

CHAPTER I

Shakespeare, jokes, humour, and tolerance

I. PROSPECTUS

Few topics [compared with humour] need as much prefatory apologism before receiving scholarly treatment.¹

Humour, in its harder or softer forms, will be seen to play a significant role in relation to all of the kinds of tolerance in Shakespeare which the present study will consider. This is for reasons going beyond the self-evident fact that manifestations of tolerance in Shakespeare's plays are more likely to arise in genial comedy-like settings than in tragedy-like ones.

In fact harder or harsher rather than more genial forms of humour often accompany Shakespearian treatments of tolerance in both comedy and tragedy. Although festive and socially inclusive moods are often said to distinguish Shakespearian from classical or Jonsonian satiric comedy, some Shakespeare comedies contain judgmental types of humour situated far from the genial. In Chapter 4 on religion, for instance, we will meet in *All's Well that Ends Well* a long and complex series of linked jokes satirising issues arising in bitter and dangerous contemporary sectarian dissensions.

On the other hand, as we shall see in Chapter 5, a genial quip made by the Duke in *Othello* illustrates how Shakespeare gives space within a tragedy to tolerance-promoting jesting (a space, it will be argued, that is established only to be tragically stifled in that play).² The Duke's attempt at a conciliatory gesture using humour is mirrored in a number of Shakespearian and contemporary contexts that will be considered in Chapters 3 and 4; in these discord threatens to disrupt encounters between persons of diverse outlook or culture, and jokes are used to help rescue dialogue.

Such dialogue settings involving diverse persons might be bracketed with a range of other settings portrayed by Shakespeare in which convivial

or at least peaceable assemblages make room for free-spirited interchanges between mismatched persons, allowing the give-and-take of easy ‘conversation’.³ Such give-and-take is well described when the contending suitors for Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew* are invited to ‘quaff carouses to our mistress’ health, / And do as adversaries do in law – Strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends’ (1.2.278–9).

To help with the appreciation of these and similar contexts in which humour or good humour abets tolerance, this first chapter will examine certain aspects of Shakespearian joking and humour in a more focused way than will be possible in the course of later discussions. It will begin by reviewing theories of humour, particularly ‘denigration’ theories and their alternatives, dating from before Shakespeare’s time to beyond it. This will underpin a discussion of recently proposed theories (with possible Shakespearian application) to the effect that some seemingly denigratory humour which hinges on national or other stereotyping may conceal ploys intended to define and gain recognition for group identities. The present chapter will then attempt an analysis of Shakespeare’s purposes in dramatising jokes that are failures, even dismal or repugnant failures; this will lead to discussions of joke patterns seen in the second *Henriad* and in *The Merchant of Venice*.

2. JOKES REQUIRE, AND REVEAL, SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

Joking is not a simple matter. Across time or culture, and sometimes just across subcultures, jokes can be confusedly received or even mistakenly detected. Thus the transatlantic Professor Morris Zapp in David Lodge’s comic novel *Changing Places* realises only belatedly that the populist presentational style of BBC Radio 1 is not at all a devastatingly clever spoof, as he first supposes, but is rather the thing itself. The point of this joke is that Zapp’s fame is in hermeneutics. Or again, observing the wisdom in popular usages, it is worth considering the outraged phrase ‘you must be joking!’; the exclamation suggests how the irony or indirection seen in jokes may produce ambiguity or uncertainty.

In fact, the present may not be an ideal moment for understanding jokes. According to the critic Warren St John, academic researchers agree that the folk tradition of trading and telling jokes has recently declined sharply, and moreover ‘it’s a matter of faith among professional comics that jokes . . . have been displaced by observational humor and one-liners’.⁴ St John indicates that these changes have been attributed by various commentators to reductions of attention span, to an aversion to ‘look-at-me’

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styles of social performance, to 'political correctness', or to a contraction of the range of agreed social standards against which humour might react.

Distance in time, and perhaps also a new puritanism, may create particular problems for the interpretation of Shakespeare's jokes. A valuable mode of access to them may be suggested by a remark made by the witty Rosaline of *Love's Labour's Lost*: 'A jest's prosperity lies in the ear / Of him that hears it, never in the tongue / Of him that makes it' (5.2.847–9). That is, historical work may aim to reconstruct what the ears of Shakespeare's time heard in his jests. Also, conversely, a literary analysis of dramatic contexts and patterns may reveal the likely register and thrust of an otherwise obscure Shakespearian joke, and these in turn may yield insight into the topical issues and the societal perspectives that formed the basis for its humour.

3. ANACHRONISMS AND DEFINITIONS

To give a reference point for the following I should mention that the *OED* does support non-anachronistic uses of the word 'toleration' in relation to Shakespeare: specifically religious 'toleration' (meaning 4.a.) dates from 1609, and more general 'toleration' (meaning 3) dates from 1610 or earlier.

A conscious use of anachronism may be valuable when we come to discuss currents of thought or feeling with which Shakespeare engaged but which in his time were still unnamed because inchoate or just nascent. On the other hand, history often produces divergences between partly kindred concepts,⁵ and so uses of anachronistic terms may also may create confusions or encourage the framing of unbecoming questions. An example of an unbecoming question suggested by an anachronistic term might be: was Shakespeare a 'liberal'? The word 'liberal', meaning progressive, freedom-loving, or the like, was coined in the late eighteenth century; the concept may have arisen in the later seventeenth century, but in Shakespeare's time a 'liberal' position was not only nameless, but also, as a single ideological or conceptual package, inconceivable. Nevertheless, a connection that is very relevant to our discussion of Shakespeare is suggested by a distinction made by Sammy Basu between some proto-liberal proponents of toleration:⁶

What was absent from, and perhaps even antithetical to Locke but loomed large in certain other liberals (*avant la lettre*) – namely the Leveller Richard Overton (fl. 1640–60) and the Whig Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftsbury (1671–1713) – was the perception that humour was a mode of toleration vital to

the viability of the then emergent liberal policy. For both, humour involved the perception of an incongruity that ruptures one's expectations, typically the sudden juxtaposition of the sacred and profane in revealing and meaningful ways. It thereby contributed to self-knowledge and political accommodation. In defending humour, both also warned that English liberal culture was carrying with it some redundantly heavy and humourless Puritan baggage.

If no full 'liberal' in the later sense, nonetheless Shakespeare represented 'heavy and humourless Puritan baggage' only in order to spoof it, and he did distinctly link humour and toleration.

Terminological anachronisms will be useful and hopefully not misleading in the following discussions of Shakespearian 'ethnic jokes'. According to the *OED*, in Shakespeare's time 'ethnic' was used only with reference to religions, and meant 'pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish; Gentile, heathen, pagan'. For convenience I will be extending this term to its modern range (dated to after the mid-nineteenth century), so that 'ethnic' in 'ethnic joke' will refer to all sorts of groups differing from a majority, in nationality, 'race', language, or culture.

Like 'ethnic', the anachronistic word 'joke' is never used by Shakespeare himself. It was imported into standard English from the slang of the late seventeenth century. The closest equivalent word used by Shakespeare is 'jest', which is indeed used in nearly all of his plays and groups of poems.⁷ But the denotation of 'jest' in Shakespeare's time was much broader than that of 'joke'; a jest could be a flippant inconsequential act, or a throw-away remark, or an elaborate prank, or even a confidence sting. Similarly, 'to jest' could be to taunt, chatter, banter, or be elaborately witty.

4. WHAT WAS FUNNY?

The lack of an exact correspondence between what a 'jest' was for Shakespeare's age and a 'joke' for ours connects with the famous riddle of what, in various cultures or times, makes certain verbal acts laughable. This question has been addressed repeatedly by physiologists, psychologists, social scientists, and nearly all of the big names in philosophy and literary criticism since antiquity. For philosophers, the question of human laughter has fed fundamental discussions: for instance, Aristotle, theorising on physiology, comments that humans are the only creatures that laugh.⁸

Many theories of verbal humour have been proposed, including ones attributing its laughter-evoking powers to surprise, incongruity, deflation, absurdity, release of repression, ambiguity, logical paradox, or a mixing of

contradictory ‘scripts’. But a clear majority among all those who have speculated on the question have settled on so-called ‘derision theories’ of humour, following Aristotle, who in turn followed hints in Plato.⁹ In derision theories laughter is always caused by ridicule, and the targets of ridicule are always persons or human types that are ugly, absurd, inferior, or unworthy. A brilliant essay by Quentin Skinner outlines the evolution of the main theories of laughter up to and somewhat beyond the time when the mid-seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes offered his own very famous version of derision theory.¹⁰ Skinner shows that Hobbes returned to derision theory after a number of Renaissance thinkers had diverged from it by proposing, variously, that laughter may be kindly, civil, or even healthful because it corrects melancholia. Those included such important thinkers as Baldassare Castiglione and the physician Girolamo Fracastoro (the medical genius who first proposed a germ theory of infection).

Another important Renaissance view of humour (one of the few not discussed by Skinner) arises in Francis Bacon’s ‘On Discourse’. In all three published versions of this essay, starting from that of 1597, Bacon approved of a limited inclusion of jests in conversation in order to provide variety, as a sort of condiment or seasoning, but warned that one must be judicious in their use:¹¹

It is good to varie and mixe speech of the present occasion with argument, tales with reasons, asking of questions, with telling of opinions, and iest with earnest. But some things are priuileged from iest, namely Religion, matters of state, great persons, any mans present business of importance, and any case that deserueth pittie.

Since Bacon counselled avoiding jesting about politics, religion, power, weighty matters, or the pathetic, he may seem to have left few topics for what we call jokes aside from shaggy dogs, grapes, and light-bulbs.

In fact, Bacon had quite telling reasons for counselling against many kinds of jesting. These reasons connect with the fact that ‘Of Discourse’ was a guide to making profitable uses of sociability. So, just after recommending jesting, Bacon also recommended that conversationalists encourage others to talk about their own particular knowledge and skills:

He that questioneth much, shall learn much, and content much, specially if hee applie his questions to the skill of the person of whome he asketh, for he shall giue them occasion to please themselues in speaking, and himselfe shall continually gather knowledge.

Bacon's belief that 'knowledge is power' applies here, but so does a view that flattery of experts may advance one's influence and power. Similar gains, on the other hand, might be hindered if one gave unnecessary offence. So Bacon inserted into the later versions of his essay – in between his recommendations of conversational jests and inquisitive flattery – a warning against impulsive or incautious jest-making:¹²

And generally, men ought to find the difference between saltiness and bitterness. Certainly, he that hath a satirical vein, as he maketh others afraid of his wit, so he had need to be afraid of others' memory.

Thus, for Bacon, restraints upon joking are necessary in order to advance the self-serving ends of making friends and avoiding enemies.¹³

Others in Bacon's age perceived further reasons for avoiding jests that injure feelings. These are reasons of considerateness. For instance, Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* excluded from poetry's function of 'delightful teaching' any provoking of 'coarse amusement' by such comic turns as 'against lawe of hospitality, to jest at straungers, because they speake not English so well as wee doe'.¹⁴ A widely used rhetorical manual by Thomas Wilson, in this and other ways closely following Cicero's *De Oratore*, generally condemned scurrilous jesting.¹⁵ Wilson's position is similar to that suggested by Shakespeare's Beatrice in her castigation of Benedick's allegedly libellous wit (*Much Ado*, 2.1.127–32).

Not a scurrilous, but even a deserved mockery, is condemned in Olivia's objection in *Twelfth Night* to the comic but cruel roasting of Malvolio: 'He hath been most notoriously abused' (5.1.375). Shakespeare's scoffers, right down to Sebastian and Antonio of *The Tempest*, are generally portrayed as untoward. Remarking on Shakespeare's 'sneerers', albeit from the standpoint of the Romantic age, Coleridge commented:¹⁶

Observe the fine humanity of Shakespeare in that his sneerers are all worthless villains. Too cunning to attach value to *self-praise*, and unable to obtain approval from those they are compelled to respect, they propitiate their own *self-love* by disparaging and lowering others.

Kindness as a reason for avoiding cruel jokes was explicitly propounded by the French physician Laurent Joubert in his 1579 *Treatise on Laughter*. Joubert's treatise agreed with Bacon's warning against making jests that could irritate the powerful, but remarked also that it 'is of a great inhumanity to make fun of the miserable on whom we should take pity'.¹⁷ Also, although Joubert held in accord with derision theories that

‘The raw material of the laughable in speech is drawn from lampoons, gibes, derision, mockery, and remarks that are stinging, biting, equivocal, ambiguous, and which spring in any way from error’, he added that ‘All come from scorn and derision, which when serious and of consequence become harmful, but when light remain laughable.’¹⁸ So, for Joubert, unkind derision that is not good-humoured or light is not funny, and should be avoided.

Thomas Hobbes, on the contrary, did not believe in the possibility of benign laughter. His convictions about human nature made him find nothing exceptional in cruel mockery causing pain through laughter. Yet Hobbes did not approve of laughter, which for him expressed the pleasure taken in the ‘sudden glory’ of a realisation of one’s superiority, power, or dominance over another. Hobbes scornfully suggested that by laughing at those even more wretched than themselves persons of small ability ‘keep themselves in their own favour . . . by observing the imperfections of other men’.¹⁹ Their laughter is a badge of their unworthiness. But such baseness of motive was not for Hobbes the main reason why laughter should be suppressed; the reason was rather the safety of society. Since for Hobbes laughter is always denigrating, it always offends. It therefore always produces dissension. Allowing such dissension runs contrary to Hobbes’s ‘first and Fundamental Law of Nature; which is to seek Peace, and follow it’.²⁰

Hobbes therefore presented a maximised sort of derision theory in which society’s well-being, but no impulse of kindness, mandates limits on laughter. Quentin Skinner contrasts this Hobbesian position with several later views on laughter. The Augustan age in England typically found laughter lowering, and its writers advised the gentle to avoid it. Many Romantic literary critics, including Maurice Morgann, who extravagantly praised Falstaff,²¹ thought laughter an expression of humane sympathy. Nearer our time, Freud and Nietzsche both found laughter revealing of hidden or denied drives, and both thought it possibly emancipating.

The most extensive twentieth-century study of laughter, that by Henri Bergson, reverts to a version of derision theory. Bergson holds that whenever something is laughable this is because it reveals some sort of automatism in a human being, something rigid or semi-mechanical. This elicits derision because humans should manifest the elasticity and responsiveness characteristic of vitality. So, Bergson holds, typical targets of laughter are narrow-mindedness, absent-mindedness, or self-obsession. He further argues that laughter is socially useful, but also inevitably

unkind: ‘in laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour’.²² Bergson sums up:

Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. [Laughter] would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. (197)

But is this so – must laughter always be bereft of ‘the stamp of sympathy or kindness’? Or is the reverse possible: might laughter in some cases increase sympathy or reduce the likelihood of hatred or conflict?

Thousands of writers have addressed these and similar questions. Some have even constructed grids with theories of laughter on one axis and supposed listings of all types of humour on another, and considered how each theory matches up with each type of humour.²³ As serious as that is, I’d rather use the tactic counselled by Francis Bacon in ‘Of Discourse’, which consists of seeking the knowledge possessed by skilled practitioners of an art or craft.²⁴ Usefully, the screenwriter Max Eastman recorded the insights of some of Hollywood’s great comics.²⁵ Groucho Marx told Eastman:

There are all kinds of humour. Some is derisive, some sympathetic, and some merely whimsical. That is just what makes comedy so much harder to create than serious drama; people laugh in many different ways, and they cry in only one. (370)

Surely Groucho is justified in claiming that comedy takes many shapes. Mae West’s remarks ran similarly:

Ridicule is just one phase of humour and is not always the basis for a laugh, although it is a sure-fire short cut. In ridicule, too, all those who laugh are not necessarily amused. Sympathy may be aroused for the poor fellow who is the object of ridicule. (371)

Again, we will find use for Mae West’s remarks on a possible counter-reaction of sympathy, and on the dangers of cheap laugh-seeking, when considering Shakespeare’s dramatised joking.

5. SHAKESPEARE AND THE ETHNIC JOKE

Many Shakespeare plays contain comic remarks or interchanges which at least partly resemble what have more recently been labelled ‘nationality’ jokes (‘Polish jokes’, ‘Scottish jokes’, ‘Irish jokes’, etc.).²⁶ This was not unusual; A. J. Hoenselaars has shown that the English Renaissance stage very

frequently displayed comic stereotyping of nationalities, both foreign and British.²⁷ But almost all of Shakespeare's critics have avoided addressing the issues raised by his nationality jokes, perhaps being shy of handling trivialities, or else fastidious of matters now judged shamefully incorrect.

A bold exception is Gary Taylor, who commends Shakespearian nationality jokes in terms of the pleasure they may give. Taylor develops his theory of a pleasurable reception being proper by drawing on personal experience; he reports himself having been in youth wholly unaware of the actual identity of the incredibly stupid 'Polacks' whom he often heard maligned in 'Polish jokes'. For him, as a child, 'Polacks' might as well have been creatures from outer space. Hearing them named signalled exactly and only: 'expect laughter soon'. Taylor suggests that today's Shakespeare audiences could benefit in terms of pleasure from adopting a similar outlook.²⁸

I think that Taylor means that audiences may benefit from putting aside their aversions to the evils of bigotry, and replacing these with a sophisticated understanding that linguistic markers can serve wholly different purposes in varied contexts. Legitimate pleasure may be blocked unless it is realised that a narrative or textual convention need not necessarily reflect referents or realities external to itself.

It is true that humour researchers have shown that the groups named in typical stupidity-alleging 'nationality' jokes – be they Belgians, Kerrymen, Newfoundlanders, Sikhs, or others – vary only according to the origins of the joke-tellers, and are otherwise utterly interchangeable.²⁹ Because identical nationality jokes appear worldwide with differently named targets, it might be argued that such a joke's naming of a nationality is simply a marker for a genre of humour, a signal for an expectation of laughter (just as the mere naming of 'Radio Yerevan' cues smiling in Eastern Europe, as we shall see in Chapter 4).

But I wonder . . . members of the nationalities used as 'markers' may justifiably be offended by the kinds of jokes that attribute colossal stupidity to them, even though an identical joke might be told elsewhere with a different target.

Moreover, in common with other theatrically staged nationality jokes of the era, those of Shakespeare did not typically allege a worldwide possibility: stupidity. Instead, they often assigned specific, although still prejudiced, differential characteristics to various national targets, as has been detailed by A. J. Hoenselaars.³⁰ Even so, specific stereotyping on its own is a dubious basis for brilliant humour. Perhaps, however, it might be a basis for depiction of a failed attempt at humour.

Such observations point towards a main focus of this chapter: Shakespeare's representations of poor or failed jokes. I will argue that these depictions need not be either inartistic or reprehensible; a dramatist may present unpalatable or embarrassing situations involving joking not for the sake of buying easy laughter, but rather to make salient points about individual or group relations, or about the social processes of joking itself. Thus it is worth giving serious attention to some ethnic jokes in Shakespeare which may not be at all successful as jokes, and may not be at all pleasant.

6. JOKE-MAKING, FAILURE, AND RISK

Many studies have insisted that humour is always entirely relative to context,³¹ and it is certainly true that all jokes will not 'work' equally well with all audiences or in all settings.³² Yet it is possible that certain aspects of the process of joking are similar in all periods and cultures.

I believe one such invariant characteristic of joking is that a true joke must be capable not only of succeeding but also of failing. The tyrant who elicits obedient hilarity through fear is therefore not truly joking. To a limited extent, then, jokes resemble scientific hypotheses, which, in order to be validated, must also be capable of being falsified or invalidated; jokes, like proper scientific theories, must risk failure and rejection because otherwise they cannot overcome these and 'work'.

A further, perhaps universal, aspect is that if the connection between a joke-audience and a joke-maker is in some way personal, the audience's awareness that joke-making must risk failure can strengthen eventual laughter. The process is as follows: their awareness that a friend's or acquaintance's joke may 'bomb', or fall flat, may induce in the joke-hearers a salutary anxiety or tension on account of their sympathetic dreading of – or perhaps their rivalrous wish for – an embarrassing failure. When a joke succeeds, the release of this tension may amplify the success of the 'punch-line'. The precariousness of jokes thus may supply the tension required for a pleasurable tension/release cycle, the release being laughter. Playwrights may, and Shakespeare did, imitate this pattern, placing both jokers and joke-hearers onstage.³³

7. MORE HUMOUR THEORY, AND FALSTAFFIAN APPLICATIONS

Sammy Basu argues that joking need not be socially conservative, denying the inevitability of humour 'reinscrib[ing] the limit it temporarily transgresses'.³⁴ Thus he claims humour can advance 'dialogic ethics' and