

Matthew Harrison

## How to Do Things with Dicks: Marston and the Embarrassment of Pornography

Marston's "Pygmalion's Image" expands Ovid's scene (in book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*) in two directions. It invites us to laugh at the naivete of Pygmalion, juxtaposed against the worldly narrator who sees the delusion of his Petrarchan yearnings. But then, the frank eroticism of the second half—at least, Marston claims in the retraction that follows—is meant first to arouse the imagined reader and expose the folly of that arousal. Part of the challenge of the poem is figuring out how to assess these three moves: satire, arousal, and moral judgment. I argue that the poem's imagery literalizes an ongoing conceit, its reckoning with art's ability to make hard things soft and soft things hard. Tumescence and detumescence come to figure the embarrassment of art's influence on its audience.

My essay theorizes Marston's wantonness alongside three interlocutors: Shakespeare, Gombrich's account of art, and Eve Sedgwick.

Toward a Quantum Theory of Dick Jokes  
Matt Kozusko

Toward the end of the Pyramus and Thisbe playlet in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Snout, as Wall, gives his final line: "Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so / And, being done, thus Wall away doth go" (5.1.217-218). There is a joke here, and it's almost certainly an ejaculation joke. No stage directions survive to elucidate the moment, but it is fairly clear that Snout/Wall has been excited to sexual climax by the stimulation provided in the course of Bottom/Pyramus and Flute/Thisbe's exchange earlier in the scene.

In the terms of this seminar, what we see here is childish (or is it "adult"?) bawdy slapstick, culminating in a dick joke. The problem I want to point to involves how we come to the certain knowledge that "my part discharged so" is, in fact, a dick joke. To put it another way, what Snout tells us on the surface is simply that he has finished playing the role he was assigned in the interlude. The play itself goes rather out of its way to establish these very terms in other scenes, where "discharge" is used three times to refer to the process of enacting a scripted role. Similarly, when referring to players' roles, the mechanicals use "part" or "parts" almost exclusively. Thus, the notion of a "part discharged" lands easily in its primary sense as a dramatic performance delivered. It comes to have a second, bawdy significance only when a secondary meaning is activated by a particular staging of the lines that precede it.

But if we understand that oral stimulation to Snout's genitals-and-anus area has led, in the fiction of the play and playlet, to sexual climax, what we have in this instance is a rare, and perhaps a lone, example of a penis-in-mouth joke in the time period. While dick jokes abound in early modern drama, there are likely no *fellatio* jokes anywhere in Shakespeare or in early modern drama – or indeed, in print, in English, until at least the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. More precisely, no such jokes have been clearly and persuasively identified, the likely examples having other, more sound or more probable explanations when understood in early modern lexical and semantic context. This essay sketches some context and considers some possible explanations.

(The title refers to a brief moment in the essay that uses quantum superposition as a metaphor for semantic ambiguity, which holds open meaning such that multiple states can obtain at the same time)

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Seminar: Renaissance Dick Jokes (SAA 2024)

“I Have a Thing Is Long and Stiff”:  
Riddling Sex in Early Modern England

This paper examines the “epistemological foreplay”—to quote Roger Abraham—involved in early modern bawdy riddles about penises. Bawdy riddles work as follows: they seem to depict a sexual scene or body part, and then reveal their solution to be something supposedly “non-sexual” such as a brush or a pen. They take pleasure in poking fun at penises—what they look like and what they do—by comparing them to mops or gooseberries or “corn that comes off the mill.” But they also raise epistemological questions about the body and sex in the process. Indeed, in prompting their audience to figure out what it is they describe, they point to the erotic charge of everyday objects, ultimately breaking down the very distinctions between the sexual and the non-sexual upon which the riddles are premised. In dialog with criticism that asks how we are to understand “what sex is” in the early modern period, this paper thinks through how penises and sexual acts are imagined, figured, and obscured via the playful humor of the riddle form.

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SAA 2024: Renaissance Dick Jokes

### **“Understanding” Dick Jokes as Dirty Clowning Game**

The best clowns excelled at “dirty clowning.” Clowns’ frequent dirty joking often foregrounds issues of whether a joke is fully understood and by whom. Layered humor involving plural understandings works on multiple levels: it sometimes even requires literacy (spelling) or knowledge of Latin, and it also employs so many dirty jokes that most would not get all of them in a single hearing. And dirty jokes were above all wordplay.

In the audience, we know we are hearing dirty clowning when we find extended wordplay in two-act scenes exploiting hyper-colloquially slangy, lowly or homely words, employed through gratuitous redundancy (point-scoring) and in hyperbolically dysphemistic/mock-euphemistic, highly metaphorical synonyms. These are wittily absurd, shockingly incongruous in their scale, grotesquery, or materialism. Synonymies for sex in dirty joking do not behave like euphemisms. They are not substituted to make sex sound less crude or shocking; instead, they serve opposite ends. Any understatement is ironic, wryly knowing. Laughably swaggering or homely hyperbole, grotesquery, and over-the-top cynical materialism are common. And the end result of dirty joking is only ever playfully (often copiously) emphasizing the bawdy rather than minimizing it.

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### John Marston's Satirical Entrapment

This essay explores the confused and confusing relationship between Petrarchan eroticism and satirical prudishness in John Marston's *Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image and Certaine Satyres* (1598), like in Thomas Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphoses* (1589), Everard Guilpin's *Skialetheia* (1599), and John Weever's *Faunus and Melliflora* (1600), sternly moralistic satires follow—and appear to answer—sexually suggestive stanzas, as though the satire can somehow offer an antidote to the poison of the preceding lechery. But Marston seems uniquely interested in both arousing his readers and punishing his readers for the arousal that they may experience. So too does he seem uniquely aware of his own culpability in setting this trap. By “wantonly display[ing] / The Salaminian titillations, / Which tickle vp our leud Priapians” in *The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image* (“Author in Prayse,” 4-8), Marston both mocks the luxuriousness of Petrarchan poetry and acknowledges that his own poetry is guilty of the same lechery that it attacks.