

**Abstracts for Seminar 27, “Poison in Jest’: Racist Laughter Across Genres and Nations”
Pamela Allen Brown and Robert Hornback, co-organizers**

Dr. John C. Higgins

Case Western Reserve University

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“Poison in Jest’: Racist Laughter Across Genres and Nations”

Ideology, race and the cynical laughter of *Titus Andronicus*

Titus Andronicus’s status as Shakespearean tragedy has long been a source of debate, and indeed the very terms and grounds of that debate have changed considerably during the last century. Early critics, of course, detested the play, dismissing it as an early misfire on Shakespeare’s part: a depraved, juvenile experiment in tragic theater. More recent criticism has reassessed the violence of the play, arguing that *Titus* should either be understood as a kind of satire against other excessively violent tragedies of the Elizabethan era, or approached more as a slasher film than something in the mode of Shakespeare’s later tragedies. Laughter has played a key role in these different assessments of the play. Those who dismiss the play often justify this dismissal on the grounds that its poetic and visual excesses are more likely to draw laughter from an audience than the tears associated with tragedy, while those who read the play more satirically see this laughter as a product of authorial intention and part of the play’s point.

Inappropriate laughter, of course, appears not only amongst members of the play’s audience, but within the play as well. After raping and dismembering Lavinia, Chiron and Demetrius enter the stage in 2.4 laughing at her and telling gruesome jokes. Aaron the Moor later describes how, after tricking Titus into chopping off his hand, he, “Almost broke [his] heart with extreme laughter” (5.1.113). Titus himself actually laughs during the scene that Aaron describes when presented with the heads of his two sons, something that Marcus pointedly remarks on, “Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour” (3.1.264). Laughter seems central to whatever Shakespeare accomplishes in *Titus Andronicus*, intentionally or unintentionally.

The goal of my paper is to reexamine the laughter in *Titus Andronicus* in two distinct, but related ways. First, the paper will argue that the laughter in *Titus* denotes an ideological cynicism associated particularly with Aaron the Moor, but also embodied in many respects by the play as a whole. Cynicism – in the sense theorized by Slavoj Žižek – acknowledges “The distance between the ideological mask and the reality but... still finds reasons to retain the mask” (*Sublime Object* 26); in other words, it acknowledges the falsity of an ideology but operates as though it were true regardless of this acknowledgement. Aaron gives voice to this type of cynicism towards the end of the play when he makes Lucius swear to save his child on the Roman gods, “For that I know / An idiot holds his bauble for a god, / And keeps the oath which by that god he swears” (5.1.78-80). Second, I will argue that the play takes an ideologically cynical attitude towards racial ideology. On the one hand, in fashioning Aaron the Moor as the play’s cleverest – and in many respects most honest and consistent – character, the play does not seem to depict, in any sense, the racial superiority of its white, Roman characters in comparison

to its lone Moor. On the other hand, Aaron openly embraces his viciousness, reasserting standard racist tropes of the Renaissance era. In short, despite acknowledging the falsity of racist beliefs, the play cynically – and laughingly – works to reinforce racist ideology.

Works Cited

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Ian Moulton

"Poison in Jest" SAA 2022

Title: "In Verpum": Ben Jonson, Circumcision, and Latin Philology

Abstract:

My paper will focus on Ben Jonson's boast to Drummond of Hawthornden that he could accurately interpret an epigram by Martial dealing with circumcision: "the epigram of Martial 'In Verpum' he vaunts to expone" ("Conversations," line 632). The epigram in question (11.94) mocks a Jewish poetic rival of Martial's for being circumcised. This poem is part of a larger discourse about circumcision and penile mutilation in Martial that Jonson was proud to understand. My paper relates Martial's laughter at his circumcised rival to Roman cultural attitudes towards Jews and to the practice of circumcision. It then looks at Jonson's boast that he can accurately construe the meaning of Martial's text. I argue that Jonson's proud mastery of Martial demonstrates the ways in which the adoption of ancient prejudices--in particular those around sexuality and the body--were crucial to the Renaissance project of rediscovering and appropriating the Classical past. This paper is part of a book I'm writing on ways that Martial's epigrams and the scholarly commentary around them became a site for the dissemination of knowledge about illicit sexuality in the early modern period.

The paper draws on Jonson's handwritten annotations to his 1619 edition of Martial as well as early modern printed commentaries on Martial by Calderini, Merula, and Perotti.

Secondary texts that have been very useful include:

- J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Johns Hopkins 1982)
Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: 2004)
James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (Columbia: 1996)
J. P. Sullivan, *Martial: The Unexpected Classic* (Cambridge: 1991)

Maya Mathur (Univ. of Mary Washington), "Laughter and Race-Making in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest* "

As Patricia Akhimie illustrates in her essay, "Racist Humor and Shakespearean Comedy," scholarship on early modern comedy has often preferred to focus on the restorative properties of laughter while minimizing its potential to dehumanize its targets. Recent work by premodern race scholars has sought to address this erasure by drawing attention to the ways in which comic characters and scenes can assist in the process of race-making. This paper draws on existing conversations about racial formation in the early modern period to interrogate the ways in which Shakespeare's comic characters perform important cultural work in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*. Focusing on the ludic exchanges between Lancelot and Jessica in the first play and between Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban in the second, I consider how non-elite white men use jokes to racialize and dehumanize non-white characters and study the social, material, and psychological benefits they receive from doing so. While jokes produce gains in status for Shakespeare's clowns, they also illustrate the fragility of white identity that must be shored up through jokes about non-white characters. Moreover, in a performative tradition where comic attacks must be met with witty rejoinders, I examine the extent to which racist jokes may be met with responses that resist or challenge their import.

Sources

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