“Present Mirth Hath Present Laughter; What's To Come Is Still Unsure”: Death And Humor In Early Modern England

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“PRESENT MIRTH HATH PRESENT LAUGHTER; WHAT’S TO COME IS STILL UNSURE”: DEATH AND HUMOR IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

by

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DEDICATION

To my God and King, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

To my wife, Rachel, and my daughter, Julia, the funniest people I know.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my stellar committee, who have all showed incredible patience and generosity in shepherding me through this process. I especially want to thank my director, David Miller, whose comments and guidance were as prompt as they were insightful and clear. It is seldom that the phrase “gentleman and scholar” are so completely appropriate, but Dr. Miller has embodied both terms.

Thanks also to the wonderful students and faculty (particularly the English faculty) of Heathwood Hall Episcopal School, whose encouragement and genuine love of learning have inspired me to delve deeper into literature, history, and their interconnections.

Sincere thanks to my brother, Dr. Jonathan Siricy, whose discipline and encouragement continue to be an inspiration to me. You helped me get back into this project, and you cheered me the whole way through. I am looking forward to being mistaken for you at academic gatherings. I’m not half the professor you are, but I am proud to be related to such a dedicated teacher and scholar.

Thanks to my parents, who raised and continue to love me in all of my quirks and folly. I am thankful for and love you both so much.

And finally, thanks to my long-suffering wife and daughter. You endured the long nights, the half-baked ideas, the terrible jokes, and came out loving me anyway. You both make sadness hurt less and laughter sweeter, and I cannot fully tell you how much I love you both.
ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the workings of humor in 16\textsuperscript{th}-and 17\textsuperscript{th}-century England, particularly in its proximity and deployment around death. Through Early Modern theoretical discussions of humor as well as utterances, historical tracts, poetry, and drama of the time, humor’s role in interrupting or breaking up particular modes of interpretation can be seen. Surveying Castiglione and Puttenham, records of martyred Catholics and Protestants, the poetry of Spenser and Donne, and the dramatic works of Shakespeare, I argue that humor operates as a sort of short-circuiting of a given audience expectation that allows for a potential divergence from previous assertions or articulations. The view of humor as fundamentally a function of incongruity is behind this reading, but jesting and mirth are less positive or static utterances than they are an alchemy of rhetorical savvy, audience receptivity, and timing. Humor, it has been often noted, is a force that can be marshalled by ruling powers or by rebelling insurgents. That variableness is, I believe, less a positive function of humor itself than it is a chaotic and fundamentally interactive nature. To appeal to a joke or jest is to set oneself up as much as one’s target; proper management of the audience and situation can be as poignant as it can be hilarious. That dynamic circulates throughout writing of this period, and various speakers, poets, and dramatists have offered variations on the syncopated rhythms of jesting. This manuscript is not a survey of all of the various uses of humor; it is rather an attempt to see the common footprint that jesting leaves in many of the major media of Early Modern England.
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INTRODUCTION

England in the 15th- and 16th-centuries was a country riven with religious debate, political uncertainty, and cultural unrest. It boasted at least four major shifts in official church doctrine, over three angst-filled successions of very different monarchs, and too many varieties of death to list concisely. The crown and the church held society together and aloft, and both institutions seemed ready to implode or collapse under their own shifting weight. English society was radically unstable, and it was therefore literally absurd.¹

Yet, in the midst of this upheaval and unrest wound a steady stream of humor. This humor was not just a product of societal nervousness or a sort of plucky response to adversity. It was not just a way to distract from the fear haunting the edges of everyday life. It was not limited to the wealthy or the poor, the noble or commoner, the catholic or the protestant. Humor came in joke books like the Hundred Merry Tales or Merry Tales and Quick Answers, in translated manuals for noblemen like Baldassare Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, or in light-hearted poems and plays; but humor can also be found in the accounts of executions or martyr’s deaths or in depictions of death in tragic drama and epic poetry. Humor does not always emerge in this period as a way to escape the death that surrounded the culture; it rather is shown as a way to arrest or reverse audience reception of a given event/circumstance/idea. Seen in this way, death and despair are not

¹ OED: “against or without reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.” Partially derived from Latin absurdus, or “incongruous, inconsistent.”
the obstacles or opponents of humor; they are rather opportunities for humor to halt and re-frame a given response.

Things thought incongruous or inappropriate have long been identified as at least containing the kernels of humor within them. Aristotle gives examples for how to get a laugh in the *Rhetoric*, citing puns or unexpected turns of phrase as means to get an audience to look favorably on the speaker. Cicero too describes disappointed expectations as a source of laughter in a speech. For both of them, humor works in favor of the speaker, preventing any hostility or cynicism from setting in. The good rhetor can re-direct a crowd in the direction he wants them to follow. An orator provides an opportunity for the audience to look favorably upon him in that the thwarted expectations add spice to a speech.

The so-called “Incongruity Theory” really solidified in the 18th century in the work of James Beattie, Arthur Schopenhauer, and particularly in the writing of Immanuel Kant. Kant saw the source of a “convulsive laugh” as an absurd occurrence which cannot satisfy the intellect; that is, something our rational minds cannot comprehend or make sense of, something of a physiological response to the grotesque or formally ambiguous. He illustrates his idea with a joke: “The heir of a rich relative wished to arrange for an imposing funeral, but he lamented that he could not properly succeed; ‘for’ (said he) ‘the

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3 *De Oratore*. trans. E.W. Sutton. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press. II.LXIII.255. Note the weird confluence of disappointed expectations in both the anatomy of a joke and in the narrative arc of a tragedy.
4 Given Aristotle’s attitudes towards the sexes, the “he” is unfortunately accurate.
more money I give my mourners to look sad, the more cheerful they look!’”6 The joke comes not in spite of the sad occasion or in the face of grief; it comes because it opposes two incongruous ideas (mourning, laughter) and juxtaposes them in an almost extra-rational manner. Humor here stops the train of thought leading to grief as well as the impulse to pity the bereaved individual. Kant argues that humor dissipates into nothing intelligible or logical; it is a sort of short-circuit that burns out the rational mind’s progression. This effect may not, in and of itself, provoke thought, but it does clear the way for alternative arguments or positions.

One execution from the 16th century brings these elements to the fore. In his final conversation with the executioner, Thomas More reportedly made a series of jokes about the manner of death he was about to experience as well as the apparent absurdity of the whole enterprise. These jokes are recorded in a play, Sir Thomas More, a play apparently never performed on stage. The drama draws upon Nicholas Harpsfield’s The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More for this and other instances of More’s wit. The accounts of these closing jokes appear in Cresacre More’s biography of his great-grandfather as well as John Harrington’s Metamorphosis of Ajax. I am using the play’s version of these jokes 1) because it nicely condenses several anecdotal lines into a dramatic, first-person utterance, and 2) because the play works as a meta-narrative on the staging of martyrdom to begin with, in that it presents to the play-going audience the necessity and function of speaking beyond the perceived immediate audience on stage.

The play Sir Thomas More recounts the titular scholar’s words to the man about to behead him for treason and heresy. According to custom, the executioner asks for

6 ibid. p. 200
forgiveness, to which More responds, “Forgive thee, honest fellow? Why?” (17.90)⁷

The executioner, apparently confused by the question, answers, “For your death, my lord” (91). “O, my death!” exclaims More, as if remembering his purpose for having ascended to the chopping block before launching into a string of puns, witticisms, and mock commands:

I had rather it were in thy power to
forgive me, for thou hast the sharpest action against
me. The law, my honest friend, lies in thy hands now.
([Gives him] his purse.) Here’s thy fee. And, my good
fellow, let my suit be dispatched presently; for ‘tis all
one pain to die a lingering death and to live in the
continual mill of a lawsuit. But I can tell thee, my neck
is so short that if thou shouldst behead an hundred
noblemen like myself, thou wouldst ne’er get credit
by it. Therefore—look ye, sir—do it handsomely, or,
of my word, thou shalt never deal with me hereafter.
(92-102)

More thus puns on the sharpness of the action against him, plays on the interminability of
suits in court and a “lingering death” upon the block, and jokingly chides the executioner
about doing his job right to ensure repeat business from the customer. In so doing, he
effectively deflates the seriousness of his own person, making the business of being
executed as mundane as a lawsuit or a haircut. In fact, he goes on to joke about his beard
being cut by the axe along with his neck.⁸ The situation becomes less a grand judgment
upon a stubborn recusant than a simple transaction between customer and servicer. The
legal ramifications and fatal implements are present, but More tips them slyly to represent

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⁷ Sir Thomas More, ed. John Jowett, [London: Arden Shakespeare, 2011]; all quotations from the
play are from this edition and will be noted by in text line citations.

⁸ The play has More initially ask for his beard not to be cut before remembering that “execution
passed upon that last / night, and the body of it lies buried in the Tower” (17.96). The
biographies of Harpsfield and More recount More moving his beard off of the chopping block
and telling the executioner that judgment had been pronounced upon him, not his beard.
tedium and satisfaction rather than judgment and death. This re-direction essentially leaves More’s fate open to interpretation, and one able to get a laugh out of the audience will almost invariably receive a more favorable reading. The jokes thus blunt the edge of the axe and of the sentence against him even as they acknowledge his predicament. He says ironically but also truly that the executioner will “never deal with [him] hereafter.” More hopes, of course, that England and Henry will still have to deal with his presence, however.

This hope was fulfilled, as the play Sir Thomas More was penned at least fifty years after More’s actual execution, and one biography of him appeared well into the Stuart period. And his jokes, it seems, were essential to the endurance of his cultural presence. Every account of More’s death records witticisms and puns on his arrival at the Tower of London, to his jailers, on the way to the block, while ascending the scaffold, and to the executioner himself. Even More’s enemies, Protestant chroniclers who saw him as a cruel man responsible for the torture of many believers, grant that he jested in his final moments. Holinshed’s Chronicles reads More’s penchant for joking as sinfulness, and it cites his final jokes as evidence of his corruption. John Foxe, in Acts and Monuments, admits to More’s skill with humor but argues that he abused it, “thinking to iest poore simple truth out of countenaunce.” Foxe also seeks to discredit More’s lasting value as a scholar and humanist because he proved “a scoffer & mocker at the verie houre of his death.”

9 The date of the play is contested but the earliest conjectures are in the mid to late 1580’s. Cresacre More’s biography appeared in the 1620’s.
10 1583 ed., 812.
11 Ibid, 1069.
Two things stand out in these accounts of More’s end. First, no one disputes that More in fact joked upon the block. Second, that use of humor is expressly linked to his spiritual status. For Catholic biographers, More’s humor operates as a sign of his blessed peace in the face of unjust persecution. Being able to laugh in the face of death indicates his inner assurance of salvation, as no one but a confirmed and convinced saint could compare beheading to a shave and a haircut or mock the whole proceeding as a lawsuit about to be mercifully ended. For Protestant critics, More’s jokes, though indisputably meant as jests, prove the exact opposite about him. They show that he could not take even his own demise seriously and that such an attitude could only be borne of learning and skill perverted by sin and false doctrine. For either camp, however, the jokes are the final evidence of its case. More is definitely a martyr because no one but a martyr could make light of the situation like that; More is definitely not a martyr because no martyr could make light of the situation like that. Something funny is going on, but there’s disagreement about what it means.

It is worth noting that both the executing apparatus and (in More’s case) the executed are seeking to use irony or incongruity to undermine the other. The whole process of public execution in England depended upon ending the threat of the accused, be that her/his political rebellion or religious heresy. The insurrectionist had to be shown not just as a failure but as an over-matched gnat in the face of official power. The heretic must be revealed (or presented as) a disease subject to mockery and punishment. It was not enough that the individual die. S/he had to be made to look ridiculous or inconsequential. Her/his existence could not just end; s/he had to be made the object of public scorn. The most effective means of eliminating either type of offender was to
present the ideas as laughable and worthy of that scorn. A would-be king killer would, instead of removing the head of the state, lose her/his own head. The would-be religious irritant would be dealt with like a diseased part of the body: they would be purged with fire. Conversely, if the accused were able to manage her/his demise appropriately, her/his death could mean something more than just a life ending. More turned the machinery of ironic derision towards himself and, ultimately, against the entire process. Humor in both cases served to interrupt the other side’s interpretive strategy. More’s claims to clean conscience and higher authority had to be stopped by public shaming and death; that shame could be halted by ironic joking at the whole enterprise.

Humor was a frequent topic in Early Modern rhetoric texts, courtesy manuals, and even instruction books for preaching. Castiglione lists it as one of the chief skills for the ideal courtier to master, Puttanham details humor’s ability to both curry favor and discharge “spleens,” and theologians as disparate as Hugh Latimer and More himself praised jesting as a valuable tool for expressing spiritual insight. What nearly every source agrees on, however, is that the different forms of humor (wordplay, anecdotal jests, practical jokes, sarcasm, irony, etc.) could be a two-edged sword when navigating the interaction between different classes and social groups. Humor could cut down the lower or dominated party without vulgar displays of physical force (a king or noble

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12 Thomas Wilson’s *Art of Rhetoric* (1560), Stefan Guazzo’s *Civile Conversation* (1574, 1581), and Erasmus’s *Ecclesiastae* (1535) are respective examples of each. Chris Holcomb surveys many more in *Mirth Making: the Rhetorical Discourse on Jesting in Early Modern England*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.

mocking an unruly peasant to evoke laughter rather than simply whipping him). Humor could also temper or slant physical punishment in such a way as to make the person punished rather than the punisher the subject of scrutiny and derision (a merry quip makes the servant being imprisoned bear the brunt rather than the perhaps flimsy or inconsistent reasoning behind the imprisonment). But, everyone in the period agrees, humor can also upend the established order and allow the less powerful and privileged to get the better of those supposedly above them. To use humor as a correctional tool is to open the door for humor as a disruptive force. Irony and mockery, aimed and utilized in different directions, can thus save one from having to use the whip or sword (or axe) and also compensate for a relative lack of whip or sword (or axe).

Manuals and jest books of the time sought to control or program this power so that it flowed in to authorized channels. Laughter needed to be properly directed lest the powers that be find themselves the butt of jokes. Chris Holcomb, in his study of “mirth-making” in Early Modern England, notes how courtiers and orators were cautioned to “avoid the dangers of jesting, particularly those associated with disruptive and chaotic energies.” Yet, they were at the same time encouraged to utilize humor’s power to ingratiate the one telling the joke with an audience, particularly if it was at the expense of another. The problem, as Holcomb points out, “is that jesting always involves such

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14 Sir Thomas More actually transfers such an instance from earlier anecdotes about Sir Thomas Cromwell. In the anecdote, the Lord Chancellor (More or Cromwell) meets a young servant with exceptionally long hair. When pressed as to why he has such “unruly locks,” the young man claims he has made a vow equivalent to Samson’s Nazarite oath. The Lord Chancellor, unwilling to let the “ruffian” run free but also unwilling to force the man’s breaking of the vow, commands the man to be imprisoned until the completion of his time “sanctified” by his vow, a not surprisingly short period once he had to spend it in prison. In effect, the story mocks the hypocrisy behind using a religious vow to justify unruly behavior, with More/Cromwell acting as a witty judge that makes the spiritual shackles supposedly borne by the would-be ruffian tangible.  
15 Mirth Making, p. 27
energies; it is always a flirtation with disorder.”\(^{16}\) That disorder is precisely what a potential martyr like More sought to unleash on the block. The use of humor in such situations interrupted the normal associations such an execution was meant to cement. To upset the label of heretic or traitor, More derided the whole process in an attempt to clear space for the role of martyr.

This dynamic power of humor becomes clear when it is interposed with a staging of death. In the case of executions, the presence of death is stark and unavoidable. In such cases, humor is either presented to break up the “obviousness” of the accused’s guilt or to interrupt the pity and awe such public death might inspire. That dynamic has more subtle nuances, however, and poetry of the time employed it to both denigrate over-eager proclamations of victimization/martyrdom and exalt the seemingly foolish or under-appreciated “death” of sexual pleasure.

What all of these instances indicate is an uncertainty surrounding the interpretation of and response to death. David Lee Miller, in discussing Shakespeare’s deployment of martyrdom imagery in \textit{Julius Caesar}, argues that Early Modern theater fostered a certain distancing from the fraught discourse of political and religious debate.\(^{17}\) A public death on the scaffold was not necessarily a martyrdom or an execution based just on the physical circumstances; an added layer of interpretive framing/rhetorical construction allowed the event to be interpreted in a particular way. Taking Miller’s descriptions further, one can see that death itself becomes a site of rhetorical contestation,

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
a “place”\(^\text{18}\) where various means of contextualization and argument can be brought to bear. Humor, it turns out, is an oddly effective tool in such places. I want to look at exactly how such a tool gets deployed in various contexts during this time period.

I will start by looking at how humor was discussed in two very influential manuals of the time: Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* and Puttenham’s *Art of English Poesy*. Castiglione’s treatment of humor comes in the context of how a courtier could utilize it verbally or otherwise in presentations of himself. Books II and III in particular feature a discussion of the uses of humor to help project a particular image of the speaker, but they also include warnings about humor’s power to disrupt the ideal presentation of the self. The speakers highlight how humor may help win favor or detract from a rival’s standing, but jokes and jesting are always presented as two-edged swords that can easily harm the unwise humorist. This same dynamic appears in Puttenham’s work on versification. What the *Art of English Poesy* presents in various discussions of irony and humorous invective is a sense that humor interjects itself into expected patterns or rhythms and provides a space for invention or differentiation. Both books, though dealing with “humor” as a sort of abstract concept, seek to embed it within contexts of public display and published writing. Christopher Holcomb, in his study on jesting and “mirth-making” during this time, notes that humor is always a dangerous flirtation with chaos and disorder. Building on that idea, I want to argue that part of the chaotic effect is

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\(^{18}\) Again calling on the terms and senses Miller uses, “place” is a “textual-rhetorical” term when bringing in various allusions and cultural-literary precursors. The intersection of these events and their impacts/resonances produces an “imaginary register in which different localities meet and contaminate each other” (p. 239-40). While Miller is looking at how theater allows an audience to step back from the charged language of martyrdom/heresy and makes it “possible to see the whole process [of rhetorically producing the ‘meaning’ of the event] at work,” I am interested in a particular cog in that process (p. 247). Humor’s role in halting and re-directing interpretation is my central focus.
achieved through an interruption of interpretive flow (be that the flow of authorized mockery or of rebellious defiance).

Given that dynamic, I will move into a discussion of humor in instances of public executions in England during this time. As Miller argues, staged deaths are dependent upon interpretation for their theological/political/ontological status, and humor can play an important role in the strategic construction no matter the side. Humor, specifically the humor of humiliation and ironic exaltation, was built into the very apparatus of official executions. The over-the-top nature of most forms of capital punishment lent the proceedings a symbolic meaning beyond the mere dispatching of a troublesome person, particularly in cases of political or religious schism. It was not enough that the person die; the person and her/his ideas had to be publicly marked as wayward and/or ridiculous; the power of the crown or church had to be seen as overwhelming and in direct opposition to the offender’s. The gathered crowd needed to be in on the joke of how absurd the idea of rebellion or revolution was. Any sympathy or affinity with the rebellious ideas had to be interrupted and replaced with state-sanctioned laughter at the very thought of disobedience. On the other hand, a savvy rhetorical performance by the accused could halt that interpretive flow and introduce another reading of the proceedings: rather than being a malefactor or traitor, the person dying could be perceived as a martyr being sacrificed in the face of ungodly (and, naturally, unjust) oppression. Humor at one’s own expense could short-circuit the humiliation intended by the authorities, re-directing the derision and disdain onto the whole process. One would still be executed, but one could go out with a laugh.
After looking at humor’s role in shaping an audience’s response in the cases of executions, I will examine how two Early Modern English poets looked at the interaction of humor and death. In *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser deploys humor to interrupt over-hasty proclamations of victimization (even martyrdom) and reveal them as premature. Specifically in Book III, Spenser portrays an over-willingness to claim martyr-status as something that makes a character susceptible to the very death they bemoan. In particular, such cases are halted by humorous interjection (of narrative perspective or of another character’s intrusion into the situation) and shown to be misreadings of the actual circumstance. The poem thus uses humor to stop the easy claiming of a martyr’s title, further showing that a selfish focus on oneself can be more responsible for one’s death than any outside force or oppression. Obversely, the love poetry of John Donne shows that, by means of humorous exaggeration, the mundane or earthly can lay claim to the beatified state usually reserved for martyrs. Donne’s religious poems have been seen as trying to break down the links between physical death and spiritual blessing,19 and I want to argue that the first step in that break can be seen in his erotic verse. In poems such as “The Flea” and “The Canonization,” Donne ironically exalts sexual love to a spiritual realm, making the physical (be it a common flea or a gouty man) take on martyrological elements. The poems use humor to make the ridiculous into the sublime, and the effect is ultimately an exaltation of the absurd into the transcendent.

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Finally, using the dynamics analyzed in Spenser and Donne as patterns, I will examine Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Both plays date from 1595-96, and both feature star-crossed lover plots (the former in a play-within-the-play, the latter as the primary narrative). The question of how humor can interrupt and change our views of staged death comes into sharp focus when comparing the depiction of Pyramus and Thisbe “dying for love” and Romeo and Juliet seemingly doing the same. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* curtails and surrounds its deaths with humorous comments by a staged audience, separating the apparent pathos of the lines from any sort of serious consideration by the actual audience viewing the whole picture. There is humor in the portrayals of the Rude Mechanicals, but it is always at their own unconscious expense. Their wish to signify tragic profundity fails in that the noble onlookers on stage as well as their own misapprehension of their importance/ability undermine any sort of sympathy or sadness. It is humor blocking their attempts at tragedy. *Romeo and Juliet*, conversely, succeeds primarily because of the play’s assimilation of humor and self-consciousness. That is, through its constant highlighting (primarily through the character of Mercutio, but also through Juliet and others) of artificial or contrived love language, the play actually forestalls the audience’s mockery of such sentiments. The result is, like Donne’s love poetry or the self-conscious humorist about to be executed, the play’s final scene achieves real pathos. Humor has been preemptively deployed to allow an audience to perceive the actual tragedy in the deaths of the two leads.

Death becomes then the ultimate test for humor’s power to interrupt. What martyrrologies, poetry, and plays show is that humor is a two-edged sword that can cut
multiple ways in a rhetorical situation. What it always does, though, is stop a given line of interpretation. If incongruity (or, in Castiglione’s terminology, “deformity”) is at the heart of humor, that incongruity can be a force for or against a person condemned to die, lovers dying in each others’ arms, or even what we mean when we talk about “love.”

Humor does not simply run downhill from those with power against those without; it levels the ground and allows for a reconfiguration of the hill itself.
CHAPTER 1
A CERTAIN DEFORMITY, SATYRICAL CONCEITS, AND HUMOR’S FUNCTION,
OR
HOW WE CAN QUIT WORRYING AND LEARN TO LOVE A GOOD JOKE

“There are many who think that they are marvelous if they can simply resemble a great man in some one thing; and often they seize only on the defect he has.”
-Baldassarre Castiglione

In Book II of Baldassare Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, the group of friends discussing/assembling the ideal courtier begin to touch on humor, jests, and the roles they play in the self-presentation of such a courtier. What emerges from this discussion is the desire to save and justify these roles as well as the fear or anxiety over the misuse or misapplication of such devices. The speakers are constantly trying to elicit laughter from their audience, and they constantly make a point of laughing at what they consider well-aimed witticisms or clever jests. However, they also struggle to define and differentiate good humor from more vulgar or rowdy displays. In all of this discussion, humor is both a topic for and a method employed by the speakers. They use jests to playfully contradict one another, breaking the train of thought or re-directing the flow of the conversation. They also point out that the wrong use or type of humor can destroy a person’s claims as a courtier and undermine the unity of a given assembly. Humor can be a unifying or divisive force, and the speakers acknowledge both powers.
Their discussion circulates around three primary topics: the making of jokes, the possible reception of those jokes, and the consequences/stakes of that reception. All of these points are intertwined throughout the exchanges among the interlocutors, and the potentially dangerous power of humor to disrupt and re-direct operates on the interplay among these concepts. What emerges from that interplay is the way that humor can both save or preserve a fading sense of credibility in the face of attack and corrode an obstinately combative persona. Humor allows the speaker and audience to react against a given impulse or interpretation (of others, but primarily of the self).

Before jumping into the discussion of humor proper, I want to make use of Harry Berger’s account of what is the primary quality circulating in and around the ideal courtier: sprezzatura. Berger catalogues four ways of understanding or defining this term in the lead-up to his argument about courtly presentation and inwardness. First, he addresses a general sense of sprezzatura, categorizing it as “an art that hides art, the cultivated ability to display artful artlessness, to perform any act or gesture with an insouciant or careless mastery.”20 Second, he defines its practical use for a courtier as something that suggests to an audience something greater behind the presentation; in Berger’s formulation, sprezzatura is “conspicuously false modesty” that makes an audience think more lies behind the picture presented.21 Third, this ability to imply more with less comes through as a way to mask competitiveness and selfish desire within the

21 ibid
strictures and codes of courtly society. Fourth, that sort of masking indicates to Berger that sprezzatura is a “form of defensive irony: the ability to disguise what one really desires, feels, thinks, and means or intends.” It is this fourth way of defining sprezzatura that I want to co-opt in my discussion of humor.

For Berger, sprezzatura is not deceit but rather a “display of the ability to deceive,” a bit of hair-splitting that I think is entirely in line with the “high-wire act of definitional balance” that lies at the heart of Castiglione’s discussion of courtly virtues. One of the chief jobs of a courtier is to present himself as able and willing to keep secrets, bluff successfully (in negotiations, political debates, and perhaps cards), and operate with the utmost discretion. He has to be able to imply everything (threats of violence, romantic overtures, arcane intelligence, etc.) without directly positing anything. There is a doubleness that pervades everything the courtier does and says, and that doubleness (when properly displayed and positioned) allows for plausible deniability as well as public credit depending on the circumstances. A “defensive irony” would allow one to pawn off blame for an action poorly taken or a word poorly deployed, and it would also allow one to take up credit in otherwise dubious circumstances. Such a quality

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23 Absence of Grace. p. 10

24 ibid., p. 10, 9

25 It’s worth noting here that Berger’s whole study of Castiglione and Giovanni della Casa is ultimately aimed at defending both from charges of systemic or unexamined misogyny. He argues that through a process of distancing and ironization, both texts anticipate and preclude the very criticisms that get leveled at them. The issue of gender in these proceedings is not lost on me, but I’m sticking with Castiglione’s pronouns for the time being.
allows one to underline successes and undercut failures. One’s presentation renders the
tsituation far more malleable and manageable.

And here is where I believe humor plays an important role. Presenting little and
implying much is more than a bit of sleight of hand. Frank Whigham, writing about
courtly techniques in Early Modern England, observes “modesty arouses inference in
excess of facts”; but what allows such an inference? Sprezzatura expressly asks for a
reaction or interpretation that goes against what is seemingly obvious or evident. That is,
a purposeful lack of effort that implies not just competence but supreme mastery must
overcome the apparent deficiency in the performance. Yet, sprezzatura allows for just
the opposite conclusion on the part of the audience. Humor forestalls the interpretive
move from seeming carelessness to actual lack of preparation. A well-placed joke or
timely jest flips the script, so to speak, and allows a courtier to reap the benefits of a
generous audience. Humor is, if not at the heart, at least in the central chest cavity of
sprezzatura. It is an invaluable weapon to jar or paralyze an audience and keep them
from reading too little (or too much, depending on the situation) into the presentation of
the courtier himself.

To be successful, though, humor must be thoughtfully aimed and deployed.
Vulgar presentation removes the mystery or modesty, making the “defensive irony” into
an overtly aggressive or shameful display. If, as Berger argues, sprezzatura is the ability

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26 Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory. Berkeley: Univ. of
27 Put in a more pedagogical context, a student whose presentation is devoid of notes and
obviously pre-composed lines would, from one perspective, appear to have not prepared
sufficiently.
28 In the example above, a lack of notes and no obvious one-liners could in fact indicate a total
comfort with and mastery of the subject. Students who speak naturally and confidently will often
be taken as having better prepared than those with outward signs of effort.
to defend and distance oneself from one’s own presentation, humor is an important source of leverage with which the courtier can shift an audience’s interpretation in his favor. It can stop a negative opinion in its tracks by stopping or arresting the interpretive process.

In *The Book of the Courtier*, Sir Frederick shows this awareness of humor’s uses by first identifying and then condemning the sort of pranking or horseplay he sees creeping into some of the nobles in his acquaintance. Instead of promoting good humor or solace, he sees the sort of physical jostling (tripping a person, blocking a horse, etc.) as bringing nothing but embarrassment to the audience. That is, the kind of humor that merely demeans is unfit for a courtier primarily because it ends up rebounding on the prankster himself. No one looks good, says Frederick, when physical humiliation is the goal. The odd thing about this pronouncement is Frederick’s insistence that these practices are both wrong and prevalent. That is, these pranks need to be condemned because they are so widespread.

Their being commonplace is not the only objectionable factor, however. What Sir Frederick identifies is a tendency of certain nobles already in a high position to denigrate those around them with these “jokes,” something he sees as corrosive to the status of everyone involved. The prevalence of these physical humiliations indicates an attempt to keep power, an attempt that ends up undercutting itself. While the intentions are to maintain a strict hierarchy, the final effect is a collapsing of propriety and rank. Humor here shows itself to be, as Chris Holcomb calls it, a “flirtation with disorder” that risks undoing the very goal of the prankster.29

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This reversing is something that needs to be properly contained and deployed, and in the stead of physical pranks, Sir Frederick and the group offer “meerie conceites and Jestes” as a way for a courtier to bring “solace and laughter” to the hearer as well as higher status to himself.\textsuperscript{30} Rather than physically humiliating others, the successful courtier can tell entertaining stories with funny conclusions, or he can deploy witty sayings or “privie tauntes.”\textsuperscript{31} The difference between these “proper” uses of humor and the disdained pranks is not just a verbal vs. physical distinction. It is not necessarily that good humor is less combative, either, as the latter sort of jest could involve insults or taunting. The key difference seems to be subtlety and tone, both of which are related to what Frederick calls a “respect to the situation.”\textsuperscript{32} Rhetorical awareness of the surroundings dictate when is and is not a good time for a joke or funny story. There is apparently never a good time to physically humiliate another member of the court, but there also times not to spring an embarrassing story. The good courtier needs to make sure his use of humor is received kindly lest the debasement Frederick sees from “horsing around” can be just as present.

One way to cultivate such a positive reception is to make oneself the object of scorn, albeit of a controlled and friendly sort. M. Bibbierna demonstrates this method of making himself the initial object of humor. After being nominated to talk about what makes good humor, he justifies his status not by good jokes he has made in the past but by alluding to his own baldness and an apparently humorous embarrassing moment “in the presence of Galeotto Cardinal of S. Petro in Vincula.”\textsuperscript{33} He uses this allusion, one

\textsuperscript{30} All quotations are from Hoby’s 1561 translation of Castiglione; p. 152
\textsuperscript{31} ibid; 154
\textsuperscript{32} ibid
\textsuperscript{33} p. 156
that prompts laughter from the room, to introduce his sense of what marks humor in
general: “certain deformities or ill favourednesse…matters that are disagreeing in
themselves.” 34 That is, a certain incongruity or internal inconsistency is the central
component of humor. Bibbiena follows this up with an incongruity that seems to
encapsulate the sense of what makes a good joke: “a matter that soundeth not well, and
yet is it not in yll syttinge.” 35 There is, then, a misdirection of a joke that is not right but
is not unbecoming. It both is and isn’t inappropriate.

The effect Bibbiena goes on to describe is not unlike a certain motion sickness
that arises from a disjunction between visual input and equilibrium. 36 The hearer sees
both the proper and improper uses of words in a context that produces incongruous unity.
The mind interpreting those terms is gripped with laughter at the absurd play of fitting
and unfitting. Bibbiena illustrates this incongruity with a few phrases that are appropriate
in multiple senses with seemingly opposite meanings. For example, he notes, “That he
hath is none of his owne” can be used to compliment a generous man willing to help and
provide for his friends, or to shame a dishonest individual whose possessions were gained
through “ill meanes.” 37 Here the turn of phrase with regard to the latter makes the
compliment an insult, the context of the praise being now turned to dishonor. It is, in one
sense, improper to use the language of praise with regard to a thief; and yet, it is entirely
appropriate to use this phrase to shame a malefactor. That melding of proper and
improper makes a straightforward insult into a subtle jest suitable for a courtier.

34 p. 157
35 p. 158
36 The common contemporary example would be reading while in a moving car; the eyes present
a stable, unchanging scene while the inner ear provides a definite sense of movement. The
resulting nausea is the clash of these two sensory inputs.
37 p. 158
Bibbiena offers another similar case in the phrase, “She is a woman of no smalle price.” Here the Biblical terminology of Proverbs 31 describes the virtue and wisdom of a great woman, her value coming in a pseudo-economic sense. That exact phrase could also be aimed at “a woman that loketh to be kept sumptiouslye.” Again, the phraseology of the compliment gets literalized into a more disdainful sentiment, the pseudo-economic terminology becoming real references to money.

In both instances, a sentence that has the identical linguistic form of praise becomes a not-so-flattering appraisal, reversing the direction of the usual interpretation. The would-be humorist, in deploying the sentence in a new context, engages the listener’s awareness of the impropriety in terms of traditional use as well as the accuracy in a new context. The humor comes from that awareness of both aspects as well as the slyness of the insult. A straightforward statement of a woman’s desire for a costly lifestyle or of a man’s thievery would be insulting but not funny, and Bibbiena illustrates the slanted inflection that helps produce the humor.

This slanting or verbal refraction marks the wise use of humor by a canny courtier. In the use of the double entendre, a phrase that often connotes positive attributes becomes an insult, and a similar dynamic appears in Bibbiena’s discussion of imitation or “counterfeitinge.” In this sort of jest, a noble person can highlight the foolishness or foibles of an inferior through calculated imitation, imitation meant to exaggerate the faults of the latter. While all of the assembled party argue that a true courtier must “counterfeite rather the good then the bad,” Bibbiena points out that

38 ibid
39 p. 159
40 p. 161
41 ibid
strategic deployments of imitation can work as inflected flattery. That is, they hold
simultaneously the form of compliments (they reinforce or re-present an image of
another) even as they accentuate the absurdity or foolishness or deformity on the part of
the person actually being insulted.\footnote{Modern imitations, particularly those on Saturday Night Live, seem to feature this dual-
pronged effect. It is, in one sense, a sign of one’s status to be mocked via imitation in an SNL
sketch. It is also, perhaps more directly, a way of pointing out a public figure’s quirks and absurd
behavior to have a Darrell Hammond or Jay Pharoah doing the mocking.
This effect can go even farther in both ways when the imitation supersedes the actual person. An
eexample would be Will Ferrell’s absurdist rendition of broadcaster Harry Caray, which has
become the way most non-Chicago residents under the age of 35 remember the late sportscaster.}
Thus, what seems a form of flattery is actually sly
repudiation, one intended to make the audience laugh and the speaker appear witty. As
an example, Bibbiena recalls the story of a mayor who was appealed to by a “Countrey
man” whose donkey had been stolen. In his attempt to impress upon the mayor what a
great animal he had lost, he tells him, “Syr if you had seen mine Asse you should have
known what a cause I have to complaine, for with his pad on his backe a man would
have thought him very Tully himself.”\footnote{p. 162}
This claim is taken up by one of mayor’s friends
and, when they pass a herd of goats, the friend exclaims, “Marke me this Gote, he
seemeth a Saint Paul.”\footnote{p 163}
The rural citizen is here both reified by the reference and
mocked for his inability to construct meaningful comparisons.

A key part of the success of this imitation is that it maintains clearly the
distinction between the noble friend of the mayor and the lower-class countryman. It is
just that lack of distinction that Sir Frederick maligns in his discussion of the crude

\footnote{While the joke is definitely at the expense of the rural citizen and his foolish attempt to seem
learned, one might see his comparison of a donkey to Cicero as a sly wink at how often Medieval
and Renaissance writers figuratively “rode” the Roman orator to their own rhetorical destinations.
That is, their work often aped or relied heavily upon Cicero’s writings, and Bibbiena’s own
analysis of humor is largely indebted to that same author.}
physical jokes he sees employed by young nobles. A large part of this separation is maintaining the status of and separation between the gentleman and a mere jester or clown. One may jest and provide witticisms, but he must be “alwayes keaping the astate of a gentilman.” To avoid the downfall of those who employ crass pranks or physical embarrassments, there must be a veneer of civility and a coating of wit. Brutal verbal assault or over-obvious insult defeats one half of the jest’s purpose: the elevation of the speaker.

The conversation among Castiglione’s interlocutors bears this out, as Bibbiena and Masters Bembo and Gasper begin to trade barbs via funny stories about fellow citizens of their respective cities. Each one attempts to downplay the intelligence of the other even as their respective stories serve to support the teller’s own ethos. Here the form of an entertaining tale is co-opted for the express purpose of embarrassing someone else in the party. The foolish characters in the stories are always from a particular city or from a particular vocation, and each one is meant to implicitly set the speaker above whatever principality or job is being mocked.

It is here that Chris Holcomb’s analysis of jesting in Early Modern Europe really comes to bear. Holcomb’s point is that humor often comes to the fore when different classes or divisions of society are pressed together. Humor becomes a way to navigate the borders and edges of social distinctions, although that navigation is tricky. Holcomb points out that while humor could be used to re-instate or re-emphasize existing lines of

45 p. 162
46 A duke of Ferrara who fails to adequately compliment a grieving father; a “Doctour” (p. 167) who leaves himself open to a retort from a condemned prisoner; an abbot who fails to grasp the concept of matter and displacement in his suggestion that to get rid of rubbish one merely need to dig a hole big enough to hold said rubbish and the dug-out dirt.
demarcation between classes, that same humor could ultimately blur the same divisions. In the instances brought up by Frederick and Bibbiena in Castiglione’s writing, those divisions and borders become hair-thin. How, one might ask, is a nobleman imitating a country peasant going to avoid blurring the lines that separate the two? Hence Bibbiena’s insistence upon decorum and his adamance that a jesting courtier not become too much of a jester or fool.

While Holcomb sees the uncertainty coming from the interaction among various social classes (and the potential for upheaval among those strata of society), I think that Bibbiena’s anxiety stems from a more fundamental quality of humor: its propensity to rebound or reverse upon the user. In the case of the peasant’s appeal to the mayor and the noble bystander’s mocking comment, the proximity of the two classes is definitely part of the situation’s humorous make-up, and I do not discount an awareness of that proximity (and a desire to assert dominance and distance) on the part of the noble wit. However, the danger in that case is fundamentally one where the comfortable distance is interrupted or reversed by the peasant’s reference to Cicero. The nobleman’s jest is an attempt to bring momentum back to the conservative or established order, but doing so has its own dangers that must be recognized and cautioned against.

While this might still seem to be simply an elaboration of Holcomb’s view regarding humor, I think that class or social divisions are merely an incidental part of the equation. Humor works on the linguistic, the social, and even the spiritual level as a wrench in the works of interpretive processes. The deformity and absurdity that Bibbiena sees as the basic factor in humor are elements that halt or interrupt the comfortable way
of reading.\textsuperscript{47} It can turn the tables on the speaker just as easily as it can re-assert status and control over a target of humor (a peasant, a rival courtier, etc.). That nobles happen to worry about it does not mean that it is only an issue for nobles to worry about.

That point is driven home by another of Bibbiena’s examples of a funny story, the tale of an ape who could play chess well enough to defeat most human opponents. The story involves the ape being brought before the King of Portugal to play one of the courtiers there. The ape, surprisingly, quickly defeats the man. Being enraged by his loss, the nobleman brandishes the figure of the king and strikes the ape. Asked to play the man again, the ape contrives to both checkmate the man and pull a cushion over its head simultaneously to avoid another blow. “Now see,” Bibbiena intones, “whetehr this Ape were not wise, circumspect and of a good understanding.”\textsuperscript{48} Bibbiena’s purpose is to draw the conversation back to a general discourse of humor and its uses; he does not insult anyone directly and instead mocks the would-be wise man who too overtly seeks to defeat others and defend themselves. Such speakers are, in his story, trained apes who jabber pointlessly before kings.\textsuperscript{49} He has interrupted the too-pointed direction of the

\textsuperscript{47} I use “reading” in as broad a sense as possible in order to include interpretation of a staged scene, a visual tableau, or any “textual” representation. There is a nested series of arguments about reading as if reading and reading as if seeing that will become more important moving forward.

\textsuperscript{48} p. 168

\textsuperscript{49} JoAnn Cavallo reads the entire joke-telling section as veiled political jabs and provides historical/social background information to support the idea that Bibbiena is fending off attacks and slights from Bembo. In her reading of the ape joke, Bembo is the Portuguese courtier who unfairly (and in an ungentlemanly manner) attacks a superior opponent. The Portuguese setting is seen as a reference to Portugal taking over the Indian spice trade from Bembo’s native Venice, thus swiping at the political situation as well. While I can’t dispute Cavallo’s learning and research, I think the direct political context fails to capture the full weight of the joke. If Bibbiena is the self-deprecating ape who uses his own wit to escape the unjust attacks of courtiers and kings (Lady Emilia would, in this reading, be a duped ally of Bembo in his aggression), he still presents the competition as an absurd enterprise that leaves no one looking good. The ape’s machinations may leave it smarting less, but the image of an ape defeating an opponent only to run away with a cushion clutched above its head all the
discussion and steered it back to a friendly symposium.\textsuperscript{50} Just as he had tried to offset hostility in making fun of himself, he now tries to de-contextualize the humor and make it an abstract phenomenon without the regional or political connotations. Humor gives and humor takes away.\textsuperscript{51}

While spoken jests and their live performance make up the bulk (if not the entirety) of Castiglione’s treatment of humor, it is important to remember that his work is written down. It is a theatrical script (or an account of a real meeting) presented as a book. “The Courtier” is both a man to be discussed and laid out as well as the text in which this man is discussed and delineated. Part of the importance of Castiglione’s book is the way that it makes apparent the necessity of “reading” people and their self presentations.\textsuperscript{52} In that same sense, the successful courtier is the one who can successfully “write” himself in a particular way.

\textsuperscript{50} Of course Lord Gonzaga manages to interrupt and subtly re-direct that attempt as well, as he promptly calls the ape a “Doctour emong other Apes” (168) certainly visiting Portugal with the intention of earning fame. It is now the academics or doctors who get the brunt of the story, while nobles are spared the full harshness of Bibbiena’s fable.

\textsuperscript{51} Along these lines, however, one sub-genre of the humorous story or insult might be the geographical or institutional barb. Going back to Cavallo’s claims (see note 30 above), Bembo and Bibbiena could be participating in a sublimation of the political rivalry effected and achieved through humor. Humor would allow them to snipe at each other and their respective national/civic origins, but it could also be taken on the whole as a de-clawing of the rivalry by rendering it all merely a matter of jokes and mutual jesting.

\textsuperscript{52} Harry Berger in fact makes much of this distinction in his argument that Castiglione is distancing himself from the sort of misogyny and hierarchical oppression with which his text has been identified by more modern readers and scholars. He argues that “in the process of representing and defining the culture of sprezzatura, and under the appearance of embracing its values, the Courtier…distance[s] [itself] from what [it] represent[s]” (Abense of Grace, p. 5). By
The shared terminology indicates a certain exchange or interchange in the
dynamics of spoken humor or written jesting. That Castiglione is able to thoroughly
create a sense of lively dialogue and actual conversation in his written text indicates that
the principles of humor may be transferrable across media. The spoken word and the
written may both be sources of laughter, and with similar effects.

George Puttenham’s 1589 *Arte of English Poesie* treats several different sorts of
humor employed in or produced by poetic writing. He describes the “satyrics” and the
“epigrammatists,” both of whom attacked or blasted what they saw as society’s ills or
vices.\(^{53}\) Through their “rough and bitter speeches” as well as their “pretty merry
conceits,” these poets tried to re-orient society’s attitudes towards what they considered
abuses of power or any manner of “indecent things.”\(^{54}\) Thus, the purpose of satire would
be to reverse the perception of what would normally be considered common or matter-of-
course activities.

The epigrammatist could even utilize a witty conceit to rebut misplaced credit or honor. As Puttenham recounts, Virgil had produced a short, anonymous verse in praise

\(^{53}\) All quotations of Puttenham are from Whigham and Rebhorn edition. p. 116
\(^{54}\) ibid
of the emperor, for which a “saucy courtier” took credit. In response to this other man being rewarded, Virgil reportedly produced another poem announcing that he had been the author of the earlier lines. Instead of simply claiming credit, however, he first wrote:

\[
\begin{align*}
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis} \\
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis} \\
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis} \\
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis}
\end{align*}
\]

After letting those lines stew in the public imagination, he prefaced the earlier lines with “\textit{Hos ego versiculos feci tultit alter honores}” (“I wrote these lines, another takes the praise”) and proceeded to finish the half lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis} & \quad \textit{Fertis aratra boves}. \\
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis} & \quad \textit{Vellera fertis oves}. \\
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis} & \quad \textit{Mellificatis apes}. \\
    \textit{Sic vos non vobis} & \quad \textit{Nidificatis aves}.
\end{align*}
\]

Thus you, [like] the ox, pull the plow, but not for yourselves. 
Thus you, [like] the sheep, bear a fleece, but not for yourselves. 
Thus you, [like] the bee, make honey, but not for yourselves. 
Thus you, [like] the bird, make a nest, but not for yourselves.

Here the lines are condemning the lack of credit granted to the truly worthy poet, but they also provide a weird sort of rebound effect that shames the one taking unearned glory. Instead of merely complaining, however, the poem shows the cleverness and wit of the poet, thus expressly demanding to be rightly praised and showing off the ability that earns such praise.

Puttenham also discusses the art of nicknaming, his version of the Greek trope of playing off of someone’s name. He relates a few anecdotes wherein a high-born or

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55 p. 143  
56 ibid. translation from the notes by Whigham and Rebhorn  
57 His use of “nick” here comes from the idea that the re-working or punning on the name cuts slightly, or nicks, the target.
highly-learned figure is ridiculed by an inversion of their monicker. Claudius Tiberius Nero, he writes, was referred to as “Caldius Biberius Mero” by this political enemies. Thus, the grand names of the emperor were cleverly inverted to mean “Hot-Drinker-Straight-Wine.” Similarily, Puttenham writes that Erasmus was mocked by an oppositional friar as “Errans mus,” Latin for “erring mouse.” Thus, what should confer honor or prestige is here interrupted and altered to produce shame or reproach with the specific purpose to diminish dignity and deny stature. This trope could be understood from speaking the pun, the but the ability to apply precision and subtlety via writing is important.

Puttenham’s account of turning “scurrility” into “decency” has less precision, but it continues the thought that humor may forestall a given outcome (positive or negative). Using Henry VIII’s standard bearer, Sir Andrew Flamock, as an example, Puttenham shows two anecdotes where the ire or the esteem of the king could be assuaged/lost through an introduction of humorous incongruity. The first example involves an action that seemed to initially court the rage of the monarch, but humorous inversion instead curried favor:

[W]aiting one day at the King’s heels when he entered the park at Greenwich, the King blew his horn, Flamock, having his belly full and his tail at commandment, gave out a rap nothing faintly, that the King turned him about and said, “How now, sirrah?” Flamock, not well knowing how to excuse his unmannery act, “If it please you, Sir,” quoth he, “your Majesty blew one blast for the keeper, and I another for his man.” The King laughed heartily and took it nothing offensively: for indeed, as the case fell out, it was not indecently spoken by Andrew Flamock,

58 ibid. p. 286; the translation is from the notes
59 ibid. p. 287; again, the translation comes from the notes. Whigham and Rebhorn include a couple other punning references to Erasmus’s name: Errasmus (“You err, mouse”) and Arasmus (“You plow, mouse,” which they explain as “You are a plowman or peasant, mouse”).
60 The advantage in writing is clarity and the verbal precision afforded by the letters. The danger would, of course, be the danger in appearing overtly hostile.
61 p. 352
for it was the cleanliest excuse he could make, and a merry implicative in terms nothing odious, and therefore a sporting satisfaction to the King’s mind…

The humor turns what would be an affront to the king into sort of mocking imitation, not downplaying the flatulence but re-contextualizing it. The stately horn of the king finds its subservient counterpart in the “rap” from Flamock himself. Puttenham’s account even continues the joke as he uses “cleanliest” for “wittiest,” again joking on the scatological event that he couldn’t quite bring himself to name expressly. Henry’s initial anger is turned to laughter by the joke, his first impulse interrupted by the wit.

The next example, however, shows the obverse. King Henry and Flamock are traveling by barge to “visit a fair lady whom the King loved” when the monarch proposes a rhyming contest. The king offers three lines about a “flower” who “hath my heart,” which Flamock reportedly completes with another reference to flatulence. This joke turns the king’s playful mood into anger, and he banishes Flamock from his presence. Rather than continuing or playing into the purpose of the king, Flamock’s jest reverses course and strips him of the very basis of his status.

For both examples, the writing of the stories actually adds another dimension to Puttenham’s account. For the first, he adds some puns of his own to illustrate the proper blending of decency and “unshamefastness,” puns that rely on the added structural dimension of a written text. For the second, his unwillingness to recreate Flamock’s faux

62 ibid
63 p. 353
64 As in the earlier anecdote, Puttenham refuses to use the word “fart,” putting on the decency he argues Flamock was wont to jettison.
65 or “coarse,” if we’re following the spirit of the passage
66 Holcombe’s analysis of these anecdotes focuses on the class distinctions that are problematized and re-instanted by the jokes. He, again, is not wrong to note the class connotations of the exchanges, but the undercurrent of reversal is my main point.
pas necessitates him to set up clues for the reader that indicate what was said without actually saying it. Thus, he presents the king’s lines and the obvious rhyming word that would so enrage a lovelorn monarch. 67 The “reading” is expanded to allow for interplay between narrative and commentary, and part of the humor comes through in that exchange.

Of these different approaches to humor, the one that seems to best correspond to Castiglione’s version of mocking or “counterfeiting” (as presented via Bibbiena) are those employed by mimics or “pantomimi”:

There was another kind of poem invented only to make sport and to refresh the company with a manner of buffoonery or counterfeiting of merry speeches, converting all that which they had heard spoken before to a certain derision by a quite contrary sense. And this was done when comedies or tragedies were a-playing, and that between the acts when the players went to make ready for another, there was great silence and the people waxed weary, then came in these manner of counterfeit vices; they were called pantomimi, and all that had before been said, or great part of it, they gave a cross construction to it very ridiculously. 68

What Puttenham describes is a way for dramatic genres to be undercut or put to a “contrary” use than their original intention. The speeches of woe from a tragedy and the proclamations of love and happiness from a comedy would both be parodied as ridiculous to help keep the audience entertained. The important terms here are “contrary” and “cross construction,” terms that indicate how a poet of a certain sort could use the generic conventions of their own works as fodder to keep the audience engaged.

67 One is reminded of Chaucer’s play on this with the fabliaux in The Canterbury Tales. “The Miller’s Tale” in particular features a disclaimer that Chaucer has no choice but to record the words of the “churls” in the group. Of course, such a disclaimer ignores the possibility of editing these tales, or (more fundamentally), the fact that Chaucer is behind the whole thing.
68 ibid. pp. 116-17
Like the examples of humor and jests listed by Bibbiena in Castiglione’s dialogue, Puttenham indicates that these mock speeches were primarily there to “refresh the company” or to keep them from growing weary from too long a play. Comedic interludes prevented too-serious material from bogging down the attentions of the patrons. Also, like the phrases Bibbiena brings up that are identical linguistically but can function as either compliments or insults, Puttenham says that these speeches were given “a cross construction” to produce a ridiculous effect. The words and phrases were meant to evoke memories of the serious speeches, only they were meant to indicate a lightness and whimsy presumably far from the purpose of the original texts. Here too, just as a nobleman or wise man might subtly mock a peasant or fool by imitating them, the self-importance of the dramatic lines is pilloried by a close “counterfeiting.” The actors performing these speeches were christened “pantomimi,” or “imitator of all things.”

The final line of this description even hints at the issue that seems so troublesome to Bibbiena and the noble speakers in Castiglione. Puttenham, having described a series of different types of poets and their respective styles, states that these differences were the source of their names. And yet, if these parodists and imitators were truly miming the speeches of other genres, they are (in one sense) indistinguishable from those other poets. The imitation that was meant to bring out the opposite effect of the original could in fact serve as a point of confusion, melding or linking the two. To define an actor by style becomes problematic when that style is an imitation of others.

Most importantly, however, these comedic interludes served as a break from or interruption to whatever was passing across the stage. The audience’s bored response

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69 p. 117; footnote 11
needed to be halted or arrested, and humor worked as a way to re-engage their attention. Instead of losing the interest or investment of the onlookers, humorous interludes provided a chance to re-capture the spectators. Thus, the humor Puttenham describes could be either a reversal of the emotions evoked by the dramatic proceedings (sadness or awe to mirth, in the case of a tragic play) or reversal of the audience’s expectations to be entertained (the stale or prosaic transformed into the amusing and engaging, in the case of a comedy). In the same way that a courtier floundering for esteem or attention could utilize humor, these poets employ parodic sketches to draw a crowd back in. The prize in both situations is audience favor, and humor is presented as a way to get the individual monarch or the mass of spectators to look kindly on the performer.

The key element is, again, reversal. A satirist seeks to make what is seen as positive (or at least common) into something hated or shameful by means of ridicule, be it sly or overt. The nicknamer tries to turn what should be a signifier of glory or honor into a derogatory phrase or title. The pantomimi counter and counterfeit the generic and emotional connotations of other dramatic presentations in order to produce laughter and an escape from restiveness.

Humor is thus a force that can break down barriers as easily as it can re-establish them. A person of lower birth and learning can be put in their “proper place,” but they can also erupt out of that place with a well-placed joke (or an ill-timed one on the part of a nobleman). More importantly, humor stops and forces a re-assessment by the audience. It can make a tense situation more felicitous, and it can make a potential enemy a friend. It can make a vulnerable victim a triumphant winner, or it can make pretentious speakers into absurd fools.
The “deformity” Bibiena describes as the heart of humor/jesting in *The Courtier* is ultimately a force that arrests, something that stops an audience in its tracks and makes it reconsider. The effectiveness of humor is the extent to which it can interrupt contrary impulses or directions of thought. Given that potential, then, humor’s value to both a regime wanting to punish/eradicate rebellion and a rebel wanting to repudiate/admonish that same regime would be enormous.
CHAPTER 2
(S)LAUGHTER AT THE SCAFFOLD,
OR
HOW TO MAKE A POINT WHILE LOSING YOUR HEAD

“Nothing in his life
became him like the leaving it.”
-Macbeth Liv

English executions of the Early Modern period were, quite literally, overkill. Hearkening back to a long history of theatrical punishments,70 those convicted of murder, heresy, or (a sort of combination of the two71) treason were potentially subjected to a host of indignities and tortures that went beyond merely ending the offender’s life. Those holding to Protestant views or doctrines were often paraded in front of viewers to then be burnt alive. Catholics judged to be conspiring against the monarch and the Anglican church over which he/she nominally presided were hung until nearly dead before being cut down, vivisected, and forced to watch their own entrails burned in front of them. An eventual beheading ended the agony.

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70 Roman crucifixions are an obvious precursor, although Chinese “death by a thousand cuts” executions and medieval impalement offer equally theatrical examples.
71 Following Henry VIII’s break from the Catholic Church (or, rather, as an indication of it), the Tudor king declared himself the “Supreme Head of the Church of England,” thus melding his earthly throne with the spiritual authority of the church. Elizabeth’s status was semantically changed (“Supreme Governor of the Church of England”) but functionally upheld when she took the throne. In the case of both monarchs, attempting to overthrow them constituted an assault on their physical body as well as on the vessel of God’s governance of the church. By the same token, professing alternative doctrinal allegiance represented an attack on the national powers of the crown. Treason thus combined political malefaction along with spiritual reprobation, a dangerous mix of the worst crimes in the temporal and eternal realms, respectively.
The point in both cases seemed to be a profound statement upon every aspect of the condemned’s existence. Bodily, the state imposed its will by slowly dismembering the criminal/martyr. The crime of threatening the body politic (or the body of true believers) was, following a sort of *contrapasso* movement, meted out on the offender’s own body. The threat of unraveling the national body became a literal disintegration of the traitor. In the case of burnings, the infection or contagion of false doctrine was purged.

Behind the symbolic gravitas of these measures, however, lies the absurdity of how far they go. The crime is made literal in the punishment, but the methods are so extreme as to (theoretically) evoke a response of ridicule. Pain is obviously one goal, but humiliation is equally important. The person executed must be seen as ridiculous, as figuratively and literally annihilated. To merely kill the person leaves a gap for the audience to fill with credence. The individual must be utterly destroyed in as painful and demeaning a way as possible.

Elaine Scarry, in her study on pain and its destructive/creative capabilities, argues that state-sponsored torture is a means by which the “incontestable reality” of pain being inflicted can be transferred to the authority and power of a particular regime.72 While I agree with her analysis of the ways such pain can be used to create a dramatic representation that belies its own necessity (a regime that needs to use such methods to create an aura of incontestability is proving its own highly contestable status), I think that Early Modern English executions operate in terms of humorous deconstruction of the subject as well as physical torture. One indication that more than mere torture was at

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stake (no pun intended) is that the processes would continue even after the condemned had expired.

The spectacle of burning lasted far longer than the life of the prisoner, and its symbolic value superseded that person’s physical life. The point was not just that the person die or that they suffer; the audience needed to see them as incongruously transformed physically into the spiritual contagion they represented to orthodoxy. They ceased to be human insomuch as they ceased to obey the mandates of a human Catholic believer. The power of the Catholic Church was absolutely augmented in the way Scarry describes in her study of torture (the ephemeral spiritual authority, particularly the authority to punish, solidified by presenting the fires of hell and literally reducing a prisoner to ash), but the Church also emphasized its power through its ability to speed up the process returning humans to dust described in scripture. The absurdity of reducing a human to a bundle of sticks or fuel for fire interrupts the grandiose claims of a heretic, producing a (hopefully) clear picture for the audience.

The same process occurs in Protestant executions. A prisoner might already be dead by the time his organs were being removed and burned, and he often died in the midst of that process without it stopping. The beheading may have ensured death, but it often occurred after life had left the body. Pain stopped being inflicted, and yet the spectacle continued. The mockery of that person in some ways surpassed or at least outlasted the pain actually caused. To reduce the prisoner to a collection of viscera and limbs mocked his attempt to destroy the cohesion of society and monarch. What he wished became a reality, only in his own person.

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73 Genesis 3.19
What such executions show is a desire to interrupt the proposed purpose of a heretic or traitor by absurdly over-reaching the bounds of human suffering. The symbolic power Scarry describes works to make obvious the regime’s power, even over the body of the executed. That reaction can take on the tenor of humor in at least two different ways: the offending figure could become a mockery or parody of the exalted status s/he attempts to occupy, or the state’s authority could successfully transcend or overcome the threat with an ease so evident that the whole idea of rebellion or transgression is rendered absurd. In either case, the seriousness of the claims or threats of the rogue individual(s) are halted by the state’s over-the-top means of eliminating them.

This utterly negated existence\(^7^4\) plays into what Paul Strohm, following Walter Benjamin, calls the *bloße leben* or “bare life.” This concept is the “null point” at which the accused becomes an “object lesson in the sovereign’s assertion of power.”\(^7^5\) The sovereign here asserts the utter meaninglessness of the condemned life other than as a means to illustrate his dominance, and that dominance is meant to be in stark contrast not only to the dominated person but also with their oppositional views.\(^7^6\) That overwhelming conclusion benefits from a reading that emphasizes the hilariously empty claims of the accused.

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\(^7^4\) Part of that utter negation, I believe, is the presentation of ease in eliminating the threat. That impression of a person being so overmatched by state power lends a humorous aspect to the proceedings.

\(^7^5\) *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. p. 209

\(^7^6\) The desired effect is akin to the animated short “Godzilla vs. Bambi” wherein a large build-up of credits and prelude are ended in under four seconds by a giant foot crushing the deer. The would-be martyr builds their view into a viable alternative only to have it immediately crushed by the might of the sovereign.
It is here that the public audience needs to be addressed. A crowd assembled to watch someone die must be prevented from pitying or identifying with the claims of that person. They may recant their beliefs, presenting a public contradiction to their published or reported doctrines. That incongruity, presented with the right timing and staging, could produce an irony that reflected humorously upon the ethos of the speaker. Specifically, the boldness or zeal of a transgressive statement would be ironized by their submissive return to established theology/political view. They may speak to their own power or ability to resist, a claim instantly contradicted by the state’s apparatus. They may argue for the justness or rightness of their cause, something that the evident punishment forcefully contradicts. The point is that the executioner gets the last word before the audience. The prolonged manner of death ensures just that. The body of the accused becomes an object lesson in state power.

The audience for these spectacles is the gathered crowd (executions, as we are reminded in various accounts and pictorial representations from the period, were popular public events). Those present were “treated” to the scene, stage-managed by the authorities and designed for maximum embarrassment. The prolonged pain was, again, more than mere torture; it was symbolic and visually arresting. The gathered people (city dwellers, merchants, even some nobles) were shown the literal enacting of the what the condemned, according to the authorities, sought to accomplish in the church or nation. In that sense, the whole presentation had the rhetorical structure of a retort; that is, the public death responded to the will or threats of the accused in a pointedly ironic way. The issue of rhetorically positioning the death was already a part of the proceedings. The
whole apparatus of execution was bent towards convincing the gathered crowd of the authority of the crown/church/regime.

These events were not simply for the immediate spectators, however. They also served as the subject for widely-distributed pamphlets. Eye witness accounts of the bad ends of convicted heretics provided those unable to be physically present a picture and description of what transpired. These accounts could accent and emphasize the interests of the executing authority, playing up particular portions of the demonstration to ensure a specific reading.

This wider audience could be co-opted by a different interpretation of the events, however. A more sympathetic chronicler (or, less generously, a polemicist) could transform the utter humiliation into spiritual triumph. The work of undercutting seriousness could just as easily be turned against the ruling powers, and that interruption could be utilized to negate the statement of authority. A commentary in this vein could turn a brutally demeaning execution into the beatific ascension of a holy blissful martyr.

In both cases, the audience was left to make sense of the death. They were those standing around (either literally or in the broader sense of occupying the same political/religious/rhetorical space as the accused), potentially joining with the regime in condemning the actions of the heretic/traitor. They were also those that, if things did not break right in the eyes of the authorities, could join the accused and follow their ideological rebellion.

How funny these executions are depends upon the type of humor the state is trying to employ. The state could opt for beheading, the execution equivalent of a brutal one-liner (the “short cut,” if you will). Half-hanging, utilized as part of the more strident
rebels’ punishments, would correspond to the insult or cutting remark that leaves the victim breathless and set up for further abuse (“rope burn” would here take on more sinister valences). Disembowelment would be the sort of vitriol that is so effusive and over-the-top that it empties the target of any and all humanity (the strings of insults hurled at Richard III would be one literary example of the verbal analog). Instead of lambasting a person with their faults and failures, the church would instead literally burn the heretic alive. The derisive, cutting insult is made physical, the burning remark becomes actual flame. The disintegration eradicates the person who claimed to be something grander. It is the humor of the shaming of Malvolio in Twelfth Night or Tamburlaine’s whipping the conquered kings like horses across the stage. It is the pretense of greatness being utterly subjugated. The accused is set up above the crowd, in full view of the assembled people, and they are presented as an awful object. The disjunction between the grandiose claims (either printed or read by the authoritative spokesman, or recounted by the accused her/himself) and the actual fate of the condemned produces an off-kilter impression for the audience. The over-kill of the executions emphasizes the ridiculous nature of views of the accused. This brand of humor brings out some of the latent violence present in the theatrical conclusions of comedies. The denouement may be death, something more immediately reminiscent of a tragedy, but the reconstituted social order that marks the comedic arc is here shown to

77 It is interesting and not a little disconcerting that a common modern term for one person verbally besting another in an exchange of insults or criticisms is “evisceration” (ex. “John Oliver completely eviscerated President Trump after an interview in which he President said he would never be a guest on Oliver’s show.”)

78 Another eerie confluence with modern terminology shows up here. Recalling and listing personal, physical, or professional failings can be referred to as “roasting” (Ex. “The sports commentator roasted Rick Pitino about the various scandals and sleazy goings-on that have dogged the coach since his time at the University of Hawaii.”)
involve a brutal tying up of loose ends to ensure the stability of the community.\textsuperscript{79} Death, in these cases, was the expected end, and that death’s extreme nature provided the punchline.

Even in less extreme executions (Thomas More’s or Thomas Cromwell’s, for example), this dynamic of a high figure falling persists. More was the Lord Chancellor of England, yet he refused to acknowledge Henry VIII as the Head of the Church. Consequently, he was denied his own head. Cromwell was the principal secretary and Chief Minister to this same Henry, but his Lutheran beliefs (and support of Anne of Cleves over Catherine Howard) made him a threat to the king’s headship of the Church of England. He incurred the same fate as More had (that punning reversal of losing one’s head for threatening the symbolic head is again apparent).\textsuperscript{80} The crowd would see the former officials laid low by the axe, and the disjunction between their former and current state would serve to emphasize the king’s authority at the expense of even his closest ministers.

What these cases indicate is that the audience must in some ways be in on the joke for the execution to accomplish its purpose. There has to be a confession of sorts identifying what the prisoner believes to be true (or believed to be true) so that the

\textsuperscript{79} Northrop Frye’s analysis of comedy and tragedy are underpinning my points here. Frye describes comedy as a genre presenting communal order falling into disarray and re-assembling in a new hierarchy (see “Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes” in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, University of Toronto Press, 2006). The violence of such a re-constitution is foregrounded in the executions, the (expected) happiness of restored order offset in the pain and public humiliation of the offender.

\textsuperscript{80} There are certain accounts, most notably Edward Hall’s, which indicate Cromwell suffered through a particularly brutal and botched execution due to his executioner being made drunk by certain enemies (The vnion of two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre [and] Yorke, etc. London: printed by Richard Grafton, 1548. p. CCxlii). Though dubious, these claims would only further the humiliation and humorous infliction of suffering.
immediate rebuttal can have full force. As with all humor, timing is paramount. To let heretical or treasonous ideas go too long without reversal could prove to be dangerous as the audience might start to entertain them as viable ideas. To step on those ideas too quickly, however, makes them appear dangerously vital and volatile.

The interruption of heretical or treasonous beliefs via a violent humor provided the regime a sense of security in the face of opposing ideology. If managed properly by the executioners, the rebel could literally be laughed off the stage; the threat to official positions would be mocked and eradicated to stop any further uprisings.

An example of derisive laughter leveraged against an accused traitor comes from the accounts of Dr. Roderigo Lopez, the ill-fated personal physician of Queen Elizabeth’s whose Portuguese nationality and Jewish heritage made him a target for would-be conspiracy hunters. The Earl of Essex helped to uncover a Spanish plot against the Queen’s life, a plot that when investigated seemed to implicate the good doctor. Lopez was not Spanish, nor is there any evidence that he practiced Judaism. However, the dual marks of non-Christian and non-English connections helped expedite his execution as a traitor to the queen on behalf of the looming Spanish menace.81

In June of 1594, Lopez suffered the full punishment of being half-hanged, drawn, quartered, and burned. He reportedly proclaimed loudly “he loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ,” and apparently sincere proclamation of his innocence in the face of the accusations and punishment.82 The crowd, however, fully invested in the staged

82 This line is recounted in William Camden’s The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth, Late Queen of England, London: 3rd ed., printed by E. Flesher, 1675. pp. 484-85. Camden notes that the confession evoked “no small Laughter” from the crowd.
sight of the dying man, laughed uproariously at his apparent confession. The understanding was that Lopez was actually still a practitioner of the Jewish religion, and his equating love of the queen with love of Jesus was seen as a tacit and underhanded admission of his guilt. The apparatus of humiliation and dismemberment worked in that it interrupted any direct speeches from the accused. Saying you are innocent while being killed in such a manner invites an ironic interpretation and produces laughter.

And yet, that power for interruption could be re-directed by the accused him or herself. The same disruptive power employed to silence them could be brought to bear on the seat of authority as well. The emphasis of the official power was the bodily demise, a physical destruction that symbolized an absolute end of the thoughts and ideas that threatened the status quo politically or religiously (or both at once, for Tudor monarchs who were also the Heads of the English Church). Reducing the convicted person to their body and showing the absolute power of the governing body took, as Scarry describes, the “incontestable legitimacy” of the prisoner’s real body and ascribed it to the symbolic power of the church or state.83 Humor could reverse that process, however, and transform the bodily demise into a symbolic realism that contested or even transcended the earthly plane.

This humor of the condemned turns the flow of official power against itself by undercutting the physical world (and the reality of the body in general) in order to emphasize the spiritual power gained through sacrifice.84 This can be a grave, serious

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83 The Body in Pain, p. 37
84 A modern example that, to me, seems to consciously court the mythic resonances of martyrdom is found in the original Star Wars film. Obi Wan courts physical annihilation (“If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine”) with the express purpose of becoming an ineffable, spiritual presence.
gambit on the part of the accused, but it can also take the form of humorous jibes at the expense of their own bodily existence or at the overwrought machinations of the regime. The accused could go along with the dehumanizing punishment, in effect taking the specter of resistance and domination away from the executioners. As the humiliation and mockery are most effective if the subject (or, object, really) of scorn resents or resists the slings and arrows thrown at them, to stand up directly to such torture only showcases the physical dominance of the regime, making the encounter a true victory. To acknowledge one’s physical helplessness in the face of oppression can spark an awareness that the fight is rigged to begin with and that the regime’s over-the-top reaction indicates a certain anxiety or insecurity. An awareness, that is, in the very audience the regime wants to convince and include in their mockery.

Thomas More used this approach, reportedly cracking jokes about his own frailty and imminent bodily end through the entire process. Several accounts mention that, as More walked to the scaffold, a woman accosted him about a petition she had sent him while he was Lord Chancellor. He allegedly responded, “Good woman, have Patience but for an Hour and the King will rid me of the Care I have for those Papers, and every thing else.”

He thus made light of his death as an excuse to get out of the bureaucratic

Another film example where “dying” (in this case failing miserably on stage) becomes a triumph would be Michael Hoffman’s 1999 version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In the final Act, the players put on the “lamentable comedy” of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” star-crossed lovers plot that initially elicits nothing but mockery and scorn. The “tragic” death of Pyramus gets laughed at mercilessly, but Thisbe (played by Sam Rockwell) silences the jeers with a powerful performance. Specifically, he jettisons the pretense of a boy playing a woman by dropping his vocal register and removing his wig, essentially acknowledging the artificiality of the scene and yet connecting with the audience in a deeply poignant way. The laughter gives way to tears, and even the cynical spectators grant the scene genuine applause. (see chapter four for a more in-depth discussion of this play’s text and a comparison of it with Romeo and Juliet).
tedium of this lost position. The loss of status so central to the King’s humiliating intentions becomes, in this case, a blessing for which More is grateful. The same sort of jolly acceptance shows through in his reported words to the lieutenant guarding the proceedings: “Pray, Sir, see me safe up; and as to my coming down, let me shift for myself.” Again, his death is here transformed into a matter of practical convenience. Coming down the structure will be easy and worry-free. The beheading is not a loss of life as much as it is a loss of worry and concern. The intended humiliation and ridicule is turned into a natural and even welcome course of events.

More’s final jest jabs at the very execution by turning it into a mundane act. He had grown a beard while imprisoned in the Tower of London, and he asked the executioner to wait while he moved it out of the way. His explanation was that the beard had “committed no treason” and should thus be spared the axe. Here the execution is nothing more than a shave or haircut. Instead of a demonstration of authority, the power to kill becomes nothing more than a barber’s errand. By not resisting the impingement upon his person, More shows the absurdity of that impingement.

More’s jokes are notable in that they get referenced by both those who saw him as a dogmatic sadist who got better than he deserved for his treachery and by those who viewed him as a martyr for the true cause of Catholic Christendom. Foxe observes in his Actes and Monuments that More’s behavior on the scaffold showed him to be a man incapable of having a serious thought without “ministr[ing] some mock in the

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86 ibid
87 ibid
Jesting at this time only served, for Foxe, to show More’s inability to get the point of his punishment. After listing the jokes, Foxe adds with evident disgust, “Thus with a mocke he ended his life.” For William Roper, More’s son-in-law, these same jokes showcased the blessed peace and wit of a true martyr. Specifically, his “chereful countenance” and his speaking “merrily” prove his sincerity and devotion to the God to whom he committed his spirit in death. No one but a man thoroughly ensconced in the favor and presence of the Lord could find humor in such a terrifying position.

I find Roper’s take, while just as biased and influenced by polemical concerns, a bit more rhetorically convincing than Foxe’s. As we will see, Foxe is not averse to humor at an execution. What Roper describes in More’s death (and what Foxe will illustrate in his account, for example, of Thomas Cranmer) is humor’s ability to highjack the intended thrust of an act and re-direct it against the ruling power. The execution was meant to strip More of his dignity and his most prized commodity: his intellect. He may not have faced the disembowelment of other accused traitors, but as a scholar and Renaissance humanist, his head would have been the most prized part of his anatomy. More’s jokes show his trust in something beyond by making light of that grave threat. Foxe is correct in saying that More was out of touch with this impending physical demise, but that disconnect lies behind and (paradoxically) is made possible by the jokes. Humor halts the force of the execution and directs it upwards to God.

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88 *Actes and monuments of matters most speciall and memorable, happenyng in the Church with an vniuersall history of the same, etc.* London: Printed by John Daye, 1583. STC 11225. p. 1069
89 ibid
Thus, More expertly interrupted the intended humiliation by bowing to it. He made light of himself and the proceedings by insisting on their insignificance in the face of eternity. His jokes, at the very least, provided something to be accounted for in chronicles and written descriptions. Again, even Protestant writers like Foxe admit that More jested on the scaffold. More did not save his life, but he did throw a considerable wrench into the rhetorical proceedings of his execution. His use of humor allowed space for future chroniclers to regard him as a divine saint, a man who would not be silenced by fear of death.

Thomas Cranmer similarly turned his brutal execution into a means of his own purgation. Cranmer was a leading figure in the movement that made England a Protestant nation, and he suffered Queen Mary’s ire when she took the throne. He issued several documents recanting his anti-Catholic positions, but his prominence in the Protestant wave that had removed Mary’s mother necessitated (in the Queen’s view) his open execution. Given a final opportunity to speak and articulate his rejection of Lutheran teachings, Cranmer instead reversed course and railed against the Pope and the corrupt doctrines of the Catholic church. He thus made a straightforward admission of guilt into a fierce accusation of the accusers themselves. That reversal was not the true source of humor, however.\footnote{Foxe. \textit{Actes and Monuments.} pp. 1886-88} \footnote{Ibid, p. 1888}

Having been taken to the fire, Cranmer took his “\textit{vnworthy right hand}” (the one that had written his recantations) and placed it into the center of the flames.\footnote{Ibid, p. 1888} Cranmer clearly meant the gesture to be a symbolic penance for his having renounced his beliefs in print. However, the image is a startlingly incongruous one. The flames, again, are
intended as symbolic purgation for the body of believers, an earthly representation of the
hellish flames awaiting the heretic. Cranmer here turns them into a means of purging
himself of the offending appendage and entering into heaven maimed but redeemed.93

That reversal of purpose is accentuated by the overall absurdity of the action.
Cranmer did not escape the flames or avoid his complete immolation; he just fast-tracked
the burning of his hand while he was completely engulfed by the fire. The symbolism is
potent because it is really all that remains. There was no part of him that was spared, yet
he chose to emphasize his hand’s demise. The protection of the body from infection here
becomes a pointless gesture in the person of Cranmer. Ending his “heresy” through a
public burning is as futile as burning one’s hand while completely surrounded by fire.

Cranmer’s case also shows how jokes or humorous interruptions can be
underscored and better understood via illustration. Foxe’s Acts and Monuments includes
a full woodcut of the former Archbishop of Canterbury thrusting his hand into the flames,
a textbook absurdity94 in that the face of the martyr/heretic is calm and serene whereas
the face of the monk overseeing the burning clearly shows concern. The picture follows
the image a page earlier of Cranmer (again serene) being “plucked” from the stage by
irate Papists for his public refusal to renounce his Protestant views, another scene in

93 Mark 9.43 is the relevant reference. Jesus tells his disciples to cut off their hand if it “causes
thee to offend,” stating that entering into life “maimed” is better than going to hell with two
hands. Specifically, Jesus notes hell as a place where the flame “never shall be quenched.”
(Geneva Bible) There is a latent absurdity in this admonition that highlights the preeminence
of the spiritual condition over the physical person. To prize one’s hand above an eternal abode is
presented as manifestly absurd, especially given that an eternal resurrection will restore or render
unnecessary any lost limbs. Cranmer is calling upon the same sort of juxtaposition, only here he
makes the flames important in a spiritual sense as opposed to a tangible burning.
94 The Latin term absurdus indicates “out of tune.” Cranmer’s willingness to embrace the flame
and his putting one appendage forward seems to clash with 1) the desire to produce fear and pain,
and 2) the idea that all of the body is going to get burned. The woodcut is found on page 1888.
which the figure being physically assaulted has an oddly placid expression. Such
depictions emphasize incongruity in order to effect the interruption of official force. The
execution and the earlier woodcut show Cranmer alone in a sea of officials and judging
crowds, an isolated island of tranquility and beatific calm (in Foxe’s estimation) amidst
the roiling cruelty of Catholic oppression. That presentation turns the assembled forces
of authority and the intended humiliation of Cranmer into proof of his spiritual authority
and, ironically, the beneficiary of sympathy/awe instead of contempt.

The woodcuts even go so far as to make those that should be mocking or taking
some form of satisfaction from Cranmer’s death into grave onlookers with no real
emotional investment or even monks who are horrified by what they witness. The
expressions could be simply the limited skill of the artisan, but it is telling that the
expected emotions are interrupted and replaced with either blank looks or disturbed
stares.

Both More and Cranmer bow to their respective executions in such a way that
reveals them to be absurd exercises unable to touch the spiritual reality of the men
themselves. More points towards the transcendent realm of the spirit in his mockery of
his frail physical form; Cranmer makes his body an object lesson of Jesus’ instructions
about offending hands/eyes and aims for heavenly salvation via the fires of earthly
authorities. Both take the overpowering physical authority, as evidenced by the
execution, and turn it into meaningless exercise merely concerned with a transient and
inconstant realm. By agreeing with the physical humiliation, they in turn humiliate the
regime so invested in the terms of that exchange.95

95 A similar comedic effect can be seen in Ronald Reagan’s debate rejoinder to Walter Mondale’s implications that the incumbent President was too old to effectively govern. Reagan said he
Another sort of jesting made not the victim but the precise terms of offense the object of ridicule. Again, both Catholic and Protestant examples can be found. Edmund Campion, a Jesuit priest and Catholic insurgent during Elizabeth’s reign, went to the gallows with his fellow Catholics in December of 1581 to jeers and catcalls from the crowd. Campion denied that he bore his monarch any ill will or that he was a traitor, to which an accuser retorted that in his Catholicism “al treason is conteined.”

Immediately after this exchange, an Anglican minister encouraged Campion to pray for mercy and offered to pray with him, to which the condemned priest replied “You and I are not one in religion.” While this isn’t exactly a roaring one-liner, it does point out the absurdity of the situation by succinctly making the crime a definite rejoinder to the unthinking offer of the priest. Campion here points out the apparent inconsistency of condemning him for his religion and then asking him to pray and make use of it. He has been convicted for being Catholic, and yet he has to point out to his Anglican counterpart that they are not actually part of the same body of believers. It’s as if after being told that his religion is the source of his guilt that he then has to remind his accusers of why he’s being executed. His “milde countenance” underscores the fact that he sticks to the terms of his conviction as a matter of principle while his accusers seem at best confused and at worst hypocritical.

wouldn’t make age an issue, adding that he would not emphasize his opponent’s youth and inexperience. He took the terms of the attack, agreed with them, then reversed them to put himself at an advantage over his opponent.


97 ibid; Anthony Munday’s account of Campion’s execution (A discouerie of Edmund Campion, and his confederates, etc. London: Printed by John Charlewood, 1582. STC 18270), to which Alfield specifically responds, also mentions this response, although by omitting the preceding comments of his accusers Munday loses the sense of the barb.

98 In Alfield’s words; Munday calls it a “false humility” aimed at duping the gullible crowd.
As Campion continued to say his own prayers in Latin, the crowd badgered him to pray in English, a contested point between Catholics and Protestants. Campion responded that he “he would pray in a language that he wel vnderstood.”\(^9\) The joke here is that Campion was incredibly learned and erudite, something that even his critics grudgingly admitted. Further, he was a native of England, fluent in his mother tongue. Yet, he turns the point of contention regarding the vernacular prayers (and translations of the Bible, implicitly) so that it favors the more arcane language. Arguments from the Protestant side (William Tyndale probably being the most vociferous English voice) pointed to the necessity for common people to hear and understand the scripture. Campion here makes English a less-decipherable tongue and jokes that if understanding is the criteria for spiritual blessedness, he had better stick with his Latin. The zinger response is made more effective in halting objection in that it takes on the terms of Protestant positions and transforms them into ones doctrinally agreeable to a Catholic. Campion seems here to beat the Protestants on their own terms.

Thomas Cromwell likewise ironized the charges against him (as a heretic) by initially stating that he was of the “Catholic faith,” a claim he quickly clarified by declaring, “I see and acknowledge that there is in myself no hope of salvation, but all my confidence, hope and trust is in thy most merciful goodness. I have no merits or good works which I may allege before thee.”\(^10\) Cromwell’s more modern chronicler, John Schofield, points out that the condemned man was here equivocating the term Catholic, at first seeming to give the authorities a confession of his return to the “true” faith only to

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\(^9\) Ibid; Munday omits this remark and simply states that Campion continued to pray in Latin.

reveal that he was using it in the sense of “universal” church as it was used by Luther.\textsuperscript{101} Cromwell is thus mocking the use of the word by his Roman Catholic adversaries and arguing for salvation through faith alone.\textsuperscript{102} He attacks the legitimacy of his accusers by taking their terminology (the “Catholic” designation) and slyly making it a mark of distinction for his Protestant beliefs.

Like Campion, Cromwell attacks his accuser in the very terms with which he was addressed, terms that led to his conviction and execution. He almost feigns acceptance of the punishment only to reveal his true religious leanings. This feigning makes what would be a triumph for the regime into the subtle victory for the opposition. The accused accepts the debate but re-defines the terms at the last minute. This reversal also makes the “final word” of the execution appear more like a silencing of discussion than as a resounding defeat of the opposing view. That is, while the axe falling (in the case of Cromwell) or the hanging/disemboweling/beheading sequence (in the case of Campion) may end the literal staging of the event, the ironic statements or equivocations make those final actions seem more a sign of anxiety for silence than a willingness to refute. These phrases undermine and subvert the humiliating effect for which the execution was designed. They turn, or at least provide the possibility of turning, the tide against the dominant force.

\textsuperscript{101} ibid, 269.
\textsuperscript{102} Henry VIII had, by this time, declared himself the head of the Church of England. Cromwell’s religious and political reforms in that cause had earned him several bitter foes, primarily among the Catholic nobility of England. In the charges against him, Cromwell was accused of both being a friend to Anabaptists and denying transubstantiation, coded terms for his Lutheran leanings. The resentment towards him, therefore, had a good bit to do with his Lutheran doctrine, even though the opportunity for his downfall came only after some political missteps.
Humor, or rather, some of the constituent parts of humor (irony, equivocation, incongruity, absurdity, etc.), can thus be an effective tool for interrupting the other side and for making the opposing message a site of absurdity and ridicule. The stagecraft of public executions is, to paraphrase Foucault, meting out the symbolic breach in a literal way on the body of the offender.\textsuperscript{103} The rebellions, heresies, treasons, and protests are halted and held up for mass spectation and derision. The would-be revolutionary or prophet is turned into a shrill voice burnt away in flames or a body devoid of (literal) integrity and unified purpose. A former high official is brought low (and often beheaded) to illustrate their lost position and prestige. Yet, that same interruption or “official word” can be interrupted by ironic agreement or self-deprecation. The very terms of the charge can be altered or punned to produce doubt and uncertainty on the part of the audience.

What More and Cromwell illustrate is that an undermining of position can have a net effect on the ruling power as well. More’s jokes at his own expense paint Henry (the “Head of the Church of England”) as a petty tyrant ignorant of the broader reach of heavenly authority; Cromwell’s ironic use of \textit{Catholic} portrays the same monarch as out of touch with the reality of what words actually mean. Both make the loss of position a statement on earthly authority in general.

Campion and Cranmer reject the earthly realm as anything but a staging or launching ground for an eternal destination. Campion scoffs at the petty understandings of the vernacular, making the crowd seem vulgar and himself exalted through his Latin communion with the divine. Cranmer turns the fires of execution into a fit means of

eradicating the corruption of his own person. Both are serious, but not entirely. Campion does not honestly intimate that God cannot understand English any more than Cranmer thinks his hand actually should burn first. But they do want their greater points about the illegitimacy or inadequacy of earthly authority to be honestly considered.

That there were competing accounts and even martyrrologies (Catholic ones, Protestant ones, etc.) indicates that these events were rhetorically contested, specifically on the level of printed testimonies. That so many of the pro-martyr accounts inserted or emphasized the jibes of the condemned shows the extent to which humor could help a would-be saint’s case. That so many anti-martyr tracts denied or occluded the humorous aspects of the proceedings, even those built into the execution itself, indicates a certain uneasiness with humor’s ability to interrupt a given rhetorical assertion. Humor was a weapon that could be brought to bear effectively to halt or interrupt the interpretive flow so natural and visually clear to the audience actually at the scaffold. The pro-martyr author could use humor to highlight the person as a text to be read, a site for interpretation and (hopefully) generous analysis. The anti-martyr author seemed more likely to angrily protest such a ridiculous claim, a claim only heightened by the attention afforded in print. The irony seemed to be lost on them in multiple senses.

Anti-martyr tracts end up re-creating (at best) a story endorsed by the stagecraft of the state, a narrative invested in the visual provided by the official authority (here stands the condemned, here follows the punishment, etc.). Pro-martyr writers thus seek to

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problematize and ironically critique that story by emphasizing the textuality of the death and of the individual. The former group seeks to present the discourse of “reading-as-if-seeing,” in Harry Berger’s phrase.105 Thus Munday writes A Discoverie of Edmund Campion, purporting to reveal for spectation the actual scene of the Jesuit priest’s death. He narrates the final moments almost as a pantomime, distancing the priest from the words and hollowing out the import of the final utterances. Alfield, conversely, highlights the speech of his subject. Campion is not just a body to be watched but a textual entity to be read and interpreted, and that reading/decoding uses his jibes and cutting remarks to halt the easy visual narrative of the recalcitrant, rebellious traitor meeting his end. To continue Berger’s train of thought, Alfield (and the pro-martyr writers in general, both Catholic and Protestant) present the story to be read as if reading. The textual interplay of expression and word, of call and response, finds itself fully humorous and fully activated as a text to be read in a version that raises Campion (or any would-be martyr) to the level of a martyr.

This rhetorical slant or inclination carries across religious or sectarian lines. Susannah Breitz Monta observes that both Catholic and Protestant martyrologies often relied on nearly identical tropes and markers for their claims of divine transcendence. She notes that the similarities between the two groups were so pronounced as to demand explanation and differentiation during the period itself. As she explains, “martyrologists proposed that the cause, not the death, makes the martyr (non poena sed causa).”106 Thus, Foxe can play up the textuality and humor of Protestant Cranmer, but he has to

106 Martyrdom and Literature. p. 9
angrily denounce the wit of More. The former’s actions testify to his sacred peace, and that justifies his designation as a martyr. The latter’s jests show only a willful disregard for serious matters. That Foxe would call the execution a serious matter shows that he misses, (or purposely resists) the somewhat ironic direction/purpose of More’s scaffold performance.

What this example illustrates is that although the cause is the main reason for beatifying one person and condemning another, each death still demands an explanation in terms of the death itself. An interpretive loop is created in that the person’s beliefs justify their witness status, but that witness status is still located in their manner of death. Their beliefs cause their death, yet their deaths are simultaneously evidence of the righteousness of their beliefs.

The stakes (pun intended) of these competing rhetorical positions are as high as they can be. The impending specter of sudden death makes the contest a grave (again, pun intended) matter. Humor makes the other side appear ridiculous, interrupts that seriousness to show the opposition as hopelessly off the mark. Martyrs or heretics, heroes or traitors—these choices are revealed and even constructed by the willingness of each side to satirize the other.

The power of humor of course becomes more obvious (and perhaps gets added into the mix at all) when the event gets recorded and broadcast via a printed text. Jokes can be recorded for the larger audience (i.e., those not actually present), as in the case of Thomas More. Jokes can be highlighted and explained, equivocations clarified and emphasized, as in the case of Thomas Cromwell. Jokes can be illustrated and almost diagrammed in woodcuts, as in the case of Thomas Cranmer. Jokes can work to make
casual responses (and the expressions that accompany them) into deadpan one-liners. The martyrrologist has at his disposal a range of rhetorical tools to exalt the deceased, but humor helps to simultaneously express the serenity of the martyr and satirize the apparent anxiety on the part of the authorities.

That dual purpose mirrors the process by which the accusing powers sought to revisit the crime upon the body of the condemned and articulate their own authority. Foucault sketches out unintentional consequences of public executions (pity and identification with the accused\textsuperscript{107}), but I think there is an element of humor mismanagement in these consequences. That mismanagement is particularly pronounced in the polemical debates around the deaths, the rhetorical struggles over who is a martyr and who is a heretic/traitor. By being deathly serious, those who argue against a given person’s martyr status\textsuperscript{108} end up sacrificing a key tool in their arsenal. The proceedings of an execution are of course grave concerns, but the turnabout and absurdity of the claims made are part of the interrupting process that would make such an execution successful. The person’s physical death is not the only point; reducing that person to merely a physical being whose claims of spiritual or political transcendence are patently ridiculous is equally important.

The starkness of public executions and their textual representations (or perhaps, the extreme nature of their processes and the corresponding stakes) are but one instance illustrating humor’s power to interrupt an audience’s reading of death. This power was just as likely to crop up in poetry of the period as it was to emerge in martyrrologies. As the next chapter will illustrate, two poets utilized humor to respectively break down

\textsuperscript{107} Discipline and Punish, pp. 86-92.
\textsuperscript{108} Munday against Campion, Foxe against More, et al.
pretensions of grandeur and to exalt the apparently debased or derided up to martyr status. If humor can reduce a highly-placed, highly-educated physician to a cruel punchline and secure the reputation of a “disgraced” public official, an overly-dramatic sea nymph and a flea will prove to be just as amenable to that interrupting power.
CHAPTER 3
DYING WITH FELICITY AND THE WELL-GIVEN LIFE,
OR
HOW A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FUNERAL

“And he that striues to touch the starres,
oft stumbles at a strawe.”
- The Shepheardes Calender, “July”

“‘Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.”
- “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”

Humor’s ability to halt or interrupt a given interpretive or ideological flow can be observed in the poetry of late 16th- and early 17th-century England, a poetry (as has been noted in various places by multiple scholars) steeped in rhetorical tradition and education.109 Specifically the poetry of Spenser and Donne show how humorous treatments of death can arrest the normal emotional responses and key up alternative responses. The effects created by this interruption can range from strategic bathos (in the local lines of the poem) to a general reconsideration of thematic elements. In pairing humor with death, Spenser’s poetry critiques the self-aggrandizement and ego

109 David Norbrook’s Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) is a fairly broad survey of the interactions and interconnections between poetry and political discourse, although it does touch specifically on rhetorical education and the connections argued for by poets during the period. E. Armstrong’s A Ciceronian Sunburn: A Tudor Dialogue on Humanistic Rhetoric and Civic Poetics (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006) is a relatively recent example that argues for a deep connection between the rhetorical tradition of Cicero and the poetry of Spenser and Sidney while surveying the general scholarship linking the two.
glorification of the victim’s discourse\textsuperscript{110}, questioning the assumptions of a would-be martyr. Donne’s love poetry uses incongruities to render the “death” of sexual climax the equivalent of a martyr’s transcendent demise, thus humorously linking the benefits of a martyr’s death to something a tad less spiritual.

While the disruptive and disjunctive power of humor was a tool for social cohesion and for class distinction, humor served as a means to arrest particular linguistic or social equations.\textsuperscript{111} In poetry, this effect could be used to problematize strict equivalence connections or culturally conditioned links. Specifically, the tried and true linguistic/cultural bonds between death and sex could be mocked, reversed, re-considered, or even expanded in unlikely ways by injecting humor. In Edmund Spenser’s \textit{Faerie Queene}, a few episodes show how an overly self-involved perspective on death actually ends up conflating sexual love with physical annihilation. The humor comes from an outside perspective (be it the narrative set up or the view of another character) interjecting itself, making this conflation obviously specious and ultimately self-defeating. The humorous re-consideration of the situation stops the all-too-easy paralysis and self-destruction in the would-be martyrs’ complaints. The erotic poetry of John

\textsuperscript{110} Borrowing Harry Berger’s concept and terminology. Though Berger is analyzing \textit{King Lear}, the same dynamic shows up as a sort of martyr’s discourse here in Spenser. \textit{Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare} (Stanford University Press, 1997). pp. 229-30

\textsuperscript{111} Rick Bowers argues that laughter, whether from a powerful group at the “expense of subordinates” or from a “powerless group” at the “pretensions of their superiors,” is always a force that “consolidates relationships” (\textit{Radical Comedy in Early Modern England: Contexts, Cultures, Performances}; Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008; p. 4). I do not want to completely reject that notion, as humor does help to forge bonds and define cultural/hierarchical distinctions. Still, the work of Chris Holcomb and Paul Strohm (cited in earlier chapter) seems to indicate that humor is as much a force of chaos as it is a way to establish order. Bowers also notes the potential breaks with tradition and connection in humor when he describes the comedic heroes of Early Modern England having to “perform necessary, dangerous, and radical innovations by constantly breaking away from the past, and just as constantly disrupting the present” (p. 9).
Donne, conversely, satirically pushes the language of sexual “death” to a magisterially ridiculous level, making lovers martyrs and granting the spiritual transcendence of witnesses dying for spiritual truth to the carnal bounds of love. The humor in both poets interrupts the easy connections between sex and death by re-considering (either through undercutting or hyperbolically expanding) the claims of lovers to martyr status. Both engage with the tropes of love poetry, but neither is content with leaving the established dynamics (be they Petrarchan or more broadly chivalric) un-interrogated. The destructive aspect of love implicit in these tropes (paralyzed, broken lover; defeated, mortally-wounded worshipper at the altar of love) becomes something to unpack and disentangle from potentially positive relationships. There is in these poets, despite their engagement with death (of the literal and figurative kind), what Rick Bowers calls “the most radical comic attribute…hope.”

While Donne’s playfulness and wit are well-established critical tropes, notes on Spenser’s humor are a more recent addition to the scholarly conversation. Long billed as “our sage and serious Poet” by Milton, Spenser has begun to be seen as more than a dour moralizer or a humorless Protestant zealot. Particularly in the Faerie Queene, and

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112 Radical Comedy, p. 9.
113 Adam Potkay makes an interesting argument that a lack of joy (which would include wit and humor) was a pronounced danger not just for Spenser for all Protestants, and he points to sermons and writings by Luther and Calvin imploring the elect to not just walk in the Spirit of God but to evidence their regenerated souls in rejoicing and jollity. Joy was more than just a nice idea, it was an obligation or duty of believer that evidenced their spiritual resurrection. Potkay reads the specter of Sans-Joy (who, while temporarily defeated, is still lurking in a hellish recovery room) in Book I as the main evidence for this doctrine in the Faerie Queene, but the pitiless rigor with which Guyon destroys the Bower of Bliss at the close of Book II seems a similarly chilling illustration of the effects/results of lacking joy. “Spenser, Donne, and the Theology of Joy.” Studies in English Literature 1500-1900, Volume 46, Number 1, Winter 2006, 43-66.

It’s worth saying that Spenser criticism has long had a humorous element, either in the presentation of a particular reading (C.S. Lewis’s christening of the two wrestling maidens in the Bower of Bliss “Cissie and Flossie” in The Allegory of Love comes to mind) or in a recognition of the poem’s less straightforward interpretive possibilities. David Lee Miller’s reading of “Dan
especially in Book III (the legend of chastity), Spenser sets up situations where death is bemoaned or threatened or effectively invoked, only for an outside perspective to intrude and interrupt the course of grief or fear or despair. This outside perspective belongs ultimately to the reader of the poem, but it can also belong to a character who intrudes on the insularity of the lamenting figure. These figures seek to, by their own rhetorical constructions of themselves and the situation, establish a hermetic world where they occupy the center and death surrounds them. What the intruding reader (within or without the narrative) reveals is that death is a result of the speaker’s own conjuring. The poem thus invites a view of such proclamations of grief and despair as ironic and premature, and of these grief-stricken characters as at least partially the cause of their own sorrow.

Spenser’s treatment of chastity, however, renders these revelations and reconsid erations as more than simply philosophical un-maskings. Following the dark and destructive ending of Book II (the knight of temperance, Guyon, physically destroying the Bower of Bliss with “rigor pitilessse”), Book III turns to a less morally-compromised hero in Britomart. The virtue of temperance is unable to handle the mores and ideological pitfalls of sexuality in Book II, and so it falls to a brighter and, frankly, more effective knight to handle that question. Book III is full of characters hiding their

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Edmund” in his introduction to the 1590 *Faerie Queene* shows the ironic edge with which we are encouraged to read the narrator of the poem, and he cites modern scholarship that picks up on the “mixed signals” and “profusion of cues…that invite incompatible responses” (p. 154). While the immediate point is that Spenser’s poem is far from the simplistic moralizing tale (albeit with killer imagery) the Romantics read it as, the diffusion and proliferation of mutually exclusive readings is in perfect synch with an understanding of humor as incongruous or mismatched connections. (*The Faerie Queene, 1590.* *A Critical Companion to Spenser Studies.* ed. Bart Van Es. 2006, 139-165)
sadness and their sorrow, the lead knight herself covering her wounded heart in the armor she takes from her palace. What Spenser shows in this book is not an uncovering or stripping away of defenses with the intent to broadcast the shame of real pain, however. The intrusion of outside perspectives is done with humor to separate the objective or actual dangers characters encounter from those they construct for themselves.

Specifically, Cymoent in canto iv, Braggadochio in canto viii, and Scudamore in canto xi weave a world in which they are either the unhappy victim or baleful harbinger of death, only to have the poem zoom out (so to speak) and reveal the broader situation around them. The poem thus mocks the attempts to deploy the language or representation of death when life and deliverance are close at hand. Humor halts the downward spiral of lament and violence, allowing for a re-consideration of the circumstances. Given what happens to sexual desire in Book II, a re-consideration of a supposedly “mortal” act via chastity is appropriate.115 It is fitting then that Book III uses humor to halt the sort of destructive end witnessed at the close of the previous “Legende.”

It should also be mentioned that Book III is at least as interested in the poetic representation of love and desire as it is with acts of love and desire. A poetry always written from a particular perspective (one inflected with the language of war, conquest, 

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115 The virtue for which Britomart stands is a sort of focal point for dangerous conflations and misreadings. Thus, while there are several instances where mis-recognitions crop up and cause chaos in the poem, humor’s power to arrest particular (mis)associations is particularly suited to the Legend of Chastity. Joseph Parry argues that Britomart “becomes an emblem of the paradoxes that constitute chastity as a self- and other-centered, self-affirming and self-denying virtue,” and further that re-thinking human relationships in less power-situated terms is a long-term goal of Book III (p. 43). “Petrarch’s Mourning, Spenser’s Scudamour, and Britomart’s Gift of Death,” Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2005. I want to look at how humor makes possible that sort of re-thinking, and I believe Book III makes pronounced use of humor’s interrupting power.
and control) tends to produce or devolve into the violence that caps Book II. Britomart herself feels love as a wound, and the experience of falling in love become for her, initially, an occasion for lament and a warlike quest. Love becomes a war insomuch as the lover represents him/herself in battle. The stakes of such a proposition become life and death in poetry, or the inscription of one’s will onto the heart and being of another. That metaphorical trope is made horrifically real in the book’s final canto where an evil wizard removes the heart of a captive woman and literally writes “straunge characters” in her blood in an attempt “to make her him to loue.”

This is a book dealing expressly with the dangers of invoking death and physical destruction when trying to figure psychological or emotional states. Representation (of self, of situation, of emotion) is a tricky business that can easily become an over-the-top expression of despair and self-destruction, one that often contrasts with the reality (again, of self, of situation, or of emotion).

Three episodes in Book III particularly contrast expressions about or laments of death with the specific situation within which the lament actually occurs, creating a humorous disjunction between the melodramatic proclamations of a character and their status. The first is in canto iv, as the immortal sea-nymph Cymoent spends several stanzas lamenting her son’s death at the hands of Britomart, a lament complicated by the fact that he is not actually dead. The second episode is in canto viii, where the false knight Braggadochio constantly threatens death and violence in battle only to quickly turn tail and run when faced with an actual knight. The third instance is in canto xi, wherein Britomart happens upon Scudamour lamenting the loss of his beloved and the

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116 III.xii.31.2,6
117 He has suffered “a mere flesh wound.”

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insurmountability of his bereavement; Britomart promptly aids the crying knight by pointing to the actual path to rectifying the mess. In each, the poem intrudes on the self-aggrandizing and narcissistic notions of the speakers, using humor to halt a particular interpretation of the situation and effect a reversal of fortune most apparent to the reading audience.

This effect of self-involved bewailing of death being reversed by the reality outside of the speaker crops up in canto iv with Cymoent’s hearing about her son, Marinell, being felled in battle with Britomart. A prophecy that Marinell would come to harm by a woman has led Cymoent to keep her son from amorous pursuits and encourage him to invest his energy into chivalric combat. In true misunderstanding-the-prophecy-and-thus-ensuring-its-accuracy fashion, Marinell encounters a female knight and is wounded on his side, lying on the shore “in deadly stonishment.”

The theme of figuring love as a wound is here transmuted into being physically wounded by a woman in battle; thinking love is a battlefield leads to being injured on an actual battlefield.

Cymoent’s response to the news of her son’s injury is more illustrative of the faulty recognition and bemoaning of death, however. She swoons several times and rides with a train of her fellow nymphs to the site of Marinell’s fall. Seeing him on the ground, she begins a multi-stanza lament with her sister nymphs adding harmony: “Deare image of my selfe… that is, / The wretched sonne of wretched mother borne, / Is this thine high aduauncement…?” Her son’s fall is figured first and foremost as her own, he being both an “image” of herself and mirror of her wretchedness. His own pain and suffering is

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118 iv.19.1
119 36.1-3
presented as merely an avenue to her own anguish, a means by which she can express her own pain.

She goes on to reduce her son to lifeless clay and rapidly-fading memories, proclaiming him lost to destiny’s “irreucable” sway: “Now lyest thou a lumpe of earth forlorne, / Ne of the late life memory is lefte.” He is no longer the honored son but a mere body bereft of life and significance. Her lament follows this pattern of reducing Marinell to a prop or effacing him entirely at the expense of her overwhelming grief. He is merely “deare members” that have been pierced in battle, a phrase that could easily be describing her own sadness, separated as it is from any specific possessor. His own pain or suffering is lost in her personal construction/perception of the situation.

Mention of Marinell is completely left aside for an entire stanza as she bemoans her immortality:

O what auailes it of immortall seed
To beene ybredd and neuer borne to dye?
Farre better I it deeme to die with speed,
Then waste in woe and waylfull miserye.
Who dyes the vtmost dolor doth aby, 
But who that liues, is lefte to waile his losse:
So life is losse, and death felicity.
Sad life worse then glad death: and greater crosse
To see frends graue, then dead the graue self to engrosse.122

Her life is figured as a worse fate than Marinell’s death, although his particular death is kind of an afterthought. Her sadness takes on the tenor of an abstract or philosophical disputation. It is not the grave of her son or her offspring only that causes her pain; it’s any “frends graue” that brings up these feelings. Death is “felicity” that she just can’t

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120 36.7-8
121 37.4
122 38
enjoy, forced as she is to “waste in woe and wayfull miserye.” She goes on to repine over not being able to say goodbye to her son, that she could not “him bed farewell” before his untimely demise. She ends with a fond goodbye “till we againe may meet.” He is absent already, in her mind, wiped out by the depredations of some fiendish foe and cruel fate.

The odd effect here is that it is not fate nor the attack of a knight that destroys Marinell. It is Cymoent’s lament that erases his life and memory. As soon as the lament is finished (“when they all had sorowed their fill”), a physician actually checks Marinell and finds a pulse of life still in him. He is not, despite Cymoent’s grief, dead. Her pain and grief are founded not on his actual position; they are a result of her self-involved view of the situation. Rather than pain coming from the situation, her view of the situation and her imagined pain arise from her own mind. That disjunction becomes clear as soon as another perspective comes into play. The grief over death meets an awkward obstacle when it turns out Marinell is still alive. The grave and sorrowful condition in which she finds herself is a construct of her mind. The last farewell she wanted, the company of her son, the joy of his success—all is still within her grasp if she would lay aside the grieving and attend to him.

This discovery of life is absurdly anti-climactic given the woe and sorrow expressed by the nymphs. It is telling that they only think to check his actual body after “they all had sorowed their fill” and constructed their own version of what his death

123 39. 5. There is an odd Oedipal implication in the use of “bed” that lends her forbidding her son from loving a woman a whole new dimension of strangeness.
124 39.9
125 40.1
represents (their sad state to be immortal and watch their mortal offspring die). The dirge ends quickly when Liagore (the medically-trained nymph) tells Cymoent that Marinell is alive: “shee knew there staied still / Some litle life his feeble sprites emong; / Which to his mother told, despeyre she from her flong.” The ambiguity in that last line (is Cymoent flinging her own despair away, or is Liagore invading the sad space and tossing out the necessity of a funeral?) highlights the awkwardness of having sung such a self-centered lament only to find the excuse for the lament still breathing. The poem recounts the nymphs taking Marinell to an ocean “bowre” to convalesce in three stanzas, a full stanza less than Cymoent’s song lasts.

The episode is more than just an embarrassment for the self-absorbed nymph, however. It uses the humor of a rapid reversal to illustrate the dangers inherent in too soon appropriating the language of a forlorn sufferer or even martyr. Concentrating on the significance of a person’s death, especially in terms of one’s own importance, can lead to mis-reading the situation entirely. Death invoked prematurely almost becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Canto viii sees a similar dynamic in its treatment of self delusion with nearly catastrophic consequences. The episode brings together several strands from previous passages, most importantly the subplots involving the false knight Braggadocchio and the witch who takes in/eventually threatens the fair dame Florimell. The witch, in an effort to appease her son’s desire for Florimell, creates an imitation of the beautiful lady out of a sort of Petrarchan “Build your own beloved” kit. Snow, wax, and vermilion form the

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126 40.1
127 41.7-9
classically beautiful complexion; “two burning lampes”\textsuperscript{128} are goggled about by spritely puppeteers to simulate eyes; and “golden wyre”\textsuperscript{129} serves as hair. This false lady is an animatronic love machine meant to fulfill the lusts and fantasies of the son, fantasies which even include her “[c]oyly rebutting his embracement light.”\textsuperscript{130} The son is pacified playing “with shadowes,” condensing the self delusion of love poetry into a fairly sad and pathetic image.

The couple soon encounters another self-deluded person, a wayward braggart named Braggadocchio, who in Book II manages to steal the horse and lance of a true knight. To the son and snowy Florimell, this is a real threat that causes the former to collapse “deade through feare.”\textsuperscript{131} Yet the poet reveals to the audience (or, reminds us, really):

Yet knight he was not, but a boastfull swaine,
That deedes of armes had euer in despaire,
Proud Braggadocchio, that in vaunting vaine
His glory did repose, and credit did maintaine.\textsuperscript{132}

Braggadocchio is, like the “woman” at his side, merely an appearance that depends upon the credulity and mental construction of the hearer to constitute anything (pleasure, fear, etc.). The “deade” son himself is not really deceased but merely scared to death, even though his attacker is mere words.

That connection to death is furthered by Braggadocchio’s threat: “Villein (sayd he) this Lady is my deare, / Dy, if thou it gainsay: I will away her beare.”\textsuperscript{133} The stakes

\textsuperscript{128} 7.1
\textsuperscript{129} 7.6
\textsuperscript{130} 10.5
\textsuperscript{131} 12.6
\textsuperscript{132} 11.6-9
\textsuperscript{133} 12.8-9 (my emphasis added)
seem to be life and death. This “knight,” after all, brandishes a “bloody speare” and threatens to kill anyone who opposes his will. The mortal danger is conjured by the appearance and deceptive workings of the mind, in this case both the deceiver’s and that of the gullible person being deceived. Braggadocchio essentially bluffs the son out of his “lady,” but the narrator’s peek into the character allows the audience to laugh at the sheer boldness of the move given its lack of a foundation in reality.134

That Braggadocchio himself is now in possession of a false Florimell automaton that deceives him by his own unconscious consent keeps the absurd train of deception going. A deceptive construct of a woman sent to deceive a son is stolen by a false construct of a knight who uses deception to falsely threaten death and who is himself deceived by the same woman construct. Both men think themselves near either death or (in the Donne-ish usage) “death,” yet neither is in any danger. It is all a trick of the mind.

This same trick is re-deployed with re-situated roles when Braggadocchio is accosted by an actual knight who takes an amorous liking to the snowy Florimell. The new player challenges the boastful fake to a duel, rising up in a show of real force and effectively collapsing Braggadocchio’s illusion of power and strength. The audience knows that Braggadocchio is not a real knight and that his displays of martial strength and courtly overtures to the snow robot are equally hollow. The intrusion of the other knight makes it clear.

Here, however, the poem doubles down on humorously off-base death threats. When challenged with a duel, Braggadocchio taunts the other knight:

Sith then...needes thou wilt

134 A similar effect comes courtesy of Star Wars episode IV wherein the Jedi waves his hand and gets through a checkpoint merely by stating the facts he wants the hearer to believe. The humor comes from the facts stated being the exact opposite of what the audience knows to be true.
Thy daies abridge, through profe of puissaunce,  
Turne we our steeds, that both in equall tilt  
May meete againe, and each take happy chaunce.\textsuperscript{135}

Rather than falling down in a dead swoon, as did the witch’s son, Braggadocchio responds to real mortal danger with another empty threat. He makes it seem as if the knight is signing his own death warrant in the challenge. The absurdity of that claim is underscored by the end of the stanza:

This said, they both a furlongs mountenaunce  
Retird their steeds, to ronne in euen race:  
But \textit{Braggadocio} with his bloody launc  
Once hauing turnd, no more returnd his face,  
But left his loue to losse, and fled him selfe apace.\textsuperscript{136}

The boasts of war-like might and death dealing actually bring about an instance where Braggadocchio is almost killed by a real knight. His illusory power incites the very violence with which he threatens others, yet his bold words meet their ironic counterpart in his hasty exit.

Like Cymoent, Braggadocchio’s confident proclamations are countermanded by reality; in both cases, it is an overweening or overstepping of boundaries that almost causes calamity. Cymoent’s haste to bemoan her fate leaves Marinell to die. Braggadocchio’s haste to proclaim his might almost leads to his own death. Her failure to recognize the situation is capped with a furtive retreat into the sea. His initial bluster is capped by a furtive exit into the woods. Both paradoxically undermine the seriousness of death by humorously overstating their own proximity to it. The opening up of perspectives makes for a funny undercutting of their positions. Their mentally-

\textsuperscript{135} 18.1-4  
\textsuperscript{136} 18.5-9
constructed worlds collapse in a splash of embarrassed sea foam and a cloud of cowardly dust kicked up by a horse galloping away.

These earlier episodes set a pattern of fear or woe that further probing or perspectival shift proves ridiculous or misguided. Invoking the rhetoric of martyr or avenger without cause brings about those very situations in tragicomic ways, and the intrusion of an outside perspective reveals those points of grisly humor. The knight of chastity herself becomes this intruding force in canto xi. After chasing the giant Ollyphant into a wood “shrowded in security,” Britomart comes across a weeping knight unaware of her presence. He lies with his “face vpon the grouwnd…groueling,” appearing to be “slombring in the shade.” Britomart courteously does not want to disturb him “[n]or seeme too suddeintly him to inuade,” allowing her to perceive his plight without being noticed herself.

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137 This foreshadows her intrusion into Busirane’s castle later in the canto, her chaste perspective allowing her to defeat and collapse the violent poetic force of the wizard’s “love.” Adam McKeown argues that Britomart’s contemplation of the pageant within the castle figures the power of Spenser’s poetry to be both “sensuous and compelling” as well as a force to “explode its rational coherence, creating in the reader a sense that a world of strange and hidden possibilities is glinting through cracks in the poem’s rhetorical facade” (“Looking at Britomart Looking at Pictures.” SEL, 1500-1900, 45.1, The English Renaissance [Winter, 2005], p. 49). McKeown’s point is that the poem is putting sensory or visual impressions in competition with rhetorical function and letting the reader work out the effects. Berger’s notions of “reading-as-if-reading” and “reading-as-if-seeing” would thus create through a sort of poetic alchemy something beyond either individually. For my purposes, the reader’s contribution here would be more than merely glimpsing some deeper meaning; s/he would become the ultimate intruding force in the poem’s workings, bringing an outside perspective that (in cases where the reading is humorous or ironic) would halt the easy assumptions or associations of a traditional plot.

138 6.7
139 8.1.2
140 8.5
This knight, Scudamour, has been described as an “icon of endless, inconsolable mourning” as well as someone having “a bad romance day.” Even those who argue for a reading him as a truly tragic figure admit that he can come across as a “pasteboard Petrarchan character” or an “Ariostan-style knight whom we have watched with a kind of comic detachment.” Whether Scudamour is a non-ironic emblem of Petrarchan paralysis and truly forlorn love or a parodic cautionary tale (or, as is so often the case with Spenser’s poem, both at once), his actions and words mark him as a would-be victim of love’s vicissitudes, a self-proclaimed martyr on the altar of love.

Scudamour begins to break forth in “bitter plaintes,” bewailing his situation and protesting it before God:

…O souerayn Lord that sit’st on hye,
And raignst in blis amongst thy blessed Saintes,
How suffrest thou such shamefull crueltie,
So long vnwreaked of thine enimy?
Or has thou, Lord, of good mens cause no heed?
Or doth thy justice sleepe, and silent ly?
What booteth then the good and righteous deed,
If goodnesse find no grace, nor righteousness no meed?

Scudamour’s complaint thus begins by invoking Almighty God who sits among His “blessed Saintes,” a nod towards those who have lived and died in the service of the Lord. Scudamour is calling upon God almost with an audience in mind to hold the deity accountable. He misses the real significance of that audience, however, in that in calling upon saints he is ignoring the martyrdom that so many suffered to earn the status. He

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141 See John Fraccero, “The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch’s Poetics,” *Diacritics* 5.1 (1975):36 and Lin Kelsey’s response to Joseph Parry at RSA.
143 He seems to represent the obverse position of the speaker in Psalm 116:15: “Precious in the sight of the LORD [is] the death of his saints.” The Geneva Bible comments here, “I perceive that God has a care over his, so that he both disposes their death, and takes an account.”
instead paints himself as a righteous man whose good deeds avail him nothing. Scudamour positions himself as a man whose worthiness is forsaken by the very God whose justice is supposed to uphold the universe.

Scudamour continues to question God in the next stanza, this time bemoaning the torture and capture of Amoret: “If good find grace, and righteousnes reward, / Why then is Amoret in caytiue band…?” It is not merely his virtue and righteousness that are being disdained, then; Amoret (the most “bounteous creature…On foot, vpon the face of liuing land”) is also ignored and punished despite her goodness. Scudamour continues his rhetorical questioning of God, asking why Amoret has remained the captive of the evil wizard Busirane for seven months. Here the question, though directed towards God, seems to land on Scudamour himself. That is, in asking why God has “[s]uffred” this situation to continue, he implicates himself for not rectifying it. The righteousness and good deeds he ascribes to himself seem insufficient to solve the plight of his love. This insufficiency is the cause of the continued captivity and of this complaint; it prolongs the former and spurs the latter. Scudamour, through accusing God of negligence, condemns himself as the responsible party. His framing of the situation is at least a major component of the problem if not the problem itself.

That self-incrimination continues as he describes Amoret’s treatment at the hands of Busirane: “deadly torments doe her chast brest rend, / And the sharpe steele doth riue

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144 The Protestant idea of sola gratia may be cropping up here, as the very act of trying to stand on good deeds by and from oneself raises the question of the source of righteousness.

145 10.1.2

146 10.3.4
her hart in tway, / All for she Scudamore will not denay.”

In practical terms, Amoret’s torture is a result of her commitment to Scudamour; she will not deny her betrothal to him, motivating Busirane’s actions. As Lauren Silberman notes, line five links Scudamour to Busirane by making her willingness to deny Busirane the very unwillingness to deny Scudamour anything. They are, in effect, two sides of the same coin.

Yet that merging with Busirane in action hides Scudamour’s bigger failing: his self-defeating conception of the whole situation. It is one thing to blame himself for loving and being loved by Amoret (“If only she didn’t love me so much she would yield to that evil wizard and end her torment.”). What the final lines in this lament show is that Scudamour is directly responsible for Amoret’s predicament because he cannot get past his own self-pity:

Yet thou vile man, vile Scudamore art sound,  
Ne canst her ayde, ne canst her foe dismay;  
Vnworthy wretch to tread vpon the ground,  
For whom so faire a Lady feeles so sore a wound.

Gone are the protestations of being righteous or worthy in deed. Gone are the accusations against God or calling the Deity to task in front of the saints. Here instead we see a knight so trapped inside his own despair (and his own head) that he cannot see any hope or solution. He collapses again in “singulfes” or sobs, unable to continue his lament, his life seeming to be over. The poet draws our attention to this “seeming” by emphasizing that his own sadness and sobs are “[c]hoking the remnant of his plaintife

11.3-5

11.6-9
12.1
speach, / As if his dayes were come to their last reach.”151 The “as if” highlights the permeable wall around this situation. That is, he may seem to be dying from grief, but his days are being foreshortened not by the external circumstances but by his own internal sadness. He is the source of his own trouble.

This illusion that his days are at their end is so strong that Britomart feels she must intervene, “fearing least from her cage the wearie soule would flit.”152 It is here that the self-involved, alternately self-justifying and self-recriminating perspective runs into the reality of a knight actually able to help. The clash of perspectives here takes on a sort of slapstick dimension as Scudamour is first shocked to see someone else (this is all about him, after all) and then tries to ignore her by slamming his head down:

[He] therewith somewhat starting, vp gan looke,
And seeing him behind a stranger knight…
With great indignaunce he that sight forsooke,
And downe againe himselfe disdainfully
Abiecting, th’earth with his faire forehead strooke…153

The surprise expressed in Scudamour’s starting up is countered by the comical slamming of his head back down on the ground. His ostrich-like move brings out just how much his despair relies upon his isolated perspective. He is lamenting the torture of his lady almost to the point of his own death—until someone tries to snap him out of it, at which point he violently resists the aid.

Britomart has to further talk him out of his nigh-suicidal despair, indicating that the problem lies more in his perception of the issue than in the circumstances proper154.

151 12.4-5
152 12.9
153 13.2-3, 5-7
154 Of course, it should be said that in the *Faerie Queene*, a character’s perception of a situation can alter their real circumstances (Redcross Knight’s misadventures with Errour in Book I come to mind, as does Guyon’s knockabout run-in with Furor and Occasion in Book II). Spenser’s
She refers to his sadness as “deepe conceiued griefe,” which doubles to mean a pain borne deep within as well as something born within him, a product of his own conception. She goes on to urge him to accept the help granted to him by the very “heuenly grace” and “high prouidence” that he railed against in his lament. Distress and misfortune must be endured, she argues, for “life is wretchednesse.” The bubble of despair must be burst, and the solipsistic insistence that all is lost has to be abandoned before help can be accepted.

Scudamour’s response to this good advice is to lift up his head and lean on his elbow, striking a pose of incredulity and (to my mind) annoyance at being interrupted. He repeats that there is no help to be had, that there is no way of freeing Amoret from the evil wizard who seeks to “constraine [her] / Loue to conceiue in her disdainfull brest.” Scudamour is adamant that “worldly price cannot redeeme my deare,” in a way explaining why he complained to God and ignoring the possibility that divine forces may have brought along help in the form of a mighty knight. Despite Britomart’s willingness to help him or die trying, Scudamour insists that her power is as insufficient as his own and that she should “spare thy happy daies, and them apply / To better boot, but let me die, that ought; / More is more losse: one is enough to dy.” The last line seems to push Britomart’s proposed sacrifice out of the picture and re-position

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allegory is constantly slipping away from easy distinctions, but Una’s counseling of Redcross in the cave of Despayre seems to correspond to this episode (RCK is about to kill himself because of his failures, and Una has to remind him of grace and get him out of the dark pit).
Scudamour alone on the sacrificial stake. He almost demands that he die in a sort of just
reward for his failure (a failure in fact constituted by his willingness to die ineffectually),
and his “sacrifice” manages to occlude the death/torture of Amoret. He is the “one” that
suffices.162

What Scudamour’s moment of surprise and his subsequent rejoinder hammers
home is how prematurely bewailing death can be quickly (and sometimes, ironically,
unwillingly) contradicted by an outside view. The speaker’s imagined and rhetorically-
constituted position becomes the actual position only as long as the real situation is held
at bay. The causal relationship between death and lament actually gets reversed, with the
lament almost conjuring the end instead of vice versa.

Spenser’s set-up of each situation is then an illustration/satirization of invoking
death too quickly and in an insular manner. The fact that Cymoent takes so much time to
lament her woeful state and already imagines herself bereft of her son almost causes that
very disaster. Braggadocchio’s invoking of death in battle almost gets him killed by his
truly dangerous opponent. Scudamour’s complaint about never seeing Amoret again is
almost fulfilled in that his grief almost overtakes and kills him. Death does not catch
these characters unaware; they court it and proclaim it, making themselves the center of
their own respective universes. They almost succeed in conjuring the very demise they
bewail. If not for the medical knowledge of a fellow sea-nymph, the cowardice of the

162 There is a punning register throughout that implicates the selfishness of male sexual desire. It
is because Amoret has yielded herself to Scudamour that she will not give in to Busirane. She is
cought between their desires, and both are in some ways writing those designs onto her person
(Scudamour cannot imagine her free and thus leaves her there; Busirane will not let her go and
literally writes in her blood, having taken her heart out in a basin). This last line, however, moves back to Scudamour’s self-involvement and prioritizes his position in the relationship. It’s enough for him to die for his love for her, and it’s enough that he gets to consummate his passion (or “dy”) in their coupling.
braggart, or the interjection of Britomart, each character’s deathly proclamations would come true.163

Going back to the Book’s explicitly thematic virtue, chastity, this calling forth of death has an added valence. In each case, the men are confronting the business-end of forced chastity. This is more literally the case with Cymoent’s son, Marinell, in that he has shunned the romantic attentions of women because of a misunderstood prophecy. His real danger is not the love of women but the lance of one particular women: Britomart. His chastity does not protect him from the literal penetration of that weapon. This fleeing from romantic “death” still almost ends with his actual death. With Braggadocchio’s, his misguided attempts to woo the snow-based Florimell clone are countered by the threats of the wandering knight. Fleeing the actual death represented by battle with this knight means running from the false “death” represented by the sexbot version of Florimell. Scudamour finally is kept from his love by Busirane’s machinations, but those depredations are implicitly identified with his own desires for and designs on Amoret. His flight from the wizard’s castle is a retreat from the physical death he cannot help but identify with his desire for Amoret.

What the poem seems to set up here is a picture of the dangers inherent in both calling forth the specter of physical death before it has actually arrived and, further, failing to understand the connections between sexual consummation and that physical demise. Marinell mistakes love for a wound and misses the actual physical wound from

163 This raises the question of whether or not their escapes constitute failures or successes. They all survive (or, in Cymoent’s case, see their loved one survive), but that actually seems to foil their purpose. Britomart, from that perspective, is actually the hero of Cymoent’s episode and the villain in Scudamour’s; she provides the opportunity for grief in the former and removes that opportunity in the latter.
Britomart. Reading sex as a battle merely leads to his vulnerability to an actual fight. Cymoent’s lament underscores the delusion for the reader, inviting a cautious re-evaluation of both assumptions.164 Braggadocchio fools himself into thinking that he is a true battle-worthy knight and that his “lady” is actually a lady, illusions that end up conflating his lack of military prowess with “her” lack of real flesh. He cannot engage in a real joust any more than he can engage her in any real, mutual union. Scudamour’s almost succumbing to grief is equated with his surrender to the conception of love as a power relation or conquest. He himself is conquered and almost dies because of that perspective, and it takes an outside force (Britomart) to re-orient that relationship. In each case, the links between sex and death are made too literal and simultaneously miss the actual danger or vulnerability in sexual union.

Spenser’s epic romance is full of such problematic conflations, of mistaking one thing for another.165 It is noteworthy that here, sex and death get conflated in ways more geared towards the humorous, however. The sudden revelation that Cymoent’s woe is not in fact warranted helps cast her self-pitying rhetoric in a more satirical light. The quick reversal of Braggadocchio’s fortunes is a cascade of absurdity.166 Scudamour’s

164 She is, after all, the source of Marinell’s misunderstanding. She misreads the Proteus’ prophecy and prevents him from pursuing romantic love. She continues that misreading by not getting that her son is actually still alive and that her tragedy is more a function of her own perceptions than of the actual situation.
165 The image of Occasion in Book II, canto iv comes across like allegorical depictions of Opportunity, with a forelock of hair to be grasped (Occasion is an old hag limping on a lame leg, while Opportunity was often depicted as a beautiful woman). Later in Book II (canto xii), Guyon comes across sculpture and artwork that fools the eye into believing the artifice is real (plants that out-do nature, waves that seem to really lap the shore, etc.). He comes across these beguiling artworks in the Bower of Bliss. Most famously, in Book I Redcrosse Knight and Una slay the monster Errour only to immediately trust the seemingly honest Archimago. In so doing, they prove themselves to be stuck still Errour’s cave, having never recognized the true nature of the deception.
166 First, fake knight wins fake woman through bluffing. Then, real knight and fake knight bandy ironic statements about death and possession of said fake woman. Finally, false knight pretends
insistence on his own death (as well as the subjugation of his beloved) is so strong that he strikes his head trying to return to the self-centered sorrow, creating a bizarrely comic image of a male knight refusing a female knight’s help so adamantly that he’s literally banging his head off the ground. The faults and cracks in each scenario have a comedic reversal built into them.

One thing Spenser’s complex allegorical treatment shows is just how fraught these connections are, and how far humor can go towards revealing and de-mystifying these links. Links between death and transcendence, as we have seen, play a huge part in the rhetorical and theological constructions of martyrdom. And if Spenser’s poem is trying to caution against an overly hasty and ultimately illegitimate deployment of that rhetoric (especially when sex is in lurking behind the lamented demise, “death” behind death), the lyrics of John Donne are focused on the possibilities opened up by expanding the sort of death that gets one transcendence.

Helen C. White observes that John Donne “was born with the chance to be a Catholic martyr and rejected it,” a rejection cemented by his 1610 tract *Pseudo-Martyr*, which argued that adherents to Roman Catholicism were not morally or theologically proscribed from taking the Oath of Allegiance to James I.\(^{167}\) Donne here intervened in a broader debate about the value of martyrs, as many Catholics chose to suffer execution to proclaim their loyalty to the Pope. That willingness to die was not limited to Catholics, however. Both Protestant and Catholic martyrlogies asserted that a blessed certainty came from sacrificing one’s life for given beliefs, but as both sides suffered deaths at the

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\(^{167}\) *The Metaphysical Poets*, New York: MacMillian, 1936, p. 96
stake and scaffold, the question of how much certainty was actually granted became a loaded one. What was actually gained by being martyred, especially since both sides could line up competing lists of their chosen acolytes? Further, was there a way to achieve the spiritual benefits of martyrdom without physically dying? Could being a witness be separated from being a martyr? What *Pseudo-Martyr* expressly rejects is the inexorable linkage between death and witnessing. Susannah Breitz Monta has argued that Donne’s Holy Sonnets and theological tracts try to extricate the “rewards” of martyrdom from actual physical death, positing instead a way for someone to reap the benefits through “more mundane” forms of suffering. She examines the way that Donne sets up and satirizes proclamations of spiritual certainty via death, noting how he mocks the implicit connections martyrs of every Christian stripe tried to forge between their own deaths and the sacrifice of Christ. In so doing, she sees him poetically extracting the spiritual advantages one might enjoy from actual physical death.  

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169 Daniel R. Gibbons similarly sketches out a way of reading Donne’s religious poetry (particularly the sonnet sequence *La Carona*) as charged with the “rhetoric of limited openness, of theological multivocality, and of mystical excess” with the purpose of creating “a common devotional ground which was designed to all a mystical union of private Christian devotion that could exist alongside the public unity of worship that ought to have existed” in public liturgical performance (“Rewriting Spiritual Community in Spenser, Donne, and the *Book of Common Prayer.*” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 54:1, Spring 2012, p. 28). Gibbons sees all of Donne’s *religious* lyrics as participating in a sort of controversy-transcending vision of divine experience (one he traces in the 1559 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*) that places Catholic and Protestant beliefs alongside each other in such a way that no one side or sect could be the exclusive audience. Specifically, the performative domain of communal liturgy becomes, in his reading of Donne, a space for “broad—but, from Donne’s perspective, basically orthodox—devotional community which exceeds the confessional boundaries of Donne’s England” (p. 34). If Monta’s point is that Donne wanted to save the certainty and spiritual blessings of martyrdom from death for both Catholics and Protestants, Gibbons’s is that Donne wanted to let all persuasions in on the communal worship of liturgy.
I want to argue that Donne’s love poetry begins this extrication by re-positioning martyrdom into more carnal, even humorous situations. Specifically, I see some of his love poems (particularly “The Flea” and “The Canonization”) making ironically exalted claims for individuals in the throes of sexual desire rather than religious meditation. By lifting up a parasite and two lovers to the status of “martyrs,” he begins to uncouple physical, literal death from the joys and certainties of martyrdom. Transcendence, these poems argue, can come from sexual “dying” as much as it can from literal expiration. If, as Monta observes, the Holy Sonnets in fact show Donne undercuts the grand claims of martyrs in favor of a continual process of justification advocated in his religious tracts, seeing something other than literal death achieve blessedness in his secular poems provides both a better understanding of the rhetorical thrust of these poems and a better indication about how traditional links between theological subjects might be disrupted and ultimately supplanted. That is, exalting the “death” of sexual climax to a place where it reaps the rewards of a martyr’s death (a gambit that humorously couples the literality of martyrdom’s rewards with the metaphorical “death” of orgasm) allows Donne to uncouple spiritual assurance from being burnt or hanged.

The language deployed throughout both “The Canonization” and “The Flea” perfectly mirrors the rhetoric of martyrdom, down to the puns and entendres on burning and consume/consummation. If such descriptions of physical love are pushing things too far, however, martyrrology can also be accused of overstepping the bounds of

170 Recalling Gibbons again, the sort of all-inclusive project of Donne’s liturgical poems would be foreshadowed in the juxtaposition of spiritual sainthood and physical lovers. The “communion of saints whose timeless, ceaseless activity is liturgy” (as Gibbons describes the community imagined/ performed in La Carona) would be opened even more broadly (p. 34). The liturgical activity could even include the physical act of love.
metaphorical reason. If, however, the metaphors are valid and appropriate (albeit unconventional), the benefits of martyrdom can be had at a relative discount. Sexual ecstasy and religious fervor both apparently end in canonization, and the first is probably going to win out as the more attractive option.

Donne provides the comparison in “The Flea” by setting up the titular arachnid as both a parody of and alternative to the martyr. “Mark but this flea,”¹⁷¹ the poem begins, setting a tone of humorous disjunction. The grave implications “[m]ark” both Jesus’ invocations to “Behold the fowls of the air” and “Consider the lilies”¹⁷² as well as Pilate’s call to the crowd after Jesus’ scourging, “Behold the man.”¹⁷³ Thus the flea is, from the outset, occupying a tropological space that wavers between the mundane but emblematic and the divine but seemingly humiliated. In the first stanza, the flea fills both roles in that it represents the mingling of “two bloods”¹⁷⁴ (the speaker and the addressed) through having “sucked” both as well as by its freedom from “sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead.”¹⁷⁵ It is a physical synthesis of the two on a microcosmic scale, and it is parodically Christ-like in being outside the moral failings of fallen humans. It is a small creature whose minute scale grants it enormous symbolic weight, even as its important actions are beneath the moral concerns of human beings. Though it is less than human, it does “more than we would do.”¹⁷⁶ Sexual contact is both epitomized and trivialized in the flea’s actions. It is more and less than important.

¹⁷¹ l. 1
¹⁷² Matthew 6.26, 28. KJV
¹⁷³ John 19.5
¹⁷⁴ l. 4
¹⁷⁵ l. 6
¹⁷⁶ l. 9
Having established a humorous dichotomy of the trivial and the transcendent in a small flea, the speaker pushes beyond all sense of symbolic propriety in the second stanza:

O, stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.  

The flea is now a “marriage bed and marriage temple” through its mingling of the two bloods. It is a holy object of reverence, worthy of being defended and preserved. The speaker almost talks himself into how important the flea is, going from “almost” joined in marriage to “more than married” by virtue of the flea’s having bitten them both. Killing the flea is not simply taking care of a pest; it is more than just symbolic of denying the speaker sexual consummation as well. It is literally an act of suicide. I say “literally” on purpose, as the line between symbol and reality is erased by the language of the stanza. Killing the flea is metaphorically killing the speaker, but it’s literally taking both lives as they are all literally/symbolically joined in the body of the flea. 

That same dynamic or movement informs the language of martyrs. They are simple witnesses to the grand truths they represent, yet their deaths achieve a grander

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177 l. 10-18
178 The effect is not unlike Hamlet’s jesting response to Claudius in Act 4, Scene 3. “Farewell, dear mother,” he says upon hearing that he is going to England. Claudius a bit stiffly insists that he is “Thy loving father, Hamlet.” Hamlet responds, “My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother.—Come, for England!” The metaphorical becomes the literal becomes the ridiculous.
importance by virtue of what they proclaim. Martyrs are, in a cynical sense, expected to talk loudly about how little their deaths matter, implying all the while that their executions portend awe-inspiring mysteries in the spirit. Donne’s speaker mocks that boastful humility by making the flea both a preview of sexual desire and a consummation of it. He further positions the flea’s death as more than symbolic of the death of the lovers. The absurdity of the flea’s exaltation is a direct copy of the martyr’s apotheosis.

This complex play on the literal and metaphorical explicitly evokes martyrdom in the third stanza, where the speaker responds to the flea’s death: “Cruel and sudden, hast thou since / Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?” The term “innocent blood” is full of Biblical precedent, but it had particular resonance in the rhetoric surrounding martyrs. In particular, the reference in Revelation 17.6 to the “blood of the saints” and the “blood of the martyrs of Jesus” linked innocent blood to those dying for religious beliefs. The pun on “innocence” and “innocents” also brings in the massacre of the multitudes of saints. Here then, the flea is a martyr (or many martyrs), extinguished by the caprice of a human being. The marriage temple, the cloistering of essences, the literal repository of essential fluids—it’s all destroyed and eradicated in a moment of violence. The flea would have seemingly reached its apotheosis, the promise of its symbolic value has now been capitalized in the moment of transcendent death.

Yet, the poem ends with a complete re-direction of that energy. Neither the speaker or the person addressed are “weaker now” that the flea is dead. “Then learn how false fears be,” line 25 reads. The death of the flea is neither religiously galvanizing nor

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179 l. 19; There is a pun here on “innocence” and “innocents” as well, implying a massacre on the part of cruel woman.
180 Proverbs 6.17 cites God’s hatred for “hands that shed innocent blood.”
is it an existentially cataclysmic moment. Despite the hyperbolic claims of self-murder and shedding innocent blood, the death is ultimately not that big a deal. The real payoff is in the last two lines: “Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me, / Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee.” As savvy (or just attentive) readers deduced from the start, the flea is a sort of ignoratio elenchi to help further the speaker’s goal of sexual union. Though the flea’s heightened importance mirrors the exaltation of a would-be martyr, sex is the real point where transcendence is reached. The benefits of a grand death are undercut in favor of carnal pleasures. You can be the flea getting crushed between opposing forces, or you can re-conceive the whole debate as an insignificant question in the light of sexual desire.

This argument for the superiority and sacred importance of love-making is more fully explored in “The Canonization,” a poem whose very title invites connections between sainthood and sexuality. I cannot pretend to give a full or even completely coherent account of this poem¹, but I think this dynamic whereby physical love undercuts and then trumps the sacrifice of martyrdom informs the twists and turns present in the lines. Specifically, the hope that a martyr’s death earns sainthood, that dying for particular beliefs confirms the veracity of those beliefs, is here refracted so that beatification comes from a decidedly physical act of propagation rather than one of self-negation. “For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,” the speaker begins, explicitly invoking the deity as he addresses the audience. This audience is presented with various other things to contemplate in order to allow time and space for love. Among those objects presented, however, are the speaker’s own physical flaws (“palsy”,

¹ I admit that Brooks’s Well-Wrought Urn might be clearer to me than the actual verse that provides its title.
“gout”, “five gray hairs”). Thus, in order to fend off criticism and distract attention from the actual love, the speaker offers up the frailty (and apparently relative baldness) of his own body. The love here is surely sexual, but it’s something more than the merely physical. Though thoroughly grounded in the physical reality of disease and decay, love is transcending those boundaries.

That transcendence is a key part of what would-be martyrs sought in general, as proponents of every stripe viewed death as a way to go beyond their physical lives and thus ensure sainthood. Monta, in her analysis of Holy Sonnets 11 and 14, notes that each poem begins at a high emotional pitch as their speakers ask for a violent moment of salvation. One way those poems defuse such explosive potential is to mockingly take the metaphors of martyrdom literally (the speaker literally wishes to be Jesus on the cross, the soul of the speaker literally is literally a city under siege). This complex interaction between the metaphors and reality comes through in “The Canonization” specifically in the realm of love poetry, as the clichés and tropes of Petrarchan love poetry are mocked by the incredulous but still desperate-sounding speaker:

Alas, alas, who’s injured by my love?
What merchant’s ships have my sighs drowned?
Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
When did the heats which my veins fill
Add one man to the plaguy bill? \(^{182}\)

Love doesn’t literally produce sighs enough to change the currents in the ocean, nor does it produce actual floods on land. No alternation of chills or heat in the heart or veins of the speaker has transformed surrounding weather patterns or resulted in actual death. The hyperbolic tenor of certain verses is lampooned by being taken literally, thus negating

\(^{182}\) 1.10-15
any sort of plausible effect. The audience is being called upon to canonize the lovers, but the relative seriousness of that call is hard to gauge.

“The Canonization” continues to compile and intermix metaphors until the actual relation between the words and the relative seriousness of the poem are occluded. That slippery notion of seriousness is further exacerbated by the pun on “die” in the third stanza. The speaker asks that he and his lover be called flies, but he immediately adds the image of “tapers” or candles to that one. Both images find an endpoint in the phrase “at our own cost die,” which combines 1) the flies dying in the fire of the candles, 2) the candles dying in that they burn themselves up, and 3) the (perhaps) base reality of “dying” in a sexual sense. The metaphors end in a literal death, the literal act ends in a metaphorical “death.”

A similar combination of images follows in references to “the eagle and the dove. / The phoenix riddle” all climaxing in a statement of transcendence that again holds up a literal/metaphorical death as the triumphant element: “We die and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love.” The metaphors again reach climax in literal death and rebirth; the literal act of love-making reaches climax in “dying” and (the speaker hopes anyway) recouping enough energy for another go at it. With these terms, the poem essentially marks the narrative arc of martyrs as mere metaphors for the “real” death and life arising in sex. The language of ecstasy and spiritual union woven throughout martyrologies is here reversed so that the true goal is not a holy conflagration but sexual consummation.

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183 l. 21
184 22-23
185 l. 26-27
The fourth stanza returns to the expressly Christian terminology of canonization and beatific exaltation, as the poem itself becomes the monument and venerated object celebrating the lovers: “We can die by it, if not live by love, / And if unfit for tombs and hearse /Our legend be, it will be fit for verse…”\textsuperscript{186} The passage deploys what James P. Bednarz calls the “authority of the sacred” in a transfer of authenticity from private interaction to public (in this case poetic) pronouncement.\textsuperscript{187} That is, by utilizing the language of sanctification usually reserved for venerated saints, the poet makes the lovers’ experience more than just personal. It achieves a higher level in that it bears witness to the power of sexual union for all who read and remember. Bednarz further argues that the “hymns” (what the speaker calls the lines of the poem) confirm the sainthood of the lovers, just as the death of a martyr was thought to attest to that individual’s sainthood. The power of verse takes the place of tombs and holy relics, establishing that the glory of a martyr can be matched by the joys of sex. This love is finally proclaimed a “pattern…from above” to cement its status as an act equivalent to a holy rite. The language of the martyr is not exclusive to martyrdom, and that opens the door for all sorts of reconsiderations.

What all of these competing levels of metaphor and allusion indicate is that transcendence can be just as easily claimed for a physical experience that doesn’t lead to actual death as it can for a dramatic execution. Again, “dying” beats death in that both get a share of heavenly bliss, and the former costs a whole lot less. The humor comes from the fact that both sex and martyrdom trade on hyperbolic metaphors and often opaque descriptions that can be stretched beyond all recognition. We can laugh at the

\textsuperscript{186} I. 28-30
\textsuperscript{187} Shakespeare and the Truth of Love: The Mysteries of “The Phoenix and the Turtle”.
lover proclaiming the holiness of his love, and we can see the rhetorical hoops he jumps through to argue for that status. This leaves actual martyrdom in a tough spot, however.

Coming full circle to Donne’s Pseudo-Martyr, I think both options are actually in play. What these erotic poems illustrate is that the language of martyrdom is over the top and prone to problematic deployment. Donne argues that the supposed joys of martyrdom, the certainty of blessedness, is actually a case of mistaken causes. “So consider,” he writes, “it is not the Catholicke faith, but an vniust vsurpation, and that it is not the Lyon of Iuda, for whose service and honour your liues were well giuen, but it is for a Weasell.” Notice that the bait and switch of martyrdom’s language does not mean those who died had malicious intent. Rather, their lives were still “well giuen,” an endorsement of their zeal if not for their methodology. The paradox is that such deployment is not a reason to stop using these terms and metaphors altogether. These poems show that such problematic deployment can be used in a multitude of ways, and if nothing is out of bounds then nothing is off the table. Once the gate is opened for such metaphors and interpretations, there’s no need to make self-destructive acts like martyrdom the exclusive domain or path. The Holy Sonnets may be a culmination of this process, mockingly bringing in sexual imagery to shock the speaker out of false conceptions of salvation. However, that process needs to begin by expanding and (in some cases) humorously exploding the limits of application. Sex and “death” have to be juxtaposed, or in this case, shown to be the same thing.

Donne’s poetry is more than just an abstract or philosophical game, however. The stakes of how “death” was defined and its benefits articulated had particular

188 D2v
importance in Early Modern England. Both Catholics and Protestants held uneasily to the idea that martyrdom achieved or established a level of theological uncertainty unavailable in life. Donne sought to contest that assertion in his prose, and I think these erotic poems are invested in the same argument. He may have elsewhere articulated the necessity of continuing to strive for Truth, but he offered a compelling alternative to a martyr’s death in his love poems. Martyrs die. Lovers “die.” Advantage: Lovers.

Both poets therefore use humor as an interrupting force breaking up the easy conflations of love and death. Spenser’s poem investigates the grandiose claims of would-be martyrs for love only to find their “deaths” a matter of perspective (in the cases examined, the wrong perspective). Donne’s erotic lyrics humorously conjoin love and death so that a flea and pair of infatuated lovers get the same divine treatment as a bona fide saint or holy martyr. The self-aggrandizing are cut down, the lowly exalted, and humor does the heavy lifting in both cases.
CHAPTER 4
TRAGICAL MIRTH AND A TALE OF WOE,
OR
HOW TO SAVE THE LOVERS AND KEEP FROM GOING BOTTOM UP

“How oft, when men are at the point of death,
Have they been merry! which their keepers call
A lightning before death.”
-Romeo and Juliet V.iii

“Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.”
-Mel Brooks

Death, as we have seen, is a glaring test for humor’s transformative/refractive power. The starkness of a life ending creates an interpretive void that can be efficiently and effectively filled by using humor. A death can be made into a foolish over-estimation of one’s own importance, as official executions tried to reduce the accused to an empty shell or sub-human object of scorn. The accused can always bend those attempts into a more rhetorically powerful argument for martyrdom and transcendence, however, through a half-submission that re-directs the humor back onto the executing power. That is, humor can be an external force attacking the serious claims of a dying person, or the person can assimilate humor into her/himself, thus making the executioner and the apparatus around him part of the scorn and mockery.

As the poetry of Spenser and Donne illustrates, humor can undo the sort of heroic or grandiose associations a would-be martyr would seek to forge for themselves, and
humor can also raise the seemingly insignificant or mundane to the heights of ecstatic exaltation. The former move transforms potential tragedies into comedies, and the self-centered person intent on martyrdom instead finds themselves an unwitting clown performing a sort of slapstick parody of a sacrificial lamb. The latter process, however, sees humor translate the derided/mocked element or figure into a beatified state. In the *Faerie Queene* (especially Book III), promoting oneself as the star of a tragic narrative often gets one trundled into a very different sort of tale, one where mockery emerges where one would have hoped for sympathy or tears. Conversely, the realm of earthly love and even of vile arachnids gets transmogrified into the saintly domain of angels and holy favor in Donne. The very lowliness of the subjects (and a self-mockery of that lowliness) allows for a transformation that transcends the merely comedic and allows for a profound effect on the audience.

Thus, the effect Donne’s erotic poetry achieves through its glorification of the lowly is the same one produced by a canny prisoner executed and proclaimed a martyr. Obviously the staging and format are different, but the rhetorical strategy is the same: the fine line between martyr and heretic is ultimately established in an audience’s response to the individuals in question, just as the status of earthly love or a flea in a poem comes down to how seriously the reader can take the proposed exaltation. Making someone look ridiculous can un-mask a good number of false assumptions or faulty premises, but being able to take ridicule or mockery and re-direct it opens the door for an actual conferral of grand status. Donne’s erotic poetry proposes, like the accused mocking his

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189 David Foster Wallace once defined a bad film as any one that provoked laughter where it meant to induce tears and vice versa. One might, in the same spirit, argue that any “tragic” actor/character/figure who gets laughs when s/he wants to elicit tears is a bad tragedian and an entertaining comic.
own position on the scaffold, that while the situation may be absurd, something transcendent could still result.

Donne’s melding of the language of religious martyrdom with the passions of earthly love has been linked to the rhetorical construction of love as divine, transcendent apotheosis in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and that play’s treatment of self-sacrifice and audience reception is a brilliant examination of the dynamics of humor and martyrdom in Early Modern England. To see the full extent to which *Romeo and Juliet* deals with humor, however, the play needs to be set in relief against another Shakespearean play believed to be composed around the same time: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. What emerges is the way external humor can interrupt a narrative

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190 While the general dates of composition are pretty well established (via external references, topical allusions, and appearances in print), there is some division among scholars and editors about the exact order of composition for the two plays. Brian Gibbons (editor of the second Arden edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1980), G. Blakemore Evans (editor of the 1984 Cambridge edition of the same play), Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells (editors of the Oxford edition of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, 1986), and René Weis (editor of the third Arden *Romeo and Juliet*, 2012) all place the tragedy later than the comedy. On the other hand, S.B. Hemingway (“The Relation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to *Romeo and Juliet*” MLN 26, 1911), Kenneth Muir (*The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays*, 1977), Harold F. Brooks (editor of the second Arden edition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1979), and Amy J. Reiss and George Walton Williams (“Tragical mirth: from *Romeo to Dream*” in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*” edited by Joseph A. Porter, 1997) all argue that the *Dream* is a comedic revisiting of the tragic scenario presented in *Romeo and Juliet*. Each side finds interesting interpretive significance in its respective ordering of the plays (Is Puck promising a more serious presentation of tragic love when he says the players will “make amends” at the close of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, alluding to the forthcoming *Romeo and Juliet*? Is the playwright deflecting charges of over-sentimentality in *Romeo and Juliet* when he has the noble company deride the scenario in the “Pyramus and Thisbe” set up?), but none are overwhelmingly conclusive in their findings.

The broadest range of possible composition, again based on seemingly topical allusions and external references to/publication of the plays, put both between 1594 and 1597. Most, if not all, scholars narrow that down reasonably to 1595-96 based on stylistic judgments and probable occasions for the plays’ first performances. Gibbons ends his consideration of the composition history of the plays by saying, “What cannot be doubted, whichever play is the earlier, is the close relationship between them” (xlv). Peter Holland, concluding his essay in the 2000 Oxford edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, writes, “[I]n the final analysis, all that matters is that the two plays were clearly being worked on at roughly the same moment” (110).
intended to be tragedy, transforming it from a site of awe to one of ridicule. What also emerges, however, is humor’s power (when properly managed) to halt derision or mockery and exalt to the level of martyr.

The connection between these two plays is not merely historical coincidence. While the settings and generic orientations are vastly different (a comedy set in classical Athens vs. a tragedy set in Renaissance Verona), both plays feature young people defying the laws and conventions of their elders in order to pursue their passionate love for one another. Marriage and its consummation are afforded high praise in both plays, and the language of adoration and devotion in each play is noteworthy for its deployment of previous tropes as well as its distinctive treatment of that language. Perhaps most obviously, however, both feature a “star-crossed lovers” plot wherein a young man and young woman from feuding families die as a result of their love for each other. How Shakespeare presents this plot is entirely different from play to play, however, and the differences illustrate how humor can both destroy the dramatic effect of death and be subsumed to raise up those who die to martyr-status.

Because A Midsummer Night’s Dream includes the “tragical mirth” of Pyramus and Thisbe as a coda to the main plot of the play, I will examine it first. There are, of course, resonant themes between the primary storylines and this almost tossed-off addition, and those themes bear some accounting. The opposition of youthful love and fancy to the more monetary or political desires of parents shows itself in the love quadrangle of the first four acts as well as in the “tedious brief scene” presented at the wedding festivities in Act V. Where the crossed loves of Hermia, Helena, Demetrius,
and Lysander are first exacerbated and then alleviated by the intervention of Fairy creatures, however, Pyramus and Thisbe receive no such supernatural attention or aid. What is magically brought together to set the table for a wedding feast in the main plot is irrevocably shattered in the short play.

Instead of presenting a scene of pathos and heart-breaking loss, however, the Pyramus and Thisbe scenes provide some of the biggest laughs in the whole *Dream*. In particular, humor turns or refracts the players’ intended interpretation; pathos becomes mockery becomes bathos becomes irony. The players’ attempts to evoke pity and tragic awe are initially interrupted by their own inept acting, an ineptitude compounded by their fear that the dramatic presentation will be mistaken for reality as well as by their complete obliviousness to how bad they actually are. Like a prisoner who takes her/himself too seriously, a would-be tragic actor with no self-awareness (in this case, Bottom as Pyramus or Francis Flute as Thisbe) is an easy target for mockery. On top of that, at each step the royal audience on stage (Duke Theseus, Hippolyta, Demetrius, et. al.) cuts into the Mechanicals’ sense of drama and tragedy, playing up the already ridiculous elements of the performance. The deaths of the two lovers on stage are occasions not for sadness or solemn contemplation; they are cues for laughter.193

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193 Robin Headlam Wells describes Bottom’s performance of Pyramus’s “Herculean death-throes” as “protracted nonsense,” arguing that the play within the play is a “burlesque” of the demise of the heroic lover. Wells notes the absurdity of these scenes as part of his analysis of the specific effect of *Romeo and Juliet*’s final suicides, but interestingly enough he leaves out the roles played by the royal audience in highlighting that absurdity. His contention is that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* presents Petrarchan love imagery as farce, while *Romeo and Juliet* transforms the same concepts into kitsch. I disagree that *Romeo and Juliet* satirizes or undercuts its own tragic payoff, primarily because I feel that the play has a sense of self-awareness about its own potential reception as humorous absurdity. Bottom and the rest of the players do make their scene into a comedy, but it’s primarily the distance between their expected reception and their actual performance that creates the incongruity so essential to humor. The interjections by Theseus and his noble peanut gallery only add to that effect by highlighting how far the play is
Given the naturally tragic shape of this short plot, the “mirth” it provokes is odd. However, it is a part of the play’s very introduction. When Peter Quince hands out the roles in I.2, he gives the title as “The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe.” Recalling the incongruity and deformity so intrinsic to theories of humor, such a title already sets up the play as ridiculous. A lamentable comedy is, generically, a contradiction in terms; it is also, as Philostrate tells Theseus in Act V, a fairly accurate description of production. The acting is so bad that the effect is the exact opposite of what would be expected of a tragedy. Watching the rehearsal “[m]ade mine eyes water,” Philostrate says, but the tears were the “merry” result of “loud laughter.” Like Bibbiena’s witty phrases that reverse a normally positive connotation, the description of the play is both sadly off-kilter and painfully apt.

Another emphasis on this double description comes from the duchess herself. Between Theseus calling for the play and the players actually taking the stage, Hippolyta states that she does not enjoy seeing “wretchedness o’ercharged, / And duty in his service perishing.” She seems to be asking her husband not to bring out loyal actors only to have them ridiculed. The “wretched” players will be unable to do justice to the emotional power of a tragedy, thus dying on stage in the sense of failing to evoke the desired

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194 Jonathan Bate argues that this comedic epilogue is a self-conscious parodying on Shakespeare’s part of his own predilection for literary adaptation and allusion. The play within the play is, in effect, Shakespeare mocking his own literary aspirations even as he continues to work within the milieu of classical myth (Shakespeare and Ovid. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. p. 41).

195 11-12
196 V.1.69, 70
197 85-6
emotions. However, she also implicates the entire plot of the play in her distaste for “duty in his service perishing,” as the lover Pyramus will die in his service to Thisbe. Her expression of anxiety is not just that the players are unfit for their parts; she implies that even a good performance would be unwelcome. The “noble” conventions and love tropes are as painful for her to witness as a poor performance. With that phrase, Hippolyta begins to implicate the entire staging of the Dream before the real play-going audience. That is, the supposedly royal audience on stage becomes as much a target for irony as the supposedly working-class actors performing in front of them. The metadramatic effect is that that the laughing “nobles” and their taste for classical tragedy (and its clichés) are just as open to satirizing as any bumbling performance of a classical myth. All parties are fair game for the reversal and mockery of the actual audience watching Shakespeare’s play.

Theseus’ response addresses Hippolyta’s first concern (the sense that watching a poor performer punch above his weight class dramatically is somehow indecent), but his answer opens up an oddly incongruous line of thought in showing his own lack of awareness concerning the larger irony contained in her objection. He presents the duty of the royal or superior audience as being able to pick out what is meant by the inadequate presentation and fill in the intention. After recalling the greetings and welcomes of humble servants who stammer and forget to actually welcome him, he states, “Love,

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198 Madeleine Forey claims that the humor of the whole performance is primarily a function of Shakespeare “sharing with the more cultured of his audience the rather exclusive humor of literary play.” Specifically, she sees the allusions to Golding’s translation of Ovid (Shakespeare’s likely source for the Pyramus and Thisbe episode) as part of a larger network of playful communication meant to cement Shakespeare’s status among the social elite (“‘Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou Art Translated!’: Ovid, Golding, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” Modern Language Review, 93.2 [April, 1998]. p. 329).
therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity / In least speak most, to my capacity.”

199 He seems to want to say that his magnanimity is more than capable of reading the loyalty and honest effort in the players’ poor performance, and that though his jibes and jokes at the play’s expense may seem evidence of disdain, he actually means to express love and respect. What he really articulates, however, is a “generosity” that is more concerned with showing his ducal awesomeness than it is with actually thanking or appreciating his subjects’ efforts. A bumbling or halting performance is another chance for him to be condescending, and that seems to be what he really loves. 200 Thus, while the duke wants to set up an interpretive system wherein bad performance is a sign of respect and cutting jibes are a sign of appreciation, he ends up illustrating how complacent and prone to ironic deconstruction he himself is.

From this sort of introduction, the brief scene is presented as an instance where grave attempts to evoke deep pity and catharsis fail and produce the very opposite. In addition, though the witty comments from the noble audience seem to stake a superior position above the hapless players, the whole progression ends up reflecting ironically on everyone on stage. That converse effect indicates a disconnect between how the “players” in the play-within-the-play and the total number of characters on stage view themselves and how they come across to the theatre audience watching the whole show. The humor halts the tragic effects of the sad story and instead of awe or reverence invites scorn and derision; that derision itself is two-edged, however, and no one gets out unscathed. The players are attempting to achieve great heights of drama and pathos, but

199 Robin Headlam Wells notes that the duke conflates madness or “divine frenzy” with poetic inspiration. His primary point here is to identify elements of the “heroic lover” and love-sickness being identified with one another (“Neo-Petrarchan Kitsch in Romeo and Juliet.” p. 925).
the insinuations of the nobles will reduce that to absurdity, an absurdity that ends up engulfing the whole final act.  

The prologue is the first victim of this treatment, and the kind-generosity-as-sign-of-affection approach gets pushed by the initial lines: “If we offend, it is with our goodwill. / That you should think we come not to offend, / But with goodwill.” The mismatched pairing of “offend” and “goodwill” is pressed together as if the former were a natural sign of the latter. This sets up a pattern of misreading and mis-punctuating the lines so that the most incongruous ideas are set in terms of each other:

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.

The duke’s averring that he senses more genuine reverence in mis-stated greetings is put to the test here, as he has to now make sense of an acting troupe seeking to offend him with their goodwill, who come to despite him, and who are not interested in contenting him. Rather than thanks or reward, they want him to repent of having called them. All of this is presented, again in good faith, but the duke cannot help but remark upon the jumbled mess. “His speech was like a tangled chain,” the duke manages, “nothing

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201 Forey also argues that in this act, A Midsummer Night’s Dream “presents in its characters the different attitudes to writing and reading out of which the possibility for [...] parody arises” (“Ovid, Golding, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, p. 328). That is, the sort of literal reading of the Mechanicals comes up against the “sophisticated” or dextrous readings of the nobles, allowing for play and parodic presentation.

202 108-10

203 110-17
impaired, but all disordered.” Lysander offers a similar description by saying the speaker “hath rid his prologue like a rough colt; he knows not the stop.” The halting speech is here ridiculed as a mangled bit of oratory, and the implicit taunting or verbal attack is denigrated as mere nonsense. Hippolyta too adds a negative comparison, saying that the speaker “played on this prologue like a child on a recorder—a sound, but not in government.” What all three comments emphasize is the lack of understanding or control on the part of the speaker. As the duke noted in his memory of nervous “clerks” seeking to flatter him, the actor has made “periods in the midst of sentences,” divorcing the speech from sense (102). The actor here is an inanimate chain whom others have implicitly tangled; he is a hapless rider unable to govern an unruly mount through his own ignorance; and he is a foolish child, unaware of how to manipulate the sounds of an instrument into melody. The malapropisms may be the player’s, but the privilege of interrupting and providing the humorous perspective is the audience’s. They are the source of the wit and understanding. Or so they present themselves.

Through such comparisons, the noble audience raise themselves up as objects of scorn. They belabor endlessly the poor reading of the prologue, and they go out of their way to inform each other that they perceive how badly the player spoke it. Yet, the real audience observing the play could easily get the absurdity of the reading. There were not botched classical allusions, no faulty Latin or poorly-parsed Greek. The nobles come across as smug nit-pickers, preying on an obviously hapless target. They seem unaware

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204 124-25
205 119–20
206 122-23
of the negative image of themselves they project. They are, despite the duke’s claims of generosity, a profoundly un-generous audience.\textsuperscript{207}

This “wit” pops up again as the “characters” in the play are introduced, specifically the lion and wall, who according to the prologue will “[a]t large discourse, while here they do remain.”\textsuperscript{208} The duke cheekily asks if the lion is to speak, noting the promise of discourse from (or with?) the beast. Demetrius responds, “No wonder, my lord. One lion may when many asses do.”\textsuperscript{209} Again, the actors’ missteps are emphasized and brought out as ridiculous and as unintentional by the royal audience. The wall is also treated to the same reception, as the actor (Snout) first explains how he means to portray a wall by appealing to his costume and make up.\textsuperscript{210} Theseus responds to the explanation with a complimentary question that holds a mocking edge: “Would you desire lime and hair to speak better?”\textsuperscript{211} Demetrius answers with another disdainful commendation: “It is the wittiest partition that ever I heard discourse, my lord,” thus bringing out the nobleman’s familiarity with rhetorical terminology and unkindly indicating that the player has no such knowledge.\textsuperscript{212} The actors are reduced to asses and talkative divisions not just by their performance, again, but by the observations of the external audience.

\textsuperscript{207} A modern descendent of this type of audience member might be the heckler at a stand-up comedy show. The heckler attempts to co-opt the laughs and audience attention by lampooning the performer. While this may occasionally work in the short term, the more common effect is to invite audience scorn and come across as boorish.
\textsuperscript{208} 150
\textsuperscript{209} 152-3
\textsuperscript{210} Also, it may be an unfair comparison, but Henry V calls upon the audience to imagine the fields of France and the tramping of horses at the outset, similarly acknowledging the lack of set pieces and the need for an audience to suspend disbelief.
\textsuperscript{211} 164
\textsuperscript{212} 165-66; see OED: 1551 T. Wilson Rule of Reason sig. Eijv “A man is deuided into bodie, and soule, & this kynde of deuidyng is properlie called Partition.”
The reference to “asses,” of course brings up the earlier action in the play, specifically where Bottom is transformed by Puck into a walking, braying donkey. This reference is interesting for two reasons. First, while the royals may congratulate themselves on their word association joke (these asses are playing lions, now; get it?), the Mechanicals as well as the actual play-going audience can appreciate the reference because they have seen Bottom “translated” into a donkey. The nobles tell a joke that really goes over their own heads. Second, the reference to transformation brings up the madcap absurdities of Lysander and Demetrius getting drugged and acting the proverbial fool in the same woods as the “ass-ension.” They can mock Bottom and his players for being idiots, but the audience watching the play knows that they were just as susceptible to Puck’s shenanigans as any Mechanical. The fairy’s pronouncement that mortals are fools did not exempt nobles, and the audience knows that. Thus, there is still a lack of awareness on the part of Lysander, Demetrius, the duke, et al. of their own absurdity.

That lack of awareness is really one of the chief traits the players and the nobles share. When Theseus jokingly suggests that the wall should return the curses of Pyramus, Bottom does not get that the duke is mocking the talkativeness of the partition. He instead takes it as a serious stage direction and feels the need to point out that his last line is in fact the cue for Thisbe to enter. The earnestness of Bottom’s response shows his lack of understanding and ultimately his status as the object of the humor. He cannot distinguish between jokes and honest suggestions for carrying out the play. The duke is equally clueless, however, in that he doesn’t even consider how bad he looks to the real audience in his frequent interruptions.
Theseus affirms that obliviousness in his response to Hippolyta’s exasperated exclamation that the play is “the silliest stuff” that she has ever heard. He tells her even “the best in this kind [staged plays] are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.” Plays are ultimately dependent upon the wit and imagination of the audience, he argues, and thus even a terribly written or acted play can benefit from the input of its viewers. He seems to argue that any humor in this instance is the product of their noble emendation, and the credit/authority belongs to the audience. What he misses, of course, is that the whole play’s audience has been tracking the humor without any of their help, and further that their constant interjections serve more to implicate them in the whole humorous show than to differentiate them from the sad players. Hippolyta tries to draw a stark (some might say harsh) line between the wit of the royal observer and the performance of the players, but the total effect is absurd because of the audience watching everyone on stage. Theseus is correct, but not in the way that he seems to think.

The “death” of Pyramus and Thisbe provides the final contrast between the dramatic or emotional intent of the play and the derisive mockery of the audience. As Pyramus comes upon the mantle of his beloved ripped to shreds by a lion, he delivers a speech of mournful loss before stabbing himself. Hippolyta initially seems to feel sympathy in spite of herself, countenancing the unavoidably poignant spectacle of man committing suicide out of misdirected grief. “Beshrew my heart but I pity the man,”

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213 207
214 208-9
215 As in Romeo and Juliet, the suicide is brought on by a misunderstanding of what has actually occurred. Thisbe, like Juliet, only appears dead. Her mantle is shredded, but she has escaped unscathed.
216 279
she says, almost chiding herself for feeling anything other than sneering superiority to the play’s content. Given what both she and the larger audience have witnessed, however, it seems clear that she is pitying Bottom and his inadequacy as an actor, not the tragic character he’s portraying. The object of that sympathy is driven home with Bottom’s absurd professions of his own demise:

Thus die I, thus, thus, thus.
Now am I dead;
Now am I fled;
My soul is in the sky.
Tongue, lose they light!
Moon, take thy flight!
Now die, die, die, die, die.217

The ridiculous juxtapositions of an obviously still breathing person proclaiming their soul to be winging towards heaven or of the tongue making such proclamations losing its light is punctuated by the laughable repetition of “die.” Theseus takes the over-abundance of “die” and turns it into a game, both in words and in activity: “No die, but an ace for him, for he is but one.”218 The literal death becomes a game of dice, which the duke rejects in favor of cards. Bottom, as Pyramus, has managed in his emphasis on the word “die” to remove it entirely from the context of actual death. It is now, through the intervention of the audience, a game of chance that marks him more as a card (hence the “ace” reference) than as a rolling cube.

Lysander seconds that interpretation even as he re-directs the duke back to the apparent demise of Pyramus: “Less than an ace, man, for he is dead, he is nothing.”219 His “card” fails to register even one, as he has negated himself in death. Taking the cue,
Theseus responds that with a surgeon the character “might yet recover and yet prove an ass.” The character has gone from inspiring some sense of sympathy to inducing gaming puns to becoming a zero score to potentially returning to a donkey. The humor employed by the on-stage audience transforms the characters on stage from tragedians to comedians just as surely as Puck’s magical trickery made Bottom an ass, and that same absurd power to interrupt noble (or tragic) pretensions hits every character on stage. The earlier sorcery actually serves as foreshadowing for humor’s grand finale, as Mechanical and royal alike are transmuted into objects of scorn.

It is fitting then that Theseus concludes the play calls for an end to the festivities. His voice has been the main one to pronounce the worth (or lack thereof) of the drama, and the contrast between his intended presentation (“I’m a great and beneficent ruler with nothing but love for my servants”) and his actual ethos (“I’m a self-satisfied blow hard who enjoys having people grovel and swoon before me”) is the most stark and ironic. When Bottom offers an epilogue to the piece, Theseus quickly cuts him off with a speech that speaks as much to the lack of inherent worth in the work as it does to his “genuine” appreciation of the players:

No epilogue, I pray you. For your play needs no excuse. Never excuse. For when the players are all dead, there need none to be blamed. Marry, if he that writ it had played Pyramus and hanged himself in Thisbe’s garter, it would have been a fine tragedy; and so it is, truly, and very notably discharged.

Theseus’ response is a hilarious exercise in praising the work without directly acknowledging its failure to maintain genuine tragic pathos. He indicates both that the

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220 298-99
221 Again, the duke’s insult is as much a cue for derision from the audience, as they would know more than Theseus at this point about men becoming donkeys.
222 341-47
players need not ask for “excuse” and that there could be no excuse for such a performance. The writer’s own death would have been a “fine tragedy,” playing on the confusion between staged action and reality (something the players had a good deal of trouble distinguishing between). That the performance is “very notably discharged” is both an apparent compliment to the actors and a sigh of relief that they are done with it.

So for “A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe, very tragical mirth,” the title does turn out to be accurate, primarily because the players in it and the nobles watching it all provide attempts to achieve some high effect (tragic pathos and evidence of superior learning and wit, respectively), attempts that seem to undermine themselves in the eyes of the actual audience. The humor, as something external to the tragic lovers plot or the characters in general, produces the “tragical mirth” in the description. There is a strict distinction between the players and the audience, and the latter provide the imagination and interpretive input. It is their work that makes the play what it is, and it is their almost aloof humor that makes the play such a hilarious spectacle. 223

This effect is again surprising in that the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe was a well-known narrative from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and the tale in that epic poem is far from

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223 Oddly enough, a modern version of this scene helps illustrate the need for a more distanced perspective. In 1964, the Beatles performed as the players for BBC television, an odd spectacle that cast Paul McCartney as Pyramus, John Lennon as Thisbe, George Harrison as Moonlight, and Ringo Starr as the lion. What the surreal event illustrates is the utterly nonsensical elements of the play. Without the pointed interpolations of the royal crowd, the scene is merely bad. Only a recognition of the celebrity status of the players allows for humor. That aspect in fact provides the external perspective. We are not seeing a group of rude mechanicals, but celebrities half-divesting themselves of their normal dress and personae. It is through that outside lens that humor is created. Ringo makes this explicit when he, after being taunted for his sub-par roaring, responds that were he a real lion instead of a drummer, he would not be as well off financially. The off-color commentary comes as much from the all-too-aware band members as from the audience. They are quick to point out their own absurdity, robbing the catcalls from the crowd of their derisive punch.
comical. The Dream deploys humor to deflate and transgress the tragic origins of the story. Even the nobles, seemingly the ones pointing out the inherent absurdity in the story, fall into a sort of unwitting absurdity. The whole lot on stage become a farcical presentation of inept tragic execution (no pun intended) and tone-deaf criticism. In this case, it is the tragedy at self on trial, and sentence is silliness and absurdity rather than genuine tragedy. The high pretensions become grounds for humorous reversal, and the result is laughter at the foolish deaths.

That dynamic is essentially the same one used in the humiliation of public execution, and episodes in Book III of the Faerie Queen also show how humor can re-orient one’s perspective with regard to death and its perceived closeness. That is, humor can make the would-be martyr or serious claimant to the title of tragic hero an absurd object of mockery or a fool to be laughed at. But as we have seen in executions and poetic constructions, laughter at those dying for their punctured pretensions is but one direction into which humor can shunt an audience. Humor can interrupt the laughter or mockery of a given figure/idea just as well. A successful martyr can use humor’s power to halt the derision and effectively position him/herself as a figure worthy of genuine pity and awe, and a successful tragedy can employ the same dynamic to halt mockery or derision from the audience. Thus, while Dream shows humor’s power to make a tragedy a comedy, Romeo and Juliet (as we will see) shows how another employment of humor can preserve the pathos of a tragic ending.

Interestingly, Forey connects the constant clarifications and protestations from the Mechanics about not being taken literally to Golding’s moralizing preface to his translation of Ovid. Both, in her assessment, are afraid that their work will be taken at face value (“Ovid, Golding, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” p. 325).
Romeo and Juliet is an amazing display of how to manage humor to accentuate the pathos, as the play has many funny elements that end up adding to the final tragedy rather than corroding it or undermining it.\footnote{There is some critical resistance to reading the play as a genuine tragedy. Robin Headlam Wells, for example, sees the play transforming certain Renaissance conceptions of the “heroic lover” into kitsch, essentially making the final deaths into “saccharine fantasy” about transcendent love that is satirized by the play entire. Wells admits, however, that “[i]t is a widely accepted view…that in the end of the play Romeo and Juliet are joined in some kind of mystical union” (“Neo-Petrarchan Kitsch in Romeo and Juliet” p. 930, 929).} What most critical accounts of that tragedy never quite account for, however, are the elements of humor within the play.\footnote{Coppélia Kahn, for instance, sees the death of the two lovers as a “transcendent form” of sexual consummation that translates them into a “higher stage of existence.” Yet, all of the jokes and/or mockery of such grandiose ideas is left out of her argument about the adult lives both Romeo and Juliet forego with their suicides (“Coming of Age in Verona.” The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare. edited by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980]. p. 188).} The difference between the comedic aspects in the unironic tragedy and the “tragical mirth” seen in the Dream is their relationship to the main plot of the play and their relative awareness of their own inherent absurdity. Specifically, the self-congratulating humor of Theseus and his noble compatriots in the Dream blinds them and makes them as oblivious to their ironic treatment by the main audience as the Mechanicals are to the mockery being hurled at them by their immediate crowd. There is some awareness of the players’ absurdity in the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude, but the overall effect is that any
sort of serious consideration (of the scenes presented by the players or of the “noble”
learning the stage audience represents) gets interrupted by an ironic view from the real
audience. The final play with a play is a series of un-self aware characters bungling and
missing how ridiculous they are. For *Romeo and Juliet*, the plot incorporates and
acknowledges the potential absurdity, primarily in the figure of Mercutio,227 Romeo’s
friend and would-be advisor in matters of love.

Mercutio’s relationship to Romeo is very different from Duke Theseus’ standing
with regard to the players. While there is a hierarchical and age distinction between the
title lover and his friend (Mercutio is a relative of both the prince of Verona and the high-
born count with designs to marry Juliet), they operate on the same plane of narrative
importance. Mercutio is more jaded and experienced than his friend, but they meet and

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227 I am here following a pretty well-worn critical account of Romeo’s friend. Robert Penn
Warren cites Mercutio’s mockery and wit as an example of the poet “inject[ing] the impurity of
an intellectual style into the lover’s pure poem.” In that way, the figure given to “mocking
laughter” becomes a good friend to the naive or oblivious love poetry in that he helps preclude
the audience’s incredulity: “The poet seems to say: ‘I know the worst that can be said on this
subject, and I am giving fair warning. Read at your own risk.’ So the poetry arises from a
recalcitrant and contradictory context; and finally involves that context” ("Pure and Impure

At least going back to John Dryden’s essay on the subject, Mercutio is seen as a rival to Romeo’s
central role and the former’s wit as a necessarily taming force to the latter’s love clichés (see
famous lines about Shakespeare having to kill Mercutio or be killed by him; Henry Hallam
references this account and adds that Mercutio might have killed Romeo [*Introduction to the
Howard Furness, Philadelphia: 1878, p. 159n]).

For a broad-ranging investigation of the various mythical and cultural associations of the
character, see Joseph Porter’s *Shakespeare’s Mercutio: His History and Drama* (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 1988). Porter makes an interesting connection between
Mercutio and the god Mercury, both the former as symbolic “conductor of souls to Hades”
because of his similarity to the tricky messenger of Roman mythology (p. 127).

For a discussion of Mercutio’s death in terms of the dramatic structure of the play (not merely a
dramatic necessity to shut up a mouthy character but an instructive and integral element of the
whole tragedy), see Raymond V. Utterback’s “The Death of Mercutio” (*Shakespeare Quarterly*,
speak as comrades and equals. He does not stand outside the action of the play and pronounce its artificiality. That is, while he may mock the laments and groans of Romeo as something a player or clichéd lover might emote, he does not go so far as to announce that Romeo is actually a part being played by a young actor. He is as ensconced in the world of Verona as Romeo or Juliet.

That ensconced perspective means that his jabs at Romeo always come from within the play itself. His opening lines to Romeo are not those of a viewer separated from the imaginative world inhabited by a character; his humor is instead a way of incorporating awareness and understanding into the effusions of the stage lover. Romeo initially tends to speak as a stereotypical Petrarchan lover, weighed down by the pretensions and clichés of unrequited love. Mercutio’s first strategy is to turn those clichés into humorous barbs against themselves and produce parodic images of the sad lover. When Romeo claims he cannot dance for his “soul of lead” (the result of his would-be lover Rosaline rejecting him), Mercutio taunts him by suggesting he “[b]orrow Cupid’s wings” to “soar with them above a common bound.” He thus turns the trite imagery of love making the heart soar into a retort against Romeo’s despondency. When Mercutio and another of Romeo’s friends are looking for their friend, Mercutio begins to “conjure” him to appear in the form of poetic love tropes:

Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh.
Speak one rhyme and I am satisfied.
Cry but “Ay me,” pronounce but “love” and “dove.”
Speak to my gossip Venus one fair word,
One nickname for her purblind son and heir,
Young Abraham Cupid, he that shot so trim
When King Cophetua loved the beggar maid.

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228 All quotations from the 3rd Arden edition of the play (edited by René Weis, 2012). I.4.15
229 17, 18
230 II.1.6-14
Here Mercutio mocks Romeo reducing himself to a series of hackneyed love poetry conventions by literally calling him with hackneyed love conventions. Romeo is no longer a person but a conventional response to a lovesick heart. 231 The devolution from a man to merely a sighing voice leads into a tacit criticism of un-original rhyming and less-than-imaginative invocations of Cupid. Providing no original sentiments or images of love, Romeo is little more than a cliché, so much so that he (through Mercutio’s mockery) is made to lose his physical integrity and metamorphose into a hackneyed repetition of well-worn lovesick tropes. Mercutio cannot find Romeo, he jokes, because the youth has seemingly dissolved into the very clichés he has been spouting.

Mercutio’s teasing of this sort seems the obverse of the royal quips in the Dream. Those jokes pull the characters out of their dramatic or poetic (loosely speaking) context in order to shine the harsh spotlight of “reality” or “plausibility” on the proceedings. They interrupt the flow of the narrative by interjecting the seemingly undeniable solidity of how actual people might talk, act, etc. Mercutio’s jests pull poetic fictions and tropes into the world of the play, making “real” people into characters and noting the absurdity of such a transformation. He mocks Romeo’s trite proclamations, and his humor acknowledges the poetic topoi to which the young lover is alluding. His mockery interrupts Romeo’s too-hasty retreat into cliché in the same way that Juliet halts his quick swearing by the moon in the famous balcony scene. To be too much the Petrarchan lover misses the inconsistencies and absurdities of that mode of expression. Mercutio’s humor makes the audience countenance the potentially ridiculous elements of what they are

231 That “Romeo” is itself a bit of a by-word for a hackneyed romantic male is an irony Mercutio and Shakespeare would have appreciated and found hilarious.
watching, but doing so from within the play hints at a deeper pathos or power in the work itself.

That sense of mockery is not limited to poetic flourishes, however. Mercutio’s humor takes aim at the very conventions that seem to govern the psychological principles underpinning individual actions and the social interactions of Verona. When nettling Romeo over the young man’s ill humor, he gives a lengthy speech about Queen Mab, a fairy creature whose interactions with the sleeping produce dreams not worthy to be heeded. The dreams are suited to individual professions and interests, and each person is moved to nocturnal reveries by an absurdly-carriaged creature. According to Mercutio’s conceit, lovers visited by Mab dream of, naturally enough, love; courtiers are visited by thoughts of courtesy and suits to be made. Lawyers and parsons have more concrete dreams in that they see visions of “fees”\(^\text{232}\) and “another benefice,”\(^\text{233}\) respectively. Soldiers are visited by horrific re-enactments of their brutal campaigns, and the speech is finally interrupted by Romeo’s claim that Mercutio is speaking “of nothing.”\(^\text{234}\) Mercutio has, then, brought Romeo to a more practical view of thoughts, dreams, and imaginations, namely that they are no more than fancy. He has also, importantly, shown Romeo a style of poetic discourse that is both satirical and richly particularized in that it broadcasts its own absurdity and creates original imagery that implicitly denigrates the sighing clichés of Romeo’s love poems.

\(\text{232}\) I.4.73
\(\text{233}\) 81
\(\text{234}\) 96
Mercutio’s response to Romeo is to paint the workings of the human mind in starkly insubstantial terms, again indicating how silly Romeo’s beloved love tropes really are:

True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is as thin of substance as the air
And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
Even now the frozen bosom of the north
And, being angered, puffs away from thence,
Turning his side to the dew-dropping south.\textsuperscript{235}

The thoughts and intents of the heart are, as it were, mere air being puffed out by the machinery of the mind. They are, he insists, as much the product of external circumstances and conditions as they are something that originates in the will and motive of a human being. It is not a grand design or governing intelligence that leads us on, he argues, but the capricious whims of directionless forces.

Mercutio’s disdain for the effects of human agency are, in one sense, a canny admission of any romance or tragedy’s dependence upon circumstance. An audience can carp or criticize a play for its reliance on coincidental plot devices or contrived machinations. The characters may seem flat or underdeveloped, their thought processes ill-defined or inconsistent. Mercutio’s observations point out that human action in general is often less than reasonable, and the effects of even the deepest emotion may pass with a change in the wind. He is, in effect, insulating or inoculating the play from less generous audience reactions by painting human psychology with similar colors.

The biggest external element driving the play’s plot, the feud between the houses of Capulet and Montague, is not immune to Mercutio’s withering gaze. When a letter

\textsuperscript{235} 97-103
from Tybalt arrives at the house of Montague challenging Romeo, Mercutio plays off the stupidity of such machinations. “Romeo will answer it,” says a compatriot of the Montagues. “Any man that can write may answer a letter,” quips Mercutio, indicating that over-emphasizing words is an empty gesture. The special cause for conflict between the houses is nothing more than foolish messages to the jesting Mercutio.

Mercutio links the conventions of feud and dueling to the love tropes he had ridiculed earlier. Both, in his estimation and description, are empty conventions that are as meaningless as the fanciful constructions of Queen Mab and potentially harmful if taken too seriously or literally. Romeo cannot answer or care about such challenges according to Mercutio:

[H]e is already dead, stabbed with a white wench’s black eye, run through the ear with a love-song, the very pin of his heart cleft with the blind bow-boy’s butt shaft.

The lady’s eyes have already worked like daggers, love’s arrow already pierced his heart, and Romeo is left figuratively unmanned or, worse, literally stupefied.

Those conventional terms for being romantically smitten segue into Mercutio’s account of Tybalt, a character whose skill and taste for fighting emerges in disturbing adherence to the customs and rules of dueling:

O, he’s the courageous captain of compliments. He fights as you sing prick-song, keeps time, distance, and proportion. He rests his minim rests, one, two, and the third in your bosom—the very butcher of a silk button, a duelist, a duelist, a gentleman of the very first house of the first and second cause. Ah, the immortal passado, the punto reverso, the hay!
Tybalt is dangerous precisely because he follows the guidelines of “proper” dueling. He is not simply an overweening ruffian with no discipline or judgment; he is, to Mercutio, a murderous thug with all of the training and skill of a gentleman fencer. The comparisons to a talented musician diminishes Tybalt’s capacity (his noble status is belied by the more working-class profession), and the mocking reference to a “butcher of a silk button” underscores the violent threat he constitutes even while undercutting his actual skill.\footnote{The butcher of a button is, after all, not much of a butcher.}

It is worth noting that Mercutio is not one to avoid a fight. It is he, after all, that answers Tybalt’s taunts when Romeo is too full of love and good cheer to take offense. What he seems to object to is not violence so much as the loving treatment of the fashionable practices surrounding violence. He calls Tybalt an example of “such antic, lisping, affecting fantasticoes,” a group that cares more for social graces than the reality of life and society.\footnote{28-9} It’s Tybalt’s style more than his actions that incur Mercutio’s disdain.

Tybalt’s willingness to put a veneer of civility upon a brutal and bloody activity makes him another object of scorn for Mercutio. Though he reproaches his friend Benvolio for it, Mercutio’s mockery of the man too willing to invent a cause for dueling could just as easily be applied to Verona’s prince of cats:

\begin{quote}
Thou—why, thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard than thou hast. Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes. What eye but such an eye would spy out such a quarrel? Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat, and yet thy head hath been beaten as addle as an egg for quarreling. Thou hast quarreled with a man for coughing in the street because he hath wakened thy dog that hath lain asleep in the sun. Didst thou not fall out with a tailor for wearing his new doublet before Easter? With another, for tying his new shoes with old ribbon? And yet thou wilt tutor me from quarreling.\footnote{III.1.16-29}
\end{quote}
The issue is not the quarreling or feuding itself but the insistence upon specious causes. Mercutio mocks the idea that personal grooming, public behavior, or sumptuary etiquette could be a just cause for a fight, but he also makes light of Benvolio attacking a man cracking hazelnuts as some sort of affront to his eye color. The latter pun continues the literalization (or over-literalization) of certain situational conventions, and it highlights two of the biggest sources of enmity: an over-willingness to be offended into fighting (“What eye but such an eye would spy out such a quarrel?”), and an overriding lack of humor. To take silliness and puns too seriously sets one on the way to violence.

Again, Mercutio is not above fighting. He essentially insists on combat with Tybalt when Romeo will not take the bait when he is insulted. His manner derides the formality and protocol the others insist on using, however. “By my head, here comes the Capulets,” Benovolio remarks a few lines later.243 “By my heel, I care not,” retorts Mercutio.244 “Gentlemens, good e’en. A word with one of you,” calls Tybalt.245 “And but one word with one of us? Couple it with something. Make it a word and a blow,” answers Mercutio.246 No statement or pretense of courtesy escapes whipping at the hands of the Veronese nobleman. He takes up a scorched-earth policy in terms of satirical mockery.

That mockery has been noted as early as John Dryden’s recounting that Shakespeare had to kill off Mercutio in Act III or else be killed by him. That is, there is a hint of danger in allowing a character to so mock another. The entire tragic conclusion

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243 34
244 35
245 37
246 38-9
could be upset if the clichés are too prominently mocked. As it happens in the Dream, the satirizing of the lover could upset any of the desired audience responses. Laughter, not tears, could come as a result of Mercutio constantly pulling the rug out from underneath the conventions of plot and tragedy.

It is fitting, then, that Mercutio’s death is in keeping with his humorous habit of literalizing the conventions of love and violence. When actually stabbed by Tybalt because of Romeo’s intervention, Mercutio both downplays his wound and acknowledges its deadly reality: “Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch. Marry, ’tis enough.”247 That response wrong-foots Romeo, in a sense, in that it undermines the deadly seriousness of Romeo’s love rhetoric and underscores the harsh reality of actual wounds. The young lover cannot comprehend the latter, as he almost chides Mercutio for not bearing his wound: “Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much.”248 Indeed, the roles are almost reversed here, in that now Romeo is exhorting his friend to stand up and get over the pain just as Mercutio had earlier urged him to overcome the pangs of despised love. The gentleman with the actual wound transforms his pain into a negative simile, forcing the reality of physical pain into a poetic realm of expression:

No, ’tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but ’tis enough. ’Twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o’ both your houses! Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain that fights by the book of arithmetic!249

This is essentially the revenge of the metaphors. Mercutio delighted in mocking the formal construction of love and battle, making the terms and euphemisms of both into

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247 95
248 97
249 98-104
sport. And yet, the deadly reality comes back to literally kill him. He is “scratch[ed]” by the prince of cats, the injuries of love are literally figured in his body, and he will become a “grave man” in his death. The jokes do not exercise a controlling power over the violence of desire and combat; they release the inherent power of both. The one who most resisted and mocked those energies falls prey to them.

Mercutio’s death provides a clarity and unified quality to the audience’s reactions to the play. Where the royal observers in the Dream may carp and tease in their own individual veins, the death of Mercutio funnels the responses into a more univocal dread of the impending tragedy. This is not a case of Shakespeare merely writing out the humorous character in order to save the lamentable aspects of the play’s denouement. Simply eliminating a dissenting voice in that manner would open the door and invite play-goers to take up the mantle of cynical observers. The construction of the play and Mercutio’s placement within it ensure that his humorous interjections are folded back into the main plot, in a sense inoculating Romeo and Juliet from the type of ironic treatment “Pyramus and Thisbe” receives in the comedy.

What Mercutio’s presence in the play reveals is that abdicating or exiling the incongruous from a given plot does not remove the potential for humorous interpretation: it actually leaves a narrative open to ironic treatment. If humor ultimately interrupts a given emotional or interpretational current, not acknowledging humor means that a tragedy can too easily be amended into a comedy. By countenancing the ironic and sardonic side of the material in the course of the play itself, Romeo and Juliet achieves a pathos far more pure and effective than the straight-faced pantomiming of “Pyramus and Thisbe.”
That embrace of incongruity goes back to the initial meeting between the two lovers, the celebrated sonnet they weave in conjunction with one another. Romeo is instantly smitten, Petrarchan-style, by the sight of the beautiful Juliet. He approaches her, and in their conversation links the amorous desires of love with the religious yearnings of the faithful pilgrim:

If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.\(^{250}\)

He opens their courtship with a seemingly absurd appeal, rendering her a “holy shrine” that he wishes to “profane” with his unworthy hand. His conflation of his beloved with a sacred relic in a sense shuts down objections by incorporating absurd overstatement into itself. The genius of this gambit is built-in mechanism of denial. He prefaches the whole conceit with “if,” inviting her to respond either in the affirmative or negative. She is patently not a holy shrine, but she most obviously is at the same time.\(^{251}\) Either interpretation can be emphasized or renounced at any point.

That inescapable pull in both directions renders objection almost impossible, and Juliet’s response follows both the form and theme of Romeo’s importuning:

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.\(^{252}\)

She accepts the conflation of holy reverence and loving embrace, offering another way to figure the physical contact between them. The “palms” of religious obeisance become

\(^{250}\) I.5.92-5
\(^{251}\) Castiglione’s examples of the witty phrases that are wildly mis-attributed and absolutely appropriate at the same time come to mind.
\(^{252}\) 96-9
the palms of their hands, punningly rendering touch as worship. It is interesting that she seeks to tame his desire by re-directing his yearning for a kiss into a mere touching of hands. His “two blushing pilgrims” become “palmers,” as she lessens the impact of his religious imagery and emphasizes it in another way.

Not to be dissuaded, Romeo asks “Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?” He thus furthers the dual course of emphasizing the religious and literal aspects of his opening conceit. If we are discussing palmers, he counters, do they not have lips? “Aye, pilgrim,” Juliet responds, “lips that they must use in prayer.” She is trying to insist on the reverential interpretation of the situation, and yet in granting the religious premise, she has in effect yielded the interpretational power of the whole sonnet. She is participating in the construction or melding of the two, and while her attempts at reversal are clever in their coyness, they also belie her own acquiescence to being figured as a saint and holy artifact.

The final four lines cement the fact that both Romeo and Juliet are desiring to end in a kiss. Romeo asks that the prayer of his hands and lips be granted: “O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do. / They pray: grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.” Juliet answers that saints cannot but grant prayers, though they will not physically move: “Saints do not move, though grant for prayers’ sake.” Romeo completes the

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253 100
254 See Watson and Dickey’s essay for analysis of Juliet’s implicit struggle against a legacy (cultural and historical) of rape. I will not try to re-argue the claims for Juliet’s agency in this sonnet. She is its co-author, and I do not want to rob her of her will while shaming her for giving in to Romeo’s desires. I do want to emphasize that her witty responses are effective goads that lead both her and him into a mutual act.
256 102-3
257 104
transaction and the union of romantic and religious concerns: “Then move not while my prayer’s effect I take.” That final union is achieved, then, not through single-minded pursuit. It becomes a mutual action by means of reversal and incongruous juxtaposition. The poignancy of the two ill-fated lovers joining is presented in microcosm in their linguistic and physical union.

It is not my intention to argue that *Romeo and Juliet* is secretly a comedy, or that the courtship of the two title characters is a satire on Petrarchan conventions. This is not secretly the comedy of Mercutio and the hapless lovers who stumble into physical death and literary immortality any more than “Pyramus and Thisbe” is covertly the most truly tragic element of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Rather, the humor is more fully integrated into and employed by *Romeo and Juliet*, and that integration produces a more thoroughly engaging and successful transcendence in the final act. Like a man about to be executed who jokes at his own expense, *Romeo and Juliet* acknowledges its own sentimental quality and inherently ridiculous subject matter. Through the quips and scorns of Mercutio, the play prevents external criticism in both senses of the term: it offers humorous mockery before an outside voice can, and it stops such mockery by transforming such criticism into an effective argument for its own seriousness. Juliet

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258 Wells makes what seems to be the best historical case for taking the play this way, but he ends up appealing to Mercutio’s “stoically understated death in the street” to illustrate the kitsch factor in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet (“Neo-Petrarchan Kitsch,” p. 930). If puns and curses count as “understated” or “stoic,” I’m not sure how or what the term “kitsch” is supposed to mean. There are certainly points where Juliet halts and re-directs Romeo’s overly-conventional wooing into a more constructive and meaningful avenue, but the final scene of mutual suicide has left the cold formulae of Petrarchan love behind in its genuine pathos. Even Wells has to admit that part of the play’s allure is “illusion that Shakespeare creates of real people who have inner lives,” an admission that seems at pains to deny the real emotional impact of the play in the face of the fairly evident effect (p. 920).
does not explicitly take on the mantle of “saint,” but she becomes one in her very interaction with Romeo’s verse lines.

The means of death for the pairs of lovers offers a final insight into the differing strategies of their respective plays. Both Pyramus and Thisbe stab themselves, exclaiming their own demise in terms unsubtle and direct (Pyramus won’t stop saying “die,” and Thisbe announces her own end with “Adieu, adieu, adieu.”260). Romeo, rather than killing himself with his own sword, drinks down a dram of poison from a poor apothecary. Juliet, using Romeo’s weapon, renders herself a “sheath” to surround her dead husband’s sword.261 Thus, while the former two choose the obvious means of death and remain heedless of the symbolic level of their actions, the latter pair first imbibes the danger of criticism and foregrounds the sexual/allegorical layers of meaning in their actions. Romeo is all too aware of the words of others on his deathbed (the “true apothecary”262 explicitly, but the specter of Mercutio’s taunts hovers near), and Juliet is painfully cognizant of the effects of her stabbing herself. Both end on “die,” but it is not the random repetition seen in Bottom’s rendition. That use of the word robbed it of its meaning and spilled out into games of dice and cards. Romeo and Juliet augment the physical death and unite it with the ecstasy of sexual union. The meaning expands, but not in a chaotic or uncontrolled way. The meaning becomes double by the will and direction of the characters, not the audience.

That contrast echoes the concept of humor seen in earlier chapters. To decry or forego humor is to leave oneself open to the chaotic re-inscription and re-interpretation of

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260 V.1.334
261 V.3.170
262 119
others. Humorous intervention from outside interrupts one’s wishes for seriousness and can render the whole enterprise of death pretentious and absurd. To control that response means to be the author and not merely the source of humor. To “die with a kiss” invites a punning reading, but one with specific parameters; to “die die die die die” destroys any hope of order by insisting on itself too much and too often. In comedic argot, the former actually kills (hits home) while the latter dies (fails to connect and leaves the actor defenseless before the scorn of the crowd).

Paradoxically, then, *Romeo and Juliet* is able to withstand ridicule because it first invites it and includes it in the person of Mercutio. Before the title characters even meet and embark on the tragic journey towards death, the play has pointed out the contrived nature of love and romance. While Bottom and the Rude Mechanicals are hopelessly trapped in their script and consequently vulnerable to external scrutiny, Juliet and her Romeo have a measure of self-awareness and a chance to assimilate the critiques from the jaundiced perspective.

One might be tempted to relate this self-awareness to certain post-modern strategies of ironic distancing and cynical explosion of hypocrisy, but I do not think that the humor here is meant to be completely and utterly corrosive/destructive.\(^{263}\) The purpose of the humor is not merely to preclude criticism by stating it first and doing the damage to oneself; the genuine pathos and tragedy would be forfeit in such an instance, as the play within the *Dream* illustrates. Rather than undermine that sense of transcendence and tragedy, the humor interrupts the inclination to mock and turns the audience back towards lamenting the fate of the two lovers. They become martyrs for

\(^{263}\) For a much more cogent analysis of postmodern fiction’s uses of irony, see David Foster Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.”
love because they mention and encompass all of the surface absurdity of that statement. They achieve a power that simple death alone could not reach precisely because humor is so well-managed and incorporated. Thus, instead of being shuffled off of the stage with haste, *Romeo and Juliet* ends with a promise “to have more talk of these sad things.”

It becomes a story of matchless woe precisely because of its inclusion of humor; “Pyramus and Thisbe” becomes an object of mockery as a direct result of its lack of internal humor.

That irony illustrates the incongruous power of humor. Death is the ultimate test of that power, and Shakespeare’s treatment of apparently tragic death marks the dramatically different effects humor can produce. Thus, the difference between a martyr and a buffoon is the correct government of humor, and surprisingly it is the former who better manages the absurdity.

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264 V.3.307
CONCLUSION

“I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.”
-Woody Allen

In the final act of *Henry IV* part 1, Falstaff avoids prolonged battle with an enemy at Shrewsbury by feigning death. His opponent leaves, believing his work to be done, and Prince Hal comes upon the fallen form of his ersatz father figure after dispatching Harry Hotspur. The prince is clearly moved at the thought of a world without Falstaff, but, as befits their relationship, he mourns the apparent death with humorous jabs at the older man’s girth and waywardness:

What, old acquaintance, could not all this flesh
Keep in a little life? Poor Jack, farewell.
I could have better spared a better man.
O, I should have a heavy miss of thee
If I were much in love with vanity.
Death hath not struck so fat a deer today,
Though many dearer in this bloody fray.
Embowed will I see thee by and by;
Till then in blood by noble Percy lie
(V.iv.104-12).

There is an odd push-pull dynamic to this speech, as Hal keeps on acknowledging his affection for Falstaff and almost simultaneously evincing his disdain for the old knight. He seems amazed that so fat a man could not keep some life in him, and yet he calls him “Poor Jack.” He can’t quite settle on the importance of the death, and he ends up comparing him to a deer struck down in the metaphorical hunt of battle, darkly saying he’ll be back to “embowel[]” or dress the slain carcass “by and by.” Instead of a
straightforward lament on the loss of life and friendship, we get an oddly conflicted account from Hal. His jokes won’t allow a full confrontation with the specter of a truly dead Falstaff.

And, appropriately enough, Falstaff’s own life gets in the way of such a confrontation. As Hal moves off to gather reinforcements, Falstaff pops up and scoffs at the idea of being “emboweled”: “If thou embowel me today, I’ll give you leave to powder me and eat me too tomorrow” (113-15). Falstaff refuses to be food, neither literally nor in the metaphorical sense that he might feed a heart willing to mourn. He begins to tear apart the whole sense of the scene, at certain points interrupting his own train of thought to introduce new, ridiculous perspectives on death and his cowardice:

'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit, or that hot termagant Scot had paid me scot and lot too. Counterfeit? I lie. I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man; but to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed. The better part of valor is discretion, in the which better part I have saved my life (115-23).

It was, he claims, time to be a fake, but he wasn’t really faking. Death would have been the real fake. By pretending, he has preserved the real. Discretion (which the OED glosses as “the power conceded to a person, nation, etc., by the unconditional surrender of an enemy”) becomes the primary element of courage. Yielding wins honor, at least in Falstaff’s mind.

This odd scene of misrepresentation and misattribution (Falstaff stabs the dead Hotspur and demands a reward, shocking Hal with his audacity and his still being alive) encapsulates how humor disrupts and re-directs our interpretive energies. Hal cannot quite imagine or articulate a really dead Falstaff, and his jokes are answered in the fat
man rising up and taking credit for Hal’s victory. Falstaff cannot imagine a world without Falstaff, and so cowardice becomes valorous, the dead become a threat, and faking death is no counterfeit at all. Falstaff’s “resurrection” becomes a grotesque parody of Christ’s resurrection and of the hope of eternal life (“Lord, lord, how this world is given to lying,” he chides Hal upon being told he was dead; 148-49). Coming as it does on the heels of a climactic battle between the “noble” Hotspur and the wastrel Hal, this comedic interlude re-directs the audience away from the fighting itself and toward the rhetorical construction of it in the aftermath. The jokes clear the way for Falstaff to insert his own valor, a valor built on cowardice and deception.

We have seen how humor is used in this period, and its destructive/constructive powers in the face of death are fairly far-ranging. The point to consider is that the seeds of one are always in the deployment of the other. That is, to construct an alternative view of oneself on the scaffold, one must interrupt the destructive narrative deployed by the executing power. To claim a martyr or victim status prematurely risks the collapse of that very status. Conversely, to break down the hard-and-fast connections between death and transcendence allows for the significance of more mundane or earthly activities. The lovers dying in each others’ arms might be torn down as absurd caricatures of naive sentiment, but they might also rise above their formulaic status by tearing away the artificial-seeming trappings of love clichés. That dead body on the ground could be a chance to mourn, but joking about it just might bring him back to life (and let him steal your glory).

Humor is used in this period to shake the progression of thought and emotional connection. It breaks down supposedly standard readings of death, but it also allows for
those standard readings in the face overwhelming opposition. Humor allows an audience to step back and re-appraise the situation. Sometimes that re-appraisal is harder on the object of interpretation (a dying prisoner, a self-involved knight, or a troupe who can’t quite remember their lines). Sometimes, however, humor allows the derided, the mocked, the downtrodden, and the absurd figure to achieve something higher and more lasting. Heretics can become martyrs, sex can become a sacrament, and lovers can become saints. In Early Modern England, humor was a truly democratic and democratizing force. It let everyone potentially press pause and re-write the script.
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