

Means of Generating Humor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Bullet-pointed examples and quotes are from *Titus Andronicus*.

comic predicaments: based on an attitude of sympathetic acceptance of the human condition and can be seen in situations in which someone appears foolish or bested by life for the moment; in this case, however, no hostile feelings are intended to be aroused or expressed

- Titus' mad attempts to petition the gods with messages attached to arrow shafts is generally humorous (if not precisely funny), but Shakespeare juxtaposes one of Titus' rants with a short speech that reminds the audience that his madness has its roots in real grief. It invites them to not only sympathize with the unreasonable Titus, but also to remind them people (in general) are vulnerable--that they can only be pushed so far before they break.
- Titus: [Pluto] doth me wrong to feed me with delays.
I'll dive into the burning lake below
And pull her out of Acheron by the heels.
Marcus, we are but shrubs, no cedars we,
No big-boned men framed of the Cyclops' size,
But metal, Marcus, steel to the very back,
Yet wrung with wrongs more than our backs can bear. (IV.iii.42-48)

exaggeration (hyperbole): the representation of something in an excessive (hyperbolic) manner for the sake of humor or emphasis

- The form of revenge that Titus seeks is over-the-top. He is not content with evening the score with his enemies; he also injures their dignity and self-respect.
- Titus: [Chiron and Demetrius] are, both bakèd in this pie, / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred. (V.iii.61-3)

incongruity: associating objects, attitudes, people, or ideas that do not belong together or do not belong in the same environment

- Titus directs Lavinia to take his severed hand in her teeth (since she lacks hands to carry it). It draws attention to the fact that they both lack hands in an awkward, ridiculous, and disgusting manner. This is especially true since Titus matter-of-factly asks her to complete the task as if it were an ordinary request.
- Titus: Lavinia, thou shalt be employed: / Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth. (III.i.281-282)

parody: 1) (noun) a humorously exaggerated imitation of a writer, artist, or genre; 2) (verb) to produce a humorously exaggerated imitation of a writer, artist, or genre

- Aaron the Moor is a parody of the Vice character from morality plays-- a type of literature in which the protagonist is tempted to do evil by a symbolic representation of sin (personified in the character of Vice). *Titus Andronicus*, however, is a (mostly) realistic narrative that is set in the real world, so a character who is irredeemably and gleefully evil is out of place in a narrative that is not populated by symbols. Aaron's cartoonish delight in harming others feels

unrealistic in comparison to the other characters (who have more complexity), especially in the way that Aaron both recognizes his own villainy and revels in it.

- Aaron: I have done a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly, / And nothing grieves me heartily indeed / But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (V.i.141-144)

ridicule: the teasing and mockery of others or oneself. *Negative ridicule* finds its source in attempts to enhance one's own sense of importance through the mockery of others. Here, one laughs at the expense of the target of ridicule. *Playful ridicule*, on the other hand, is based on the sympathetic acceptance of human weaknesses. Though one laughs at the target of ridicule, one feels kinship and sympathy with him or her.

- The play invites its audience to laugh at the stupidity of the clown. Since the play's attitude toward the clown is a kind of sneering superiority, the ridicule is definitely negative. His portrayal plays to the sense of superiority that sophisticated, urban playgoers would have had toward rural people.
- Clown: Alas, sir, I know not Jupiter. I never drank with him in all my life. (IV.iii.84-85)

surprise or reversals: the occurrence of the unexpected-- whether fact, thought, feeling, or event

- There are lots of surprises in *Titus*, though not all are play humorously. One part that usually does engender laughter is Titus' completely unexpected reaction to Marcus' killing of a fly. Titus' absurd over-identification with the insect develops over several lines and seemingly comes out of nowhere. Though obviously disturbed by the events of the play, to this point in the dinner scene there had been no prior indication that Titus might actually be losing his grip on sanity.
- Titus: What dost thou strike at, Marcus, with thy knife?
Marcus: At that that I have killed, my lord: a fly.
Titus: Out on thee, murderer! Thou kill'st my heart. (III.ii.52-54)

understatement: the presentation of something as being smaller, worse, or less important than it actually is for the sake of humor or emphasis

- In response to Chiron's claim that Aaron has "undone" their mother by conceiving a demonstrably biracial child out of wedlock, Aaron replies that he has, in fact, "done" her (playing on the sexual sense of the verb "to do"). In contrast to Chiron's hysteria, Aaron's response is simple, matter-of-fact, and seemingly ignores the significant danger that his actions have occasioned. Aaron is not treating the potentially explosive situation with the gravity that in context) it would seem to require.
- Chiron: Thou hast undone our mother.
Aaron: Villain, I have done thy mother. (IV.ii.76-77)

verbal humor: the manipulation of language through word play, puns, jokes, sarcasm, wit, name-calling, and the like

- Titus plays with different senses of the word "hand" in a jokey, ridiculous manner-- in context illustrating his loosening grip on sanity.
- Titus: What violent **hands** can [Lavinia] lay on her life? / Ah, wherefore dost thou urge the name of **hands** [...] / Oh, **handle** not the theme, to talk of **hands**, / Lest we remember still that we have none. (III.ii.25-30)