

NOT SHAKESPEARE

Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century

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CHAPTER I

'Vile beyond endurance': the language of burlesque

Gilbert Abbott à Beckett's *King John (with the Benefit of the Act)* premiered at the St James's Theatre on 16 October 1837. In his burlesque of the tyrannous monarch, the comedian Henry Hall wore an ermine trimmed robe, a chain mail tunic, and a breast plate with a spike in the centre (illustration 3). This pseudo-medieval garb sneeringly alludes to the vogue for historically accurate stage dress which began, not coincidentally, with J. R. Planché and Charles Kemble's production of *King John* (Covent Garden 1823), the first Shakespearean revival to feature costumes of antiquarian propriety. Hall's helmet (in the shape of a chimney cowl) also ingeniously features a bird-topped weather vane, complete with four spindles labelled 'N', 'E', 'W', and 'S'. The sartorial flourish is ludicrous since weathercocks belong on spires and not on the heads of royalty.¹ The sources of its humour are several. In its blatant contrast with Hall's vaguely antiquarian costume, the weather vane mocks the legitimate theatre's increasing obsession with historically correct stage accessories. The costume indeed guarantees accuracy – not historical, but meteorological. Additionally, the costume encodes a burlesque of dramatic character. The four letters on John's weather vane stand not for geographical directions but, as Walter Hamilton relates, for the satiric epithet 'Naughty English Wrongful Sovereign'.² The acronym thus functions as a joke on the character's villainy.

More suggestively, the ornamental headpiece expresses the provisional and mutable nature of theatrical performance. Like the weather vane which continually turns in the wind, never pointing for long in any one direction, so, too, the Shakespeare burlesque never comes to rest at

¹ An illustration in Charles Selby's *Kynge Richard ye Third* shows Lady Anne wearing a similar headpiece, described as a 'moveable weather arrow with N.S.E.W., made of pasteboard and gold paper' (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d., pp. 4, 5).

² Walter Hamilton, ed., *Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors* 6 vols. London: Reeves and Turner, 1885.



3. Henry Hall as burlesque King John in Gilbert Abbott à Beckett's *King John* (*with the Benefit of the Act*), St James's Theatre, London, 1837.

a single point, never affixes itself to a single, invariable meaning. This ingenious comic metaphor confirms Robert Allen's recent assertion that there is 'no moment' when a burlesque 'speaks with the voice of moral and authorial omniscience' (*Horrible Prettiness*, pp. 27, 28). One of the principal ways in which burlesque performance remains continually open, continually resistant to the ascription of meaning, is through its own language. The weather vane's four letters 'N', 'E', 'W', 'S' tell us that the unpredictability of burlesque – its newness – begins in language, even before the undecidability of theatrical performance comes into play. As the *King John* burlesque vividly announces, burlesque speech is always already a redirection, always already a whirlwind. Performance only intensifies, then, the conundrum that begins in the language of burlesque nonsense. While it is the nature of *all* burlesques to disable themselves through language, such disability is most forcefully enacted in Shakespeare burlesques since their 'source texts' are themselves repositories of sanctified meanings. The nonsense locutions of the Shakespeare burlesque act as a reified negation: the palpable collapse of a once familiar, once sensible Shakespearean canon. Like the crazy weather vane atop a chimney cowl which purports to be an appropriate costume for a twelfth-century English king, the inanities of Shakespeare burlesques obstruct their own meaning, rendering them 'not simply improbable', as the critic E. S. Dallas observed, but also 'impossible and incomprehensible' (*Blackwood's Magazine* 79 Feb. 1856, p. 229). The acknowledged incomprehensions of burlesque language – its topicalities, puns, and revisions – do not obstruct or impede the spectator from accessing an otherwise intelligible performance text; rather, those incomprehensions enable spectators to undertake interpretive acts. The bafflement of meaning thus provides the burlesque with its own critical metalanguage, enabling it to move beyond what would seem to be an interpretive stalemate and toward acts of cultural engagement.

Shakespeare burlesques gleefully trafficked in topicalities, with characters, events, and scenic locations regularly contemporized to conform to the audience's knowledge, if not necessarily to its own experience. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate the burlesque's fluency in what the *Theatrical Times* called 'the town-talk of the day'.³ The most pronounced localization was that Shakespearean characters were transformed into

³ Review of *The Judgment of Paris; or, the Pas de Pippins*, by Charles Selby, Adelphi Theatre, London, *Theatrical Times* 22 August 1846.

ordinary Londoners, a strategy of social demotion which recalls the classic definition of literary burlesque as the low treatment of a serious subject. In Blanchard's *The Merchant of Venice (very far indeed) from the Text of Shakespeare*, the merchant Antonio becomes a fishmonger, the money-lending Shylock a neighbourhood pawnbroker, Gratiano a footman in plush breeches, and the noble Portia a buxom tapstress.⁴ London environs were frequently substituted for Shakespeare's historical and foreign locales. In Burnand's *The Rise and Fall of Richard III* (1868), Lord Stanley resides in the facetiously described suburban 'village' of Seven Dials, an area of St Giles' parish in central London then notorious for squalor and homicide.⁵ Even when burlesque characters retained their noble or regal status, they nonetheless spoke with anachronistic references to contemporary urban culture. Thus, in Coyne's burlesque of *Richard III*, Buckingham swears to the Lord Mayor (falsely, as it turns out) that the respectable Richard never visits the 'Cider Cellars', a notorious late-night drinking club in the Strand.⁶ A travesty King Lear rages in the midst of a storm that he can easily knock out 'the Benica Boy' because he has 'learned the uppercut from our Champion Sayers'.⁷ The allusion here is to the 1860 bare-knuckle prizefight between the American John Heenan ('the Benica Boy') and the victorious Englishman Tom Sayers. In *Hamlet According to an Act of Parliament* (1853), Bernardo takes advantage of the ghost's midnight visitation to mock the contemporary vogue for seances or 'spirit rapping'.⁸

Shakespeare burlesques frequently alluded to the contemporary theatrical scene, with satiric references to actors, theatre repertoires, and even the Lord Chamberlain's licensing authority. In *A Thin Slice of Ham Let!*, the sceptical hero likens his father's spectre to the stage 'ghost' which John Henry Pepper conjured upon the stage of the Royal Polytechnic. 'It may be a trick / From the Polytechnic', he warns Horatio; '[j]ust a spectre of Pepper's invoking' (Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, IV, p. 59).⁹ Among the literary and theatrical ghosts which Pepper depicted

⁴ E. L. Blanchard, *The Merchant of Venice (very far indeed) from the Text of Shakespeare. A Burlesque Operatic Extravaganza in One Act* 1843 British Library Add Mss 42,968 fols. 688–700.

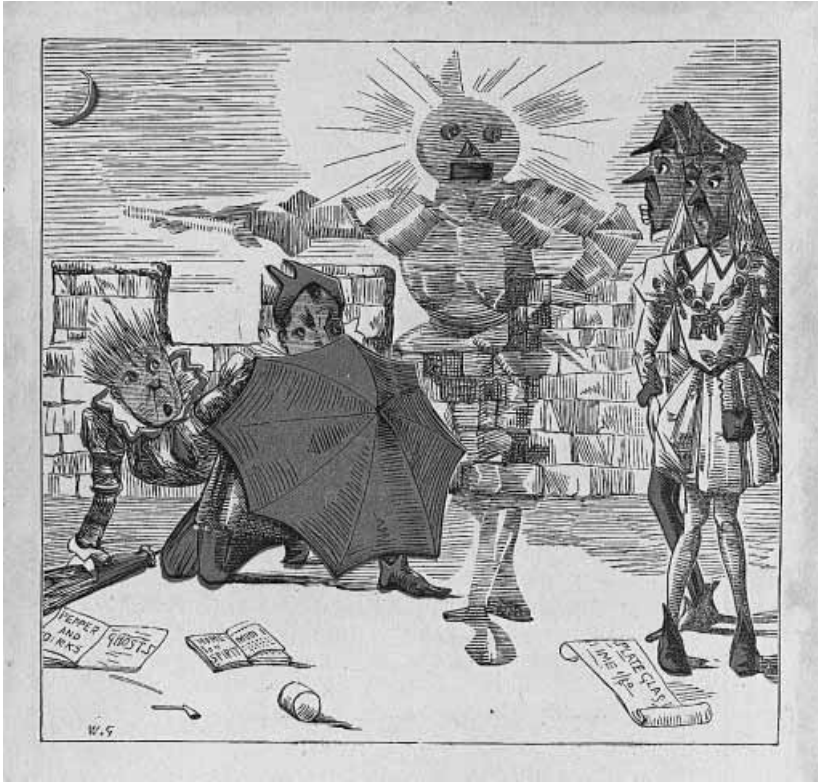
⁵ F. C. Burnand, *The Rise and Fall of Richard III; or, a New Front to an Old Dickey* (London: Phillips, n.d.), stage direction, p. 15.

⁶ J. Stirling Coyne, *New Grand, Historical, Bombastical, Musical and Completely Illegitimate Tragedy to be Called 'Richard III'* 1844 British Library Add Mss 42,973, f. 9b.

⁷ Anon., *Kynge Lear and Hys Faythfulle Foole. Burlesque in One Act* 1860 British Library Add Mss 52,994 C, f. 8.

⁸ Barton, *Hamlet According to an Act of Parliament* 1853 British Library Add Mss 52,943 M, f. 7.

⁹ In Pepper's trick, the image of a person standing beneath the stage was projected through a series of mirrors onto a large sheet of glass slotted into the stage floor and held up by imperceptible



4. 'Hamlet; a *ballet d'action* in the court of Denmark, into which are introduced some strange figures and awful frights. For characters, see small bill of great William', c. 1850s. The ghost of Old Hamlet is played by 'Pepper's Ghost', a popular magic trick in the mid nineteenth century which created the theatrical illusion of a ghost through an ingenious placement of mirrors and plate glass. Note the anachronistic umbrellas, which identify Horatio and Marcellus as Victorian 'gents'.

during his entertainments at the Polytechnic was, indeed, the ghost of Old Hamlet. A nineteenth-century cartoon, depicted in illustration 4, exploits the comic potential of Pepper's Ghost by imagining it as part of a *Hamlet* burlesque. Appearing in double to indicate movement upon catching sight of his father's ghost, Hamlet calmly scratches his chin. By contrast, the terrified Horatio and Marcellus (whose hair stands

wires. From the audience's perspective, the resulting projection appeared to be an incorporeal presence. Because 'Pepper's Ghost' was only a reflection, a stage actor could seem to pierce it with a knife or even to walk through it. When the gas lamps placed beneath the stage were turned on and off, the ghost seemed to materialize and disintegrate.

on end) cower behind an anachronistic umbrella, the property of choice in Victorian burlesque. The translucent ghost consists of a carved pumpkin head atop a suit of armour. The papers scattered on the floor – ‘Pepper and Dirks’, ‘Plate Glass’, and ‘Spirit Medi[um]’ – quite explicitly instruct us to read the ghost as a spirit conjured up by the magician Pepper (and his collaborator Henry Dirks) through the clever use of unseen mirrors and plate glass.

In *Romeo and Juliet Travestie*, the young lovers catch head colds while standing in the night air during the balcony scene and thus find themselves swearing to ‘the boon, the inconstant boon’ (p. 18). Apart from butchering the most famous love scene in English drama (an irreverence compounded by fits of sneezing), the characters’ nasal intonations also mocked Charles Kean’s speech impediment which made ‘m’ sound like ‘b’. Hamlet’s speech to the players in *Hamlet! The Ravin’ Prince of Denmark!!* (1866) becomes an address to the audience in which the burlesque tragic hero ironically laments the decline of tragedy and the rise of ‘sickly’ sensation melodrama (Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, iv, p. 111). ‘O for some Bard to consecrate the scene’, Hamlet impertunes, ‘[a]nd bid the Drama be what she hath been!’ Maurice Dowling’s *Romeo and Juliet, as the Law Directs* (Strand 1837) alludes not only to the patent theatres’ longstanding monopoly, but also to the Strand’s ongoing legal battles with the Lord Chamberlain over violations of the Licensing Act of 1737. Until 1843, minor theatres like the Strand were restricted to the production of burlettas in which scripted dialogue was supplemented by extensive musical accompaniment, singing, and dancing. In the opening scene of Dowling’s play, Sampson and Gregory clarify the extent to which they are legally permitted to rely on their script:

SAMPSON: . . . Is this a lawful thing?
 What shall I say?
 GREGORY: Don’t say at all, but sing.
 SAMPSON: Is that the law? May I say words that tease?
 GREGORY: So that you sing it, say whate’er you please.¹⁰

Recognizing a duty to melodize their speech, the pair immediately launch into a duet to the tune of ‘Sampson and Balthazar’. Their preceding banter exposes the law’s inane emphasis on form over content: Shakespeare’s words (at least his unalloyed words) could not be performed outside

¹⁰ Maurice Dowling, *Romeo and Juliet, as the Law Directs. An Operatic Burlesque Burletta* (London: J. Duncombe & Co., n.d.), p. 5.

a patent theatre yet the most ribald puns could be sung with impunity from the stage of the Strand.

The scant scholarly attention which these comic plays have received can be traced in part to the enduring perception – erroneous, as I shall argue – that burlesque humour depends primarily upon comprehending long outdated topical allusions, puns, and slang. For many students of nineteenth-century popular drama, burlesques do not warrant serious attention because over the intervening years they have become unintelligible. Consider, for example, James Ellis' assertion in his 1983 survey of Victorian burlesques of *Hamlet* that while topicalities guarantee a burlesque's short-term notoriety, they also render it 'utterly inaccessible' to later generations.¹¹ Ellis certainly has a point. Many of the local references in these plays elude general comprehension. In order to decode them, modern readers will need to research nineteenth-century social and cultural history. Similarly, colloquialisms such as 'tol lol' (tolerably well), 'shindy' (a spree), and 'like bricks' (with gusto) which initially gave the burlesque its arresting immediacy – Shakespeare's characters speaking in the idiom of modern Londoners – now send exasperated readers to J. C. Hotten's *A Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words* (1859). The very language which first made Shakespeare burlesques so breathlessly up-to-the-minute now makes those same plays so hopelessly out-of-date. Of course every theatrical era dates itself, and no doubt audience members will exchange bewildered looks during some far distant revival of the Reduced Shakespeare Company's *The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr (abridged)* (1994) when the actors refer to 'Donahue, Geraldo, and Oprah Jessy Raphael [*sic*]' and a 'Southern California white trash surfer dude'.¹²

But let us not accept defeat too easily. While it is undeniably true that many of the local references in Shakespeare burlesques are no longer intelligible in the twenty-first century, it is equally true that those same references were never completely intelligible to anyone except their immediate, target audience – and, even then, not in all cases. In other words, nineteenth-century burlesques began to date even in the nineteenth century. In *A Book of Burlesque* (1891), W. Davenport Adams acknowledged that *Hamlet Travestie* made for 'dreary reading' eighty years after its initial publication (p. 123). In 1883, the author T. F. Dillon-Crocker wrote to his

¹¹ James Ellis, 'The Counterfeit Presentment: Nineteenth-Century Burlesques of *Hamlet*', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre Research* 11.1 (Summer 1983), pp. 29–50.

¹² Jess Borgeson, Adam Long, and Daniel Singer, *The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr (abridged)* (New York: Applause Books, 1994), pp. 5, 32.

friend Walter Hamilton, suggesting that he include a reference to *King John* (*with the Benefit of the Act*) in his forthcoming collection of parodies and burlesques even though ‘at the present day [the burlesque] sounds very insipid, if not, irreverent fooling’.¹³ Of course à Beckett’s burlesque was not even a memory for Dillon-Croker, who was only six when it premiered. His interest in the *King John* burlesque was thus purely antiquarian; the play was a ‘curious’ relic which preserved a ‘style of composition that amused an audience nearly fifty years ago’. For Augustin Filon, burlesques deteriorated at an even more accelerated rate. Reading in middle age a burlesque one adored as a youth, he confessed, was like cutting through a ‘thicket of allusions which had become enigmas’ (*The English Stage*, p. 95). Topical allusions were no longer amusing, he lamented, because they were no longer ‘intelligible’.

Retrospective accounts of the burlesque’s fading appeal do not, however, tell the whole story. For it is demonstrably the case that burlesques were not uniformly intelligible even when they were first performed. After undergoing the ‘penitential study’ of reading several burlesque texts to learn if he had missed any ‘clever writing’ which had been injuriously ‘gabbled’ by the performers, William Archer concluded that because the writing was so bad, the performers had done him an unwitting favour by turning the impoverished dialogue into gibberish through their strong Cockney accents (*English Dramatists*, p. 113). In a more measured account, the *Illustrated London News* reported that ‘the jokes were so thick’ in Selby’s *Kynge Richard ye Third*, that ‘the hearers had not time to reflect on the worth of one before the wit of another flashed forth’.¹⁴

All these accounts reveal that the topicalities of Shakespeare burlesques, even for their original audiences, have *never* been fully intelligible. The audience’s awareness of its own inability to ‘recognize’ the play has always been part of the burlesque experience. Thus, our own inapprehension of such topicalities does not depart from, but actually conforms to (without precisely duplicating), a continuing pattern of spectating and reading. Certainly, it is now perplexing to read a nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesque. But it was equally perplexing for members of the original audiences, if only because actors ‘gabbled’ the jokes, playwrights crammed too many topical allusions into the text, or audiences themselves did not possess the requisite knowledge to catch all the local references. Indeed, spectators from the provinces (to say nothing of those

¹³ T. F. Dillon-Croker, a letter to Walter Hamilton, November 1883, qtd in Hamilton, *Parodies*, II, p. 199.

¹⁴ *Illustrated London News* 2 March 1844.

from outside Britain) were far less likely to be acquainted with details of metropolitan life than were the burlesque's 'native' audience. There was no original moment of spectatorial mastery which later generations of critics must struggle heroically to recover. It is liberating, indeed, to realize that topicalities – the very feature which was supposed to make burlesque Shakespeare *more* accessible than legitimate Shakespeare – puzzled even some of the original audience members. It is liberating because it allows us to escape from the burden of our perceived ignorance. We need not be intimidated by seemingly irretrievable topicalities to the point where we forsake the plays entirely. Instead, we can recognize that ignorance – both ours and the original audience's – is the constitutive condition of burlesque spectating.¹⁵ Here is a paradox, indeed. On the one hand, topicalities enact the seductive fantasy of a transparent text completely available to its immediate audience (and, subsequently, to earnest scholar-detectives). To be sure, some topical references were indeed understood by some spectators. (It would be ludicrous to argue that audiences understood nothing.) On the other hand, topicalities, because they were self-disintegrating, asserted that no text was ever completely transparent and that no spectator (or scholar) was ever a perfect interpreter.

The fundamentally equivocal nature of burlesque topicalities is not just a self-congratulatory academic conceit but a critical perspective articulated from within Shakespeare burlesques themselves. *Hamlet! The Ravin' Prince of Denmark!!* (1866) offers a vivid example of familiarity which cannot be trusted. Ophelia recounts to her father that Hamlet wore

[n]o shoes at all, and only half a stocking,
 Burst into the nursery without ever knocking;
 Then seized the infant by its little throttle,
 And drank the dead king's health in its milk-bottle!
 (Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, IV, p. 98)

The sight of a prince who '[d]escend[s] to such familiarity' only convinces Ophelia that 'there's no trusting to appearances'. The familiarity of the 'ravin' prince Hamlet stands metonymically for burlesque's own descent into familiarity through localizations and topical allusions. But

¹⁵ The gaps in the original audience's comprehension need hardly strike us as exceptional. The twenty-seven-line, high-speed, backward version of *Hamlet* which concludes the Reduced Shakespeare Company's performance subverts its audience's desire to take in that performance moment by moment (see Borgeson *et al.*, *Compleat Works*, pp. 107–9). And yet audiences applaud this *tour de force* precisely because of the actors' heroic efforts not to abbreviate *Hamlet* but to render this most familiar of all Shakespearean plays both familiar *and* elusive; perceived, but not understood.

just as Ophelia disavows seemingly familiar appearances, so, too, the audience must disavow a seemingly familiar performance. In this moment, the Shakespeare burlesque signals its own disabling intentions, its own self-generated occlusion of meaning under the ultimately false guise of recognition and remembrance. Similarly, the ‘counterfeit presentments’ in *Hamlet the Hysterical: A Delirium in Five Spasms!!!* are represented by ‘two large empty picture-frames’.¹⁶ The absent portraits clearly mock Irving’s virtual placement of the portraits along the invisible fourth wall between the actors and the audience, thus suggesting that the images might exist only in Hamlet’s mind. The burlesque, in its contorted staging, does not support the ambiguous implication of the Lyceum production, but rather depicts a lack of implication which it reifies through picture frames which frame only an absence. Since those frames function, moreover, as an icon of the proscenium stage on which they appear, we can read the stage image as an assertion of the performance’s own renunciatory stance: the refusal to mark out a set of meanings which derive mimetically from a Shakespearean antecedent. *Hamlet the Hysterical* offers not ‘counterfeit presentments’, but no presentment at all.

To get a better sense of how burlesque topicalities mystify more than they clarify, we might look at how topicalities function in Shakespeare’s original plays (without, however, implying that burlesques function as miniature versions of supposedly greater plays). In *Puzzling Shakespeare*, Leah Marcus argues that localizations in Shakespearean texts actively resist the hermeneutic compulsions of readers. ‘To attempt topical readings of Shakespearean drama’, she contends, ‘is not at all to find reassuring patterns. It is more like entering a murky labyrinth [*sic*] without signposts or exits.’¹⁷ In ‘old’ historicist criticism, decoding topical references was the key which unlocked a text’s hidden, but nonetheless fixed, meaning. Only in the final, decisive act of decoding would that fixed meaning become fully apparent. Turning this positivist method on its head, Marcus contends that Shakespearean topicalities do not provide access to uniform meaning (which, she claims, was never there in the first place) but rather thwart our attempts to regularize meaning. We might claim, similarly, that the localizations of Shakespeare burlesques do not adorn an immanent master-text which we can understand only by decoding all its localizations; rather, the topicalities *are* the burlesque itself. Fragmentary,

¹⁶ *Under the Clock* 29 November 1884.

¹⁷ Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xi. Marcus clearly means ‘maze’ instead of ‘labyrinth’. It is impossible to get lost in a labyrinth since there is only ever one path to follow.

unstable, and hostile to the ascription of unitary meaning, burlesque topicalities provide only the illusion of certain meaning. In actuality, they disperse meaning by implicating the play in an extensive network of references and cross-references. Some impassioned editor might well produce an exhaustively glossed edition of a nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesque, an edition whose rising tide of footnotes threatens to capsize a vulnerable, exposed textual artifact. But meticulous annotations will not – indeed cannot – restore a burlesque’s original meaning by clarifying all its references, solving all its puzzles, and answering all its riddles. To decode all the codes will never put us in possession of the burlesque itself. Rather, the burlesque will always dispossess us.

My claims for the critical functions of nineteenth-century burlesque topicalities would not have been made by most nineteenth-century theatrical observers. But it is precisely because Shakespeare burlesques are now remote that the singularity of meaning which has always lain at the heart of the burlesque experience has become even more pronounced. Because the plays’ local meanings are no longer available to us (at least not in the way they once seemed to be) we stand better prepared to realize that these plays do not transmit meaning so much as they confound the possibility of meaning. When localizations are no longer local and when allusions no longer allude, we can see how those textual features offer something more than socio-historical sign posting. My intention here is not to assume a condescending superiority in relation to the burlesque’s original readers and spectators, but only to clarify the opportunities for critical awareness which historical dispossession ironically affords. What critics routinely lament as the ‘utter inaccessibility’ of burlesque turns out to be, upon reflection, the precise point of access. Not to a lost, yet recoupable, meaning; but to the ways in which burlesques problematize the very notion of meaning. By thwarting our efforts to decode topical references, the modern experience of reading discloses, however obliquely, the historical experience of burlesque spectating.

It might be objected that while both modern readers and original spectators equally misunderstand the topicalities of Shakespeare burlesques, such misunderstandings are not constitutive, but simply accidental. That is, we in the twenty-first century do not possess sufficient knowledge of daily life in nineteenth-century Britain to decode the topical allusions, but there is nothing to prevent us from acquiring such knowledge. Similarly, there was no reason why original audience members could not

have understood all the topical references if only the actors' diction were clearer, pacing were slower, and volume greater. Such a view presumes that the burlesque was itself a pre-existing coherent entity whose coherence would be fully available to audiences and readers alike if only the optimum conditions could be achieved. That premise, I believe, is false. Incomprehension is a built-in feature of burlesques and has never been – then or now – merely the unfortunate result of circumstances which might otherwise be ameliorated. And the most incontrovertible example of the burlesque's blockage of its own meaning is the quibbling pun – the 'fatal *Cleopatra*', in Samuel Johnson's damning description, for which Shakespeare 'lost the world, and was content to lose it'.¹⁸

Audaciously, a pun makes a word's sound the basis for its meaning. If two words sound alike, then they also must mean alike. The classic pun thus consists of two evident homophones with divergent, irreconcilable meanings (e.g., 'heir' and 'air'). John F. Poole's *Romeo and Juliet; or, the Beautiful Blonde who Dyed for Love*, for example, puns on the homophones 'dyed' and 'died'. Puns render meaning absurd by divorcing the word as verbal object – the phoneme – from the word as sign. While Jonathan Swift disparaged it as the '*Fundum*' or 'Bottom' of language,¹⁹ the reviled, indecorous pun has come into its own in the post-structural age, when the waywardness of language itself has been the subject of relentless critical investigation. Puns offer a 'model of language', Jonathan Culler has argued, characterized by 'looseness', 'unpredictability', and the 'mutability of meaning'.²⁰ Far from being inconsequential, the pun reveals a fundamental aspect of language which we might prefer to keep hidden: that meaning is never identical to itself. In a sense which Swift certainly did not intend, the pun truly is the 'fundum' – or foundation – of language. Since Shakespeare's own wordplay has received particular scholarly attention in recent years, it seems appropriate that wordplay in Shakespeare burlesques also be reappraised.²¹ Such reappraisal entails

¹⁸ Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to Shakespeare' (1765; London: 1778), p. 19. 'A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth.'

¹⁹ Jonathan Swift, 'A Modest Defence of Punning', in *Prose Works*, ed. Herbert Davis 12 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), IV, p. 205.

²⁰ Jonathan Culler, 'The Call of the Phoneme', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 14.

²¹ See, for example, Patricia Parker's *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Nineteenth-century critics were hardly unaware of Shakespearean wordplay. The German scholar Hermann Ulrici, for example, observed that Shakespeare's own 'verbal play', despite having been 'declared unnatural and disagreeable', nonetheless reveals the 'inadequacy of human cognition and knowledge, [for] which language is the expression' (*Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*, trans. A. J. W. Morrison, London: Chapman Brothers, 1846, pp. 163–4).

illuminating the ways in which burlesques function as a performative meta-language. What Patricia Parker has written of Shakespearean wordplay is equally germane to the wordplay of Shakespeare burlesques: that it neither disfigures nor ornaments an otherwise hallowed language but rather constitutes a form of ‘discourse as discourse’ (*Shakespeare from the Margins*, p. 3).

The most common form of burlesque pun juxtaposes either simple homophones or confected homophonic phrases. In *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare*, Macbeth learns that Fleance, who was carrying a torch to light Banquo’s way, escaped from the murderers. ‘[T]he young *torcher*’, he groans, ‘lives to *torture* me’.²² The pun cleverly serves a deeper self-referential function by acknowledging its own status as word ‘torture’. Later in the play, after Macbeth learns that he shall not be troubled until ‘Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane’, the murderous sovereign gleefully declares that he would be a ‘*dunce-inane*’ were he to renounce the throne (p. 31). In a slightly more complicated pun which depends upon reversing word sequence, Macbeth curses ‘*Birnam Wood!* – would any one *would burn ’em!*’ (p. 35). Similarly, in *Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved*, Shylock transposes Antonio’s off-hand comment ‘’Tis but a spree, Jew’ into ‘But a *jeu d’esprit*’ (p. 6).²³

Whether in soliloquies or dialogue, puns were typically arranged in sequences. Such extended punning carried a cumulative effect in performance whereby each successive pun was more excruciating than the last. The audience thus experienced an ecstatic agony as the performance repeatedly carried itself to – and then retreated from – the brink of semantic collapse. The virtuosity of burlesque performers lay in their ability first to intercept a word before it landed on its accustomed meaning and then to redirect it toward an entirely different meaning. Here is a brief example from the opening scene of *Perdita*, just after Polixenes announces his impending departure for Sicily:

- HERMIONE: Nay I am sure your Majesty but jokes –
You only talk of starting, for the hoax.
- POLIXENES: Start for the Oaks? Not so; my heart it grieves,
Speaking of trees, that we must take our leaves,
And trunks, and make our bows. To follow suit
With these vile puns, we should now be *en route*.²⁴

²² Francis Talfourd, *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare* (1847; London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d.), p. 25.

²³ Puns were underlined in both manuscript and published versions of nineteenth-century burlesques so that readers would not overlook instances of wordplay better suited to auditors.

²⁴ William Brough, *Perdita; or, the Royal Milkmaid* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d.), p. 8.

Hermione blithely rejects Polixenes' decision to return home, gently insisting that the Sicilian king only teases her, that his declaration was but a 'hoax'. In the Cockney dialect which Mrs Buckingham White spoke as burlesque Hermione, the organic initial '/h/' in 'hoax' would have been suppressed, making the word sound like 'oax'. Hermione says 'hoax'; but Polixenes hears 'oaks'. This is a perfect pun. Yet it is also a topical allusion since the Oaks was an annual horse race for three-year-old fillies at Epsom Downs. Polixenes' interrogative 'Start for the Oaks?' is thus not only a distortion of Hermione's statement, but also a slang expression from horse racing. The allusion flits by, however, as the more conventional meaning of 'oaks' becomes the basis for a series of painfully obvious arboreal puns: leaves, trunks, bows, and *en route*.²⁵ Distancing himself from his 'vile puns', Polixenes assumes an ironic stance toward language for which he is not responsible; language which he does not speak, but rather which speaks *him*.²⁶

Characters also traded puns, as in the fast-paced wooing scene from Burnand's *The Rise and Fall of Richard III*:

RICHARD: I see that you a passion for me foster.
 ANNE: Passion for you! *High, mighty, double Gloster.*
 RICHARD: Oh, call me double Gloster, if you please,
 As long as I, in your eyes, am the cheese.
 ANNE: A cheese! Why then I cut you.
 RICHARD: I've the daring
 To ask you to consider this cheese *paring*.
 ANNE: You are hump-backed.
 RICHARD: Oh, hump-bug!
 ANNE: And knock knee'd.
 RICHARD: A friend *in-knee'd*, maam, is a friend in deed. (p. 10)

The wordplay embedded in this snappy dialogue poses little difficulty: the single word 'Gloster' refers both to Richard, Duke of Gloster, and to a type of cheese; 'to be the cheese' is a figurative expression meaning to be the best or most in fashion; the passing pun on 'I' and 'eyes' is only too obvious; to 'cut' means both to slice and, in Victorian slang, to ignore someone; 'paring' functions as a pun on the gerunds for 'to pare' and 'to pair', meaning both to slice up and to couple; 'hump-backed'

²⁵ The colloquial expression to 'take [one's] trunk' meant to depart, with 'trunk' as a synecdoche for the entire body.

²⁶ In *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare*, Rosse fails to 'twig' – i.e. apprehend – Duncan's pun on 'air' and 'hare', and thus laughs (under the king's compulsion) at words whose double meaning eludes him (p. 15).

is easily converted into ‘hump-bug’, allowing Richard to dismiss the description of his deformity by pronouncing it in a different way and thereby endowing it with a different meaning; and the volley of puns concludes with a twist on the homophones ‘knee’d’ and ‘need’.

Yet to explicate burlesque puns is to be false to the experience of burlesque performance. Contemporary theatrical accounts confirm that the puns of Shakespeare burlesques – like their topicalities – regularly failed to register with audiences. Thus, the *Morning Advertiser* suggested that the audience for *King Queer! and his Daughters Three* (1855) did not appreciate the puns because the Strand’s ensemble had not yet perfected its comic timing. ‘[M]any of the puns, after a few nights’ performance’, the newspaper reassuringly predicted, ‘will tell with good effect’.²⁷ Halliday complained that ‘[h]alf of the puns’ in a burlesque performance were ‘lost upon the audience owing to [their] obscurity and the rapidity with which they follow upon each other’s heels’.²⁸ *The Times* observed that the puns in *Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved* ‘were sometimes too recondite for the heedless auditory’.²⁹ Of that same production, E. S. Dallas scornfully decreed that ‘the system of punning has been carried to the limit of endurance’.³⁰ ‘Let any one read the following address of Gratiano to Nerissa’, Dallas challenged the readers of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, ‘and attempt if he can to make any meaning out of the puns’ (p. 211).

Here are Gratiano’s puns to which Dallas so vehemently objected:

The pangs of Cupid, I the first time knows ’em
 His bows and arrows pierced my harrow-ed bo-sum
 Let’s off to Night – there’s no chance of diskivery.
 With me dear, *put up*, & don’t *stand at livery*.
 Blush not that I’m a flunkey I implores;
 Let not my *plushes* be the cause of *yours*.
You to the eyes – but, though more difficulter,
I to the knees plush as the *knee plush* ultra.³¹

The opening couplet turns ‘bows and arrows’ into ‘harrow-ed bo-sum’, its lingual transposition. The Cockney dialect in which the cast performed (as in the example from *Perdita*) would have resulted in the ‘/h/’

²⁷ *Morning Advertiser* 10 April 1855.

²⁸ Andrew Halliday, ‘Burlesques’, *Cornhill Magazine* 4 (August 1861), p. 176.

²⁹ *The Times* 6 July 1853. The double emphasis on aurality – ‘heedless auditory’ – is only too appropriate.

³⁰ E. S. Dallas, ‘The Drama’, *Blackwood’s Magazine* 79 (February 1856), p. 211.

³¹ Francis Talfourd, *Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved; a Burlesque in One Act* 1853 British Library Add Mss 52,941 1, f. 12.

of 'harrow-ed' being dropped, thus making the word sound like 'arrowed'. The second couplet is a bit more dense. 'Discovery' is vulgarly mispronounced as 'diskivery' to accommodate the rhyme. 'Put up' carries the double meaning of 'to tolerate' and, in slang usage, 'to plan a robbery'. The play on words is apt, indeed, since Gratiano beseeches Nerissa to accept him *and* proposes to steal her away from her mistress Portia's home. His proposal is a kind of theft. '[S]tand at livery' refers both to the footman's uniform which Gratiano wears – his livery – and to the thief's injunction 'stand and deliver', thus continuing the image of Gratiano's criminality. The final four lines become more convoluted still. Gratiano deftly turns 'blushes' into 'plushes' – that is, a footman's knee breeches. He implores Nerissa not to be embarrassed that he is only a servant, begging her not to let his 'plushes' be the cause of her 'blushes'. The concluding image contrasts Nerissa, who blushes up 'to [her] eyes' at her suitor's humble status, with Gratiano, who 'plushes' up to his knees – that is, he wears a flunkey's knee breeches. For good measure, the final couplet also contains a fleeting pun on 'eyes' and 'I'. The declaration of love ends with a Gallic flourish in which the lowly suitor boldly exalts himself as the 'knee plush [*ne plus*] ultra'. Though intricate, Gratiano's puns are not indecipherable – at least not for patient readers. But during the performance at the Olympic Theatre, as Dallas observed, the puns were not fully apprehended by the audience.

In a more churlish assessment, Dallas derides Talfourd's script as a 'meaningless clatter of words' whose composition required 'little more skill than [that needed] to clash the cymbals in the orchestra' (*Blackwood's Magazine* 79 Feb. 1856, p. 211). That assessment is partly right and partly wrong. As for the burlesque playwright's skill, Dallas certainly underestimates the virtuosity of Talfourd's excruciatingly sustained wordplay. Much discernment lies behind the playwright's deft manipulation of language. Dallas seems on safer ground, however, when he characterizes the puns as a 'meaningless clatter of words'. If, indeed, the puns are 'meaningless' (it seems more accurate, however, to think of them as intelligible individually, yet incomprehensible in the aggregate), then it is all the more curious that Dallas does not include Nerissa's evasive rejoinder in the passage of dialogue which he quotes at length. 'I scarce know what to say', she flatly replies to Gratiano's heartfelt, punning plea (BL Add Mss 52,941 I, f. 12). Perhaps Dallas fails to cite Nerissa's pithy response precisely because it candidly acknowledges – from within the burlesque performance itself – just how overwhelming puns can be. So overwhelming, in fact, that even the characters charged with speaking

them are stunned into silence. Within the logic of the dramatic narrative, Nerissa remains silent because she is overcome with emotion. Nerissa scarcely knows what to say because she scarcely knows what she has heard. And here the character's reaction simulates the audience's reaction, or at least the audience's implied reaction. Like Nerissa, who cannot counter Gratiano's puns with any meaningful language of her own, the audience cannot hold in check the performance's own language. Relinquishing the hope of comprehending what has been spoken on the stage, the audience must accept that it, too, 'scarce know[s] what to say' in the face of such unmeaning.

Let us not, however, mistakenly believe that the unmeaning of a burlesque's puns constitutes a defect, any more than does the obscurity of its topical allusions. In fact, just the opposite is true. The performance aspires not to the self-congratulatory titters of spectators pleased with their own ability to 'get' the joke (though such tittering there may be) but rather to the silence of spectators for whom the language of burlesque no longer signifies in a comprehensible manner. Dallas was right to ask whether anyone could derive meaning from *Shylock's* puns; but he was wrong to pose the question as an indictment of burlesque. Rather, the pun is most ingenious when it possesses the least meaning. To explain a pun is to restore confidence in signification. But confidence in signification is precisely what the pun erodes. Exegesis does not 'improve' the pun by laying bare its divided meaning; in fact, exegesis arrests the pun.

Where do such observations leave us? With the counter-intuitive view that a bad pun is the surest sign of a good burlesque. The puns of a Shakespeare burlesque cannot be reintegrated into a normative view of the original text. The ferocity with which some nineteenth-century theatrical observers condemned puns attests not to the degradation of burlesque, but to its exaltation. The Shakespeare burlesque was most splendidly itself when its word torture was at its most horrific. For all his stubborn unwillingness to make peace with puns, even Dallas begrudgingly concluded in his essay from *Blackwood's Magazine* that '[a] pun is on a small scale what parody is on a large. Accept the burlesque drama wholesale, and there is no reason why one should object to the quibbling [i.e., punning] in detail. It is consistent throughout' (p. 212). It is only fitting, then, to look upon the Shakespeare burlesque as a kind of gigantic pun on the entire Shakespearean canon – one which renders its meaning absurd. But the story does not end at the impasse of meaning. For while burlesque puns do not necessarily enhance our understanding of their source text, they do enhance our understanding of the source

text's claims on canonicity and authority. Just as Shakespearean wordplay 'expose[s] the very orthodoxies and ideologies [of] the plays themselves' (Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins*, p. 114), burlesque wordplay exposes the ideologies of Shakespearean authorship. We can see this exposition most clearly by studying the revisions made to Poole's *Hamlet Travestie* for an 1870 revival at the Park Theater, Brooklyn.

The burlesque's principal asset – its spirited timeliness – was also its principal liability. Even the freshest topicality quickly staled, leaving the burlesque with no recourse but to 'update' itself through continual revisions and interpolations. Indeed, both puns and topical allusions are particularly vulnerable to change over time since they frequently derive from a slang lexicon. If the virtue of legitimate Shakespeare was durability, then the virtue of burlesque Shakespeare was novelty. Tragedians placed themselves within genealogies of acting traditions (e.g., the Garrick 'school', the Kemble 'religion') while spectators carefully took note of the same, well-established acting 'points' in successive productions of individual plays. But it would be ludicrous to suppose that anything like a sedimented tradition of burlesque acting could exist. Apart from new jokes in the script, a burlesque production could be refreshed by inserting a song newly popularized by opera singers, minstrel show serenaders, or street balladeers; imitating the idiosyncrasies of an eminent actor then performing in a nearby legitimate theatre; satirizing the stage business in a current 'hit' production; or introducing the latest dance craze at the end of a deeply tragic scene. As Marie Wilton recalled in her memoirs, the Strand's audience quickly detected changes to a burlesque performance.³² Yet Wilton misread her audience, wrongly concluding that they were disappointed by the changes and would have preferred a reliably 'fixed' production. But fixity runs counter to burlesque logic. For any burlesque audience, the successive changes introduced in the performance *were* the performance precisely because those changes branded the performance as custom-made. Every production was different because every audience was different.

Because many of the burlesque's ever-changing novelties were left unscripted, it is difficult to compile a detailed record of how productions evolved over time. The stage-manager's promptbook remains the performance historian's most valuable tool not for verifying the actuality of a performance, but for disclosing its insistently protean nature. Far from

³² Marie Bancroft and Squire Bancroft, *The Bancrofts: Recollections of Sixty Years* (London: J. Murray, 1909), p. 18.

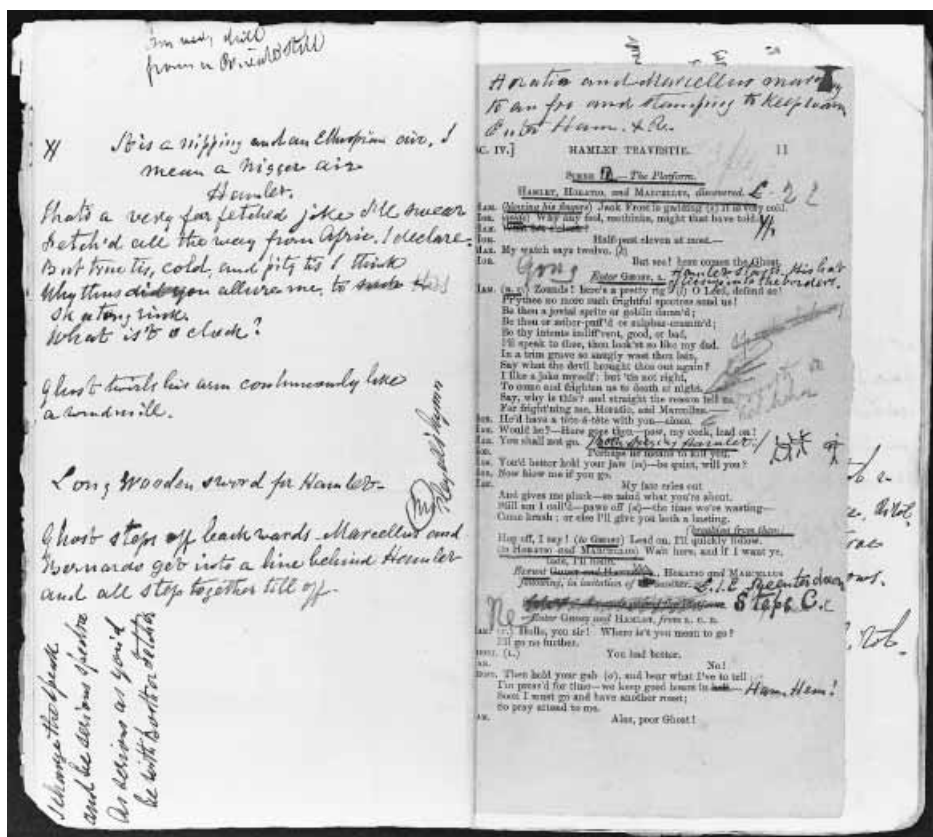
reifying the performance, the promptbook actually articulates the burlesque's deconstructive logic. Burlesque texts offered themselves not as inviolable scripts meant to be spoken upon the stage, but as opportunities for endless revisions, deletions, substitutions, and additions. Given that the burlesque's injunction might be 'always contemporize', we ought not to be surprised that burlesque scripts were invariably altered to suit the local circumstances of their production. Thus, the *Daily News*, reviewing an 1874 revival of *Hamlet Travestie*, noted the 'new songs, hornpipes, and jigs' which were added to the production, as well as the 'allusions to current events' which were 'thickly interspersed throughout the dialogue'.³³ A 'fixed' burlesque script was a contradiction in terms. When we read a burlesque text, even in manuscript, we are not reading anything approximating what was said, heard, or enacted in different theatrical stagings of that text.

To get a more specific sense of how the Shakespeare burlesque embraced its own provisionality, let us examine the promptbook for Mrs F. B. Conway's 1870 revival of *Hamlet Travestie* at the Park Theater, Brooklyn, a production which starred Edward Lamb as Hamlet and John Moore as Claudius.³⁴ For any theatrical producer in the late nineteenth century who wanted to burlesque *Hamlet*, the unlikely choice was *Hamlet Travestie*.³⁵ While the play had been popular earlier in the century, it seems not to have been performed in New York since John Brougham's revival at the Chatham Theatre twenty-five years earlier. Not only was the play sixty years old (irredeemably antique for a theatrical form which prided itself on novelty), but it contained few topicalities and even fewer directions for stage business. In settling on *Hamlet Travestie*, the Park Theater had no choice but to substantially alter Poole's original text so that it would meet its new audience's expectations. As the densely annotated promptbook confirms, an extract from which is shown in illustration 5, some of Poole's original scenes were omitted while the remainder were combined, heavily cut, and then supplemented with new dialogue, comic business, and topical references – all of which amply justified the

³³ *Daily News*; qtd in Globe Theatre advertisement, 1 December 1874. Since there had not been a London production of *Hamlet Travestie* for nearly sixty years, the reviewer was clearly comparing the Globe Theatre's performance with the published text of Poole's play.

³⁴ John Poole, *Hamlet Travestie*, Folger promptbook H38, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC. The promptbook includes actors' 'sides' for the various roles as well as a complete script. The full script was later used by Stuart Robson for an 1876 production, perhaps also occasioned by Edwin Booth's revival of *Hamlet* in New York that same year.

³⁵ Of the five *Hamlet* burlesques staged in New York City in 1870 – all inspired by Booth's acclaimed production – only that performed by Mrs Conway's company used Poole's *Hamlet Travestie*.



5. Extract from the promptbook for Mrs F. B. Conway's production of John Poole's *Hamlet Travestie*, Park Theater, Brooklyn, 1870. Note the stick figures accompanying the inserted stage direction 'Both [Horatio and Marcellus] seizing [sic] Hamlet' and the ghost's stage business of 'twirl[ing] his arms continuously like a windmill'.

playbill's description of the production as a 'Latitudinarian and Reconstructed version of *Hamlet*'.³⁶

References to life in New York appear in nearly every scene. As Hamlet waits in the 'nipping' air for the ghost's predicted appearance, he likens the battlements of Elsinore to a 'skating rink' (*Hamlet Travestie*, Fol. promptbook H38, f. 11) – referring, perhaps, to the frozen lake in Central Park on which New Yorkers had been able to ice skate during the winters since 1859. In the closet scene, Hamlet alludes to prominent figures within New York's judicial system as he craftily advises

³⁶ Playbill, *Hamlet Travestie*, Park Theater, Brooklyn, 1870, bound in Folger promptbook H38, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC.