community")? I argue that this postmodern "giving way" to differences further disturbs the stability of the binary opposition in that it demands the acknowledgement, alternatively, of *spectrums* of being. The humor in *Dream* comes some distance in acknowledging the spectrum, and perhaps in realizing what Jane Flax envisions for the sign of woman:

Reversal [of the opposition], of course, is not sufficient. A "positive" deconstruction of the man/woman pair must also be disconnected from any historical, specific, or biological referent. Woman must be deessentialized and set to play among other equally nonnecessary, nondetermined, and nonreferential signs. (421)

In featuring the aptronymic Flute as an individual on the spectrum between male and female, Shakespeare does (through humor) succeed in "deessentializing" the two genders.

To start, Francis Flute's given name is a form of homophone, in that the audience would not see the spelling of his name, whose sound may be either male or female (Francis or Frances). The flute (his surname) is also a phallic instrument—suggestively played, I may add—but also possesses many holes, to suggest the feminine. Flutes also emit notes of a higher pitch than other wind instruments. If we extend the bellows-mender occupation to imagine Francis's average "day at the office," we observe a young man repairing a device made to blow on and enlarge a flame, which is positioned inside the womb of a fireplace, and whose smoke flows through the phallus of a chimney. There is sufficient confused imagery here to cloud the separateness of the male and female poles; in Francis and his work, those poles are intermingled.

In *Pyramus and Thisbe*, this intermingling of male/female is further extended. Not only must Flute and Bottom (whose names, if it is not too indecent to point out, have their own apparent sexual relationship) spy and whisper through a hole (female) made by poor Snout's undoubtedly spit-soaked fingers, but they end their lives by the phallus of a blade (male). Reigning over their scene is an amalgamation of male and female in the form of a female moon, ensconcing (metaphorically) a man in the moon. The lovers, from the audience, argue about Starveling's portrayal of the moon: Theseus offers, practically, that "the man should be put into the lantern. How is it else the man i'th' moon?" (5.1.237-239) Flute, meanwhile, has inhabited Thisbe's costume, and has thus succeeded in what Theseus deems a complete and sensical marriage of two poles.

In his portrayal of Thisbe, Francis and Frances (at first, the two branches of a binary opposition) ostensibly combine to yield Thisbe, who exists on the spectrum of

male-female.⁸ The mechanicals' rehearsals serve to remind the audience constantly of Flute's sex: "Nay, faith, let me not play a woman. I have a beard coming in" (1.1.39-40). On the Elizabethan stage it was indeed customary for male actors to play female parts, but uncustomary (except in comedies) to acknowledge it.

Flute straddles the male-female opposition throughout the play, so that even when he is portraying Thisbe, Quince interjects to correct Flute's pronunciation while simultaneously calling out his sex: "Ninus' tomb, man!" (3.1.85). Further, in the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* at the lovers' wedding, Flute's lines seem written to convince the audience of his femininity, which backfires humorously to remind the audience that he is indeed male, or at least not completely female, in the conventional sense. Flute as Thisbe refers to his own "cherry lips," and compares himself (at a stretch, maybe) to Helen of Troy (5.1.188). In blurring the divide between male and female and refusing to conform to a gender, Flute disables the binary opposition but also makes room for a spectrum of male-female, across which he dances in *Dream*, most literally, when he and Bottom perform a bergamask dance, further intermingling their genders.

This engagement with and disabling of the binary is another form of boundary-pushing that is signature to comedy. Regardless of the playwright's intention (we cannot know if Shakespeare was phobic of the gender spectrum or not) these devices of comedy acknowledge in us our deepest fears and discomforts and stealthily, almost by osmosis, require us to confront them.

⁸ We could indeed regard Thisbe as a sign as well, each conventional gender pole combining to yield another whole that is a spectrum.

CONCLUSION

Through the close examination of irony, stakes, wordplay, departure from form, timing, metatheatrics, and cross-dressing, we have observed the vital transgressiveness of humor. Structuralist, deconstructive, and postmodern theory equip us with the language to codify and experiment with humor possibilities; and, these theoretical frameworks being transgressive to degrees in their own right, substantiate the notion that humor has innate boundary-pushing qualities.

So what does this microscope on humor reveal about our humanness? It seems we derive pleasure from the acknowledgment that things are not what they seem (fallibility), that there exists a realm beyond our present experience (irony), that the boxes into which we have packaged ourselves and our experience are truly without sides (departure from form, metatheatrics, and the disabling of the binary opposition). The human experience is a machine we have built, but perhaps humor shows us it can be rewired. The inclusiveness of humor prizes a diversity of perspectives and challenges the notion of a singular truth promoted by the powerful. And, humor, as an alleged human universal, enjoins us with our peers while it unites us in play with other species. Thus, humor reveals a remarkable human capacity for empathy, and for the will to transgress convention.

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