

Introduction

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Laughter is not a decision – it happens to us, at times inappropriately and inauspiciously. Psychoanalysis is well known for having shed some light on the perennial mysteries of what we do not control – dreams, parapraxes, symptoms, and sexual problems. While the Freudian slip and the bungled act have become part of Western culture’s lingua franca, it is less commonly known that psychoanalysis provides revelatory insights about the mechanisms of jokes, comedy, humor and their effects. Many people today would happily admit to their Oedipus Complex, but few would feel comfortable reflecting on why they laugh at the humiliation of their co-worker, titter at an ethnic or sexist remark, or realize that like jokes, their dreams are made out of puns, witticisms and one-liners. Few note, as Freud did, that dreams were “insufferably witty,” revealing an annoying predilection for bad puns. And fewer have noted, as Lacan did, that comedy allows access to the unconscious.

If someone were to ask what single book one should read to understand the psychoanalytic method, the answer would be *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In one brief monograph, Freud succinctly explains how the unconscious operates: it does things with words. The psychoanalytic cure is not just a “talking cure,” but to further play on Austin’s famous dictum, it does things with jokes. We propose a paradigm swerve, a Freudian slip on a banana peel.

Freud revealed that dreams were the royal road to the unconscious. Freud also thought that by understanding the workings of the joke, we would be better readers of our hidden selves, discovering knowledge where we did not expect it. Jokes and dreams share several characteristics: they outwit an inner censor, allow satisfaction, are produced spontaneously and forgotten quickly, and are therefore subjected to repression. Jokes offer a shortcut to the unconscious we can use in broad daylight.

As he did with dreams, Freud gave intellectual and philosophical dignity to jokes in his watershed book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*

(1905). While Freud's book is not about comedy per se, it unmask the working of the jokes and of language, and this is the stuff dreams and comedy are made of. Freud perspicaciously noted to Fliess that "The ostensible wit of all unconscious processes is intimately related to the theory of the joke and the comic."¹ As in comedy, dreams and jokes bypass the objections of consciousness outwitting censorship, disguised by riddles and homonyms. Dreams and jokes allow access to hidden wishes while granting aggression an acceptable outlet and establish a social tie that satisfies repressed unconscious desires.

Illuminating the joke by exploring its psychic economy, Freud showed that, linguistically, jokes and dreams work by condensing and displacing meanings and making witty use of polysemy. Both dreams and jokes function by disguising and deforming latent content. While the dream may grant wish fulfillment for the dreamer alone, the satisfaction of the joke is shared, at least most of the time. Economically, the joke bypasses the inhibiting factor both in the teller of the joke and in the listener, allowing for a gain in pleasure. As two essays in this collection by Drach and Rabaté will make explicit, the psychic payoffs garnered by jokes, witticisms, and puns are subject to dynamics of economy. Jokes, Freud tells us, are a way we profit from the unconscious in waking life with laughter as the delightful dividend.

Jokes were serious business for the father of psychoanalysis. Jokes were serious business for Jacques Lacan, as well. Lacan's re-reading of Freud's joke book distances the joke from the folkloric terrain of ethnic Jewish studies that was Freud's entry point, initially having envisioned his book on jokes as a monograph on Jewish humor. Extending Freud's discovery that the joke and the comic reveal the logic of the unconscious, Lacan's psychoanalytic technique amplified Freud's linguistic theories on the *Witz*.

Like a joke, a successful psychoanalytic interpretation concerns not only a specific word's meaning, but also its polysemy and its connotations. For Lacan, an analyst's effective intervention is a kind of punctuation that operates on the analysand's speech by what Flaubert called "*le mot juste*," the "right word." And, just as in the case of the punch line, the timing of the intervention is essential to its efficacy. Aaron Schuster has noted that good timing is indispensable for the production of laughter.² This is true

¹ Sigmund Freud, Letter from Freud to Fliess, September 11, 1899. Jeffrey Masson, editor. *The complete letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 371.

² See Aaron Schuster, "A Philosophy of Tickling," *Cabinet* 50 (Summer 2013): 41–48.

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for both comedy and for something else that makes us laugh—tickling. When either goes on for too long, the fun is over. Lacan's controversial practice of the variable-length session requires the same attention to timing in order to produce unconscious effects. If the session length is predictable, one misses an opportunity to be clinically effective; the cut (*scansion*) attempts to produce a punchline that will reveal a hidden truth and create new meaning. We see that Lacan's interest in humor is not purely scholarly but also practical, it concerns a technical savoir faire regarding efficacious psychoanalytic technical interventions. Just because most analysts do not find their analysts funny, does not mean that their analysts might not have taken Freud's book on jokes seriously.

In the Beginning was Laughter

The young Lacan was closely connected to the Surrealists who transformed the humor of the morbid, absurd, and nonsensical into an art form, showing creative ingenuity with humor. André Breton coined the phrase "black humor," which would designate an important genre of literature and film in the latter half of the twentieth century. As a group, the Surrealists were preoccupied with a myriad of modes of disturbing and provocative nonsense and hilariously incongruous juxtapositions. They influenced Lacan's theorization of paranoia, a major contribution to the history of psychoanalysis, and praised his early work.

Central to Lacan's theory of the origins of subjectivity was his invention of the mirror stage, a dialectical progression in which the child identifies with his or her mirror image and marks it with jubilatory laughter. This decisive turning point in the infant's ego formation via identification with the mirror image is a joyful moment of triumphant illusory mastery over the body, punctuated by laughter. Laughter is at the origin of the ego.

Lacan's mirror stage marks the beginning of subjective constitution. In fact, child development has often been theorized in terms of the infant and toddler's acquisition of varying abilities of smiling: in the mirror, at others, and eventually through the capacity to laugh and make jokes. Before speaking, walking, or even crawling, infants laugh and joke.

Laughter is central to humans. As Lacan writes in *My Teaching*, dreams, failure, and laughter are attributes specific to the speaking subject.³

³ Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 2008), 79.

Long ago, Aristotle had observed that animals do not laugh. Recent scientific research has questioned the accepted knowledge of the Greek polymath showing that laughter is not exclusive to homo sapiens, and recent studies have demonstrated that our primate cousins seem to be having a very good time. While animals may play, animals do not play jokes. Moreover, while some animals are capable of deception, erasing their traces to avoid predation, animals do not speak. They can communicate but they do not have language. Bees, for instance, show sophisticated communication strategies indicating floral location, but a bee does not give the wrong information just to make fun of its fellow bee. Jokes are proper only to speaking beings or to our beloved Tom and Jerry.

Comedy of the sexes

As far as the birds and the bees are concerned, as subjects of language, the joke is on us – we are laughing and laughed at in the proverbial comedy of the sexes. Lovers act ridiculously, which the theater of Molière and Marivaux so delightfully depicts. Alceste's misanthropic proclamations ranting against humanity's hypocrisy are hilariously controverted by his mad passion for Célimène, who embodies virtually every quality he claims to despise. Marivaux's very name has become a French noun depicting a kind of game playing with regard to love that keeps it on the side of levity and wit. When Lacan avers the affinity between love and comedy, he is not making light of love, quite the contrary – he grants it its central place in the theater of life.

Far from being harmonious, love is always a surprising encounter with excess. At times, it is anxiety-producing, and it always entails an overload that opposes its illusion of completion. Love supplements for deficit and discordance, however humorous this seems to others, a fact exploited by every romantic comedy. This is perhaps summed up best in the last line of Billy Wilder's classic 1959 comedy, *Some Like it Hot*, where Joe E. Brown, responding to Jack Lemmon's protestations that they cannot be married because he is not a woman, replies, "Well, nobody's perfect." The point, so perfectly depicted in Wilder's film is simply that the fact that Daphne (Jack Lemmon) is a man in no way impinges on Oswald's (Joe E Brown) fantasy. Oswald can only say "nobody's perfect" and go on loving "Daphne." The end of the film is a perfect illustration of one of Lacan's definitions of love: giving what one doesn't have to a person who doesn't want it.

“Love is a comic feeling”

For Lacan, love is inseparable from comedy: “Love is a comic feeling,”⁴ he observed, placing the problem of love at the center of comedy. Insofar as love is blind, the lover believes she has found her twin soul, while audiences laugh at the glaring error. A standard trope in comedy, the examples are myriad: Titania, the queen of the fairies, is enamored with Bottom in the form of an ass; Mozart’s couple Fiordiligi and Dorabella famously end up in love with one another’s original partner; the perfect match is always a mismatch. Transference love, the very motor of psychoanalysis, is a comedy of mistaken identity, a comedy of errors.

It follows that when exploring the concept of transference-love in psychoanalysis in his seminar *On Transference*, Lacan would be able to further elaborate on the connection between love and comedy noticing that there is something “irresistibly comical” about people in love.⁵ People in love are funny. Expounding on the comic nature of love and sex throughout his career, in his late teaching, Lacan refers to love as silliness or “funny business” (*bêtise*), a kind of nonsense.⁶ He shows that the sexual reality of the unconscious is comic insofar as it is an equivocal handling of nonsense. It is not surprising that not only is sex the most recurrent theme in comedy, but sex, Lacan reminds us, is “innately comical.”⁷ Lacan’s dictum “there is no such thing as sexual rapport,” highlights that there is no complementarity between the sexes and despite the occasional pleasures, there is no harmony in the bedroom. Sex is always too much or not enough, takes place too early or too late, is “it” but is not “it,” and so on. Satisfaction is fleeting.

The act of copulation is the stuff of comedy. This is not lost on most children. For Freud, children are budding theorists, precocious researchers, often distrusting accepted knowledge about reproduction and countering scientific explanations with complex theories of their own. Freud gave us a limited list of them, a colorful compilation of infantile sexual theories, which sound funny to us but serious to the children who invent them. At the same time, the scientific truth often sounds preposterous to children who respond to “the sperm and egg story” with peals of laughter. This

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre V: Les formations de l’inconscient*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: du Seuil, 1998), 135.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VIII: Le transfert 1960–1961* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 134.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: On the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 12.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XV: Moment de Conclure*, November 5, 1977, unpublished papers.

illustrates how adult sexuality and the scientific theories we know to be true are nevertheless still narrative constructions. They show that not only is gender a social construction but that sex is as well. Judith Butler and Anne Fausto-Sterling have persuasively argued that sex and gender are discursively imposed norms. What can we do about the fact that sex surpasses both sense and science? Perhaps what children do – laugh. Laughter allows us a way to make do with this excess that transcends and stunts the subject. In fact, what the “truth about sexuality” teaches us most of all is that sexuality becomes most comedic precisely when one tries to make sense of it. As Groucho Marx once observed, anyone who can see through women is missing a lot!

Dying of laughter

Lacan further developed Freud’s observation that sexual reproduction and mortality are connected. Sex, like death, is beyond sense, but comedy lassos this beyond into an equivocation that makes for laughter rather than sadness or despair. In his 1962–1963 *Anxiety* seminar, Lacan puns on the relation between laughter, love, death, and comedy as “tightly entwined with the demand for love-making.” He continues, “to *faire l’amour*—if you will, *faire l’amourir*, to do it to death, it is even *à mourir de rire*, to die of laughter. I am not accentuating the side of love that partakes in a comical feeling just for the sake of it. In any case, this is precisely where the restful side of post-orgasm resides. If this demand for death is what gets satisfied, well, good gracious, it’s lightly satisfied, because one gets off lightly.”⁸ While referring to love-making, Lacan exploits the French homophony between orgasm, *la petite mort* (little death), which in his pun becomes love-die-laugh. His point is that orgasm is related to death, (as the little ending rather than the real one) and he goes from *amour* (love) to *mourir* (to die), but by way of *rire* (to laugh) suggesting that love-making is a comical way to confront and avoid death at the same time. Sex is a way of playing with death while staying alive. To “get off lightly” is a further pun on the levity involved in sexual *jouissance*.

Lacan would further reflect on the imbrication of love, sex, and death at the end of his life, in a seminar evocatively titled *Moment to Conclude*, where he made an explicit paradigm shift from tragedy to comedy as the representative genre for psychoanalysis: “Life is not tragic. It is comic. This

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X On Anxiety* Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by A. R. Price (Polity: Cambridge, 2014) 263 (translation slightly modified).

is however, why it is so curious that Freud would not find something better than the Oedipus complex, a tragedy, to discuss it, as if that was what it was all about. . . . He could have taken a shortcut – comedy.”⁹ We are not traveling down the well-trodden royal road, one that long before the Via Apia was already present in Oedipus’ fateful trek from Corinth to Thebes, rather we propose taking the fast lane to the unconscious – comedy.

Don’t Cut the Comedy!

Psychoanalysis has long been associated with tragedy (*Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet*), but there is a strong warrant, especially now when the Oedipus complex has been criticized for its supposed universality, to show psychoanalysis’ intimate link with comedy. It is comedy that enables us to understand the silliness implicit in the notion of the phallus. As Moustafa Safouan puts it, “the phallus is the joke of phallicism.”¹⁰ The phallus is what is propped up to account for the impossibility of signifying sexual difference in the unconscious (the unconscious is unreasonable; it knows only one sex – the phallus).

Taking distance from the Oedipal model, and thus from tragedy, comedy would allow Lacan to elaborate upon the function of the phallus in psychoanalysis. Lacan explicitly says, “The phallus is the essence of comedy.”¹¹ The phallus is a hodgepodge, a pastiche, a semblance, precisely because it does not resolve the problem of sexual difference. It is rather a prosthesis to and supplement for a structural insufficiency. As a stand-in for the thing missing that can never be there, the phallus is predicated on an error, namely that of taking an organ for the signifier of sexual difference. This recurrent error is comedic; the comedy of Eros is a comedy of errors.

Comedy’s humor makes of love not a hallowed, exceptional experience but a banal one which takes place not in a remote romantic scenario but in the humdrum of daily life. If the humorous situations seem improbable, they become nevertheless believable due to the presence of what Lacan calls “a hidden signifier” that guarantees their comic effect. He states: “The sphere of comedy is created by the presence at its center of a hidden

⁹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire XV: Moment de Conclure*.

¹⁰ Quoted in Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 134.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXII: R.S.I.*, March 11, 1975, unpublished papers.

signifier” which is no other than psychoanalysis’ most envied and contended personality – Mr. Phallus, who has been around for a long time. In the Old Comedy, Lacan tells us, the phallus “is there in person.”¹² In ancient comedy, the phallus was not hidden but at center stage, displayed as an oversized, ridiculous prop whose mere appearance caused uproarious laughter in the audience. This response was triggered by the unveiling of the phallus precisely as a prop. Famously observed in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, where the erections of the Spartans and Athenians are caricatured by the use of strap-on broomsticks or poles that make the audience burst into laughter. The phallus sustained, nevertheless, a social link evident in the origins of comedy. The “komos” designated a procession of men carrying phalluses parading as part of a community’s religious (pagan) celebration.

Since time immemorial, insofar as it is a prop precariously staying afloat, the power of the phallus necessarily entails the prospect of detumescence; its efficacy is fleeting; we might sink. Lacan explains theoretically how this precarious device manages to buoy us up, “The phallus is nothing more than a signifier, the signifier of this flight. Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens. If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives.”¹³ The phallus that nobody has or can be, but most everyone can borrow, keeping its wearer afloat, is a lifesaver, a flotation device, something to hold on to so that we do not drown in the soup of life.

Comedy allows us to bind death to life, affirming life in its impermanence. Mel Brooks’s famous lines eloquently convey this precious quality of comedy: “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when I fall into an open sewer and die.” Comedy confronts us with mortality all the while making us laugh. We do not need to fear death; we just need to be sure we are not there when it arrives, as Woody Allen advocates.

Comedy successfully negotiates life’s transience, avoiding the descent into melancholy; the comic hero may fall into the sewer, but life triumphs while remaining fleeting. The brush with death is not chilling but thrilling, linking failure to life and laughter, rather than to death and silence, comedy situates us differently in relation to the abyss. While tragedy “functions in the direction of a triumph of death” because the tragic hero’s conflict always leads to death, in comedy, the hero survives by transforming himself; he is an agent of the endurance of life – the comedic hero has

¹² Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 314.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 314.

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learnt to live with the death drive.¹⁴ Like Wile E. Coyote or Buster Keaton, the comic hero never stops not dying. Comedy euthanizes death's lethality.

Encroaching upon prescribed boundaries while playing at the limit, the fun in comedy emerges. The comedic transgression amuses us because we vicariously enjoy the perpetrator's violations while remaining on the side of the law. Identification in comedy is not the key; we laugh often without identifying with the comic hero. We laugh at Tweety's abuse of Sylvester the cat, who keeps returning for more, and more, and more. We laugh at an excess we cannot identify with at the level of the ego, but that resonates at the level of the drive. This is also why the lovers' comedy is "irresistible" – we are relieved that it is not our own.

What makes us laugh exceeds the control of the political power and ideology that subtends it. The unruly body holds sway, unmasking the puffed up posturing. Flatulence trumps abstinence as great airs become literal. However much a subject may be complicit or enraptured with any given controlling discourse, the effects of comedy intrude upon the physical body. The unruliness of the body is exposed. Comedy accepts mortality as ineluctable but tolerable, linking failure to life and laughter rather than to death and silence, situating us differently in relation to the abyss.

The funny bone is a material part of the body, not just a metaphor. Comedy makes room for the unassimilable alterity that resists our efforts to tame it. Comedy works on this breach in sense and comprehension that Lacan called the Real. This is evident in Lacan's evocation of Harpo Marx, "the terrible dumb brother," whose inscrutable smile sustains doubt and "radical annihilation." Lacan praises the "stuff of the Marx brothers' extraordinary farce and uninterrupted play of 'jokes' that makes their activity so valuable."¹⁵ Harpo's crazy smile presentifies the silent Real of death, life in all its happenstance and finitude, emphasizing that comedy is on the side of life in all its unbearable absurdity. Like an analyst, Harpo plays the fool and we are never sure of how to read his mute smile. Is it dim-witted or the greatest wit of all?

Most people remember Lacan's work on tragedy in the 1950s and that *Hamlet* was Lacan's main literary source. Hamlet's last words, "The rest is silence," illustrates Lacan's idea that tragic action offers a purified realization that leaves uncovered the real, ultimate object of desire – death itself. In his Seminar *On Ethics* (1959–1960) Lacan revisited the cathartic function of tragedy and developed the notion that comedy is a refusal or

¹⁴ Ibid., 313. ¹⁵ Ibid., 55.

postponement of this trajectory. He made use of the Marx brothers, and Harpo in particular, for this development. Already in what is known as his second seminar, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, Lacan discussed at length Plautus and Molière's *Amphitryon* finding in this comedy of doubles that the ego has its say, and the ego is not who you think he is; the ego is somebody else.¹⁶ Comedy would stay with Lacan because psychoanalysis stayed with Lacan. Lacan explicitly states that he had the comic genre in mind when he began to discuss formations of the unconscious. Just a few years later, he would devote many lessons of his seminar to explore comedies, including Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and *The Clouds*, Molière's *The School for Wives*, and Genet's play *The Balcony* showing the way the phallus is implicated in power, and its failures.

For Lacan, comedy introduces a new relation to speech that differs from tragedy establishing a different type of social link, making explicit our imbrication in the signifying order. He considers comedy as “the representation of the end of a communion meal from which tragedy has evolved.”¹⁷ The phallus on stage, a standard practice of ancient comedy, allows Lacan to ascribe ancient comedy with a ceremonial value, comparing comic theater to a Catholic communion mass, noting that comedy reestablishes the signifying order of language and culture, and moreover exhibits the root of its symbolic logic, the phallus.¹⁸ Comedy as a representation is already at a remove from the ritual itself. Working its magic at the border between jouissance and meaning, comedy allows us to move a step further from catharsis, to transubstantiation not of the body of Christ, but of a signifier that makes reality a little more palatable. Understanding this theoretical truism, Groucho Marx noted that while he was not crazy about reality, it was still the only place to get a decent meal.

Comedy allowed Lacan to add a psychoanalytic twist to Hegel's contention that comedy brings the divine down to the human level: “One must simply remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate it in its full human dimension, not excluding the unconscious, is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it . . .”¹⁹ Lacan explains that unlike in tragedy where

¹⁶ Lacan, *The Seminar. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Sylvana Tomaselli. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 258–259, 263–267, 270.

¹⁷ Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre V: Les formations de l'inconscient*, 262.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 314.