Darby Dyer

ENGL 5903.50

Dr. Greer

July 18th, 2013

A Serious Look at the Pun and its Rhetorical Function

While classic rhetoricians were silent on the subject of the pun, the figure surfaced during

the Renaissance and is best known for its prevalence in the plays of Shakespeare, tragedies and

comedies alike. However, the pun has received frequent criticism, especially for its recurrent

appearance in tragedies as well as its unascertained origin. But regardless of the harsh criticism it

has endured, the pun possesses both literary and rhetorical significance.

Because of the pun's obscure lexical background, many critics do not recognize the

literary or rhetorical function of the pun but instead agree with the *Oxford English Dictionary*—

that a pun is merely a "bastard" (Bates 423). The pun appeared nonexistent during the

Renaissance; however, Elizabethans and Jacobeans "were notorious for the practice [of

punning]. But that isn't what they called it" (Read 81). Instead, in the sixteenth and early

seventeenth centuries, punning—or wordplay—was associated with "a panoply of rhetorical

figures," particularly syllepsis, antanaclasis, and paronmasia" (81). But regardless of the pun's

pervasiveness, the pun often exhibited a negative connotation, for it was considered a "disdainful

term […], a vice, and never an ornament, of style; a word no Elizabethan would have recognized

is used to accuse the authors of the age of a flawed and defective literary sensibility—a

misplaced levity that expresses itself in this clownish verbal sporting" (82). In fact, Read shares

criticism regarding the usage of puns in tragedies—that "they disturb, distract, divert," for they

often interrupt "at a moment of high seriousness" (85). Several early critics—Samuel Johnson,

for example—examined the "improper positioning" of Shakespeare's puns and with "the assumption that all puns are alien in the mouths of the characters that speak them: that a pun can never be the authentic expression of a mind laboring under strong emotion" (85, 92). However, Johnson was unaware of not only the characters' ability to use the pun skillfully but also the acceptance of the pun by the Elizabethan audience.

Although critics such as Johnson claim that puns are often poorly positioned, especially in tragedies, with specific regard to the criticism of the deathbed pun, Elizabethans found "a humorous touch" at the time of death to be appropriate (Koller 383). Thus, fellow Elizabethans would have likely accepted Shakespeare's habitual incorporation of the deathbed pun, for there was a certain art to dying. Characters wanted to go out with a bang. And a pun is "one of the most effectual intensives of passion" (Read 93). In fact, "[t]hat Shakespeare so often allows his characters to expire upon a pun suggests that there is something in the nature of this rhetorical genus he considers particularly fitting to the last moment of a speech" (93). Spending one's dying breath on a pun achieves "an urgent economy of expression; the final breath searches for coherence, and the connections made by punning exhibit, ultimately, a faith in meaning and in the power of the mind to discover or create it" (93). Shakespeare provides his characters with "an instinctive attempt to master the situation, and to imbue the few words that are left with the greatest possible significance" (93). For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio uses a pun in his final words: "…ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man" (III.i.98). The root of the deathbed pun lies in the word "grave," for Romeo and Benvolio take it to mean respected; however, Mercutio intends for it to mean dead. Thus, neither Romeo nor Benvolio realize the severity of Mercutio's dire condition until is too late. Therefore, Mercutio's pun enhances the conflict of the play. He has not only just been accidentally yet severely injured by

Romeo's sword, but also Romeo and the other characters do not comprehend Mercutio's usage

of the pun; hence, they do not seek help for the dying Mercutio. Only the reader understands

Mercutio's skillful wordplay and foresees his ultimate demise. The dramatic irony evoked by the

pun advances the plot and may even create an internal conflict for the reader who realizes the

severity of the situation but is unable to help the dying Mercutio. Thus, the deathbed pun exhibits

a powerful, rhetorical function that should be well respected by both readers and critics.

Shakespeare's puns have several functions—from providing humorous effects to

developing dramatic conflict. And his puns often reveal the "linguistic essence of ambiguity"

(Rot 67). Such ambiguity subsequently leads to conflict, as seen in Mercutio's final pun as well

as Macbeth's lines when he awaits the death of Banquo: "Cancel and tear to pieces that great

bond / Which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow / Makes wing to th' rooky wood"

(III.ii.49-51). The subtle pun, with emphasis on the crow and the rook, provides "expressiveness"

as well as a "great amount of emotive information" (Rot 68). However, because of the subtly of

the lines, perhaps not all readers will be able to identify this ambiguous pun. For only the

educated fully understand and enjoy puns (Hartsock 224). In fact, the frequent "reason for

disdain of some of our pedants toward puns is a natural inability to grasp wit of any kind" (224).

Thus, it is not the pun that is misplaced or lacking rhetorical or literary value but instead that

critics who struggle to understand the embedded wit of the pun choose to criticize it. Because the

pun can often be interpreted in more than one way—"what the perception psychologists call a

'bistable illusion,' one of those pictures which looked at one way is a rabbit and another a

duck"—readers (mostly modern) will likely struggle to unravel the meaning of the pun; because

"[t]he eye, more consistent than the mind, cannot see both at the same time but instead puts our

mind into a high-frequency oscillation between the two worlds" (Lanham 127). Interpreting puns

can present a challenge for the mind, for the "pun effect is a function of multiple meaning"; and one must be concise and clever to master this exercise of the mind (Brown 14; Lederer 32). In fact, for a pun to be classified as a pun, the hearer must be able to recognize both meanings of the word. Yet the pun allows one to escape from literal directness and take a step toward the achievement of symbolic metaphor (Brown 18). Therefore, the pun is unquestionably more than merely a misplaced, distracting levity in the notable works of Shakespeare. Critics who are blind of the pun's rhetorical and cognitive value claim, "Shakespeare was great *despite* his puns" (Hartsock 224). Though Shakespeare was eminent *because of* his puns, among other extraordinary literary qualities as well. But his puns certainly transform his plays and act as an interactive source of entertainment for the reader. While the Elizabethan audience was expected to interpret Shakespeare's skillful inclusion of puns in his tragedies, modern audiences were and still are likely to struggle with the masterful mind exercise.

Shakespeare's use of puns in his tragedies "locates him firmly within the linguistic concerns and practices of his age, which treated wordplay as a source of knowledge, or at least as a legitimate form of argument" (Keller 75). In fact, "Shakespeare used puns at pivotal moments in his tragedies to express a character's state of mind or guide the audience's response to it, an experience which Renaissance audiences expected from drama but which can seem alien to modern ones" (75). The Elizabethan audience was often quick to recognize and interpret Shakespeare's puns, for he "used regional words and pronunciations that nowadays have dialectal or social connotations attached to them that would not have applied in his age" (Ravassat 156). Our contemporary connotation of words that can be found in Shakespeare's puns, on the contrary, could possibly conflict with his original, intended meaning for the wordplay. And modern readers can even be led astray by false interpretations of wordplay by our

present sexual connotations in words, such as "bottom," "excrement," "gay," and so on (157).

Therefore, because modern audiences are less responsive to Shakespearean puns and perhaps

misunderstand the intentional meaning, there have been subsequent gaps in translations.

In Sander Rot's "On the Philological Essence of Shakespearian Humour," he describes

the importance of humor in Shakespeare's works; though, he explains that many translations

neglect the humor of his plays, thus preventing Non-English readers from experiencing

Shakespeare's plays at their full value. However, Roe elucidates that in an authentic

representation of life in literature, tragedy and comedy can certainly be interwoven. Hence, Roe

defends Shakespeare's function of the two, as Shakespeare has received much criticism for

incorporating humor in tragedies. While Shakespeare's integration of humor has been frequently

analyzed as well as criticized, Roe crystallizes the criticism by saying that although Shakespeare

does not always have a specific aim for his humor, he does, however, reveal "the manifestation

of spontaneous joy and zest for life," for it precisely embodies the people of England (63). In

fact, Shakespeare conceived his puns as well as other rhetorical figures "in the spirit of his age"

(Joseph 168). Thus, Shakespeare's use and placement of puns in his plays corresponds

appropriately with Elizabethan culture.

Although Shakespeare's use of the pun has often been criticized, it certainly possesses

literary merit and serves a significant rhetorical function. Essentially, the root of criticism upon

the pun is the critic's misunderstanding of it as well as its questionable origin. However, neither

of these reasons outweighs the purposeful power of the pun.

Works Cited

Bates, Catherine. "The Point of Puns." Modern Philology 96.4 (1999): 421-38. JSTOR. Web. 28

  June 2013.

Brown, James. "Eight Types of Puns." *PMLA* 71.1 (1956): 14-26. JSTOR. Web. 2 July 2013.

Hartsock, Ernest. "In Defense of Punning." American Speech 4.3 (1929): 224-27. JSTOR.

  Web. 6 July 2013.

Joseph, Sister Miriam. "Logos: The Topics of Invention." *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of*

  Language. New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1966. 90-173. Print.

Keller, Stefan Daniel. *The Development of Shakespeare's Rhetoric: A Study of Nine Plays*.

  Germany: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag GmbH & Co., 2009. E-Book.

Koller, Kathrine. "Falstaff and the Art of Dying." *Modern Language Notes* 60.6 (1945): 383-86.

  JSTOR. Web. 18 July 2013.

Lanham, Richard A. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. 2nd ed. Berkley: U of California P, 1991.

  Print.

Lederer, Richard. "A Primer of Puns." The English Journal 70.6 (1981): 32-36. JSTOR. Web. 2

  July 2013.

Ravassat, Mireille and Jonathan Culpeper, eds. "Wholes and Holes in the Study of Shakespeare's

  Wordplay." *Stylistics and Shakespeare's Language: Transdisciplinary Approaches.* New

  York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. 139-64. Print.

Read, Sophia. "Puns: serious wordplay." *Renaissance Figures of Speech*. Eds. Sylvia Adamson,

  Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber. New York: Cambridge UP, 2007. 81-94. Print.

Rot, Sander. "On the Philological Essence of Shakespearian Humour." *Modern Language*

  Studies 13.3 (1983): 62-70. JSTOR. Web. 2 July 2013.

Shakespeare, William. *Four Great Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth*. New

      York: Signet Classics, 1998. Print.

---. *Romeo and Juliet. shakespeare.mit.edu.* n.d. Web. 28 June 2013.