

Hannah Breder

**Strange Justifiers: Suspicion, Knowledge, and Witty Status in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene***

This essay contributes to a recent scholarly conversation that questions the sense of social or cultural "mastery" that comic wit is often thought to represent. In an effort to bring greater precision to the relations of knowledge and feeling that underpin witty status, this essay considers suspicion – specifically suspicion of women – as a comic, distinctly witty episteme in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene, or, The Silent Woman*. In *Epicoene*, suspicion functions both as an affective mode that shapes witty discourse and as a heuristic, a form of presumed knowledge that determines what witty characters perceive to be true about the women in their circles and about themselves in relation to those women. I argue that suspicion enables *Epicoene*'s gallants to perform two central conventions of their witty status: a projection of sophisticated knowledge about their social milieu, and a posture of affective "distance" from the mundane concerns of that milieu. This essay builds on recent analyses of comic wit by examining the knowledge relations that wit indexes, in order to better understand how the rhetorical and affective strategies that underpin wit construct male privilege and contribute to *Epicoene*'s social stratification.

Matthew Harrison

***As You Like It* and Craft**

Taking off from Rosalind's observations that Silvius's lament for Phoebe is a "passion" that's "much upon [her] fashion," my paper will explore how Shakespeare's comedy engages a particular problem of the poetics of the period. The word "passion," of course, can signify both a "true feeling" and a "stylized expression of feeling, in literary form." Shakespeare, in the 1590s, is fascinated by the gap between the two: a skilled performance (like that of the seducer in "A Lover's Complaint") may betoken art rather than feeling; an incompetent one (like Benedict's in *Much Ado*) may nonetheless suggest real feeling. Part of the teasing apart of rhetoric and poetics in the 1590s happens through thinking about the relationships among skill, sincerity, and effect in the love poem. If Sidney can take for granted that English love poems fail (as poems) because their writers are insincere in feeling; by the time Drayton is revising his sonnets, he's moving away from sincerity claims at all.

*As You Like It* (like *Love's Labors Lost*) interests me, in this regard, because its comic trajectory depends so much on educating Orlando into proper style. The trick of the play (as Louis Montrose pointed out) is to turn a problem of economic capital into one of cultural capital. In this logic, Orlando's inept poetry transposes his inappropriateness as a lover from a problem of inheritance (he is dispossessed; he is a younger brother) into a problem of education. But another strand of the play--Jaques, Corin, Touchstone--seems intently aware that normative style is in some sense merely conventional. What do we learn from Orlando's poems? They seem simultaneously used as evidence of his sincerity--he is goofily head-over-heels--and his potential insincerity--Rosalind must test him. They seem to be a performance of a certain kind of educatedness--he knows to hang poems in trees, etc--and of a certain kind of incompetence.

Lucy Holehouse

### **Learning the art of juggling in *Beggars' Bush***

In this paper, I consider the impact that juggling pamphlets had on comic spectacle. When we think of training players in the seventeenth-century we are often thinking of the apprenticed boy players who learning to act by playing women. It's only somewhat incidentally that we think of the continued education of adult players. Yet, developments in comic performance, especially as clowns with varying comic styles filtered in and out of playing companies, meant that adult players (and playwrights) were frequently required to learn new ways of performing comic scenes.

This paper considers one such development in comedy: the use of sleight-of-hand trickery on stage. Through a comparative reading of John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *Beggars' Bush* (c. 1620) and Samuel Rid's *The Art of Juggling or Legerdemain* (1612), I consider the continued education and training of comic players and those writing comic scenes. In *Beggars' Bush*, III.i, the beggars Higgen, Prigg, and Ferret use sleight-of-hand magic to steal from a group of drunken boors. A comparison of III.i to juggling manuals reveals multiple instances where Fletcher has drawn from juggling manuals, including instances of misinterpretation: Prigg's request that his audience imagine that the '[cork] balls shall be three bullets', is exceedingly reminiscent of Rid's recommendation to 'practise first with the leaden bullet' before moving on to 'balls of Corke'. Analysis of the texts reveal indications that player and playwright alike educated themselves on the developments in spectacle and stagecraft to remain relevant in the ever-changing landscape of the early modern theatre.

This paper asks, what does III.i require of its players beyond the learning of lines? What can this scene tell us about the relationship between player and playwright? And, finally, how can moments of stage spectacle be better understood, and perhaps even recreated, through research into surrounding educational pamphlets?

Kimberly Huth

### **"What Remedy?": Agency and Community in *The Shoemaker's Holiday***

This paper will examine social knowledge in early modern comedy: both knowledge that is shared among a social group and, more pointedly, the knowledge of how to be social. Illustrating Bourdieu's notion of the "relational mode of thinking" that produces the reality of social groups, comic drama forces audiences to reconsider the point of contact between the individual and the community in early modern culture at a historical juncture of change in economic and legal structures for determining identity and social position. Using Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* as an example, this analysis will discuss how comedy incorporates potentially conflicting forces and characters in its didactic demonstration of how to be social—in particular, a mode of sociality seemingly reliant not on the fulfillment of personal desires but rather on the abjuration of individual prerogatives through the use of a common early modern catchphrase: "no remedy." This use of this phrase spans across class lines, as everyone—citizens, shoemakers, and aristocrats alike—are forced to accept social realities that they have no way to change. Comedy demands understanding how and when to abide in discontent, knowledge directed through the genre's own weighing of private and public interests, productive and destructive desires, and intrinsic and relative valuations of the self.

Matthew Kozusko

**"Catastrophes in the old comedy"**

Edmund's line from *Lear* about Edgar's entrance in 1.2—"and pat he comes, like the catastrophe in the old comedy"—can strike modern readers and audiences as odd. We associate catastrophe with tragedy, for one, and while *Lear* deploys a range of comic conventions, even Nahum Tate couldn't quite render it funny. But Shakespeare's actual comic catastrophes are themselves notoriously difficult. This paper situates Shakespeare's comic conclusions against the backdrop of comparable practices at the time before turning to two specific moments in problem comedies, one in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and one *Measure for Measure*. I try to show that these plays seem somehow to be presciently aware of modern staging practices, which are typically defined by the particular ways they stretch themselves to accommodate and empower silenced comic heroines. Julia, Silvia, and Isabella are all famously silent at crucial moments in the catastrophe, but both plays demonstrably call for staging decisions that at least *plausibly* seem to anticipate and cater to modern anxieties.

Victor Lenthe

**Ben Jonson and the Comic Epistemology of Consensus**

My paper grows out of a book project about early modern representations of collective agreement. It explores Ben Jonson's response to a then-novel form of collective agreement proposed by the Jacobean Oath of Allegiance, according to which the English people might agree to obey the state in civil matters even as they subscribed to different comprehensive worldviews. For the purpose of the seminar, I'll consider this among other things as an epistemological problem, because agreeing that James is one's legitimate sovereign can be paraphrased as believing that one knows that he is one's legitimate sovereign.

Jonson's brilliance, as I want to show, was to recognize the Oath of Allegiance as introducing not just political and epistemological challenges but also comic ones. A loyalist Catholic at the time the Oath was introduced, he had undoubtedly studied both its text and the ensuing controversies. Shortly after the pan-European controversies about the Oath reached their height, he began work on *Bartholomew Fair*, which contains several references to the Oath and which is also dedicated to its author, King James. I will compare the Oath's notion of mere civil agreement to a vision Jonson articulates in *Bartholomew Fair*'s induction: a contract between him and the audience in which audience and playwright feel contempt for each other even as both agree to the bare minimum of civility required for a successful performance of the play. I will argue that this prologue transfers the political-philosophical problem raised by the Oath to a comedic register and, in doing so, invites playful consideration of a problem that was otherwise too politicized for disinterested philosophical consideration.

Lindsey Row-Heyveld

**Knowledge, Able-bodiedness, and Carelessness in *As You Like It***

How do we render able-bodiedness conspicuous when it thrives on inconspicuousness, especially at a historical distance? In this paper, I want to employ disabled knowledge as means for attending to able-bodiedness at work in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. In comedy we find a

unique showcase for early modern able-bodiedness, especially the kind of knowledge-making that constructs able-bodiedness and that keeps it inconspicuous even as it is ubiquitous. This paper's attempt at comic cripistemology draws attention to care—and carelessness—as essential elements of early modern dis/ability.

Orlando, the aggressively able-bodied hero of *As You Like It*, exemplifies the ways in which carelessness operates. In him we see carelessness having four separate but interrelated elements. Able-bodiedness is careless in the sense that it is 1) carefree: without anxiety or apprehension. Careless, in this sense, is also 2) reckless: not taking due care, heedless. For able-bodiedness, to be careless is also to be 3) uncared for or untended, and, simultaneously, it is to be 4) uncaring: not troubling oneself, not invested in the well-being of others. Orlando's carelessness is consistently connected to his experience of able-bodiedness, which is not subtle or subtextual, in spite of the fact that he has regularly been valorized as a model of care in both performance and scholarship. Training our attention on Orlando's carelessness reveals the spectacle of able-bodiedness in early modern England.

Emily Shortslef

### **Combatting Falsehood with Falsehood in *The Two Noble Kinsmen***

This paper will focus on a variation on the device of disguised identity, and more specifically the bed-trick, in the comic subplot of Shakespeare and Fletcher's tragicomedy *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The Jailer's Daughter, who has fallen in love with Palamon and helped him escape from prison, goes mad when she cannot find him. Upon observing her symptoms (she won't eat or sleep, she sings fragments of ballads and repeatedly speaks of Palamon as her lover) a Doctor diagnoses her with love-melancholy and proposes that her former suitor present himself to her as Palamon, persuading her to eat with him, and eventually, if she asks, going to bed with her—all ostensibly in the service of saving her life.

Combining early modern medical advice about tricking patients into eating and sleeping with the tricks of disguised identity conventional to theatrical comedy, this "cure" is underwritten by the logic (as expressed by the Doctor) that "It is a falsehood she is in, which is with falsehoods to be combatted." But if tricks frequently operate on the stage as means to achieving some kind of desired end, what's unusual here is that although this trick succeeds at saving the Daughter (the Jailer reports in the play's final scene that "she's well restored / And to be married shortly"), *The Two Noble Kinsmen* includes no scene of disclosure and revelation, no moment where the Daughter learns the identity of the man she has believed to be "Palamon." This paper will explore the significance of the fact that the resolution of the play's comic plot involves a trick that is never exposed as such to the character it targets. What does it mean, for how we understand the structure of comedy, that here the comic resolution hinges on an unrecognized falsehood, and that that trick is represented as integral to the survival of the deceived?

John-Paul Spiro

### **That Reason Wonder May Diminish**

Shakespeare's comedies often end with a promise that all will be explained. Most of the characters are in a state of surprise or bafflement, as if they have witnessed a miracle or an otherwise incomprehensible event. A character in a position of epistemic (and often social) authority assures them that all that they have witnessed will be accounted for, but first they should celebrate and even enjoy their confusion. For example, Friar Francis in *Much Ado about Nothing* claims,

All this amazement can I qualify,  
When after that the holy rites are ended,  
I'll tell you largely of fair Hero's death.  
Mean time let wonder seem familiar[.] (5.4.67-70)

I will show in this paper that in several of the comedies "letting wonder seem familiar" is presented as a means towards maintaining peace, pleasure, and reconciliation, as if rational explanation would disrupt the festivities and the atmosphere of magical possibility. The promised accounting will be delivered only after the society has been rebuilt and its speaker will reify his/her privileged position.

Following Caroline Levine's rejection of the "closure and containment" model of literary form, Shakespeare's comedies encourage us not "to overlook the future implied by the text, a deliberately uncontained temporal process." The world of the play continues after the audience has departed, and the audience itself is encouraged to respond to the play with positive affect and circumscribed analysis. Shakespeare here attempts to manage possible divisions within his audience, and he pressures his actors to compensate for remaining ambiguities via gesture. Highlighting this pattern in Shakespeare's comedies allows us to note the normative quality of these injunctions to think and feel within the strictures of the comic form.

Richard Strier

### **"AIRY NOTHING": EPISTEMOLOGY IN *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM***

This essay tries to sort out, in brief compass, the epistemological implications of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is taken to be a surprisingly difficult task. The paper tries to deal with the status of metaphors in the play -- some of which exist as mere "figures of speech," others claim descriptive (and prescriptive) power, while others seem to be literalized in the action (lovers' talk enacted by fairies). The claim that lovers have an epistemological advantage is seen to be both explored and mocked. The role of the fairies and the love-potion in the play are examined. Both are seen as to be recognized as fictions (with reference to Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*). But this view is seen as potentially complicated by Bottom's experience and claim about his experience. Theseus' long speech about lovers and madmen, which then includes poets, is analyzed in some detail, and shown to be consistently rationalistic, and not answered in the play (Hippolyta's response is not seen as doing so). The epilogue is taken as manifesting some real anxiety that the play might be "reprehended."

Maggie Vinter  
**Shylock's Comic Epistemology**

“If you tickle us, do we not laugh?” asks Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. His rhetorical question invokes Aristotle’s influential description of man as the only laughing animal in order to insist on a shared humanity common to Christians and Jews. Like many other commentators, the prominent sixteenth century theorist of laughter Laurent Joubert implicitly connects this Aristotelian understanding of laughter to Aristotle’s description elsewhere of man as a rational animal. In Joubert’s view, laughter demonstrates the laugher’s status as a human capable of both reason and emotion since it manifests the contrary impulses of joy and sadness that arise when a person views an ugly object that does not inspire pity. To laugh is to prove your own humanity, in part because it demonstrates that you yourself are engaging in epistemological inquiry, attempting to resolve internally contradictory assessments of the world. More recently, Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett and Reginald Adams have proposed a similar model, rearticulated in the language of contemporary cognitive science; laughter for them is the pleasurable manifestation of a de-bugging process through which human brains identify and eliminate errors introduced into our “world knowledge store” by the speed of cognitive processing.

Even as Shylock evokes this tradition, however, his focus on tickling subverts it. Shylock’s paradigm is, for Joubert, a “bastard” form of laughter, a purely reflexive simulacrum of true laughter that reveals and exploits bodily weakness. *The Merchant of Venice*, I argue, explores the status of laughter as a byproduct of epistemological inquiry, and as a marker of epistemological impasse, by questioning if a distinction between the “true” and the “bastard” can be sustained. This zone of indistinction does not only encompass Shylock’s assertion of humanity, but additionally draws in Gratiano, Antonio and the other Christian characters who align humorousness and humorlessness with claims to knowledge or insight, and potentially even the audience whose laughter is induced involuntarily by this peculiarly uncomfortable comedy.

Adam Zucker

**Learning (from) Bad Latin in *How A Man May Choose A Good Wife from A Bad***

Readers and spectators of early modern comedy frequently encountered the stock figure of the pedant: a self-important, word-mangling teacher who may or may not look slightly familiar to those of us who love being scholars and never mangle words. This paper discusses Thomas Heywood’s rightfully obscure 1602 comedy *How a Man May Choose a Good Wife from a Bad* to explore a few unexpected lessons taught by the Latinate obscurity that often accompanies the satirized pedant in print and on stage. In this play (as in many comedies) mistake-making, both a formal feature of the genre and an aspect of printshop practice, produces off-kilter, anti-hegemonic knowledge communities as ordinary linguistic meaning fails. When we (scholars, editors, teachers, students) modify our scholarly habits, when we attune our ears to the possibilities built into the resonance of non-semantic Latin, when, in other words, we permit our critical epistemologies to become self-knowingly comic, we can detect in early modern drama new ways to understand skill and community in our own classrooms, and possibly around our own SAA seminar tables.

