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intellectual biography of Wagner based on such studies as yet exists, they can hardly be blamed. As Alfred Dürr once said of Bach scholarship in the 1960s, research on Wagner at the start of the new millenium is, at least concerning important parts of his life, *wegen Umbau geschlossen* – closed for alterations.

Rocco Coronato

OF CUCUMBERS AND MEN.
The Male Bride from Plautus to Jonson

"For a man to write well", writes Jonson in *Timber*, "there are required three Necessaries. To reade the best Authors, observe the best Speakers: and much exercise of his owne style". Could one ask for a better manifesto of Jonson's poetics? Read the best authors he profusely did, often taking care to annotate his writings for the reader's benefit with the relevant references to the classics. The scene is thus set for Jonson's didactic, occasionally pompous classicism, where invention is abolished and imitation supreme. A few lines later, Jonson alights on the question of the study of words, one of the first "distempers" of learning, according to Bacon: "Nothing is more ridiculous, then to make an Author a *Dictator*, as the schooles have done *Aristotle*". That Jonson definitely refrains from making Aristotle a dictator, but rather reads him in his own idiosyncratic fashion is evident from the oft-quoted passage on laughter and comedy. Jonson seems naturally to state the case for the classicist *agelast*, the man who will not laugh: "Nor, is the moving of laughter alwaies the end of *Comedy*, that is rather a fowling for the peoples delight, or their fooling". What is often overlooked is the follow-up to this. Jonson does go on to quote Aristotle, but not the usual definition of the risible as the purgation of turpitude without pain. Instead, he focuses on the turpitude that is a product of laughter itself: "For, as *Aristotle* saies rightly, the moving of laughter is a fault in Comedie, a kind of turpitude, that depraves some part of a mans nature without a disease". Then he lists a few examples of comic actions that his ideal playwright should not indulge in: "As a wry face without paine moves laughter, or a deformed vizard, or a rude Clowne,

drest in a Ladies habit, and using her actions, wee dislike, and scorne such representations".[1]

Could the author of *Epicoene*, based precisely on the equivocation caused by a "Clowne, drest in a Ladies habit, and using her actions", be serious on this point? In other words, how do classical and Renaissance theories of comedy relate to the practice of an Elizabethan or Jacobean playwright? The question involves both the contrast between the dictates of the theorists and the performance of the practictioners, and the differences between the European, especially Italian Renaissance discourse on laughter and the relatively less complex theoretical context of Jonsonian England.

An overview of the vast, ever-expanding body of studies on gender disguises and reversals, which over the last twenty years have moved from the margins to the centre of literary criticism, lies beyond the remit of the present article. If I can venture the briefest of summaries, crossdressing has been preferentially associated with the underlying discourse on larger familial, social and political structures. In this perspective, it is seen as a key to the deconstruction of the theory and practice of power: between genders and also between classes. In these readings, the social context is the ultimate protagonist, determining the use that is made of conventions like the male bride or other festive and carnivalesque customs such as the *charivari*, as variously mediated by the ideological condition of the texts's author, patron and addressees.

Such a critical paradigm is clearly applicable to the texts, English and Italian, which I want to examine (and no doubt to their Latin sources too). Thus, in Italian Renaissance adaptations of the male bride motif there is a clear relationship between the strongly didactic rewriting of Plautus' *Casina*, with its insistence on social harmony, and the fact that they were produced for the consumption of courts such as Ferrara and Urbino. And the link is no less clear in the dissolution of that ideal (or if we prefer spurious) harmony in Aretino's *Marescalco*, dominated as this is by the absent Duke, prime mover and ultimate resolver of the play-action. Here, in a play which, exceptionally, hinges not on the attempt to satisfy sexual desire but on a *beffa*, a practical joke, that is an end in itself, the discomfiting of the eponymous ducal farrier actually calls into question the very project of purgation of the passions that the *beffa* was supposed to achieve. Similarly, *Epicoene* stages a peculiar form of *charivari*, and the

[1] BEN JONSON, *Timber: or, Discoveries*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965[3]), vol. VIII, 1697-699, p. 615; 2095-97, p. 627; 2629-636, p. 643.

whole comedy can be read as a protracted carnival at the expenses of the eccentric Morose (though the conclusion is hardly festive, coinciding rather with the ominous sense of dissolution portended by Aretino)

What I want to argue, however, is that contemporary critical discourses and their reification through the canon may play a distinct and in many respects autonomous role in shaping a text. I can think of no reason, in fact, why we should not take Jonson's pronouncement on its own terms. For when a learned author like Jonson took up the male bride motif he directly engaged in a dialogue with Aristotelian poetics and past comic practice (classical and Renaissance). These provided a context no less natural and obvious to him than the cross-gender shows that took place in the streets at Carnival. But to stress the importance of the classical tradition in relation to Jonson does not necessarily imply adherence to the view that he is an academic classicist. On the contrary, it is my contention that Jonson's rewriting of crossdressing ultimately undermines the classic and Renaissance belief in the purgation of eccentric passions through obscene laughter (laughing at obscenity, but also a laughter that may itself be in some way obscene) where "eccentricity" does not denote deviance from a particular society – Renaissance Ferrara or Jacobean London – but from an ideal audience of the learned. Laughter, in other words, as a means of identifying, circumscribing, constructing a "centre" synonimous with a community of the mind, an elite the sign of whose superiority is its familiarity with classical poetics and Renaissance readings of them.

This article thus seeks to view an instance of theatrical crossdressing through the perspective of comic theory, rather than social context. My emphasis is on the construction of the risible object, the interpretation of individuality as a passion that requires delimitation through a scene of ridicule. Given this assumption, I hope also to have answered a second potential objection, concerning the relative absence of theoretical debate in Elizabethan and Jacobean England compared to the vast quantity produced elsewhere in Europe, and particularly in Italy. Jonson himself quotes Aristotle and Scaliger, and there can be no doubt of the pervasiveness of the *Poetics* and its commentaries. This does not imply slavish adherence to a norm, however: rather, it offers another context of interpretation, where Jonson's deletion from the "dramatic experience" of that sense of shame as the means to personal change and redemption which in the humanist tradition had provided the justification for comic crossdressing, testifies to yet another turn in the millennial story of the male bride.

* * *

As a staple of comic crossdressing, the motif of the male bride is simple enough: a night setting, the libidinous husband thrashed by a masculine "girl" and the authors of the obscene ruse conspiratorially jeering at him.[2] Despite – or perhaps because of – this apparent simplicity, it pervades comedy from Plautus to Benny Hill. The *Casina* in fact provides the literary archetype of the male bride motif for the Renaissance. Its plot hinges on the generational conflict between the *senex amator*, the old man in love, and his son, supported by the mother. The prize at stake is the eponymous slave girl, who will never appear on stage. In their contention, both father and son are vicariously represented by their slaves: whichever of the two weds Casina will open the way to her bed for his master. Casina's hand is assigned by lot to the father's slave. Yet for both servant and master the wedding night turns to cruel farce, as they are beaten by the other slave, who has dressed up as Casina.

An evident problem with the reconstruction of the influence of *Casina* on later works is the number of textual lacunae that affect the bed scene (*Casina*, ll. 884-87, 901-12^b, 922-29). Shortly before this, it is falsely reported that Casina, objecting to her forced marriage, has seized a sword and threatens to kill any bridegroom meaning to spend the night with her, an episode that justifies a plethora of obscene puns on the *gladium* (*Casina* ll. 670-71). In his account of the wedding night the groom unequivocally confesses his cruel deception, as he seeks to embrace the coy, much too silent bride:

CL. * est?
OL. Oh, erat maximum.
* ferrum ne haberet metui, id quaerere occoepi *
dum gladium quaero, * ne habeat, arripio capulum.
sed cum cogito, non habuit gladium, nam esset frigidus
CL. Eloquere.
OL. At pudet.
CL. Num radix fuit.
OL. Non fuit.
CL. Nun cucumis?

[2] Anthropologists tend to relate it to the marriage custom of the false bride as a false target, intended to ward off the evil eye. See S. TRENKNER, "A Popular Short Story: The Source of Diphilos' *Kleroumenoi* (the *Casina* of Plautus)", *Mnemosyne*, 6 (1953), pp. 216-22.

OL. Profecto hercle * non fuit quicquam holerum.
nisi, quidquid erat, calamitas profecto attigerat numquam.
ita quidquid erat, grande erat. (*Casina* ll. 906-14)[3]

(CL. * Is it? OL. Oh, it was enormous! I was afraid she had a sword; I began searching her * while I'm searching for her sword * to see if she has one, I get hold of a hilt. On second thoughts, though, she didn't have a sword, for that would have been cold. CL. Go on. OL. I'm ashamed to. CL. It was not a radish, was it? OL. No. CL. Or a cucumber? OL. Heavens! Certainly not! * No vegetable at all, at any rate, whatever it was, certainly no blight had ever touched it. It was full grown, whatever it was.)

Denys Lambin, one of the most important Renaissance editors of Plautus, provides a full, if somewhat unnecessary explanation of these phallic allusions, and then ventures that the missing words had been foolishly omitted or deleted because of their obscenity, adding somewhat acidly that much as he loves modesty (*verecundia*) himself, he is wise enough to apply it only to his own writings.[4] Modesty was indeed to be the by-word in subsequent adaptations of *Casina*, where the Renaissance theory of laughter was called upon to reconcile the individual eccentricity of the dotard with the communal body of the city.

* * *

Renaissance treatises on laughter invariably originate from the brief passage in Aristotle's *Poetics* where the ridiculous is defined as a category of the

[3] The text and line references quoted are those of *Plautus*, 5 vols, ed. P. Nixon (Cambridge, Mass.-London: Heinemann, The Loeb Classical Library, 1959), Vol. II. Plautus' dependence on the preceding tradition is difficult to establish. It is possibile that Diphilos' *Kleroumenoi*, Plautus' lost Greek source, also featured a transvestite scene, in which case Plautus may only have needed to spice it with obscene elements derived from Atellan farce, such as the description of male genitalia as a sword or its hilt: compare the reconstruction by W. T. MCCARY, "The Comic Tradition and Comic Structure in Diphilos' *Kleroumenoi*", *Hermes*, 101 (1973), pp. 195-200, with *Casina*, ll. 451-66, 733-39, 875-77). But according to other scholars Diphilos probably resorted to an extant narrative that ridiculed an old man in love, and the resemblance between Plautus and Ovid may be similarly explained as a common derivation from an earlier oral or written tradition (TRENKNER, "A Popular Short Story", pp. 221-22).

[4] *M. Accius Plautus ex fide, atque auctoritate complurium librorum manuscriptorum Opera Dionys. Lambini Monstroliensi emendatus* (Coloniae, 1577), p. 257.

shameful which involves no denigration: "the mask [...] that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain" (1449^{a}:35), a view endorsed in Jonson's own time by George Puttenham, for whom laughter derives from both "a certaine absurditie and disproportion to nature, and the opinion of the hearer or beholder to make the thing ridiculous". Yet the application of such principles to obscenity is somewhat problematic. Are a male bride and a beaten *senex* harmlessly disproportionate spectacles? Bernardo Pino da Cagli, writing a few years before Puttenham, exhorts playwrights to avoid introducing characters that might encourage the audience to lechery: and as an example of conduct which should not be represented he cites the amorous dotard who strives to look young and handsome – the plot of *Casina* in a nutshell – to be censured because of the dangerous disproportion between his age and his deeds and words[5]. This insistence on decorum goes right back to Cicero, who adduces *turpitudo* and *deformitas* as legitimate sources of urbane laughter, but banishes *obscoenitas* from the oratorial domain as the indecorous, cheap foolery best left to street entertainers. Renaissance theorists of comedy will thus seek to balance the need to entertain, make audiences laugh, and the ultimate didactic aims of exposing the follies and vices of humankind. If, as Gian Giorgio Trissino states, adapting to the risible Aristotle's concept of tragic catharsis, comedy is the imitation of the vilest and worst actions and habits in order to teach us virtue, then it achieves redemption precisely through laughter and jesting. Laughter, even where directed at obscenity, effects the purgation of the meaner passions, and persuades the audience to value the decency and honesty of urbane life.[6] But even before the theorists had moved in, at the end of Machiavelli's *Clizia* (1525), Sofronia had reminded her errant husband (and the audience) of the didactic purpose of his discomfiture: "a volerti fare

[5] BERNARDO PINO DA CAGLI, *Breve considerazione intorno al componimento de la comedia de' nostri tempi*, first published in 1572, now in *Trattati di poetica e retorica*, ed. B. Weinberg, 4 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1970-1974), vol. II, p. 638.

[6] See respectively ARISTOTLE, *Poetics* 1449^{a}, 31-35 (Cambridge, Mass.-London: Heinemann, The Loeb Classical Library: 1995); CICERO, *De Oratore* 2.58.236, 242; 2.61.252; 2.64.260 (Cambridge, Mass.-London: Heinemann, The Loeb Classical Library: 1948); GEORGE PUTTENHAM, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589), 3.24, p. 244; G. G. TRISSINO, *La quinta e la sesta divisione della poetica* [c.1549], now in *Trattati di poetica e retorica*, vol. II, p. 57. For a comprehensive account, see M. A. SCREECH and R. CALDER, "Some Renaissance Attitudes to Laughter", *Humanism in France*, ed. A. H. T. Levi (Manchester University Press: 1970); D. MENAGER, *Le Renaissance et le rire* (Paris: 1995).

ravedere non ci era altro modo se non giugnerti in sul fatto con tanti testimoni che tu te ne vergognassi" (the only way to bring you to your senses was to catch you in the act, before so many witnesses that you would be shamed and embarassed by it).[7]

What is thus being envisaged is a precise redemptive sequence: the sexual disproportion underlined by obscenity (the all too obvious virility of the presumed Casina which casts a ludicrous light on the elderly lover's unseemly passion) promotes laughter and this in turn brings about self-purgation. The moral and physical deformity of the comic personae, especially where vividly rendered by obscenity, drive home the moral content of the fable through laughter. Grafting the Horatian *prodesse et delectare* onto the Aristotelian principle of "honest" laughter, Bernardo Pino da Cagli argues that the *ridicoli* arising from such humorous disproportion adorn comedy so that it can profit and delight without hurting its audience.[8]

But as well as on disproportion the risible depends on an element of surprise. Cicero had underlined the unexpected as a component of humour: we almost take delight in our failure to understand when a joke works by confounding our expectations. In his wake, Vincenzo Maggi exalts *admiratio* as a lawful requisite of the risible alongside harmless deformity, attainable either through depicting a new kind of turpitude or a novel way of representing a familiar one. The figurative expression of obscenities is a favoured device of this second kind. Thus Sebastiano Minturno points to the representation of the animate through the inanimate (as in the Plautine servant's description of his supposed bride's unexpected tumescence), and Ludovico Castelvetro theorises this kind of allusiveness as a form of comic deception:

> But it is to be noted that [indecencies] do not make us laugh when they are set openly before the eyes of the body or of the mind in the presence of others; rather they overcome us with shame [...] Then the aforesaid things make us laugh when they are presented [...] under a veil, by means

[7] NICOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Clizia* 1.2, 5.3, in *Tutte le opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. F. Flora, C. Cordié (Milan: Mondadori, 1956). English translation from *The Literary Works of Machiavelli*, ed. J. R. Hale (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 68, 76, 116. The relationship between the two characters is investigated in SALVATORE DE MARIA, "Nicomaco and Sofronia: Fortune and Désire in Machiavelli's *Clizia*", *The Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 14:2 (1983), pp. 201-13.

[8] *Breve considerazione*, pp. 636-38.

of which we are able to give the appearance of laughing not at the indecency but at something else.[9]

In practice however, Italian Renaissance adaptations of *Casina* repeatedly threaten to strip away this veil, overstepping the boundary between purgation through the laughter attendant on the description of the unexpected outcome of the wedding night, and the obscenely graphic rendition of the male bride's attributes. The first recorded translation of *Casina*, by Girolamo Berardo (1502), was staged in Ferrara during the celebrations for Lucretia Borgia's wedding. Berardo freely paraphrases Plautus in long-winded Italian verse, and the bed scene is not immune from the tendency to inflation. Cross-questioned on the night's events, the slave is reticent, pleading decency, but his female interlocutors run through a catalogue of vegetable and animal synonyms for the penis, finally climaxing on a firm, well-filled sausage ("Un bon zambudello duro e infiato").[10] As in Plautus, the final agnition of Casina is harbinger to the correct rites of marriage and the lawful relief of male tumescence: obscenity is merely a prelude to the proper, heterosexual consummation of desire. What Berardo underscores is that as well as exorcising improper, homoerotic passions, obscenity also elicits that sense of shame which re-inscribes the (now) disabused lovers within the order of Renaissance decorum: the outcome is not so much admiration at the spectacle as a spur to self-reformation.

The dotard's passion is an inversion of order, and as such it has to be contrastively uprooted by the ludicrous inversion of sex roles. In a tit-for-tat retaliation, comic gender reversal exorcises the unlawful disruption introduced by amorous dotards. This application of transvestitism as a panacea against inversion also surfaces in Bernardo Dovizi's *Calandria* (1513) and *Gl'ingannati*, attributed collectively to the Accademici Intronati of Siena (1531),[11] where sexual inversion is paradoxically presented as a

[9] LUDOVICO CASTELVETRO, *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta*, Seconda parte principale, 5 (1449ᵃ, 31-35), trans. Allan H. Gilbert, *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (New York: 1940), p. 314. Other references are to VINCENZO MAGGI, *De ridiculis* [c. 1550], in *Trattati di poetica e retorica*, vol. II, pp. 302, 305, 309; ANTONIO SEBASTIANO MINTURNO, *De poeta* (Venezia: Rampazetti, 1559), pp. 278, 308, 309, 326;

[10] GIROLAMO BERARDO, *Cassina. Comedia di Plauto tradotta di latino in volgare, intitolata la Cassina, nuovamente stampata* (Venezia: Zoppino, 1530), f. 46ʳ⁻ᵛ.

[11] References and quotations from: BERNARDO DOVIZI DA BIBBIENA, *La Calandria*, in *Il teatro italiano*, ed. G. Davico Bonino, 2 vols (Turin: 1977), Vol. 2.1, *La Commedia del Cinquecento*, and to ACCADEMICI INTRONATI, *Gli Ingannati*, in *Ibid*; the translations are mine). An exploration of the theme of doubles may be found in PAMELA D. STEWART, "A Play on Doubles. The *Calandria*", *Modern Language Studies*, 14:1

means of re-establishing the conventional order: only by inverting one's own sex can each twin attain the full recognition of his/her actual role. The immediate source for both plays is the *Menaechmi*, but the same-sex twins of the original here become brother and sister, and the sexual ambivalence that this generates can clearly be traced back to *Casina*. In *Calandria*, the male twin is represented at one point as a hermaphrodite enjoying both female gender and male root ("Il sesso da donna e la radice d'uomo", *Calandria* III.17). Because of the substitution between twins, the bed scene confounds the expectations of the frustrated female lover, who certifies the material absence of the "male root" by her groping in the dark (*Calandria* IV.2). The *Ingannati* similarly portrays a temporary imbalance, whose expression takes on sexual connotations. Typically, the anxiety to ascertain the identity of each character brings into play the vegetable euphemisms of *Casina*:

> Io ebbi voglia di chiarirmi se era o maschio o femina. Avendolo la padrona disteso in sul letto, e chiamandomi ch'io la aiutasse mentre ch'ella gli teneva le mani, egli si lasciava vincere. Lo sciolsi dinanzi: e, a un tratto, mi sentii percuotere non so che cosa in su le mani; né cognobi se egli era un pestaglio o una carota o pur quell'altra cosa. Ma, sia quel che si vuole, e' non è cosa che abbia sentita la grandine. (*Gl' Ingannati*, IV:5)
>
> (I had a mind to find out if it was a boy or a girl. My lady had him laid on a bed, and then called to me for help while she kept his hands; he let us prevail on him. I unloosened his front: and then suddenly I felt I know not what hit my hands; nor could I make out if it was a pestle, a carrot or that other thing. Whatever it was, it had not suffered from hail.)

In both comedies then, the humorous indecorum resulting from the multiplication of disguises and dénouements induces communal laughter to heal the disruptions occasioned by untamed passions.

In less redemptive mode, Machiavelli's very influential *Clizia* shifts away from the humanistic belief in profit and delight through the administration of measured obscenity, staging in its place a sombre invitation to senile moderation, where the humiliation of the protagonist tests the very limits of comedy.[12] As in Plautus, the obscene jest effects

(1984), pp. 22-32; ANGELA GUIDOTTI, "Il doppio gioco della *Calandria*", *Modern Language Notes*, 104 (1989), pp. 98-116.

[12] R. L. MARTINEZ, "Benefit of Absence: Machiavellian valediction in *Clizia*", in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. A. Russell Ascoli, V. Kahn (Ithaca-London: Cornell U. P., 1993), p. 118.

both the punishment and the conversion of the dotard after his surrender to the domineering wife. Again, the bed scene is not directly staged, for in keeping with Castelvetro's dictum such shows are to be seen as through a veil. What Machiavelli explicitly stresses instead is the social inversion represented even by the legitimate laughter inherent in the figure of the male bride. At first the scene seems to follow closely the Plautine original, as the old man approaches the presumed girl. Foreplay hardly proves satisfying, as Clizia almost breaks his rib. Having decided to wait silently for the morning to come, he is disturbed by the literal upsurge of Plautine obscenity:

> io mi sento stoccheggiare un fianco, e darmi qua, sotto el codrione, cinque o' sei colpi de' maladetti. Io, così fra il sonno, vi corsi subito con la mano, e trovai una cosa soda ed acuta, di modo che, tutto spaventato, mi gittai fuora dal letto, ricordandomi di quello pugnal, che Clizia aveva il di preso, per darmi con esso. (*Clizia* V:2)
>
> (I suddenly felt a stick hit me in the side, and then give me five or six great blows in the back, below the waist! Half asleep, I quickly put my hand down and found something hard and pointed that made me scramble out of bed in a panic, for I remembered the knife Clizia had picked up the previous day, to stab me with.)

The conclusion insists on derision, as Nicomaco calls for his servant, and a light, only to see first, where he had expected a girl, another of his male servants sitting up in bed, naked, and making obscene gestures, and then the two servants join together to mock him and spread the news of his discomfiture: "alla mia presenzia, or si dicevano villania, or ridevano; dipoi, così vestiti a bardosso, se n'andorno, e credo che sieno iti a trovare le donne, e tutti debbono ridere. E così ognuno rida, e Nicomaco pianga!" (They insulted and made fun of me to my face, and then, with their clothes thrown on anyhow, off they went; I think they went to find the women, and they'll all celebrate. So laugh, the lot of you, while Nicomaco weeps!). According to the convention, the ridiculousness of cross-gender disguise serves to expose eccentricity: Machiavelli completes the progression by linking laughter to the inversion of social hierarchy. Nicomaco's exclusion from general laughter equates with his eccentricity, and the male bride, despite the blatantly homosexual connotations, sadly restores the established moral order, where marriage becomes only the young.

Clizia proved a more immediate source to Italian playwrights than *Casina* itself. The subsequent, largely repetitive works belonging to this tradition enlarge upon the unnatural love contest between father and son

and the recognition of the girl. At the last moment before moral corruption, sexual incongruity is laughed out of existence through the hackneyed adaptation of Plautine obscenity. The "surprising variety of treatment"[13] found by a critic in the comedies modelled on *Casina* applies only to their plot variations, not to any real difference in the kind of purgation on offer. In Lodovico Dolce's *Il ragazzo* (1541) for example, the disguise of the male bride, mirrored by a girl disguised as a boy, eventually leads to the recognition of the boy as the girl's sister; the bed scene, clearly derived from Machiavelli, reproduces the vegetable heuristics of the *Calandria* when the old man, "giunto al fornir delle cosce, [trova] al suo luogo quella radice per cui si conosce l'uomo dalla femina" (having come to the intersection of thighs, finds there that root by which you recognize man from woman). A similar revisitation of Plautine phallic exuberance occurs in Giovan Battista Della Porta's *La fantesca* (1592), where the discovery of cross-gender disguise under-scores the old man's sexual deficiency, as the "garden" he hopes to enter turns out to be somewhat unexpectedly furnished: "Che erbe piccine? Anzi, mi diè tra mano... [...] Dico ch'era più maschio ch'io, tanto maschio che n'aresti fatto tre maschi" (Anything but delicate plants. I found myself holding... He was more man than I, such a man as you could make three men out of him). In *L'errore* (1556), Giovan Battista Gelli bases his plot on a mistaken address, and reverses the cross-dressing roles so that the dotard is himself dressed up as a girl and sent to his wife, all too ready to rebuke him for such an immodest spectacle: "un uomo di sessanta anni passati, andar da dì vestito da donna, per Firenze, senza maschera" (a man of sixty years and some, parading as a woman through the Florentine streets, by day, without even the pretext of a masquerading). Or sexual disguises can be associated with a series of commercial exchanges, with bodies, clothes, dowries and property all changing hands, as in Giovan Battista Cini's aptly titled *Baratto* (the barter; 1577), where however the conclusion is no less conventional.[14] While these and other imitations can prove exuberant in the multiplication of disguises and dénouements, the persistence of the Plautine male bride becomes a

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[13] B. M. CORRIGAN, "*Il Capriccio*: an Unpublished Italian Renaissance Comedy and Its Analogues", *Studies in the Renaissance*, 5 (1958), p. 78.

[14] See respectively LUDOVICO DOLCE, *Il ragazzo* (1541), IV.1, in *Commedie del Cinquecento*, 2 vols, ed. I. Sanesi (Bari: Laterza, 1910), vol. II; G. B. DELLA PORTA, *La fantesca*, V.4, in Id., *Commedie*, ed. V. Spampanato (Bari: Laterza, 1910); G. B. GELLI, *L'errore*, in Id., *Opere*, ed. I. Sanesi (Torino, 1952), 5.1; G. B. CINI, *Il baratto*, ed. M. L. Doglio (Torino: Einaudi, 1972); the translations are mine.

cliché solution for disentangling the plots through compliance with the convention of restorative laughter.

In Italian Renaissance adaptations of *Casina*, the bed scene constitutes the high point of comically mistaken expectations. Wheras it ought to reaffirm patriarchal dominance over the new generation, from which come both the legitimate rival (the son or other younger man) and the girl, it confounds it, representing instead the inevitable passage of power to the young. One has the impression that the excess signified by the male bride (the risible epithets used to describe the phallus; the ritual violence used against the discoverer; the conventional resolution of the conflict through mariage) is intended to bring about the symbolic annihilation of the obstacle to youthful desire, as if the purgation of the dotard's eccentric passions could only come about through a cathartic moment of self-destruction and disembodiment, followed by his surrender to the new generation.

Despite the usual emphasis on crossdressing as an intimation of the uncertainty of sexual identity, these variations on the male bride motif argue that far from drawing attention to issues of gender and power, obscenity, as well as fulfilling the twin comic requirements of surprise and a deformity that is not painful, serves rather to define and construct that ideal community on whose "opinion", as Puttenham had observed, laughter depends. This type of laughter is a response to a perceived threat to the structure of this community. Once the dotard is laughed out of his passions, his incongruity is recognised and thus purged, leaving him to either revert to the silence which had preceded his discovery of his bed-mate's true gender (confirming his exclusion) or share in the final round of laughter at his own folly. In either case, the conclusion confirms the moral purpose of comedy by reconstructing the fiction of a cohesive community of interpreters, well conversant with the Aristotelian tenets and ready to defuse and riassimilate the original eccentricity of the individual.

Aretino's *Marescalco* (1527) represents a more controversial kind of adaptation. Written under the probable influence of *Clizia,* the comedy stages a carnivalesque jest by the duke of Mantua at the expense of a homosexual eccentric, a stablemaster who is first lectured on the commonplaces of married life, then commanded by ducal decree to marry a girl who is described to him as both rich and beautiful. Even though it does not involve a bed scene as such, the play hinges on an adaptation of it in the form of delayed disclosure of the true sexual identity of the bride (which probably inspired Jonson). Canonically, the bed scene is staged in silent darkness. Aretino's innovation lies in linking this theatrical requirement to

misogynist tradition, as the page who is to impersonate the bride is instructed to counterfeit the modesty of the perfect, silent bride (a demeanour which in Jonson will later serve to confirm Morose in his mistaken expectations about Epicoene's virtues):

> MATRONA. [...] stà savio, vergognoso e riverente, e come viene lo sposo novello, affige gli occhi in terra e non guardar mai niuno in viso. E fatta la diceria, non dir di sì, se non a le tre volte, sai? [...]
>
> CARLO. Con gli occhi cosi guardando in giù, con la bocca a questa foggia, facendo le riverenze cosi e cosi, e la terza volta risponderò Signooor ssiiii. (*Marescalco* V:4.2)

> (MATRONA. Look thoughtful, modest and respectful, and when the bridegroom approaches, stare down at the ground and on no account look into anybody's face. And when the question is put, don't say "yes" until you're asked for the third time. CARLO. With my eyes lowered like this, my mouth this way and curtsying so, when I'm asked the third time I shall reply: "y-y-yes s-s-sir!")[15]

The sense of *Il Marescalco* runs counter to Machiavelli's exposure of folly as represented by illegitimate, socially disruptive, sexual desire. Ironically reflecting the victim's eccentric fancies, the male bride ends up confirming the previous state of moral disorder amid general laughter. Instead of giving voice to the importance of marriage as the moment of lawful passage of property and authority from parent to son, generation to generation, Aretino turns Plautine comedy generally, and the male bride motif in particular, to the service of the opposing *topos*, the admonition "contro il tôr moglie" where men, young men especially, are dissuaded from lawful marriage, and encouraged rather to seek their pleasures in illicit or mercenary relations. Here the crossdressing actually works against the recuperation of eccentricity, offering the model of a disjunction between laughter and purgation far removed from the Renaissance code of comic redemption.

* * *

In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the male bride is often replaced by the alternative but parallel device of the bed trick. Shakespeare resorts to it in *All's Well that Ends Well*, while also using an abridged version of the

15 PIETRO ARETINO, *Il Marescalco*, in Id., *Teatro*, ed. G. Petrocchi (Milano: Mondadori, 1971); English trans. *The Stablemaster*, in *Five Italian Renaissance Comedies*, trans. G. Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 181.

original plautine motif in the concluding scenes of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when Anne Page eludes marriage twice by swapping places with "a great lubberly boy [...] un garçon, a boy; un paysan".[16] In *The Woman's Prize* (c1611), Fletcher's amalgam of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Epicoene*, both sexes are deceived by cross-gender disguise, until old Moroso laughs off the unwanted conclusion, much as in the romantic plot of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (c.1610). Another condensed reference to the topos of the male bride is to be found in Middleton's and Dekker's *Roaring Girl* (1608): while the mannish Moll is wearing male clothes she would appear to personify all that which prohibits or invalidates awful marriage: "No priest will marry her [...] for a woman, / Whiles that shape's on, and it was never knowne / Two men were married and conjoyn'd in one".[17] Much as in the minor Italian plays, the threat of inversion almost magically reforms the eccentricity of the deviant characters. The confusion of gender roles, where wives encroach upon the patriarchal domain and husbands pervert their manliness through novel effete fashions, is to be resolved by forcing a kind of anti-marriage between them, as in the *Hic-Mulier* and *Haec-Vir* treatises, which revile women for having "buried silence, to revile slander" and men for having lost their dominance in the present "ware-house of change", then claim to effect the reform of the two androgens by their mutual confrontation.[18]

The classical and Italian Renaissance enactments of the male bride motif had already touched upon the power relationships between man and woman. While the defeat of the amorous dotard apparently seemed to reinforce the inverted hierarchy where wives rule, the downtrodden husband was simply another instance of the perverted order produced by his

16 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ed. H. J. Oliver (London-New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 1978), V:5.184, 204.

17 THOMAS DEKKER, *The Roaring Girl*, V:2, ll. 106-7, in *Dramatic Works*, ed. F. Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. II. See also SUSAN E. KRANTZ, "The Sexual Identity of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* and in London", *Renaissance and Reformation*, 19:1 (1995), pp. 5-20. The connections with the contemporary character of Mary Frith are studied in MARJORIE GARBER, "The Logic of the Transvestite: *The Roaring Girl* (1608)", in *Staging the Renaissance. Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. D. Scott Kastan, P. Stallybrass (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 221-34.

18 *Hic-Mulier, or the Man Woman* (London, 1620), sig. A4^r, and *Haec-Vir, or the Womanish Man* (London, 1620?), sig. B1^r. See also R. VALERIE LUCAS, "*Hic-Mulier*: the Female Transvestite in Early Modern England", *Renaissance and Reformation*, 12:1 (1988), pp. 65-84.

deviancy, to be made good by the wedding of the young couple, which not only reaffirmed the "proper" attributes of age and gender, but guaranteed the continuation of the patriarchal order into the next generation. Jonson's silent women and rancorous husbands are governed by a quite different theory of the ridiculous, which sanctions the dissolution of meaningful laughter and the survival of eccentricity.[19]

The main inspiration for *Epicoene* (c.1609) probably came from Libanius' Dyskolos, the noise-hating old man who gets married with the most talkative of women. Libanius' oration contains a shorter version of the bed scene: after the noisy hymeneals, Dyskolos seeks refuge in the nuptial bed chamber, only to be assaulted by his bride's thundering voice. The bed, stage to a scene of sexual abstinence, represents a comparable betrayal of hierarchical expectations to that dramatised by Jonson..[20]

Jonson's rephrasing of this motif is set in the key of an ironical celebration of the orthodox doctrine of virtuous silence within family and society. Underlining the importance of both silence and noise in sustaining social intercourse, he re-presents and polarises them in terms of Morose's self-inflicted seclusion from all the other characters, and especially the vociferous scolds whose encroachment on male authority is the very essence of misrule. Thus the Collegiates, a pack of would-be female courtiers, "cry down or up what they like, or dislike in a brain or a fashion, with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority", while in the Otters family it is the wife that "commands all at home" (*Epicoene* I:1, ll. 75-7, I:4, ll. 26-7).[21] Within this frame of urban noise, misanthropy is conveyed through silence. Morose is isolated from the community and their revels, almost entombed in a street that echoes none of those "common noises" (I:1, ll. 139-40).

Unlike the male bride motif, Morose's silence is however more a poignant symbol of the denial of social, festive intercourse than a premise of deception.[22] The comic disproportion of Morose lies in his misanthropy

19 It should be noted that all the elements of the Italian plays highlighted by O. J. CAMPBELL, "The Relation of *Epicoene* to Aretino's *Il Marescalco*", *PMLA*, 46 (1931), pp. 756-58, and D. C. BOUGHNER, "*Clizia* and *Epicoene*", *Philological Quarterly*, 19 (1940), pp. 89-91) are in fact essential parts of the Plautine plot.

20 LIBANIUS SOPHISTA, *Declamatio Lepidissima de moroso qui cum uxorem loquacem duxisset, seipsum accusat* (Lutetiae Parisiorum, 1597), p. 6.

21 All quotations are taken from BEN JONSON, *Epicoene*, ed. R. V. Holdsworth (London: The New Mermaids: 1990).

22 A. LEGGATT writes of "a rejection of social life": "Morose and His Tormentors", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 45 (1976), p. 221), while H. D. HALLAHAN sees in both

and avarice, giving his nephew Dauphine the right to abuse him, as sanctioned by that humanist tradition of urbane castigation of vice reflected in Italian comedy (I:2, ll. 11-2, 47-8).[23] But though this is the conventional context of the didactic jest, Morose cannot easily be made to fit the comic stereotype of the *senex libidinosus*, the lecherous old man, as he is trying to defraud the nephew of his rights. The first variation on the theme is that Jonson sets the accepted progression from unseemly amorous passions to laughter to purgation on its head. While the dotard's infatuation is normally the trigger that sets off the comic denoument, Morose's avarice appears to be ludicrous in so much that its fulfilment requires a young, silent wife, unanimously described by the sources as a paradoxical *adynaton*.

In fact, the silence which befits the bed trick entails an unnatural displacement of the expectations of the young. Morose is looking for a "dumb woman, be she of any form or any quality, so she be able to bear children. Her silence is dowry enough" (I:2, ll. 23-5). He interviews the fair Epicoene about her ability to bury herself in silence and be appointed his "bedfere". This cursory allusion to the bed scene is followed by the abridgement of the wedding scene. Epicoene's faint answer is spelt out three times, recalling the coyness of the perfect bride in *Il Marescalco*. Jonson's derision of conventional descriptions of female silence also surfaces when the celebration of such female virtue is sung by the effeminate Jack Daw in his "madrigal of procreation": "Silence in woman is like speech in man [...] You shall it see / Proved with increase, / I know to speak, and she to hold her peace" (II:3, ll. 111; 116-19). More clearly than in its sources, which had already enhanced the ambiguous contiguity of social and sexual misrule, *Epicoene* represents by way of sexual displacement the annihilation of social roles brought about by Morose, unaccompanied by the purgation of laughter.

The silent bed scene overturns all expectations. The discovery of the noise reported by Libanius is here introduced after the marriage, as Morose realises that Epicoene can definitely speak, and boldly object to the rule of

silence and eloquence "viable means to wisdom and power" as opposed to drooling chatter: "Silence, Eloquence, and Chatter in Jonson's *Epicoene*", *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 40 (1976), p. 126.

[23] W. D. KAY sees in *Epicoene* the "problem of reconciling the humanistic ideal of virtuous life with the actual names of aristocratic society", in a sort of "tension between fashionable court gallantry and the ideals of humanism": "Jonson's Urbane Gallants: Humanistic Contexts for *Epicoene*", *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 39, (1975), pp. 251, 252).

female silence: "I'll have none of this coacted, unnatural dumbness in my house, in a family where I govern" (III:4, ll. 48-50). Silence-breaking overturns the hierarchical roles and takes on the hermaphroditic features of her "masculine and loud commanding" (IV:1, ll. 10-11). Jonson's adaptation of the chronological order between disguise and surprise is made apparent also by the subsequent deferral of marriage consummation in the nuptial bed, where betrayal used to take place. In a significantly intertextual allusion, Morose is prevented from performing his marital duty, and the audience from having access to the *locus classicus* of the bed scene:

> Would you go to bed so presently, sir, after noon? A man of your head and hair should owe more to that reverend ceremony, and not mount the marriage-bed like a town bull or a mountain goat, but stay the due season, and ascend it then with religion and fear. Those delights are to be steeped in the humour and silence of the night, and give the day to other open pleasures and jollities of feast, of music, of revels, of discourse. (III:5, ll. 41-9)

The conventional bed scene is delayed until its dissolution: Morose's fatal bed is now the public square, a noisy antonym to the private jest directed by the jealous wives of the classical and Renaissance tradition.

The denial of sexual roles and, implicitly, of the purgative qualities associated with the exposure of sex reversal, is further achieved by vesting the dotard himself with the sexual ambiguity of the male bride. Morose has seized a sword to get rid of all women, in an inverted image of the phallic scene that annihilates all possible obscenity by excising the male root. He gives up his sexual identity in the effort to be turned back into the juvenile hermaphrodite, the most perfect image of sexual ambiguity. The two quacks who are enrolled to dissolve his marriage propose a reduction to impotence and, eventually, sexual immaturity: "a boy or child under years is not fit for marriage, because he cannot *reddere debitum*" (V:3, ll. 175-76). Morose desperately claims to be "no man, [...] utterly unable in nature, by reason of frigidity, to perform the duties or any the least office of a husband" (V:4, ll. 41, 43-4). More radically, his escape from unruly marriage lies in *error personae*, as the nephew declares he has married a boy. The hallmark of this delayed surprise lies in its ironic intertextuality, as it signals the underlying completion of the bed scene, eventually shaming the Collegiates into silence: "Madams, you are mute upon this new metamorphosis!" (V:4, ll. 227-28).

The Jonsonian male bride represents a social body that cannot be healed, suffocating communal laughter in its final silence and inverting the

ending restores the wrong sex inherent in the bed scene, albeit in a novel direction. The image of young boy releasing the old man from marriage points back in the direction of Juvenal's *Sixth Satire*, a source usually adduced only because of its misogynist overtones. Juvenal advises the prospective bridegroom to trust only the silence of a young page in bed:

> nonne putas melius, quot tecum pusio dormit?
> pusio qui noctu non litigat, exigit a te
> nulla iacens illic munuscula nec queritur quod
> et lateri parcas nec quantum iussit anheles (ll. 33-36)

(how much better to take some boy-bedfellow, who would never wrangle with you o' nights, never ask presents of you when in bed, and never complain that you took your ease and were indifferent to his solicitations!)

The bride always brings noise and argumentation:

> Semper habet lites alternaque iurgia lectus
> In quo nupta iacet; minimum dormitur in illo. [24]

(The bed that holds a wife is never free from wrangling and mutual bickerings; no sleep is to be got there! – ll. 268-69).

Jonson has thus exploded the logical double-bind that enervates the topos of the male bride: he/she must stay silent as long as he/she means to play the woman; but the best bride is the young page, as only a boy can keep the silence of the perfect bride. Homosexuality had already been present in Plautus and in most of his Renaissance followers, with the proviso that the context of the bed scene was intended to put an end to unnatural affairs. In Jonson, the homosexual innuendo of the bed scene sweeps away any pretence of comic purgation. While the obligation to explain the meaning of laughter, especially in obscene matters, ultimately entailed the theorization of the didactic function of laughter (limited obscenity curtails the continuation of disorder), here it is laughter that has been brought to an end: Jonson's reader is left with the undidactic type of laughter, the choral derision that accompanies Morose's eccentricity with peals of laughter that portend no catharsis.

* * *

24 JUVENAL AND PERSIUS, *Satirae* (Cambridge, Mass.-London: Heinemann, 1961).

The fortunes of the male bride underscore a progression from its status as a conventional plot-solver to a signifier of unbridled eccentricity. Originally, the male bride performed a kind of homeopathic function by comically representing individual eccentricity under sexual forms. Within this theoretical framework, the apparent vice of the obscene disguise enables the humanistic resolution of individual follies: its excess actually foregrounds the preservation of the traditional system of marital and sexual virtues. In its later rephrasing, however, the convention increasingly shifts attention away from the eccentric scapegoat to the very assumptions that govern virtuous laughter. The dark side of laughter is reconciled with the primal fascination coming from obscenity: they both require an indirect representation, respectively through the inanimate and through the incongruous, and they both extol the unfathomable source of pleasure deriving from the spectacle of eccentricity. In Jonson's practice, the Renaissance theory of laughter ultimately unveils this unreformable residual, this fascination with the construction of the risible: the male bride laughs at the claims to the virtuous representation of eccentricity, instead of laughing it off the stage. Yet, if Jonsonian laughter does not claim to heal or even accompany the final stages of the punishment, it still reserves ample compensation: the unreformable excess is to be grasped in its resistance to the Renaissance conventions of communality and eccentricity in order to foster a modern sense of individuality – an act which, much as Morose's exit, is aptly attended by ominous laughter: "now you may go in and rest, be as private as you will" (V:4, ll. 199-200).