Interactional Aspects of Language-based Humour in Shakespeare's Comedies: The Dynamics of Punning by Ladies-in-Waiting

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What makes Shakespeare a man of his time is, among other things, his infatuation with punning, understood as playful fiddling with (identical/similar) forms and (distinct) meanings of words. While heavy use of puns in his plays is very much in keeping with the spirit of the day, the phenomenon enjoying a remarkably high status in Elizabethan low- and highbrow literature and culture, Shakespeare's brand of linguistic humour is surely one of a kind. The present study focuses on the dynamics of punning practiced by ladies-in-waiting in three Shakespearean comedies, i.e., Lucetta in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Maria in *Twelfth Night* and Margaret in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and is designed to afford insight into intricate context-sensitive punning processes. It leads to the conclusion that even though the characters examined do not come into the category of highly prolific punsters, their playing with words is fully conscious and carefully tailored to individual contextual settings, principally to the type of interacting parties. Accordingly, rather than for ornamental purposes, punning proves to be used calculatedly as a powerful discourse management strategy aimed at asserting interactive dominance in order to mock the pretentiousness of interlocutors.

Keywords: pun; wordplay; Shakespeare's comedy; strategic punning; interaction; context

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Aspectos interactivos del humor basado en el lenguaje en las comedias de Shakespeare: la dinámica de los juegos de palabras de las damas de compañía

Lo que convierte a Shakespeare en un hombre de su tiempo es, entre otras cosas, su pasión por los juegos de palabras, entendidos como un jugueteo entre formas (idénticas/similares) y los significados (distintos) de las palabras. Mientras que el uso intensivo de los juegos de palabras en sus obras está en clara consonancia con el espíritu de su tiempo, ya que este fenómeno gozaba de un altísimo estatus en la literatura y la cultura isabelina popular y culta, el estilo de humor lingüístico de Shakespeare es sin duda único. El presente estudio se centra en la dinámica de los juegos de palabras practicada por las damas de compañía en tres comedias shakespearianas: Lucetta, en *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Maria en *Twelfth Night* y Margaret en *Much Ado*

About Nothing, y pretende arrojar luz sobre los intricados procesos de los juegos de palabras dependientes del contexto. Llega a la conclusión de que, aunque los personajes examinados no encajan en la categoría de expertos en los juegos de palabras sumamente prolíficos, su manera de jugar con las palabras es completamente consciente y está diseñada cuidadosamente para unos escenarios contextuales individuales, principalmente para la interacción con otras personas. De este modo, en vez de para propósitos ornamentales, se demuestra que los juegos de palabras se usan calculadamente como una poderosa estrategia discursiva destinada a establecer una dominación interactiva para reírse de la pretenciosidad de los interlocutores.

Palabras clave: juegos de palabras; comedias de Shakespeare; juegos de palabras estratégicos; interacción; contexto

1. Introductory Notes

Due to lack of terminological homogeneity and typological transparency in the voluminous critical literature on playful fiddling with forms and meanings of words,[1] a rich variety of more or less capacious labels are used, often indiscriminately, to refer to this practice, such as those mentioned by Szczerbowski (1998, 34), i.e., "play on words," "wordplay," "word games," "pun," "play with words," "language game," "play of language," to which one may add "verbal play/humour," "play on/with language," "linguistic /language-based humour" or "quibble."[2]

The common denominator of all these terms seems to be the recognition that, linguistically, the phenomenon is a composite of identical/like forms (orthography-pronunciation interface) and discrete meanings. Formally, then, humour-generating mechanisms include the processes of homonymy, homophony, paronymy and homography,[3] whereas the semantic requirement for triggering language-dependent humour is satisfied by a safe distance between the meaning constituents at play.[4]

At the same time, it should be highlighted that, depending on the approach, the terminology is used more or less rigorously. A straightforward example of the former case may be Cazden's (1976, 607) differentiation between "word games" as artificial formations (such as palindromes, pangrams or word squares) and "wordplay" as instances of spontaneous, unique inventions (similarly Dressler 1985, 99). The more relaxed approach, in turn, is immediately evident, for instance, from Chiaro's (1992, 5) definition of wordplay as "the use of language with intent to amuse" or from dictionary entries such as that given in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2006), where it is defined as "making jokes by using words in a clever way."

In critical literature the names most commonly employed to describe Shakespeare's witty experimenting with words include "wordplay" and "pun" (see, for instance, such leading researchers in the field as Muir [1950], Mahood [1968], Spevack [1953, 1969] or Delabastita [1993] for their personal preferences). While the two are often used interchangeably, in the present paper a conceptual distinction is drawn between them, which lies in regarding "wordplay" as a more capacious term, subsuming "pun"

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[1] The author is deeply indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights and constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper, which contributed substantially to enhancing its quality.

[2] The same holds true for other languages, like German ("Wortspiel," "Sprachspiel," "Spiel mit der Sprache"), French ("jeux de mots," "jeux avec les mots," "jeux sur les mots," "jeux de langage") or Russian ("igra słow," "jazykowaja igra") (Szczerbowski 1998, 34). What adds to the complexity of the nomenclature is the fact that some of these terms, barely congruent intralingually, tend to soak through language borders, mixing freely with each other (e.g., "jeux de mots" or "double entendre," which pass as currency in scholarly publications on linguistic humour in English).

[3] Of the four mechanisms, homography, contingent on identity between sound and spelling, and thus technically unfeasible in the disorderly sixteenth-century orthographic system, is absent from the present study.

[4] Using Cruse's (1995, 2000) specialist terminology, sufficient semantic distance is possible only where "senses" (genuine meanings) rather than "facets" (fake meanings) operate. Unlike facets, which can be simultaneously activated in a single, qualifying (non-ambiguous) context, senses are characterised by "mutual antagonism" in that a context of this type will always disambiguate them.

as a lower-order category. More specifically, "wordplay" is understood as a blanket term for all sorts of playful experiments with words, whereas "pun" is taken to refer to those instances of verbal humour which rest on the above-mentioned linguistic mechanisms of homonymy, homophony and paronymy (to the exclusion of homography for reasons set out in footnote 3). Since Shakespeare's wordplay is for the most part pun-dependent and his non-punning wordplay (such as alliterative or rhyme-based play) is outside the remit of the present research, the label "pun" is used throughout the paper in preference to "wordplay," which, it is hoped, will tighten terminological discipline and facilitate argumentation. In order to stress the interactional, process- rather than product-oriented edge of the study focused on the dynamics of exchanging wits, the name "punning" is alternatively put to use as well.

Even to the untrained eye, it is immediately noticeable that Shakespeare belongs to the category of highly prolific punsters, producing copious amounts of linguistic humour in his plays, irrespective of the genre they represent. It is little wonder, then, that the phenomenon has kindled much academic interest. Already in 1765 Johnson accentuated Shakespeare's punning proclivities with the following words:

> A quibble is to *Shakespeare* what luminous vapours are to the traveller! He follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible . . . . 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. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it. (qtd. in Evans 1959, 4; emphasis added)

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's indulgence (or overindulgence, as some might put it) in punning should be interpreted against a broader historical background that enables the correlation of his liberal use of this linguistic instrument with sixteenth-century literary practices, where it enjoyed great favour. Ellis speaks of the Elizabethan pro-punning sentiments in the following way: "By Shakespeare's day, the national interest in witty language had reached such a pitch that wordplay was almost *de rigueur* in the conversation of English courtly society, in the jest-books, ballads, and broadsides of popular literature, and even, according to Addison, in much more serious language" (1973, 12). What is more, it began to successfully penetrate into more canonical literary writing and was soon to become the stock-in-trade of numerous esteemed Elizabethan authors, such as Lyly (1554-1606), Spenser (1552-1599), Green (1558-1592) and Nash (1567-1601), among others.

Shakespeare's use of verbal play is customarily said to have undergone a massive change from an essentially carefree, aesthetically pleasing experimentation with words at the incipient stage of his development as a playwright, i.e., in comedies and histories composed in the 1590s, to a more reflexive, calculated and dramatically salient deployment of puns in tragedies (e.g., Kohl 1966, 233). Yet Parker (1996, 1), for instance, warns firmly against interpreting Shakespeare's play on words, both comic and serious, merely as

a decorative device, highlighting that it allows a deeper insight into relationships both between and within his plays, as well as into the entire Elizabethan reality, including the lifestyles, preoccupations and concerns of sixteenth-century society at large. The present paper hopes to demonstrate that the phenomenon was also used strategically as a powerful discourse coordinating device and that, as such, it plays a constructive role even as early as in the comedies.

2. The Data Retrieval and the Research Method

The empirical data for the present research come from three Shakespearean comedies, namely *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (henceforth TGV), *Twelfth Night* (TN) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (MAN), and the focus of attention is the punning practiced by ladies-in-waiting, i.e., Lucetta in TGV, Maria in TN and Margaret in MAN. The choice of comedy as a genre is the corollary of the assumption that, when compared to tragedy, it is more amenable to playful manipulation of words (even though punning in tragic plays is also highly successful in Shakespeare). In turn, the decision to concentrate on ladies-in-waiting has been influenced by the rather counter-intuitive observation that, while they may not be expected to pun as vigorously as other stock figures (like jesters, whose profession is to entertain, verbally as well as physically, or quick-witted and linguistically dexterous pages), their discourse is proportionately more punning than that of the seemingly more heavyweight punsters.

Understandably, where puns are involved, the data retrieval process is rarely, if ever, smooth and unimpeded, due to a number of independent factors. These include, among others: (a) the phenomenon's hugely elusive character (especially in the case of paradigmatic / vertical alignment of meaning components subsumed under a single form); (b) (with historical texts, such as the comedies under study) an appreciable temporal distance separating Shakespeare's plays from their modern recipients, which affects language materially, blurring the true picture of the playwright's punning practices; and (c) the fact that the Shakespearean brand of verbal humour tends to fall into intricate patterns, forming a mosaic of tightly interlaced puns, which often precludes the possibility of forcing one's way through a complex interplay of meanings. In an attempt to streamline the process of deciphering the, often obsolete, nuances of meaning, a number of dictionaries and lexicons of Shakespeare's language in general, and verbal play in particular, were consulted prior to the study proper, namely those of Onions (1919), Partridge (1961, 1973), Rubinstein (1989) and West (1998). Equally helpful, especially in providing definitions of the words at play, were dictionaries of contemporary general English, such as *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998), *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995) and *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2006).

The study sets out to identify the hallmarks of the punning styles adopted by Shakespeare's ladies-in-waiting, who prove to constitute, as occupants of this social role, a largely homogeneous category of punsters. While the common denominator here

is, therefore, the static notion of "social role" (professional rather than private),[5] the investigation homes in on the dynamics of punning, arguably informed by a number of contextual variables, principally participant configuration (including the gender and social standing of interlocutors), which are capable of accounting for the punster's diverse strategic moves, such as the choice of dominant imagery (e.g., musical, sexual), the measure of bawdiness and sophistication in verbal play or the degree of the forcefulness of the punning technique employed (e.g., frontal attack vs. gentle teasing with puns).

The characters of Shakespeare's plays are widely acknowledged to represent social types rather than individuals, and as such to share a large number of distinctive characteristics, linguistic or otherwise, which tend to reappear across different plays. Accordingly, making broader generalisations about the uniqueness of verbal humour practiced by Shakespeare's ladies-in-waiting could be considered in keeping with the rules of methodological rigour. Yet, since it is only three female figures that come under close examination in the present paper, one of the central methodological assumptions underpinning the study is that its findings should not be automatically translated into larger patterns. It is believed that such sweeping generalisations, tempting though they might be, should be based on far more extensive research, and even then they would have to be made with extra care.

Yet another basic premise of the study is that it is lengthier pun-based interactions rather than isolated instances of verbal humour that, due to providing a solid contextualisation, are better suited for illuminating the inner workings of intricate context-sensitive punning processes and for identifying recurring patterns in playful experimenting with language. Whilst the interactions examined are, in a sense, artificial exchanges, being the corollary of Shakespeare's careful deliberation and informed choices, they are considered to be fettered by the same rules as real-world impromptu speech, and investigated as such. As Herman puts it, "the principles, norms and conventions of use which underlie spontaneous communication in everyday life are precisely those which are exploited and manipulated by dramatists in their constructions of speech types and forms in plays. Thus, 'ordinary speech' or, more accurately, the 'rules' underlying the orderly and meaningful exchange of speech in everyday contexts are the *resource* that dramatists use to construct dialogue in plays" (1995, 6; emphasis in original).[6] As examples of the written-to-be-spoken mode of communication, the interactions under scrutiny are taken to have undergone a fundamental transformation from an essentially static to a fully dynamic form of dramatic

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[5] See Fabiszak (1997, 32-48) for a comprehensive account of competing role theories, principally the structural-functionalist approach in sociology (strongly represented by Knowles [1982], Davis [1948], Parsons [1951], Banton [1965] and Secord [1982]); symbolic interactionism in social psychology (championed vigorously by Turner [1966, 1976, 1978], Kuhn [1964], Goffman [1969], Cicourel [1973] and Heiss [1981]); and linguistic studies (including Lyons [1977], Levy [1979] and Morgan [1975]).

[6] However, see Herman's (1995, 3-13) fuller discussion, where a number of valid counterarguments to a direct correlation between dramatic speech and naturally occurring conversations (deployed, inter alia, by Nicoll [1968] and Beckerman [1970]) are illustrated.

dialogue (see Herman 1995, 13). It is the product of this transformation that the present study attempts to investigate.

3. Punning by Ladies-in-Waiting: Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

The present set of data comprises puns produced by the three female characters identified above, who prove to belong to a distinct category of punsters. The aggregate number of puns they generate amounts to 130 instances of clever verbal manipulations, Lucetta contributing 47, Maria 43 and Margaret 40.[7] Admittedly, these quantities look relatively modest when compared to the overall punning output of such stock figures as clowns (e.g., Lance's in *TGV*, amounting to 70 puns), pages (e.g., Speed's in *TGV*, consisting of 63 instances of verbal play) or jesters (e.g., Feste's in *TN*, made up of 65 examples). Yet, a more thorough examination, based on calculating the ratio of puns generated by the individual characters to their entire dramatic discourse measured in words (to the exclusion of essentially pun-resistant articles), reveals the ratio to be higher for ladies-in-waiting (or comparable, in Maria's case) than for the other social types. The proportion of punning to non-punning text of the individual *dramatis personae* can be represented in tabular form as follows:

Table 1. Distribution of punning and non-punning discourse of ladies-in-waiting and selected other stock figures

	LADIES-IN-WAITING			CLOWN	PAGE	JESTER
	Lucetta	*Margaret*	*Maria*	*Lance*	*Speed*	*Feste*
WORDS	559	548	1226	1852	1474	2470
PUNS	47	40	43	70	63	65
PUN-TO-WORD RATIO	8.4%	7.3%	3.5%	3.8%	4.3%	2.6%

Interestingly enough, the ladies-in-waiting do not seem to be fixated on maximising their opportunities for playing with words and, accordingly, they produce extended stretches of discourse, where not a single instance of punning is traceable. By no means, however, does it make them less colourful or idiosyncratic punsters, which, it is hoped, will be conclusively demonstrated in a number of interactions below.

A close investigation of the entire punning discourse of these female figures makes it possible to conclude that the only category of punning partners they share are ladies (their own, in the case of Lucetta and Maria), which renders this configuration of interlocutors particularly intriguing. Yet, a basic difference can be noticed between the

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[7] Despite conflicting opinions as to the merits of the numerical representation of verbal play, it brings the definite advantage of affording a bird's-eye view of punning practices, as it helps to map the frequency distribution of humorous discourse among individual characters, allowing basic insight into their approach to jocular tampering with words (see also Adamczyk 2010, 186-87).

individual waiting maids with respect to the proportion of punning encounters they have with ladies compared to those with other characters. More specifically, Lucetta puns solely with her lady, Julia, Margaret is engaged in verbal battles with her lady's cousin, Beatrice, and Beatrice's suitor, Benedick (producing a comparable amount of punning output, distributed evenly between two lengthier interactions, in these participant combinations), whereas Maria's punning partners include her lady, Olivia (with whom she in fact rarely practices verbal play, generating but a handful of puns) as well as a kinsman, Sir Toby, his companion, Sir Andrew, and a jester, Feste (who prove to be far more vigorous collaborators in verbal experiments of all sorts).

Referring back to the most prevalent participant composition, it may come as a surprise that waiting women get involved in punning games with (their) ladies, given the appreciable social distance between the two categories of females. It should be remembered, however, that in Elizabethan times puns enjoyed their highest status ever and were regarded as unwelcome only in the narrow circles of language purists. Accordingly, the practice of low characters punning with socially high-ranking figures was not necessarily considered an outward indication of gross impertinence.

As regards the commonest context for practicing verbal play in this composition of female participants in the material examined, it is essentially concerned with the love lives of the ladies, and the most resonant imagery exploited through ambiguity inherent in puns to develop love-related themes is music. On the evidence of the entire punning discourse in the three plays under scrutiny, the strong presence of music in verbal humour is highly gender-specific, it being fairly frequent among females and absent from all-male exchanges. This observation may run counter to intuition, as in Shakespeare's times music was indeed the province of men. Part of the explanation of this curious paradox may lie in the close correlation the females discover between music and love, the former functioning as the source and the latter as the target domain, to use the cognitivist nomenclature. What is more, music can also be very appealing imagery to draw on when dealing with matters of love, as it is strongly related to dancing, often triggering associations with physical love.

The following exchange from *TGV* is intended to illustrate the discussed socially asymmetric all-female participant framework along with the two heavily and skillfully exploited cognitive domains of love and music peculiar to it. The dialogue regards Proteus' love letter to Julia, which her waiting woman, Lucetta, is supposed to deliver to her personally.

(1)   *Julia*:   What is't that you
            Took up so gingerly?
      Lucetta: Nothing.
      Julia: Why didst thou stoop then?
      Lucetta: To take a paper up that I let fall.
      Julia: And is that paper nothing?
      Lucetta: Nothing concerning me.

Julia: Then let it LIE for those that it concerns.
Lucetta: Madam, it will not LIE where it concerns
        Unless it have a false interpreter.
Julia: Some love of yours hath writ to you in rhyme.
Lucetta: That I might sing it, madam, to a tune.
        Give me a NOTE, your ladyship can SET –
Julia: As little by such toys as may be possible.
        Best sing it to the tune of 'LIGHT o'Love'.
Lucetta: It is too HEAVY for so LIGHT a tune.
Julia: HEAVY? Belike it has some BURDEN then?
Lucetta: AY, and melodious were it, would you sing it.
Julia: And why not you?
Lucetta: I cannot reach so HIGH.
Julia: Let's see your song.
           [*Lucetta withholds the letter*]

        How now, minion!
        [*Threatens her*]
Lucetta: Keep TUNE there still, so you will sing it out.
        And yet methinks I do not like this TUNE.
Julia: You do not?
Lucetta: No, madam, 'tis too SHARP.
Julia: You, minion, are too saucy.
Lucetta: Nay, now you are too FLAT.
        And mar the concord with too harsh a descant.
        There wanteth but a MEAN to fill your song.
        [*Lucetta yields the letter*]
Julia: The MEAN is drowned with your unruly BASS.
Lucetta: Indeed, I bid the BASE for Proteus.
Julia: This babble shall not henceforth trouble me.

                            (1990, I.II.68-96)

[The meanings brought to the fore in the above interaction are as follows: LIE (s1 = remain, stay, s2 = tell a lie),[8] NOTE (s1 = tune, melody, s2 = short informal letter), SET (s1 = compose music for words, s2 = instruct sb to do sth, s3 = esteem, value), LIGHT (s1 = as in *light o'love*, the name of a popular dance-tune, s2 = insignificant, trivial, s3 = not heavy), HEAVY (s1 = serious, profound, s2 = weighty, difficult to lift), BURDEN (s1 = heavy load, s2 = bass part or undersong), AY/I (s1 = form of expressing

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8   The present method of elucidating the meanings at play, where "s1" and "s2 (3, 4, ...)" stand for "sense 1" (primary meaning component) and "sense 2 (3, 4, ...)" (secondary [tertiary, quaternary, ...] meaning component) respectively, follows Delabastita's (1993) convention.

assent/s2 = personal pronoun), ʜɪɢʜ (s1 = [of a note] having a frequency at the upper end of the auditory range, s2 = tall, towering), ᴛᴜɴᴇ (s1 = melody, tone; correct musical pitch, s2 = temper, mood), sʜᴀʀᴘ (s1 = [of musical sound] above true or normal pitch, s2 = brusque, biting), ғʟᴀᴛ (s1 = [of musical sound] below true or normal pitch, s2 = downright, outspoken), ᴍᴇᴀɴ (s1 = tenor or alto [intermediate between treble and bass], s2 = mid-point, middle course, average), ᴍᴇᴀɴ/(ᴍᴀɴ) (s1 = s1 in the previous entry/s2 = male), ʙᴀss/(ʙᴀsᴇ) (s1 = voice or sound of the lowest range/s2 = corrupt, depraved), ʙᴀss/ʙᴀsᴇ (s1 = s1 in the previous entry/s2 = as in *bid the base* "challenge to run" a [phrase from the boys' game of prisoner's base]).]

While Julia is intensely curious about the contents of the letter, as a young, unmarried woman, she has to feign total indifference to it, which she makes crystal clear in the following statement, immediately preceding the above passage: "I am a maid / And would not force the letter to my view, / Since maids, in modesty, say 'no' to that / Which they would have the profferer construe 'ay'" (1.11.53-56). Quite predictably, Lucetta is well aware that Julia's initial indifference to and later irritation at having received the letter are both studied, which she reveals in her aside: "She makes it strange, but she would be best / pleased / To be so angered with another letter" (1.11.100-01). In effect, she decides to softly mock her lady's pretentiousness by virtue of teasing her with puns and, therefore, delaying the moment of yielding the letter.

Although the above passage is studded with puns directed straight at Julia, Lucetta's attack is carried out in a humorous vein so as not to offend the lady. It is, however, not only the careful selection of punning strategy but also of the puns themselves which is apparently necessary, if verbal play between the lady-in-waiting and her social superior is to be possible. Indeed, Lucetta's play on words is, all things considered, fairly subtle and innocuous, chiefly because it draws on powerful musical imagery, almost every pun having one of its meaning constituents more or less closely related to music.

The remarkable consistency in developing single imagery step-by-step with the help of puns alone, which involves skilful juggling of meanings, points to Lucetta's lively mind. At the same time, Julia's quick-thinking cannot be doubted either, given that she does not remain passive in light of the way Lucetta pits her wits against her, but rather makes an attempt to repulse the attack. In effect, despite a vastly disproportionate quantitative distribution of puns in this interaction (Julia making only 3 [*HEAVY*, *BURDEN*, *BASS/ (BASE)*] against Lucetta's 12 examples [*LIE*, *NOTE*, *SET*, *LIGHT*, *AY/I*, *HIGH*, *TUNE*, *SHARP*, *FLAT*, *MEAN*, *MEAN/MAN*, *BASS/BASE*]), Julia is certainly not totally outwitted, as there is some punning dialogue between her and her lady-in-waiting.

The following excerpt from *MAN* acts to demonstrate punning in a similar contextual setting to that in example 1 above, yet employing a different technique. It is an interaction between Hero (a lady), Margaret (her waiting gentlewoman) and Beatrice (Hero's cousin), where Hero utters two sequences only (inadvertently providing input for Margaret's pun on *STUFFED* with her second turn) and is practically a non-participatory discourse party.

(2)   *Hero*: Good morrow, coz.

     Beatrice: Good morrow, sweet Hero.

     Margaret: Why how now? Do you speak in the sick TUNE?

     Beatrice: I am out of all other TUNE, methinks.

     Margaret: Clap's into LIGHT o'Love: that goes without a BURDEN: do you
             sing it and I'll dance it.

     Beatrice: Ye light o'love with your heels, then if your husband have
             stables enough, you'll see he shall lack no BARNS.

     Margaret: Oh illegitimate construction! I scorn that with my heels.

     Beatrice: 'Tis almost five o'clock, cousin, 'tis time you were ready: by
             my troth I am exceeding ill, heigh ho.

     Margaret: For a hawk, a horse, or a husband?

     Beatrice: For the letter that begins them all, H.

     Margaret: Well, and you be not turned Turk, there's no more sailing
             by the star.

     Beatrice: What means the fool, trow?

     Margaret: Nothing I, but God send everyone their heart's desire.

     Hero: These gloves the count sent me, they are an excellent perfume.

     Beatrice: I am STUFFED, cousin, I cannot smell.

     Margaret: A maid and STUFFED! There's goodly catching of cold.

     Beatrice: Oh God help me, God help me, how long have you pro-
             fessed apprehension?

     Margaret: Ever since you left it: doth not my wit become me rarely?

     Beatrice: It is not seen enough, you should wear it in your cap: by my
             troth I am sick.

     Margaret: Get you some of this distilled *Carduus* BENEDICTUS, and lay it
             to your heart, it is the only thing for a qualm.

                                                            (1988a, III.IV.29-55)

[The above exchange pivots on the following meaning components: TUNE (s1 = melody, tone; correct musical pitch, s2 = temper, mood), LIGHT (s1 = as in *light o'love*, the name of a popular dance-tune, s2 = not heavy, s3 = wanton, promiscuous), BURDEN (s1 = bass part or undersong, s2 = heavy load), BARNS (s1 = large farm buildings, s2 = children), H/(ACHE) (s1 = letter of the alphabet/s2 = pain, soreness), STUFFED (s1 = having a heavy cold, s2 = having had sexual intercourse resulting in impregnation), BENEDICTUS/(BENEDICK) (s1 = [in full *carduus benedictus* (*Eng.* Holy Thistle)] downy, yellow-flowered annual, s2 = [etymologically (Late Latin)] blessed, well spoken of/s3 = proper name [of a character in MAN]).]

The contextual setting for the verbal play here bears a close resemblance to that in example 1 in terms of the social distance between the interacting partners, the focus of the entire exchange (and its puns) on male-female relationships and, most obviously,

the resonant musical imagery of the copied puns on *TUNE*, *LIGHT* and *BURDEN*. Nevertheless, even a brief glimpse at a quantitative juxtaposition of the females' puns (Margaret punning four and Beatrice three times) makes it possible to conclude tentatively that punning here is highly interactional and much more an instance of discourse partners trading their verbal wits in a "ping-pong" fashion than of one party being teased by another.[9]

Interestingly, it is Beatrice's initiative to open the whole punning match, which she does with the play on *TUNE*. This attack is resolutely resisted by Margaret with the puns on *LIGHT* and *BURDEN*, which are soon after reciprocated with the lady's playful use of *BARNS*. Provoked again, Beatrice responds with a brilliant homophonic pun on *H/(ACHE)*, which harmonises nicely with the alliterative style of Margaret's previous sequence. In effect, as soon as the opportunity offers itself, Beatrice is again assaulted with a fairly uncomplimentary pun on *STUFFED* and a moment later with a caustic one on *BENEDICTUS/(BENEDICK)*, alluding to her beloved.

The examination of all interactions in which the two ladies-in-waiting are actively involved points to the fact that they represent a highly homogeneous category of characters in that no major differences can be noticed between them. Accordingly, the reason why the exchange in example 2 is, unlike the preceding one, an instance of ping-pong punning seems to lie in the essentially distinct personalities of the discourse partners of the two waiting maids. These, in turn, appear to be developed principally according to the type of roles the ladies assume in the plays, Beatrice being (next to Benedick) the funniest character in *MAN* (albeit predominantly involved in practicing the wit of ideas rather than of words) and Julia, conversely, the most serious figure in *TGV*. This seems also to account for the fact that puns as pointed as that on *STUFFED* are entirely absent from all interactions with Julia. Interestingly, Hero, a serious character in *MAN*, is not addressed by her waiting gentlewoman in a punning mode at all. This, however, might be largely attributable to the fact that the play is a late comedy, where Shakespeare's infatuation with play on words is no longer as overwhelming as in his earlier pieces and its use is, accordingly, considerably more strategic.

The following two exchanges are quoted to illustrate yet another facet of a playful use of words by ladies-in-waiting, namely dirty punning.[10] At the same time, it will be argued (convincingly, we hope) that the strategies chosen to communicate bawdry in these examples differ sharply according to the type of interlocutors and, strictly speaking, their gender.

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[9] Under Chiaro's (1992, 114) definition, "ping-pong punning" is a label "used to describe what happens when the participants of a conversation begin punning on every possible item in each other's speech which may contain the slightest ambiguity."

[10] A single instance of a smutty pun (namely *STUFFED*) has been presented already in example 2, yet, unlike here, lewdness was not the organising principle of the interaction quoted there. This is what is believed to make the use of the pun different from that of the puns in the present passage, which work in tandem, rather than in isolation, to build vivid sexual imagery.

(3)   *Lucetta*: What fashion, madam, shall I make your breeches?
       Julia: (…) why, ev'n what fashion thou best likes, Lucetta.
       Lucetta: You must needs have them with a CODPIECE, madam.
       Julia: Out, out, Lucetta, that will be ill-favoured.
       Lucetta: A round hose, madam, now's not worth a PIN
              Unless you have a CODPIECE to STICK PINS on.
       Julia: Lucetta, as thou lov'st me, let me have
              What thou think'st meet and is most MANNERLY.

(1990, II.VII.49, 52-58)

[The following meanings form the basis for the above punning: CODPIECE (s1 = [indelicately conspicuous] decorative pouch attached to man's breeches to cover the genitals, s2 = phallus), PIN(s) (s1 = sth insignificant, trivial, s2 = small piece[s] of metal used for fastening and decorating pieces of clothes, s3 = phallus [phalli]), STICK (s1 = stab with a sharp or pointed object, s2 = have sexual intercourse), MANNERLY/(MANLY) (s1 = well-mannered, cultivated/s2 = befitting a male; masculine, virile).]

While it may be arguable that Lucetta intends a pun on each word emphasised above (especially that the play on STICK would be asyntactic,[11] i.e., impaired in a sense), the overall sexual imagery is rather powerful. Indeed, it seems barely coincidental that words carrying heavily sexual overtones are so densely packed in a passage as short as this one, especially in view of Julia's fairly telling pun MANNERLY/(MANLY), which seems to indicate that they have been successfully decoded by her. At the same time, it is perfectly possible to interpret this interaction as being innocent, devoid of any indecent undercurrents. Apparently, Lucetta's punning strategy was based on making the context (linguistic or otherwise) for the under-the-surface meanings less forceful than that for the primary meanings, which produced the effect of covert play on words.

While in the interactions examined explicit sexual punning between the waiting maids and the ladies is non-existent, most probably due to its inappropriateness in such a socially asymmetric composition of interlocutors, it proves to be perfectly possible in a different participant configuration, as demonstrated in the following exchange:

(4)   *Margaret*: Will you then write me a sonnet in praise of my beauty?
       Benedick: In so high a STYLE, Margaret, that no man living shall COME
              OVER it, for in most COMELY truth thou deservest it.
       Margaret: To have no man COME OVER me, why, shall I always keep
              below stairs?

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[11] The term has been coined by Leech, for whom it denotes a playful use of words, where "one of the meanings does not actually fit into the syntactic context" (1969, 211). Commenting on the following words of Mercutio from *Romeo and Juliet*: "Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a *GRAVE* man" (*RJ*, III.I.95-96), Leech observes that "the sinister meaning of grave hinted at here is that of *grave* as a noun, although in the given construction 'a grave man', it can only be an adjective" (1969, 211).

> *Benedick*: Thy wit is as quick as the greyhound's mouth, it catches.
> *Margaret*: And yours, as blunt as the fencers' foils, which hit, but hurt
>   not.
> *Benedick*: A most manly wit, Margaret, it will not hurt a woman: and so
>   I pray thee call Beatrice, I give thee the *BUCKLERS*.
> *Margaret*: Give us the *SWORDS*, we have *BUCKLERS* of our own.
> *Benedick*: If you use them, Margaret, you must put in the *PIKES* with a
>   vice, and they are dangerous weapons for maids.
>
>   (1988a, V.II.3-15)

[The semantic composition of the above puns is the following: *STYLE/(STILE)* (s1 = mode of expression, wording/s2 = arrangement of steps to climb over a fence), *COME/COMELY* (s1 = as in *come over* "cross, step over"/s2 = agreeable; suitable), *COME OVER* (s1 = s1 in the above entry, s2 = have sexual intercourse with a woman), *BUCKLERS* (s1 = as in *give the bucklers* "yield, admit defeat," s2 = small round shields, s3 = pudenda), *SWORDS* (s1 = weapon, s2 = phalli), *PIKES* (s1 = short spikes screwed into the centre of bucklers, s2 = phalli).]

In the above interaction, the gentlewoman's discourse partner is for the first time a male, which seems to be the key factor in the fact that punning is, all things considered, carried out more blatantly here. While it is Benedick who initiates the whole game with his two puns *STYLE/(STILE)* and *COME/COMELY*, the first smutty pun is Margaret's. The forcefulness of the play on *COME OVER* is surely the effect of the success in providing equally powerful contexts for primary and secondary meanings of the phrasal verb, which is, in turn, achieved by virtue of the syntagmatic / horizontal arrangement of the pun components at play, where contexts for s1 and s2 are developed individually, i.e., in separate sequences and by different characters. In consequence, there is no doubt that the meaning attributed to *COME OVER* by Benedick is neutral, whereas Margaret's intention behind using it is to communicate bawdry.

In contrast, the constituent parts of the sexual pun on *BUCKLERS* are aligned paradigmatically/vertically (q.v. section 2), which is somewhat counter-intuitive, given that the word is uttered twice. The explanation for this apparent inconsistency emerges from the fact that it is actually a double pun, involving altogether three meanings of the word *bucklers*, *viz.* idiomatic (as in *to give the bucklers* "admit defeat"), literal ("small round shields"), both of which are neutral, and sexual ("pudenda"). Whereas the interplay between the first two meanings is, beyond a shadow of doubt, arranged syntagmatically, the risqué undertones are hinted at in a paradigmatic fashion.

Margaret's final bawdy play, that on *SWORDS*, is likewise an instance of vertical punning. Although the strategy of communicating indecent meanings by virtue of paradigmatic puns (where contexts for neutral and sexual meanings are tightly entwined) proves less effective than employing a syntagmatic play to this end, the forcefulness of Margaret's initial pun on *COME OVER* leaves no doubt as to her later intention in *SWORDS* and *BUCKLERS*.

A closer look at the exchanges in examples 3 and 4 points to the conclusion that the techniques implemented by the ladies-in-waiting to develop contexts for sexual meanings in puns are fairly distinct, Lucetta's verbal play being, all in all, less readily accessible and, thus, more doubtful than Margaret's. These techniques seem to echo Hausmann's (1974, 81-93) contradistinction between the *Text-Text* and *Text-Metatext* types of accessing double/multiple meanings in puns. In the former case surface-level and underlying meanings are claimed to occur to recipients simultaneously (which resembles Margaret's punning style), whereas in the latter there is some time lag between them, the primary meaning understandably being anterior to the secondary/tertiary/quaternary (as in Lucetta's strategy).[12]

The final example is provided as an illustration of yet another typical context for the playful use of language by the ladies-in-waiting, that is, the bitter mockery of their interlocutors' pompous style of speech, hardly conducive to spontaneous and unpretentious juggling with words. It is a dialogue from *TN* between Maria and her lady's wooer, Sir Andrew, witnessed by Sir Toby, Maria's suitor, who remains a mute party until the final turn of the interaction.

(5)   1. *Sir Andrew*: And you part so, mistress, I would I might never draw
                       sword again. Fair lady, do you think you have fools in HAND?

2. *Maria*: Sir, I have not you by th'HAND.

3. *Sir Andrew*: Marry, but you shall have, and here's my HAND.

4. *Maria*: Now, sir, thought is free. I pray you bring your HAND to
            th'buttery-bar and let it drink.

5. *Sir Andrew*: Wherefore, sweetheart? What's your metaphor?

6. *Maria*: It's DRY, sir.

7. *Sir Andrew*: Why, I think so: I am not such an ass but I can keep
                 my hand DRY. But what's your jest?

8. *Maria*: A DRY jest, sir.

9. *Sir Andrew*: Are you full of them?

10. *Maria*: AY, sir, *I* have them at my fingers' ends; marry, now *I* let go
             your hand, *I* am barren.

11. *Sir Toby*: O knight, thou lack'st a cup of canary.

(1988b, 1.iii.53-68)

[The meanings at play above include: HAND (s1 = as in *in hand* "being done or dealt with," s2 = the end part of an arm), DRY (s1 = thirsty or thirst-making, s2 = free from moisture or liquid, s3 = lacking sexual vigour, s4 = [of a jest] dull, flat, s5 = caustic, biting), AY/I (s1 = form of expressing assent/s2 = personal pronoun).]

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[12] Importantly, Hausmann's (1974) differentiation is not valid in instances of horizontal homophony and paronymy.

Although carried out in a humorous mode, the above exchange is a frontal punning assault against Sir Andrew who, failing to make a single pun throughout, is easily outwitted by the waiting maid, which he honestly admits in the following commentary on his own performance: "Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian / or an ordinary man has, but I am a great eater of beef, and I believe / that does harm to my wit" (1.111.70-72). Launching the attack, Maria is well aware that his wits are blunt ("He's a very fool / and a prodigal" [1.111.19-20]), yet, in her opinion, they have not dulled as a result of eating habits, but rather of a peculiar approach to language which leaves little room for lively experimentation with words. Some picture of this approach emerges already from the following observation made by Sir Toby, Sir Andrew's admirer, for a change: "He ... speaks three or four languages *word for word* without a book" (1.111.21-22; emphasis added). Worse than that, his English is heavily overburdened with sophisticated words of Latin and French provenance, which produces the effect of stilted style, highly unfavourable to spontaneous linguistic phenomena, such as puns.

Despite a considerable social distance between the two interactants, Maria, deeply irritated by Sir Andrew's pretentiousness, undertakes to outmanoeuvre him with a series of puns, at least some of which he does not seem to follow. Initially, then, the gentleman is attacked with the play on the word *HAND*, whose idiomatic meaning intended by him is cleverly turned into a literal one, and subsequently with an elaborate, and much more pointed, pun on *DRY*, which rests on no fewer than five meanings of the word. In turn six the semantic interplay in *DRY* occurs between the senses "thirsty" and "lacking sexual vigour," which Sir Andrew, though suspecting a jest, apparently fails to decode, interpreting the word still differently as "free from moisture." What is more, he also seems to miss the play on *DRY* in turn eight, where the surface-level meaning ("caustic," "biting") is a fitting description of Maria's style of jesting and the underlying one ("dull," "flat") alludes to her discourse partner's intellectual weakness.

4. Concluding Remarks

Hopefully this article has demonstrated that punning practiced by the female figures investigated here represents a unique brand of verbal play, not only in terms of the selection of puns but also of the contexts in which they are embedded. The key markers of the waiting women's playful use of language are provided in summary form below:

a) The three ladies-in-waiting examined do not fit into the category of immensely prolific punsters and produce lengthy stretches of discourse devoid of puns. However, their play on language, involving highly skilful twisting of meanings, points to the fact that they were meant by Shakespeare to be perceived as sharp-witted and verbally dexterous figures.

b) With the exception of Feste, a clown, all the punning partners of the discussed ladies-in-waiting are their social superiors. What is more, all the waiting maids in the works

scrutinised are involved in playing verbal games with ladies, who accordingly become their most characteristic punning partners.

c) Punning strategies in the examples discussed are, by and large, carefully tailored to the type of interacting parties (whereas gentlemen are frontally attacked with puns, ladies are only gently teased with them; likewise, indecent meanings are communicated much more subtly in exchanges with socially superior females than with males).

d) Two cognitive domains extensively and cleverly exploited by the ladies-in-waiting include music and love/sex, the former being the source and the latter the target domain.

e) Playing with words in the material examined is principally calculated to mock the pretentiousness of the discourse partners of the waiting maids, i.e., affected behaviour towards males in the case of ladies and mannered use of language in the case of gentlemen. Despite the fact that punning is, accordingly, mostly assaultive, and the attacked parties are usually outmanoeuvred, spectacular trading of wit occasionally takes place as well.

f) The use of the puns *TUNE*, *LIGHT* and *BURDEN* by both Lucetta in *TGV* and Margaret in *MAN* may point to Shakespeare's predilection for copying puns and their contextual settings from one play to another. While most interesting in itself, the practice would require a separate, systematic treatment, if any emerging patterns of its use were to be observed and a broader picture of the phenomenon built up.

g) The very fact of low characters punning with socially high-ranking figures may be regarded as fairly tangible evidence of a high status of verbal play in Elizabethan times. Otherwise, playing language games in such a socially asymmetric configuration of interlocutors would be most probably considered a breach of etiquette.

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