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LACANIAN LAUGHTER AND BRAGGING IN 1598

In 1598, two of the most important plays in the history of English comedy were published. These are Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* and Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*.¹ Both plays have suffered critical neglect, and stand in their respective author's extensive works as two examples of their least studied plays, though this has recently begun to change, especially in the case of *Love's Labour's Lost*.² Both plays engage, perhaps more than any others, with a set of comic traditions dating back to Greek and Roman comic drama, meaning that they weigh directly into the history of comedy and impose themselves on issues that have been at the heart of comedy since its recorded dramatization began. It would seem then, that these two plays could be important for teaching us some essential "truth" about comedy.

Yet, to speak about comedy's "truth," or to think of the enduring characteristics of comedy, is to raise an issue that Mikhail Bakhtin foregrounded. Quoting Alexander Herzen's comment "it would be extremely interesting to write a history of laughter,"³ Bakhtin's work showed that speaking of laughter as something ahistorical, as something that has essential characteristics which have always been part of comedy and will remain part of comedy forever, risks making it apolitical, and even coming down on the side of an essentialism in believing (as Aristotle may have done when he started the enduring association between comedy and "the human") in an essential subject-who-responds in laughter.⁴ In other words, by speaking of comedy as "essentially human," or in thinking of it as something

1. All references to Shakespeare are from William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton, 1997). All references to Jonson are from Ben Jonson, *Complete Works of Ben Jonson*, vol 3, ed. C. H. Hereford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

2. See for instance the Arden edition, William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Arden, 1988) 64-105.

3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University press, 1984) 59.

4. Aristotle, *Clarendon Aristotle Series: Aristotle on the Parts of Animals*, trans. James G. Lennox, ed. L. J. Akkrill and Lindsay Judson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 69. On this theory of laughter in Greek culture see Stephen Halliwell, "The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture" in *Classical Quarterly* 41. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1991): 279-296.

which has *fundamental* characteristics, we risk naturalizing the subject who responds in laughter, justifying the affect of laughter by a centralizing hypothesis of something which cannot be far away from “human nature.” It is the argument here that it is exactly this issue that appears in 1598, troubling the idea of laughter as the response of a pre-existing subject.

To think of a subject-who-responds is to suggest the analysand of psychoanalysis, and specifically the project of Jacques Lacan, whose work is the subject of this journal. As I hope to show in what follows, Lacanian psychoanalysis offers us a hypothesis which develops this relationship between the subject and his laughter. The potential impact of Lacanian theory on existing models and theories of comedy is something that has not been realized sufficiently until recent work by Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič, and there remains much to be done here.⁵ Whilst popular mis-readings of psychoanalysis may suspect that it indulges in a privileging of the individual on the couch as a subject-who-responds, laughter in Lacanian psychoanalysis shows itself to have a much more complex relationship to the formation of subjectivity. Far from allowing the subject to indulge in laughter which can be seen as purely response and therefore affirms the pre-existing subject, Lacanian laughter explains how a part of laughter’s function is to produce a subject who seems to have already existed in order to respond, making it part of the way subjectivity is created though a trick. This idea of laughter as a subject-forming process strangely seems to have risen its head in 1598.

Love’s Labour’s Lost and *Every Man In* intersect with key elements of comic tradition at a number of points: they contain romance plots, servants and masters, suggestions of doubling, old kings, lovers and clowning, as well as puns, wordplay, jokes, and many more well-known comic tropes. This article, however, will focus on just one comic feature to illustrate its arguments, a feature much less studied and therefore much more suited to an article of this length, and yet a feature which has been a familiar trope since records of comedy began and remains familiar in comedy today. The subject of this article is the brag.

The figure of the braggadocio or “braggart soldier” may be traced as far back as Menander, the Greek playwright born around 341 BC. However, the character is only accessible via Terence’s play *The Eunuch*, written in the year 146 BC, as the Menander play from which Terence took the character is lost. Terence writes that his play is derived from an original Menander entitled *The Flatterer*, in which “there are a sponger who flatters and a soldier who boasts.”⁶ Plautus’s *Miles Gloriosus*, or “The

5. See Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Mladen Dolar, “Comedy and its Double” in *Stop that Comedy!: On the Subtle Hegemony of the Tragic in Our Culture*, ed. Rober Pfaller (Wien: Sonderzahl Press, 2005)

6. Terence, *The Comedies*, ed. and trans., Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1976), 166. Earlier still, the character of the braggadocio is likely to be a derivation of the *alazôn*, an impostor who thinks himself as greater than he is. The *alazôn* is a typical figure in Greek Old Comedy, epitomized by *Aristophanes*. *Alazôn* was also the title of a Greek play from which Plautus says he took his *Miles Gloriosus*.

Braggart Soldier,” is a well-known starting point for discussions of the character, and a significant influence on the famous braggadocios of literature that were to follow.⁷ It seems clear, for example, that Plautus provided a direct inspiration for Shakespeare’s most famous braggart soldier Falstaff. The action of *Miles Gloriosus* takes place at Ephesus, and Falstaff’s followers at the Boar’s Head in *2 Henry IV* are described as “Ephesians” and the host at his lodgings in *The Merry Wives* describes himself as “Ephesian,” rare references to the location in Shakespeare, though Ephesus is also the setting for *Comedy of Errors* (*2 Henry IV*, II.ii.127, *Merry Wives*, IV.v.14). Moliere’s *Tartuffe* is a figure of braggartry indebted to the same tradition, and the character appears in countless other influential figures of European comedy from Goldoni through to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, to Dickens’s Major Bagstock of *Dombey and Son* and Gogol’s braggart soldier in the comic tale *The Nose*, all the way to the fantastic “Concentration Camp Ehrhardt” of Ernst Lubitsch’s film *To Be Or Not To Be*. This article treats just two braggarts, Captain Bobadil of Jonson’s *Every Man In His Humour* and Don Adriano de Armado of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, arguing that between them they offer a new way of thinking about the role of the braggart throughout comic history. What may be one of the most famous statements from the most famous braggart of all time, Falstaff, is a key one:

Man, is not able to invent anything that tends to laughter more than I invent or is invented on me: I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in others. (*2 Henry IV*, Iii, 8-12.5)

Here many of the shibboleths that characterize existing theorizations of laughter are problematized. The age-old question of comedy studies has been that of why we laugh, or of what we laugh at, seeing laughter as the response of a subject who already exists to a stimulus that already exists.⁸ As Anca Parvulescu says of such theories, “they conceive of [laughter] as a response to something else, and it is this something else that they are after.”⁹ Such theories risk making laughter testify to a pre-existing natural subject who responds. On the contrary, here in *2 Henry IV* laughter is something invented rather than a natural response, and further, Falstaff indicates that it is perhaps employed more “on” man than “by” him, suggesting that laughter may be “the condition of ideology” in that the moment you feel you are responding naturally and freely is the moment you are most inside ideology, as Mladen Dolar has argued.¹⁰ As with ideology, laughter’s causes and effects are not consciously employed, often appearing to come from an unknown source. Further, Falstaff knows that laughter is not just a response but a cause; it is not only that he

7. Plautus, “The Braggart Soldier” in *Four Comedies*, ed. and trans., Erich Segal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 1-74.

8. The vast majority of comedy studies have been characterized by this approach. See for example Charles Gruner, *The Game of Humour: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

9. Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 4.

10. Mladen Dolar, “Strel sredi koncerta” in *Theodor W. Adorno, Uvod v sociologijo glasbe* (Ljubljana: DZS, 1986) 307.

is the cause of wit in others (making a laughter response, to Falstaff for example) but the cause “that wit is,” making laughter something productive and constitutive, formational of the relationship between subject and Other. To reach this conclusion though, one needs a much more detailed investigation into the connection between laughter and braggartry in these two plays of 1598.

The first significant comic moment of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is one of its finest moments, and it comes immediately before the introduction of the braggart Don Armado. Costard, the young lover of the play, reveals that he has seen and fallen for the dairymaid named Jacquenetta. The conversation goes:

COSTARD: The matter is to me sir, as concerning Jacquenetta. The manner of it is, I was taken with the manner.

BEROWNE: In what manner?

COSTARD: In manner and form following, sir—all those three: I was seen with her ‘in’ the ‘manor’ house, sitting with her upon the ‘form’, and taken ‘following’ her into the park; which, put together, is ‘in manner and form following’. Now, sir, for the ‘manner’—it is the manner of a man to speak to a woman. For the ‘form’—in some form.

Costard has seen the dairymaid Jacquenetta and become “taken” with her “manner,” meaning that he has fallen in love with her. Berowne asks him to clarify “in what manner” he was taken with her “manner,” a straightforward pun. Costard’s answer is remarkable, and truly comic; it is an exercise in the creation of narrative. In answer to the question he states that he was taken with Jacquenetta “in manner and form following,” suggesting in line with his previous comment that her manner was the first thing which appealed to him, and following that, he became an admirer of her form. Alternatively, it could mean that he was taken by her “manner” and that in what follows he intends to describe how he was taken by her form, or in what form he was taken by her. Though already several puns are in play, the moment is yet to become properly radical. But then, perhaps in answer to a raised eyebrow from Berowne (as it is sometimes acted), Costard makes out that “in manner and form following” was in fact an abbreviated or condensed version of a narrative of events. He was “in” the “manor” house whilst she was sitting upon the “form,” presumably an item of furniture (although the word “form” could also refer to the act of sitting itself as it does in Ben Jonson’s play *The Sad Shepherd*, a meaning retained by the OED). Then he “follows” her into the park, which “put together” is what was meant by the initial statement “in manner and form following.”

Discussing a Lacanian model for comedy, R. D. V. Glasgow comments that whilst “functional discourse can work by provisionally nailing down words onto meanings, giving an illusion of stability (as if a particular word ‘belonged’ to its meaning),” comic moments can show us “the radical separation of signifier and signified” which forces us to recognize the dynamic potentiality for language to undermine our sense of order. For Glasgow, Lacan’s suggestion that the unconscious is “a per-

petual sliding of the signified beneath the signifier” is particularly relevant, and indeed it does connect to Lacan’s argument that language always has the capacity “to say something altogether different from what it says.” Costard’s comment shows something of this; that whilst we like to see language as referring to a reality which exists prior to that language, as if each thing or event has a language “belonging to it,” in fact no such stability can be maintained. But this is a common reading of comedy as a destructive force, as something which destroys the illusion of stability in language, and there is much more to this comic moment that such a reading allows.

Lacan’s own statement of intent in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” essay is to say that he is interested in the role of “the letter in the *creation* of signification” [my emphasis], rather than in the destruction of stable signification. This comment looks to another, the famous Lacanian statement that “a letter always arrives at its destination.” Barbara Johnson has provided the important gloss here, commenting that a letter always arrives at its destination since its destination is wherever it arrives.¹¹ Lacan’s interest is in the letter as something which produces destinations, the subject-positions of the sender and the recipient. Thus whilst Glasgow’s argument is on the side of the slipperiness of the letter and language as that which undermines otherwise stable signification, here the emphasis is on the creation of signification out of nothing.

Žižek has pointed out that this process of creating subject positions is never complete (which is indeed something that Derrida has drawn attention to), remarking that the phrase “a letter which always arrives at its destination” points at the logic of recognition/misrecognition. The letter creates its recipient, just as language creates its signified, but this recognition is also misrecognition; there is nothing to govern the process, so sense is always created out of nonsense. It is not so much that language cannot help turning to nonsense (though this may be true) but that language cannot help producing sense, sense which has nothing to guarantee it. It may be that this is all sense is: language’s production of something to which it appears to refer. Glasgow’s description explains the functioning of a normal pun like that of Berowne, where a slip between the manner of the girl and the manner of the love points to language’s arbitrary tendency to slip. Costard’s joke requires far more theorization—it shows the creation of narrative sense out of nothing but language—the words come first and then accidentally create the events that the language refers to, pointing not to the fact that comedy undermines the attempt of language to be representational but that comedy shows how language succeeds in creating a reality which it immediately appears to be representational of. This moment, then, is not a comic nonsense in which the source of humour is undermining sense but rather a comedy which shows sense coming into being based on nothing.

11. Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida” in *Yale French Studies* 55/56, “Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise” (1977): 457-505 (502).

Immediately following this comic scene, which reverses the usual reading of comedy as a breakdown of sense into nonsense and instead frames comedy as the production of sense out of nonsense, the braggart, Don Armado, enters the play. He enters via a letter, and since the braggart is always on the side of rationality, this may be seen in the terms of the Lacanian letter discussed above, as an attempt on his part to constitute the subject-positions involved as the sender and the receiver. And the subject matter of the letter itself is rationality: the rationality offered by Galen's humoral theory. The humour, as in ancient and medieval physiology, is the medical theory of the makeup and workings of the human body which holds that a system of fluids in the human body drive individual behaviour. These humours dictate behaviour and create characteristics, thereby explaining identity by the hypothesis of natural phenomena, supporting interior subjectivity. Don Armado's letter reads:

So it is, besieged with sable-coloured melancholy, I did commend the black oppressing humour to the most wholesome physic of the health-giving air; and, as I am a gentleman, betook myself to walk.

Before Don Armado begins his story we are told to associate him with humoral theory, with a rational explanation that is on the side of internal subjectivity. The theme is at the heart of Ben Jonson's comedy, as the title *Every Man in His Humour* testifies, and the issue is raised directly in its sister play, *Every Man Out of His Humour*:

Some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluents, all to run one way. (*Every Man Out* I.i. 105-8)

The issue being raised here through the connection between "humour" and "humours" and through the connection between such internalizing ideas of medical science and comedy, is that of whether laughter is a response from within. Jonson's definition here already seems to trouble this, with a humour described as something which "doth so possesse a man," indicating a possession from the outside rather than a part of interior identity, just as was suggested by the quote from Falstaff with which we began. But the point here is that the braggart is on the side of explanations for behaviour that centre the subject around its internal subjectivity, in his case seeing his melancholy as the result of internal processes; in such a reading Don Armado would be blind to what Falstaff knows—that what seems like an internal response is produced "on a man" from without. After establishing his affiliation with hypotheses of essentialist internal identity, Don Armado's letter continues into the story which he is to tell, another of the play's remarkable comic moments. The event it tells instigates that entire subplot of the play: his quest for Jacquenetta and rivalry with Costard. The letter tells that Don Armado has been walking in a park where he saw Costard, "sorting and consorting" (meaning following and then talking to) the dairymaid Jacquenetta (*LLL*, I.i. 230-66). The moment marks another incredible turn then, in that the event he describes is the same

one which Costard describes to Berowne in the lines previously discussed, as the completely constructed source of the comment “in manner and form following.” Thus, what initially appeared to be a joke that Costard plays on Berowne because Berowne might have failed to understand the phrase “in manner and form following” as “I liked her manner and then her form”—turns out to create a reality on which the entire play is structured. The arbitrary narrative that Costard’s language has constructed out of nonsense turns out to be the most serious reality in the play, which Armado describes as “that obscene and most preposterous event.” The event is indeed both obscene and preposterous; preposterous because it was borne only out of an arbitrarily uttered set of signifiers, and obscene because by showing reality to be constructed out of nothing but this, it shatters everything that Don Armado believes in, the idea that language represents internal pre-existing processes like the humours of the body, the very thing which allows him to be naturally superior and to brag.

There may be differences between Shakespeare and Jonson in the way that their comedy is concerned with displaying the way that “humours” and the natural world construct individuals, and how comedy can be a part of this process. When Romeo leaps over the garden wall of the Capulet’s orchard, Mercutio shouts “Romeo! Humours! Madman!” (*Romeo and Juliet* II.i. 7). As such, the language is at times on the side of humoral theory; one needs to regulate their internal drives in order to be socially successful. On the other hand, in Jonson’s play *Every Man In* humours become allegorical. The characters can only repeat their behaviour patterns which are already prescribed by their names; Brayne-Worme worms his way into everyone’s favour and Kno’well can only act as if he knows all. The names seem to be restrictive, as if we are not born with characteristics but are imprinted with them by naming. Jeremy Tambling has suggested that whilst Shakespeare may ultimately affirm the natural order of things, Jonson’s city-comedy challenges this. He writes that that “one difference between Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy is that the former relies upon a hidden organic unity existing between the characters, making everything grow together towards a resolution of apparent contradictions [...] there is no such unity for people in Jonson.”¹² Indeed it is interesting that Jonson does not re-visit humours often outside the two plays (*Every Man In* and *Every Man Out*) that mock their attempt to explain behaviour, as if, once discounted, they are no longer central to his worldview. On the other hand, Shakespeare makes over a hundred references to humours, always retaining the specific sense of internal bodily functions that dictate desires which are explicitly articulated by Don Armado in the passage quoted above (I.i. 235).

Thus, from the start of the play we have a comedy which is against the logic of the braggart, but more must be said about this centralizing drive of the brag, since laughter can be on the side of bragging as well as against it. If the original Menander play from which the braggart is taken was called *The Flatterer*, then this is something also retained through the chain of appearances that the braggart makes

12. Jeremy Tambling, “Dickens and Jonson” in *English* 61.232 (Spring 2012): 4-25.

in literature. Plautus's flattering servant figure is called Artotrogus, which means "bread gobbler," a phrase that also serves perfectly as a definition of Traffaldino, Goldoni's figure of the harlequin in *A Servant of Two Masters*. Tartuffe relies on the flattery of the blinded Orgon, and Mel Brooks's character Professor Siletsky takes the same tack with Colonel Ehrhardt in *To Be Or Not To Be*. Braggartry and flattery are connected concepts, they are two sides of the same coin.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, flattery (whether false or not) precedes the introduction of Don Adriano, since the King and his attendants sing the praises of this "most illustrious wight" even before his appearance (*LLL*, I.i, 160-75). Similarly, in Jonson's *Every Man In*, flattery anticipates Captain Bobadil's introduction, with Bobadil's landlord Cob speaking somewhat ironically of Bobadil: "o, my guest is a fine man" (*EIHH*, I.iii. 69). When Bobadil is first introduced, lying on a bench due to his severe hangover, he is accompanied by the flattering Matthew, who indeed may or may not be sincere in his remarks such as "I have heard it spoken of divers, that you have very rare, and un-in-one-breath-utter-able skill, sir" (*EIHH*, I.v. 120-1). Bobadil boasts of his swordsmanship but makes excuses when it comes to proving it. Matthew seems to indulge Bobadil, at least not directly showing that he has found the braggart out. Whether Matthew is sincere in his flattery is unimportant. He may be taken in by Bobadil's boasting, or he may not. It is even possible that Bobadil himself believes his own braggart at times, as indeed in Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus*, Pyrgopolynices is most certainly taken in by the appearance of his own brilliance. But whoever is taken in and whoever isn't, a fundamental component of comedy is the imaginary other who is wise to the reality of the situation. This other, which can be thought of as the Big Other as Žižek terms it, an "other, obscene, invisible power structure [that] acts the part of the 'Other of the Other' in the Lacanian sense, the part of the meta-guarantee of the consistency of the big Other (the symbolic order that regulates social life)."¹³ Whether the bragging deceives the flatterer or the flatter deceives the braggart, both imply another subject in the staging, albeit an imaginary one, who sees the reality behind the performance, and laughs at the individuals who are fooled. As Robert Pfaller has argued, if there is no individual present who is being fooled then we may construct an imaginary "naive observer" to fill this role, a kind of counterpart to the Big Other; we imagine a force who knows and a force who doesn't, in order to guarantee an order beneath whatever chaos might be apparent to us on stage.¹⁴

So the braggart and the flatter are on the same team, both believing in the existence of something outside which guarantees the existence of a social reality, or an order outside of their performance. As Zupančič has argued, we may even enjoy being the "naive observer"—being taken in by appearances—precisely to guarantee that

13. Slavoj Žižek, "The Big Other Doesn't Exist" in *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, Spring-Fall (1997). Available at www.lacan.com.

14. Robert Pfaller, "The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic" in Slavoj Žižek (ed.) *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London: Verso, 2005).

we can step back out into the fixed order of reality.¹⁵ This applies to every possible formulation of the situation; whether the braggart or flatterer is fooled, whether both are fooled, or whether neither truly believe in the flattering and braggartry that is taking place, they can still believe in a “truth” of the situation underlying the performance. In other words, they either believe that the braggart is as good as he says, or they believe that he isn’t, both of which rely on the existence of a Big Other who guarantees the structure of good and bad which the braggart is to be judged against and the possibility of perceiving the true place of the braggart in relation to his claims. Another common argument about comedy is countered here; the idea that laughter brings the high and mighty down to the base human level. Recently Simon Critchley has followed this line to some extent, commenting that “if humour tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are not the person you would like to be.”¹⁶ Zupančič’s work has troubled this notion, pointing out the conservatism of this position in that if we talk about comedy bringing you down or forcing you to recognize that you are not who you thought you were, then we assert a concept of who you really are now that your performance of perfection has been thrown off. She even makes this point relevant to braggart soldiers, mentioning Falstaff as an example of a comic character who is constantly slipping on banana peels, but rather than being “grounded” and taken down, he simply gets up again and continues to arrogantly swagger.¹⁷ This laughter which sees itself as perceiving the reality behind the illusion is in fact not against the braggart at all. There is a laughter, then, which operates not against the braggart, as one would traditionally frame it, not a laughter, which brings the braggart down for the ideal he has sold for himself and to himself, but instead the brag and laughing at the brag share a quality. If flattery and braggartry are to be thought of as two sides of the same process, then laughter—which would usually seem to oppose them—can turn out to be a third participant in the same game. Whether we believe the braggart, flatter him, or laugh and bring him down, we participate in the same process of consenting to a belief in a reality underneath the illusion, an order which might be temporarily turned into nonsense but which returns, structuring and guaranteeing our world. To modify Critchley’s terms, humour may show you that you aren’t what you thought you were, but at the same moment it can create a sense of who you “really” are.

As an aside, the point made out of 1598 may bring to bear on modern bragging. Take a particular example of bragging and flattery in contemporary culture, the modern covering letter which one is asked to write when applying for a new job. The job applicant is expected to write something along the lines of “I am outgoing, hard-working, honest, trustworthy, organized.” Here we have a kind of braggartry where what is important is not that I should actually be any of these things,

15. Alenka Zupančič, “Reversals of Nothing: The Case of the Sneezing Corpse” in *Filozofski Vestnik*, 26.2 (2005): 173-186 (181).

16. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002) 75.

17. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 29.

nor even believe myself to be. Nor is it necessary that the recipient of my letter, interviewing me for my job, should be taken in by any of these brags. Rather, the applicant is merely asked to consent to a system in which the Big Other exists. If I fail to address the demand to speak in this language, and resist using these keyword brags, then I appear to be somehow unusual or radical, and I will probably be deemed unsuitable for the job. By conforming, I simply make the gesture: I agree to a system of guaranteed order, and I agree that I can be situated in relation to this secure system. Bragging and flattering are a part of establishing order, and laughter, which has often been seen as against these processes, as a force which brings down illusions, can in fact be part of the same process of ordering.

But, as with the comedy with which we began, from *Love's Labour's Lost* which produces reality rather than reacts to it, another wonderful comic scene from *Love's Labour's Lost* throws off the idea of laughter as only serving to affirm the positions of pre-existing subjects. In the scene, Armado calls for Costard to deliver a letter for him. Costard enters with a broken leg, and Mote comments, "A wonder, master! Here's a costard broken in a shin." Armado, wrapped up in himself, does not notice Costard's broken leg, and comments "Some enigma, some riddle. Come thy l'envoy—begin." He thinks Mote's news about the broken shin is an allegory or riddle and demands a "l'envoy," an explanation for what Mote meant. Then comes Costard's turn to misread the situation. He assumes that Armado has seen the broken leg, and that Armado's comments "some enigma" (probably misheard as enema) and a "l'envoy" (connected to the verb "to lenify" meaning to purge) are offers of assistance for the broken shin. His response is to reject the help he thinks Armado has offered for the affliction Armado has in fact not even noticed:

No egma, no riddle, no l'envoy, no salve in the mail, sir! O, sir, plantain, a plain plantain! No l'envoy, no l'envoy, no salve sir, but a plantain!

Following this, Armado makes yet another misreading, commenting:

By virtue, thou enforces laughter; thy silly though, my spleen; the heaving of my lungs provokes me to ridiculous smiling! O, pardon me, my stars! Does the inconsiderate take *salve* for l'envoy and the word 'l'envoy' for a salve?

There is much to be said about this final misreading in the exchange. Firstly, it returns us to the question of laughter as connected to the humours of the body, of physiological and apolitical explanations for laughter. Armado is on the side of such a reading; just as he began by attributing melancholy to black bile, here he attributes laughter to the spleen and to the heaving of his lungs. The response is framed as a natural response to a social situation; "ridiculous smiling," laughter which ridicules Costard, has erupted naturally from Armado's imagined superior person. For Armado, a natural superiority justifies the assertion of himself over Costard, as if their positions in the hierarchy already exist and laughter merely reflects them. Humours as justification for sadistic violence are something also reflected on in *Every Man In* where Stephen is glad that "no body was hurt by his ancient humour," suggesting that humours can be the justification for violence; by

naturalizing impulse those impulses can be justified, but this acting “on impulse” paradoxically provides the justification for those impulses in the first place by acting as evidence for their presence. This is what happens with Armado’s laughter here. Laughter, by appearing to be connected to the natural, makes it seem as though that which it produces has always been there, waiting to be laughed at. It makes it seem as though the Costard already existed and the intelligent Armado was always superior, and capable of laughing at the inferior Costard, but the text reveals both Armado’s desire to see things this way and the way that such a way of seeing can come into being through laughter. As such, laughter shows the moment of ideology at work; it produces something, and makes it appear as though that which it produces was always-already there.

In Lacan essay’s on “The Instance of the Letter” which has, as we saw, been associated with an argument that comedy is the undermining or destruction of sense and rationality, Lacan comments of metaphor that:

It is in the substitution of signifier for signifier that a signification effect is produced that is poetic or creative, in other words, that brings the signification in question into existence. [The crossover between the two signifiers is the] constitutive value [needed] for the emergence of signification.¹⁸

As for the “Instance of the Letter” essay in general, the interest is in the production of meaning rather than its destruction. A kind of trick is played here in which “the crossing expresses the condition for the passage of the signifier into the signified.” The process is creative and poetic, it produces a signified. The pun, then, which has been seen as a splintering of meaning, is in fact a pre-condition for meaning in the first place; the mistaken meaning, or the possibility of mistaken meaning, is what affirms the existence of a solid signifier, a correct referent. Comedy produces meaning rather than undoes it, but this meaning appears based on nothing, sense appears out of nonsense, or as Lacan himself writes “meaning is produced in nonmeaning.”¹⁹ What we see here is the laughter both enacting and revealing the production of the appearance of the Big Other. Just as with the laughter at the bragging/flattery, the laughter, by appearing to be directed at error, asserts truth.

And these moments show that such an argument, that comedy is ideological in that it produces truths or that it creates something which it makes it appear as though it has always existed, is also where the true radical edge of comedy is found. If we can say that in this way laughter is ideology coming into being, then this shows us that what ideology brings into being is based upon nothing, or that it has nothing behind it, at least nothing stable. The radicalism of laughter is not that it transgresses ideology but that it shows us ideology at work. If with laughter we see ideology coming into being, then we undermine ideology’s claim to have a basis in something natural or in some organizing principle, showing that far from being the response of a pre-existing subject, laughter is part of the production of the

18. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton, 2006) 429.

19. Lacan, *Écrits*, 423.

subject who can only then appear to be responding in laughter. If you tell me I have no right to laugh at you, your comment appears futile, because it is the fact that I have laughed at you which qualifies me to laugh at you.

Thus, with the figure of the braggadocio we have a comic tradition which shows there is nothing traditional about comedy—that it is political and not everlasting, that rather than being a natural response, laughter can play a trick which establishes or imposes an idea of the natural. The braggart is on both sides, desiring to believe in laughter as a response, an affirmation of his superiority perhaps, and he wants to assert that ideology. And yet his performance, even if he succeeds in fooling everyone, enacts the very thing that he wants to deny, that any ideology he brings into being has nothing permanent or originary to anchor itself in.