

**Group 1: "O, I am Stabb'd with Laughter"**

**Maya Mathur, University of Mary Washington**

**Comedy is Not a Victimless Crime:  
Laughter in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* and *The Shoemaker's Holiday***

At first glance, *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c.1552-1563), a scatological comedy set in rural England, has little in common with Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599), a sophisticated city comedy that chronicles the tension between the nobility and gentry. Yet, both plays feature comic scenes in which male workers confront and mock their mistresses. While Gammer is the ostensible head of her household in the first play, she cedes authority to her servants, Hodge and Cock, and the play's vice figure, Diccon, once she loses the needle that is chief source of conflict in the play. In *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, the apprentices that work for the jovial shoemaker, Simon Eyre, disregard and challenge the domestic authority of his wife, Margery.

I am interested in exploring the comedy that is generated by the mistress-servant confrontations in both plays, and in doing so from two perspectives. First, I want to examine the laughter that stems from the ability of young men without discernible power to mock women in authority. Second, I want to consider how the women in these plays are framed by the laughter that is generated against them. In other words, does recuperating the laughter of young men also mean suppressing our sympathy for the women who lose their standing, as they become the butt of the joke? Does an attempt to reimagine how jokes might have worked for early modern audiences mean ignoring the politics of comedy? Or, is it possible to consider the comic from the perspective of those who laugh and those who are being laughed at?

**Marilyn Simon, University of Manitoba**

***The Taming of the Shrew:*  
A Tale I'm Not Supposed to Love**

My paper will look at how Shakespeare's characters find joy and purpose in sexuality. Even, perhaps, in the perennial battle of the sexes. I intend to address this paper to the positive human possibilities revealed Shakespeare's comedies. What I want to take seriously is the thrill and the joy in sexuality, in the *fun* of the battle of the sexes. What Shakespeare's plays suggest is that this battle is not simply fun but a deep way of knowing oneself and the other in mutuality and in difference. It is my contention that there is something in Shakespeare's comedies that is left behind when we mine them primarily for symptoms of unconscious prejudice, which then tacitly serve as (humourless) affirmations of our own moral progress. What I want to explore in my paper is this remainder, those places where laughter, gaiety, spirit, and love are located. Without negating the ethical concerns that compel us to see sex through the lens of egalitarian justice, I want to inquire into how Shakespeare's comedies might help us reclaim joy in sexuality, which is, after all, also a high moral concern.

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This in itself is likely to be a controversial proposition. But it is also one that I think can enliven our reading of these works, and help us rediscover what is vital in them. I am emboldened to do so by the example of scholarship that was done not so long ago, but which is nonetheless bracing in its contrast with current scholarly preoccupations.

My paper will look primarily at *The Taming of the Shrew*.

**Matthew Thiele, Glenville State College**

**“All Thy Tediousness On Me?”:  
The Ethics of Ridicule in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Measure for Measure***

This essay explores how the invitation to laughter can contribute to a sequence of ethical moments that weigh power, justice, duty, and charity. Through their constable characters in particular, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Measure for Measure* employ a particular kind of invitation to laughter, ridicule, to investigate and interrogate the relationship between laughter and power, and both plays suggest that the power to ridicule needs to be used as responsibly as any other form of power, with a careful eye toward the consequences. In conversations between Constable Elbow and Escalus and Constable Dogberry and Leonato, the plays invite the audience to laugh at the constables' poor command of the language, but both plays then immediately ask the audience to reflect on the cause of that laughter and the necessity to maintain composure, think charitably, and renew the bonds of community that have been endangered by ridicule. Although they may momentarily give in to the urge to ridicule, the constables' elite interlocutors recover quickly and demonstrate a nobility of temperament that seems didactic.

**Group 2: Corpsing**

**Ralph Cohen, American Shakespeare Center**

**Whole as a Fish:  
Helping Audiences Laugh at Shakespeare's Jokes**

The name of our seminar is an interesting one because “laughter” puts the focus not on the text of early modern plays, but on the audience’s reaction to it. The thing is that getting audiences to laugh is one thing, getting them to laugh because of what Shakespeare wrote in his plays is another. Hamlet worried about clowns trying to elicit laughter by saying “more” than had been writ down for them, but the problem in contemporary productions of the plays is that actors and directors don’t trust the words writ down for them, so they either cut those words, or try to elicit laughter by changing those words or by doing things that have nothing to do with the comedy in them (the production of *Much Ado* at the Globe last year tried in all three of those ways).

If you’ve seen Kenneth Branagh’s otherwise wonderful film of *Much Ado about Nothing*, then you know that, when it comes to comedy, he mistrusted Shakespeare. Branagh did not trust the comedy in the Dogberry subplot to be funny on its own terms and encouraged Michael Keaton to

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reprise his work in *Beetlejuice*; the result is a performance that sometimes get laughs but laughs that are unrelated to the character or the play that Shakespeare wrote.

Nothing more confirms Jonson's proposition that Shakespeare is "for all time" than a production that "recuperates" laughter through moments an audience can imagine they are sharing with the first audiences at that play. This seminar paper suggests some of the ways—none of them involves a concept—I've found that can help actors to do that. Using examples from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *As You Like It* (which I am directing for the third time), I will look at rehearsal and performances practices that help recover meaning and in that way can recuperate laughter for today's audiences.

**Scott Maisano, University of Massachusetts, Boston**

**O Bad Bee! And Worse Wax!: Act 1, Scenes 2 and 3 of *Enter Nurse; or, Love's Labour's Won***

James Shirley concludes his prefatory poem for Philip Massinger's *The Renegado, or, The Gentleman of Venice* (circa 1624) by throwing down a gauntlet for critics and commentators: "[Let them] Conspire one comedy, and they will say / 'Tis easier to commend than make a play." My contribution to our seminar takes up that gauntlet. Inspired by the reconstruction of lost theatrical spaces at Shakespeare's Globe in London and the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia, I am reconstructing a lost theatrical comedy that, I hope, will play on one or more of these simulacral (and, with the recent additions of Miles Gregory's Pop-Up Globe and Angus Vail's Container Globe, increasingly mobile) stages. Writing Shakespeare (unlike writing about Shakespeare) turns out to be a way of writing for general audiences. Most scholarship on Shakespearean comedy tends to presume and to require a vast amount of prior reading, but a Shakespearean comedy presumes and requires none: in the spirit of the Public Humanities, it simply begins with everyone, bookish or not, on the same page (and/or stage). Since my play is both a sequel to *Love's Labour's Lost* and a prequel to *Romeo and Juliet*, readers or audiences familiar with those works might have a greater understanding or appreciation of certain parts or passages. But that's true of every play. Moreover, this play is designed to stand alone: the only one of "its time" to depict bodily symptoms of the plague on stage, *Enter Nurse* could be dated as early as 1592, in which case its sequel would be *Romeo and Juliet* and its prequel *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Some shared concerns: (1) In the context of the 2017-18 renaissance of / nostalgia for comedy from four decades ago ("Jerry Before Seinfeld," Steve Martin, and SNL), cited by Gin, what are the promises and perils of reviving jokes, physical humor (as, for example, when Berowne struggles to unseal a letter), rhetorical and verse forms from four centuries ago?; (2) will what Andy describes as "archaic wordplay, obscure references, and surreal verbal constructions that require exhaustive gloss" prove to be of an age (the Elizabethan) and not for all (especially our) time?; (3) fortunately, I couldn't have dreamt up a better set of interlocutors to help me think through the problems involved in writing a 1590s comedy or indeed the problems (including but not limited to the plague, the stage puritan, clowning, and sexy battles of the sexes) this particular comedy involves.

**Stephen Wisker, University at Buffalo, SUNY**

**Fishy Etymology, or Pickle-herring Anyone?**

What if, all joking aside (in fact all joking welcomed and embraced), comedy itself could be a means to accessing comedy? Put another way, when the object of study is comedy why would we expect to stay straight faced?

What if the difficulties inherent in studying early modern comedy, the instability, insufficiency, and frequent inscrutability of the surviving texts, and the ephemerality of performance itself, might in themselves offer a possible solution? And, what if criticism, an essentially private activity, and long distrustful of performance for successive more or less valid reasons, was nudged into a more social dimension (like this forum), and forced to encounter comedy on its own terms? After all, the laughter we seek to recuperate needs voices to sound it, and, I suggest, just a little prompting and help for its luster to shine anew.

History tells us that the Elizabethan theatre had an analogous problem of uncomprehending audiences, and turned to the clown for a solution. Troupes of English actors frequently toured the continent in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and (pre-surtitles) employed a clown to offer a commentary in the local language. These characters are elusive, they left the barest imprint on the written record: one of them survives only as “John,” or “English-John,” another as “Pickle-herring.”

Most of us, if we know the word at all, associate it with a food, or else with Sir Toby’s characteristic belching (a classic clown upstaging technique), but Pickle-herring indexes a whole theatre tradition with the clown resplendent and presiding as master of ceremonies. To imagine an early modern play experienced in this manner is to glimpse the vitality of the clown in the sixteenth century theatre, and the more participatory nature of the theatrical event before it assumed the norms pervasive now, yet all but unimaginable then. This is the same world early modern comedy came crying hither from, a robust, participatory, and transactional milieu where one currency was laughter. This paper, called “Irrational Commentary” for a reason, attempts to wed scholarship with performance, discuss specific aspects of performance practice as we can reasonably reconstruct them, and apply it all (perhaps less reasonably) as a potential model for interrogating, elucidating and revivifying comedy in the context of performance. There will be more questions than answers, and fruit.

**Group 3: “The Crackling of Thorns”**

**Robert Pierce, Oberlin**

**Comedy, Formula, and Display:  
Shakespeare’s Marlovian Imitation in Shylock**

Pure comic characterization, as shown in Greek and Roman comedy, medieval farce, *commedia dell’arte*, the classical comedy of Ben Jonson and Moliere, and many modern sitcoms, tends to

fall into the pattern of formula and display. The characters are formulaic, defined by a small and traditional group of traits. Their characters do not develop during the play. Rather they display their set of traits in increasingly striking and extravagant ways. Early Modern playwrights often use the technique of imitation, picking up a plot device or a character from someone else and developing it in their own way.

When imitation is not just a source of material but a dramatic device, it arouses recognition, a sense of sameness in the audience, but much of the effect of imitation is in the ways in which the imitator thwarts that expectation of sameness. Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* imitates Marlowe's Barabas from *The Jew of Malta*, in something between homage to the previous creation and playful rivalry; and indeed Shakespeare manages to outdo even Marlowe's brilliant figure. Shakespeare as imitator of Marlowe surprises us more by the differences and by what he adds and leaves out than by the closeness of his reworking. Both playwrights delight in pushing at the edge of expectation when they might seem to be giving the audience what it has seen and heard before in the usual way of comic characterization, and they are most themselves when they might be most conventional. Marlowe's play is officially a tragedy, that most established of genres, but Barabas, his tragic hero, as the full title proclaims him to be, is in many ways a conventionally comic figure. One might expect Shylock to fit that same comic pattern and to be the comic hero of his play (which like Marlowe's strains the limits of its genre of comedy), but of course he is not even the title character like Barabas, or not quite so. How, then, do the two figures relate to each other and to the norms of comic characterization? How does our sense of Shylock come out of the ways in which he is not a replay of the Barabas formula?

**Jillian Snyder, Notre Dame**

**Lawful Jesting:  
Scornful Laughter in Early Modern Comedy**

A dearth of laughter appears to be a trait distinct to early modern Protestantism. George Meredith's "Essay on Comedy" distinguishes between "over laughers" and "non-laughers," calling those who laugh too little "Puritans." Ingvild Gilhus recent book remarks that because "Protestant religion spoke more to reason than to emotions" it thus was hostile toward laughter. And Barry Sanders boldly pronounces that Protestants—all of whom he categorizes as Puritans—were determined "to outlaw every trace of laughter" from England. But what did Protestants actually believe about laughter? Moreover, is there any way those beliefs found their way into early modern comedy?

This paper will consider these questions first by analyzing Protestant beliefs around laughter. It will explore, for example, how Protestants understood the scornful laughter of God the Father as a gesture meant to exclude the wicked. But it will also account for laughter that possesses a more joyful form, being part of the Christian eschaton. The paper then examines how these beliefs translate into portrayals of "stage puritans," such as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* or Zeal-of-the-land Busy in *Bartholomew Fair*. How does laughter—both from other characters and from audience members—exclude such figures from their respective communities or draw them in?

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Here, one might consider how Malvolio announces his revenge as he departs from Olivia's household while Busy joins his fellow fairgoers to become a "beholder" to its idolatrous puppet show. Finally, could comedy's predilection toward resolution also serve to gesture toward ultimate good and, in so doing, reflect the sort of laughter that Protestants believed would end the sorrow of humankind?

**Lieke Stelling, University of Utrecht**

**When Damnation Was Still Funny?  
Humour and the Doctrine of Election in Two Tudor Moralities**

As a consequence of the Protestant Reformation, repentance became one of the major subjects of anxiety and disquiet. Presented as the cornerstone of Protestant thought, conversion was simultaneously placed outside the reach of human influence. As scholars have shown, serious literature – tragedy in particular – served as a powerful tool to explore the disturbing questions as to how to convert if God had already decided on one's faith, and how to deal with the uncertainty regarding one's eternal destiny. Yet the notion that humour, too, was employed in connection with these questions has hardly been recognized and discussed in detail.

In this paper, I will analyze three early Elizabethan moralities that use humour to examine the above questions of repentance: Lewis Wager's *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* (c. 1550-1566), and William Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art* (1559) and *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (1560). All three of them present protagonists that make attempts at repentant conversion and struggle with the Calvinist insistence on predestination and human depravity. At the same time, humour features prominently as part of their and their antagonists' characterizations. Rather than dismissing these moralities' use of humour simply as a sugarcoat for a moral or a didactic instrument, I will approach it on its own terms and argue that they juxtapose religious incongruity with humorous incongruity. This did not serve to deny anxiety, but to create an alternative relationship with the unsettling questions of repentance that helped early moderns feel able to cope with doubt and anguish. Conversely, I will show that religion, as one of the most fundamental aspects of early modern English thought, can be seen as a significant factor in this period's creation and understanding of humour.

**Group 4: "How Far a Modern Quill Doth Come Too Short"**

**Doug Bruster, University of Texas, Austin**

**Shakespeare's Wordplay**

This paper aims to explore the relationship between comedy and a crucial element of Shakespeare's style: his wordplay. In the most general sense, all the words in his dramas constitute "wordplay," for they come in the service of the ludic. But the intentional and clever manipulation of language for comedic ends—and for instruction as well as delight—is a foundational part of who Shakespeare was as a writer. While often connected with his clowns and fools, wordplay is a defining aspect of his compositional paradigm in the mouths of high as

well as low characters, and in the poems as well as plays. For the most part, criticism has been content to acknowledge Shakespeare's wordplay as a given of his formal repertoire. It thus stands inertly "there" as part of what we associate with his achievement, and is hidden in plain sight. But the visual metaphor here asks for a qualification. As Shakespeare's language becomes increasingly difficult for readers and playgoers immersed in watching, his comedic wordplay stands as both a register of our verbal past and an impediment to the survival of his works. What changes to our understanding of Shakespeare, and in particular his comedy, will come about as the Age of the Screen unfolds? What obligation might scholars, lay readers, and performers have to the wordplay in his works as words themselves become more challenging?

**Cynthia Lewis, Davidson College**

**Dark Laughter:  
Retrieving Lost Humor in Shakespearean Tragedy**

My paper takes as its central premise the discomfort among modern audiences—especially those in the U.S.—with numerous and sizable elements of comedy that are mixed into most Shakespearean tragedies. While I would view many of these elements as unavoidable, productions seem to bend over backwards to suppress them. Why? As a culture, we seem intolerant of tonal and generic mixture—far more than early modern practicing playwrights. Even if Sir Philip Sidney deplored “mongrel tragicomedy,” Shakespeare and his contemporaries insisted on injecting risible comedy, dark irony, and gallows humor into the soberest dramatic contexts. Just after Macbeth has murdered his king, the Porter walks on, drunk and hilariously irreverent. While the Porter’s humor is usually allowed free vent in the theater, other instances in which comedy infiltrates tragedy remain buried in today’s productions. In my paper, I’ll excavate examples of what I take to be comedy that is typically suppressed in performances of *Romeo and Juliet*. Some scenes in the play are usually allowed to display humor. The balcony scene (2.2) and Juliet’s interaction with the Nurse after the Nurse has met Romeo in town (2.5) invite levity and even laughter that isn’t perceived as conflicting with the tragic direction. Mercutio’s bawdy and dark jokes about becoming a “grave man” are also permitted comic expression in keeping with his sarcasm and cynicism. But a scene like 4.5, where Juliet is presumed dead, exemplifies the humor that is ignored in this and other plays. As Juliet’s parents, Paris, and the Nurse grieve out loud over their loss, their lamentation turns into rivalry that, at once comical and deadly serious, points to other features of the play that a fully realized production would—should—acknowledge and include.

**Virginia Strain, Loyola University, Chicago**

***The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* as History Play**

In the second last episode of the first season of Amazon Prime’s *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, the eponymous standup novice calls out a would-be mentor, Sophie Lennon, who is famous for her caricature of a larger-than-life working-class woman from Queens. To Maisel’s surprise, Lennon leads a double life. At home, Lennon lives like the finest, oldest New York Families that Edith Wharton ever imagined. After being invited into Lennon’s home for the afternoon, Maisel

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produces improvised standup material that is equal parts jokes and the zealous discrediting of Lennon. What was Lennon's crime? Her advice to Maisel: you gotta get a gimmick. You can't be a real woman onstage (or in real life): "She told me that no one would find me funny unless I do some big whackadoodle character or have a dick.... Why do women have to pretend to be something that they're not?" The tension is gendered and generational and political and aesthetic. Lennon represents vaudeville: her doubleness exemplifies the distance between her stale stage routines and life. Maisel represents an emergent realism on the standup scene that is, in the late 50s, tantamount to cultural rebellion. (I'll make the easy analogy with Shakespeare's second tetralogy here: Prince Hal's political strategy, too, is a performance of becoming more himself that also represents a generational and historical shift.) If Maisel's personal attack on Lennon enacts or instantiates historical progress in the field of comedy, the episode from the period piece also refracts the in-fighting that has been publicly played out in very recent comedy history. But because it is a dispute between two women, it does not explicitly or allusively call out real-life male comics (as Hannibal Buress called out Bill Cosby; as shows like *One Mississippi* and *Girls* have represented signature forms of sexual harassment associated with Louis C K). Instead, the show is more generally driven by the double-reflexivity of today's comedy ethos: the discourse (or monologues) of professionals talking back to professionals about their conduct (be it sexual harassment or the debate on political correctness) and the larger academic and public interest in the contribution of comedy to twentieth- and twenty-first- century cultural history. In this paper, I will discuss the new series at the character level and compare the antagonism among its comedians (the clash of styles, egos, ages, and genders) with the structure and play of Prince Hal and Falstaff's relationship in *1 Henry IV* and the modes of banishment that Falstaff suffers in *2 Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. But more interestingly, I hope, I want to consider comedy as a source or catalyst for narratives of historical progress. If comedy is intensely context-driven, as is often said, what happens when, and how does, comedy alter the context?