Performative Language and Social Status

in Shakespeare’s Plays

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
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Abstract

This dissertation attempts to clarify some aspects of the operation of speech acts as they relate to power, authority, status, and rank in Shakespeare’s plays. At its core, it consists of three arguments. The first is that the ultimate index of power is the ability to have one’s words felt. That power then may translate – in terms that are neither simple nor fixed – into authority, rank, and status. The second is that such assertions or deployments of power (unless authorized by broad cultural consensus) are almost always met with resistance, and that consequently the assertions most likely to succeed are those that are least visible. The third point brings the first two together. If speech acts are often a means of asserting and exercising power, then paradoxically those speech acts that are least overt will be those most likely to succeed in that assertion: speech acts that are indirect, off-record, ambiguous, or perlocutionary. Bearing these arguments in mind, I will consider the operation and either the frustration or fruition of social ambition in Shakespeare’s plays, particularly his comedies. The plays bear out the pattern that speakers who make subtle, incremental assertions of status, by means of exploiting expectations of speech acts and genres, can then consolidate those incremental assertions into more enduring changes in status.
Acknowledgments

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The remaining errors, follies, inadequacies, typos – and all other such things of darkness – I acknowledge mine.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Having a Body and Being Felt

’Tis pity...
That wishing well had not a body in’t
Which might be felt, that we the poorer born
Whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes,
Might with effects of them follow our friends...

(All’s Well 1.1.181-86)\(^1\)

In a few short lines, Helen expresses her frustration with her sense of powerlessness, derived from her low-born status, teases out the relations between social and economic power, and gives modern theorists of class and social capital a run for their money. Her observation that “the poorer born” are bound up in wishes that have “not a body” in them delineates with remarkable precision the operation of rank, status, authority, and power (or, to use an anachronistic concept, class) in early modern England. Helen’s five lines isolate a key metric of power that applies both in early modern England and today: whether a person’s words and actions carry weight. In linguistic terms, can a person deploy speech to effect change, to change his or her environment, to get what he or she wants? Can a speaker, to put it another way, do things with words? Can that speaker deploy felicitous speech acts?

This dissertation attempts to clarify some aspects of the operation of speech acts as they relate to power, authority, status, and rank in Shakespeare’s plays. At its core, it consists of three arguments. The first is that the ultimate index of power is the ability to have one’s words felt. That power then may translate – in terms that are neither simple nor fixed – into authority, rank, and status. The second is that such assertions or deployments of power (unless authorized by

\(^1\) Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the Oxford World’s Classics editions of the plays.
broad cultural consensus) are almost always met with resistance, and that consequently the assertions most likely to succeed are those that are least visible. The third point brings the first two together. If speech acts are often a means of asserting and exercising power, then paradoxically those speech acts that are least overt will be those most likely to succeed in that assertion: speech acts that are indirect, off-record, ambiguous, or perlocutionary. Bearing these arguments in mind, I will consider the operation and either the frustration or fruition of social ambition in Shakespeare’s plays, particularly his comedies. The plays bear out the pattern that speakers who make subtle, incremental assertions of status, by means of exploiting expectations of speech acts and genres, can then consolidate those incremental assertions into more enduring changes in status.

I will begin by defining the four key terms mentioned above, terms that must be distinguished to discuss the operation of social distinction in Shakespeare’s plays: power, authority, status, and rank. I will then examine the principal theorists whose thinking about language and its constitutive role in shaping social relations most inform my study: J.L. Austin on performative language, Mikhail Bakhtin on speech genres and stylization, and Michel de Certeau’s discussion of strategic and tactical forces. Finally, I will provide an outline of the dissertation’s four chapters demonstrating how I use sustained attention to speech acts and speech genres to complement other methodologies, ranging from New Historicism, to historical formalism, to queer theory.

**Definition of Terms**

The first set of terms to be defined is somewhat idiosyncratic, but it is therefore all the more important to lay out clearly how I intend to use a series of concepts that all too often are
allowed to become confused. In discussing social mobility, it is easy to confuse the concepts of power, authority, status, and rank. My ordering of those terms is deliberate.

Power, as has been apparent since Foucault, never is. Power does. No one person can hold power, for power is contingent on the relative positions of the subject exerting it and the object upon whom it is exerted. Power can be detected only through its operation, and is thus analogous to capital, whose value floats with market forces, and whose final value can be properly counted only at the moment of transaction.

Authority, like power, exists primarily in its exertion, but it moves one step further towards tangibility: authority is power explicitly underwritten by a social structure, whether established and explicit (hierarchy) or implicit and quite possibly unconscious (ideology). In other words, authority, while as contingent upon situational relations as power, is more openly determined by, and therefore subject to, broader social norms – a consensus about who may dictate what to whom and when. Power is idiosyncratic, while authority depends on consensus. Authority as a concept derives both etymologically and conceptually from the Latin *auctoritas* – a Roman politician’s capacity to command obedience from his social “ inferiors.”

That capacity to command obedience, however, is highly context-dependent. In order to distinguish between authority and status, I will examine three very different examples. The first is a “traditionalist’s” view of authority, as exemplified by the disguised Kent’s request to join Lear’s service. He tells the King “you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master” (25-26) – which he then names as “Authority” (28). In Kent’s imagination, rank, authority cohere perfectly; he values Lear because Lear is the King. A lifetime of service and
deference to Lear have conditioned Kent to expect to be commanded by his sovereign. Oswald, however, would value Lear’s rank at a far lower rate.²

In discussing status, I am referring to a form of social position that is at once less formal than authority, and more universally acknowledged, less contingent upon circumstance. Authority is circumscribed by situation. I would like to build on Lynne Magnusson’s analysis of the senate scene in the first act of Othello in order to continue to tease the terms apart. Magnusson traces through Brabantio’s claim against Othello the shifting “voice potential” of each character, testing the ways in which gender, “class, race, necessity, linguistic ingenuity, and a number of other competing measures” (164) shape the reception of each character’s words, reception that “will vary with varying market conditions” (164). As Magnusson argues, the dominant market factor in the senate scene is not Brabantio’s status as an insider compared to Othello’s as an outsider, but rather the threat of the Turkish fleet. Othello, although an outsider in Venice, is a military authority. The Venetians need to take advantage of that authority – which is limited to the scope of his expertise – and therefore accord him greater status, giving greater weight to his words on non-military issues, such as his contested marriage to Desdemona, a marriage that affiliates him with the very social group from which Brabantio wished to exclude him.

Those affiliations are a crucial component in determining status, or the prestige an individual is accorded by society. Status depends upon “one’s association with social institutions” (Warley 74) but it is also crucially dependent upon a common, largely consensual, recognition of that status, and of the various authorities that inhere in that association. To use a

² Cf. Weber: “it is exactly such a probability of orientation toward the subjective belief in the validity of an authority which constitutes the valid authority itself” (74).
third Shakespearean example, Mistress Shore in *Richard III* is closely associated with both the London merchant class and with the throne; she remains nonetheless a figure to be mocked rather than respected. The references to her in the play make it clear that neither the court nor the City of London, as communities of practice, agree that those associations grant her social legitimacy. We might also consider the historic (as opposed to fictional) example of the midwife, an important figure for my argument in chapter four. In the birthing room, a woman of any rank who has a lot of experience delivering babies can exercise significant authority. Outside that very specific context, though, she might be a leader in her community or a near-outcast. Status is less dependent on immediate context than authority – but repeated exercises of authority can slowly accrete into status.

Finally, I wish to maintain a clear distinction between status and rank. While status is the position of the individual within a group, as agreed upon relatively explicitly by its members, rank is generally imagined as a rigid and strictly vertical hierarchy (the word derives from the French *rang* – a step, or a rung on a ladder). Rank, however, may not be respected by all members of the community, or may be respected differently in different parts of the community. To use the example of *All’s Well*, by the second half of the play, Helen holds the rank of Countess of Roussillon, and her right to the privileges and authority attendant on that rank are agreed upon by the King, his court, and the Dowager Countess. But for Helen, the only grouping that matters is domestic: Bertram’s refusal to recognize her rights as his wife leaves her dispossessed in the sphere that is most of interest to her. Rather than being Bertram’s wife, she is “the name and not the thing.”

To bring the terms together in a single example, let us consider Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*. Paulina’s rank does not change throughout the course of the play; she enters as a lady in the Sicilian court, remains a lady-in-waiting to Leontes through the sixteen years, and ends the play
as lady-in-waiting to a restored Hermione. That said, through a variety of rhetorical tactics (including, as we shall see, stylization), she establishes herself as the spokeswoman for Hermione and Perdita – both during their lives and after their deaths – and those tactics in sum amount to a consistent strategy of underwriting her words through her close connection to the Queen and the baby princess. To do so, she invokes discourses of service, and more specifically of midwifery, discourses that are at once liberating and constraining. Speaking from the position of midwife and counselor, Paulina is then able to exert considerable power over the King and his court. At first, though, there is a sharp distinction between her ability to exert power amongst Hermione’s women, who have assisted in childbirth (Paulina’s authority over Emilia seems absolute) and her ability to effect broader changes at court; the recognition of her authority is limited to those who value nurses, midwives, and gossips, and is nothing when exerted against the King’s will. In other words, until the end of the trial scene, Paulina has deployed her authority over Hermione’s women, but that deployment has yet to be translated into a broader change in status. Over time, this changes. Although she is unable to prevent Leontes’ folly, she is able to shape the course of his repentance over sixteen years. In act five, her continuous exercise of power over the course of sixteen years has acquired a legitimacy recognized by the court; clearly Cleomenes and Dion’s appeal that the King should marry is directed to Paulina as much as the King, if not more so. This is a clear recognition of her enhanced authority and status. She is not shut up in wishes; her words are felt.

**Making Use of Speech Genres: Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Force**

With those distinctions in mind, I would like to turn to the central problem of this dissertation and examine how speakers exploit communal expectations of speech genres in order to wield power, or to effect change in their social status. As I have come to conclude in the course of my research, a key index of power is the ability to deploy felicitous speech acts; this
point is the inverse of Lisa Hopkins’ pithy observation that “losers may talk, but talk, it seems, signifies nothing” (Ford 101). Austin’s particular understanding of the dependence of the felicity of speech acts on context is significant:

Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*.... Thus, for naming the ship, it is essential that I should be the person appointed to name her.... (8)

Quite plainly Austin, in considering speech acts, is concerning himself with a limited range of what Bakhtin would recognize as genres of speech; each speech act has certain formal and circumstantial qualities that must match up with broadly recognized and agreed-upon criteria, and the collective recognition that those criteria have been met endows the utterance with performative power. As David Schalkwyk puts it, performative language “does not act independently of how things are in the world, especially the world of social relations” (*Speech and Performance* 12). A bigamous wedding vow, for instance, is not valid in the eyes of the law. Without generic expectations, speech acts cannot have force, and those generic expectations are the product of social consensus.

At this stage, though, Austin is talking explicitly about illocutionary speech acts, the form of speech act most readily distinguishable from non-performative speech. Put simply, an illocutionary speech act *does* what it *says*: to utter the locution “I promise” to a listener is to

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3 In Phyllis Gorfain’s formulation, “... genres both depend on and reproduce expectations about relationships in social space and time. As they organize our interpretations of the world and constitute our relationships, genres exert social and epistemological consequences” (102). In the course of most everyday exchanges, those generic expectations are left unspoken unless two speakers realize that they are talking at cross-purposes. Chapter five explores how *All’s Well That Ends Well* dramatizes an unusually explicit negotiation of those expectations and conditions. Cf. also Giddens 293.
make that promise – unless the speaker is lying, or unless the exchange is understood by both speaker and listener to be in some sense not real. The primary distinction between performative speech and constative speech, as Austin outlines it, “is a distinction between doing and saying” (47). Put another way, the main difference is the standard to which each is held: we evaluate constative speech primarily “on the basis of its truth, by asking if it is accurate, and [performative speech] on the basis of felicity, by asking if it works” (Petrey 22). But no sooner has Austin made this distinction than he has to back-pedal and admit that “even a list of all possible criteria… would not distinguish performatives from constatives, as very commonly the same sentence is used on different occasions of utterance in both ways, performative and constative” (67). One of the key underlying principles of my argument is the interpenetration of performative and constative language, and one of the principal reasons they interpenetrate so thoroughly is the existence of another class of speech acts: perlocutionary acts.

Perlocutionary acts are a vexed subject. Austin uses the term to distinguish between an action achieved through speaking (an illocutionary act) and the consequences of that speech (a perlocutionary effect or sequel). Here is his full explanation of the difference:

We first distinguished a group of things we do in saying something, which together we summed up by saying we perform a locutionary act, which is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to “meaning” in the traditional sense. Second, we said that we also perform illocutionary acts such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, &c, i.e. utterances which have a certain (conventional) force. Thirdly, we may also perform perlocutionary acts: what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading. (109)

From this elaboration, it is quite clear that illocutionary acts are dependent on convention. A promise is binding because it is socially unacceptable to break a promise; on a more implicit level, if someone asks “Can you reach the light switch?” social convention dictates that the
listener will interpret the question as a request to turn out the lights. Perlocution, in contrast, depends on the listener’s response to an utterance. For this reason, it is useful to distinguish between a perlocutionary act, and a perlocutionary sequel. I may tell a friend that the floor is wet, an apparent constative that nonetheless carries the illocutionary force of warning her to be careful not to slip. As long as she understands my meaning, the illocutionary act of warning has been felicitous. To warn, however, is not to persuade. If I succeed in convincing my friend to be careful (where convincing is a perlocutionary act) the likely sequel is that she will tread carefully. If, despite my warning, she runs across the room and slips, my desired perlocutionary act has failed.

This interpenetration between performatives and constatives works the other way, too. Every speech act carries with it a set of conditions for felicity; to pronounce a couple married in a Catholic church means nothing unless the speaker is a priest, and the couple are indeed Catholics, single, etc. When the priest intones the words of the ceremony, he is silently affirming (i.e. making a constative statement) that those conditions have been met. Even speech acts that are less defined than the marriage ceremony follow the same pattern. If a teacher offers advice to a student on a research project, the illocutionary act of advising carries with it a series of implicit constatives: unspoken statements that the teacher is an expert in his field, that the teacher is more of an expert than the student, and moreover that that expertise gives the teacher the authority to issue a directive to the student. If the perlocutionary sequel of that directive is that the student conducts his research as advised, he is accepting the implicit constatives; if the student disregards the directive, he is rejecting one or more of the implicit constatives. Since the constatives implicit in the advice need not be intentional, and since they can be accepted or rejected by the student, I provisionally call them “perlocutionary constatives.” From this example, it is clear that such constatives, especially if repeated, can have an interpellative
function: the illocutionary act of directing or advising establishes a provisional power dynamic between teacher and student. The more the act is repeated, the more entrenched that relationship becomes.

Judith Butler, building on Althusser, asserts that “it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible” (5). If we amend this to talk of interpellation within the terms of discourse, the point is stronger: to speak or to be spoken of, to act or to be acted on – these are the actions that locate the subject in a specific social position. But this means that every utterance or action carries an interpellative function, both of self and other. Hamlet’s self-nomination as “Hamlet, the Dane” carries with it a clear illocutionary force; he is laying claim to a social identity that threatens Claudius. But what of lesser actions? What of the everyday chatter of Messina? What of the banter and insult in Romeo and Juliet? Each of these speech acts carries with it a raft of perlocutionary constatives or assertions as well. It is by means of these perlocutionary effects, the almost invisible, slowly-accreting moments of self-definition, that the most successful of Shakespeare’s social climbers make their mark. Tactical movement by tactical movement, they eke out a space for self-assertion in barely-observable perlocutionary self-interpellations.

Perhaps an example will be useful at this point. In act five of The Merchant of Venice, Antonio volunteers to stand surety for Bassanio’s fidelity to Portia:

I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your Lord
Will never more break faith advisedly. (5.1.251-53)
David Schalkwyk’s analysis of this moment makes the point that this cannot be a felicitous speech act; the promise is not something Antonio can actually guarantee. For Schalkwyk, this is the moment that Portia fully asserts her claim to Bassanio, forcing Antonio into empty speech. But that is to consider the felicity of the speech act only on the illocutionary level. On the perlocutionary level, Antonio has made the surprising, but unspoken, assertion that he is in a position to make this promise. The claim is not questioned, in part because it is so indirect; the claim is thus left hanging over the closing moments of the play. Moments such as these, moments where a speaker lays claim to a doubtful authority to speak, are the focus of this dissertation.

The covert nature of those claims to status is hardly surprising. Katherine Eisaman Maus notes in Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* a pattern that I take as paradigmatic for the age, that “class distinctions are oppressively enforced almost as soon as they are overthrown” (57-58). It is also possible to argue that social distinctions come into existence only as they are overthrown. For this reason, it can hardly be surprising that successful social climbers in a society with explicit and established hierarchies should do so through stealth rather than ostentation. Linguistic theorists of the Elizabethan era would not have found this confusing in the slightest: Rosemary Kegl remarks that “the rhetorical gesture that [George] Puttenham actually recommends to courtiers is not disclosure… but dissemblance – the ability to ‘speake otherwise than we thinke’” (29).

Such a reliance on dissimulation is explicable in part through the work of Michel de Certeau, who offers, or claims to offer, a highly pessimistic understanding of how “the common man” can forge identity and produce meaning in a highly scripted consumer culture. *The*
*Practice of Everyday Life,* for all de Certeau’s insistence that his study does not entail “a return to individuality,” and that “the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of action” (xi) rather than individual subjects, is dedicated to the “ordinary man.” And yet, while disavowing interest in the subject, he refers to “subjects (or persons) who are [the] authors or vehicles” of such “modes of operation” (xi). In de Certeau’s study, and in this one, the subject exists in a liminal space between author and vehicle, participating in both modes of being. It is thus within the scope of this study not to define what subjects are, but rather to consider what they do. And what they do is to attempt to navigate a physical and discursive world that demands that they constantly invent and reinvent themselves as their position in a reticulated social hierarchy shifts. An individual’s social position depends both on circumstance, and on the benchmarks against which that position is triangulated. The forces which go into shaping those circumstances fall loosely into what de Certeau defines as “the proper” – that space (whether physical or conceptual) that is defined by “strategies”. In his own words,

> I call a “strategy” the calculus of force relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an “environment.” A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)* and thus serves as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, “clienteles,” “targets,” or “objects” of research). Political, economic and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model. (xix)

Strategies, in other words, are the domain of the established, the recognized, the reified. To return to Puttenham, he discourages disclosure much as de Certeau disavows it as an option for the “everyday man.” Rather, according to Kegl, Puttenham associates disclosure or openness

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5 The French title, *L’invention du quotidien,* is both more accurate and more evocative.
with the authority of the monarchy (29). De Certeau, conversely, associates a dynamic of concealment and dissembling with the powerless.

The powerless, according to de Certeau, rely on improvisation (which must resonate for any reader of Greenblatt), appropriation, and *bricolage* to assert and define themselves in the face of larger and better established forces.

I call a “tactic,” on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a “proper” (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances... – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized “on the wing.” Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into “opportunities.” The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them... (xix)

For de Certeau, the actions of the common people or the powerless are actions of poaching, of inserting themselves uninvited into larger narratives. This is very much the action of early modern *arrivistes*, reacting and adjusting to the daily challenges to their stature. As I will demonstrate through close readings of Shakespeare’s plays, however, such tactical power could be consolidated.

Finally, I wish to consider Bakhtin’s concept of stylization in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, which closely resembles de Certeau’s description of the operation of tactical power. For Bakhtin, stylization is the use of someone else’s discourse for his own purposes, by inserting new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of
its own. Such discourse, in keeping with its task, must be perceived as belonging to someone else. (189)

In other words, stylized discourse can never be fully appropriated; it remains outside of the full control of the stylizing speaker. That said, the new purpose, the new semantic intention, may go unnoticed by the original speaker from whom discourse has been appropriated. Stylization is therefore the mode of operation for the underdog.6

Theory in Context

With the theoretical framework established, I will now turn to the historical and literary context. Since Renaissance Self-Fashioning, social ambition – the individual will to power and the collective and/or institutional checks on that will – has been the sine qua non of most new historicist criticism. Older historical accounts of the English Renaissance, such as those of Lawrence Stone, asserted without any hint of unease that the century between 1540 and 1640 was the “century of mobility,” during which ambitious individuals could relatively easily climb the social ladder. More recent developments in historical and social theory have rendered problematic such a simple understanding of early modern society, and indeed the very concept of the individual subject that is its basis. Earlier critics may have conceived of the Elizabethan social order in terms that present it both as too coherent (that is to say, presuming an ideological consensus that seems unlikely) and cohesive (that is to say, imagining it as too rigidly enforced) to be plausible, but it would be unwise to doubt that there was a reasonable consensus that such an hierarchy did exist, even if its terms were vague. In this context, it is perhaps worth recalling Michael Neill’s caveat that:

6 I came to Bakhtin’s concept of stylization through work by David Schalkwyk (“A Lady’s” 250 ff.), whose work with speech act theory is a clear antecedent of mine, and found it useful to describe the tactical, and thus limited, appropriation of discourse by the upstarts whose ambitions I am considering.
… while historians may argue about the actual degree of social mobility in early modern England, no one who reads a domestic tragedy like *Arden of Faversham* or the comedies of Philip Massinger with any attentiveness can doubt that anxiety about the instability and disorder attendant on social ambition and the transgression of social boundaries was one of the abiding preoccupations of this society…. In some ways it may actually be more important to understand what people thought was happening in their world than to gauge the accuracy of these beliefs, since what people believe to be true is typically what determines the way they act. (*Putting History to the Question* 3-4)

Within such a hierarchy, then, how much scope existed for advancement? And why would anyone denied advancement accept the existence of such a hierarchy? The two questions are, in fact, closely related. The second is less central to my project, but it is worth noting Kirby Farrell’s point about patriarchy, that it “provides crucial symbols which validate the self” (86). In other words, even the most fiercely independent individual pulls together his or her sense of self in a process of bricolage, using the practices and symbols available in his or her community. A wholesale rejection of that community of practice would deprive the individual of the necessary materials for self-invention and assertion.

This problem is central to Frank Whigham’s *Seizures of the Will*, throughout which he chronicles the abrupt and dramatic ruptures of individuals seizing – and trying to hold – power that convention would deny them. But in focusing on those dramatic moments, Whigham chooses to focus exclusively on tragedies. His willful subjects seldom succeed for long in laying claim to “the self as made” (1), for the “dialectic of mutual determination between patterns of social construction and the appropriation and reconstruction of those patterns” (3) is weighted so heavily against the individual actors. This builds on Whigham’s anatomization of the unstable, reticulated hierarchy of Tudor court as elaborated in *Ambition and Privilege*, in which he traces the primary source of power to Elizabeth, whose “largesse was distributed by courtiers and
functionaries, who formed a multi-layered matrix of mediation and themselves required wooing, from below as well as from above” (12). Whigham’s key observation is that court was a complex network, perpetually in the process of being created by “the activity that constituted and reconstituted the web of local bonds among courtiers of all subranks, and in so doing, reconstituted the categories of rank themselves” (10). In such an environment a courtier might “have to perform one moment as a repressive superior and the next as a clandestine arriviste” (27). Given the pressures of this kind of performance, and the high cost of failure, there can be little wonder that this activity was the subject for the tragedies studied in Whigham’s later book. If David Schalkwyk’s use of speech act theory and Lynne Magnusson’s attention to the operation of language in social interaction give me a method for examining the operation of social ambition, then Whigham’s work on moments of self-assertion provides me with a thematic focus. But the moments I focus on differ from those in Whigham’s study.

One gap in the literary study of social ambition is that remarkably little attention is paid to successful social climbers, the subject of comedy rather than tragedy. The question that first prompted me to give serious thought to social status in Shakespeare is posed by Margaret in Much Ado About Nothing: “shall I always keep below stairs?” (5.2.9-10) Margaret plaintively asks Benedick. In six words, Margaret crystallizes one of the most fascinating problems in early modern literature and culture. Ostensibly a simple question about her place in Leonato’s household, it raises several issues that are key to understanding the society Shakespeare was depicting – both the Messina of the play, and the England of 1597 on which he was drawing. Where, for instance, is “below stairs”? Margaret for the most part comes and goes throughout the household with as much freedom as any other character; indeed, her access to Hero’s bedroom is a central point in the plot. Why “must” she keep below stairs? She is uncommonly bold in her assertion of her wit and her knowledge about fashion, and her banter with Benedick shows that
she does not feel she owes “Signor Benedick” any particular deference, so who has decreed that she “must,” and why does she accept that decree? And finally, if Margaret were not “below stairs,” where would she be? And what would her new position mean for her, and for the – altered – society that she would then inhabit?

Let us buy into the fiction of a real live Margaret for a moment and try to imagine what she does believe, imagine her articulating what it would mean to live above stairs. The impression created by the play is that such a concrete articulation of ambition would be beyond her: she is interested in fashion, and play-acts as her mistress – but does her ambition take more specific form? The very generality of her complaint to Benedick suggests otherwise. This lack of clarity makes her social ambition neither less real, nor less powerful as a motive for her actions. It does, however, suggest very strongly three important aspects of social ambition.

The first is that someone who seeks advancement within a society does so in terms that are initially dictated by that society. Margaret’s appropriation of Hero’s dress – the sign and semblance of her status – hews closely to de Certeau’s description of the “presence and circulation of a representation” which is “taught by preachers, educators, and popularizers as the key to socioeconomic advancement” (xiii). What de Certeau is describing here is effectively the repertoire of practices, discourses, and symbols generated by and circulated within a community of practice. But de Certeau goes on to caution that the circulation of the representations “tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in its utilization” (xiii). Nor does the “presence and

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7 The fact that she takes it at Borachio’s request does not diminish the fact that she is acting out a fantasy of her own; as we shall see in Chapter Two, Margaret takes an active interest in fashions she cannot afford.
circulation” of such a symbol tell us how effectively it can be appropriated by those who seek to parlay representation into actual status. This leads us to the second and third closely related points.

The second aspect of social ambition, whether achieved or not, is that the moment of exercising ambition, translating desire into action, represents a crisis for two distinct reasons. I have already quoted Maus, noting a pattern that can be taken as paradigmatic for the age, that “class distinctions are oppressively enforced almost as soon as they are overthrown” (57-58). It is possible to go further, though, for enforcement of social distinctions comes into being only as a response to their violation, and indeed many social distinctions become visible only by being violated. In Much Ado, both of these patterns manifest themselves in the freedom that Margaret enjoys, coming and going as she likes, until her actions disrupt the lives of her social “betters.” It is her abuse of her access to Hero’s (upstairs) bedroom that relegates her to below stairs.

The third and final point I wish to draw from Margaret’s predicament is to note that the assertion and articulation of hierarchy is the first step in its problematization – both for those who hold status, and for those who would acquire it. The very indeterminacy of the social order is its strength, I argue, and this is what keeps Margaret below stairs. To attempt to rationalize and clarify the terms under which social status may be acquired or exercised is to give claimants to that status a clear set of criteria or representations that are open to appropriation. Similarly, I wish to emphasize that someone who harbours social ambition has or ought to have no wish to see hierarchy destroyed. Bolingbroke and Macbeth are trapped in a paradox of political theory: if they take the crown by force, they undermine the very power that they seek to usurp. For the characters in this study, the same holds true in a less obvious sense. The upstart must find some way to assert a position higher than he or she currently enjoys without devaluing the distinctions that grant high status its privileges. In the terms that I have used thus far, this means to stylize:
the ambitious must clandestinely appropriate the discourses that confer power in their particular community of practice.

“Community of practice” is in fact the last term that I wish to define, as it provides a valuable frame of reference that can more effectively shape the historical contexts marshaled in the service of scholarly readings of early modern plays than New Historicism’s reliance on thick description and anecdote. The concept of communities of practice can help establish and clarify a balance between acknowledging the power of discursive forces in shaping identity and acknowledging their operation through individuals. A community of practice, as defined by educational theorists, is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (This does not mean that communities of practice are necessarily egalitarian or consensual – simply that their membership and practices grow out of mutual engagement.) In addition, relations between and among communities of practice, and relations between communities of practice and institutions, are important: Individuals typically negotiate multiple memberships (in families, on teams, in workplaces, etc)…. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 464).

To clarify this definition, I would like to consider the paradigmatic example for this dissertation: Messina in *Much Ado About Nothing* is a community based on shared “ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values.” Whatever tensions may exist between the men of Don Pedro’s coterie, they form a community based around their shared endeavours in the recent wars; whatever tensions may exist between Hero, Beatrice, and the ladies-in-waiting, they have the shared project of marrying Hero to Claudio. And the whole population of Messina shares the practice of self-consciously witty conversation.
It is important to recognize (as McConnell-Ginet and Eckert do not in this instance) that conversation is in and of itself a practice that generates communities; it is a meaningful activity undertaken by groups of individuals of varying skill levels, governed by a series of conventions that are understood to varying degrees by different participants. Modern social theories and early modern conceptions of conversation here closely overlap. According to Erving Goffman, face-to-face interaction [is] simultaneously its own institution and the foundation of everything else in society. This “interaction order”, as he called it, is in itself a moral rendering: a complex web of standards, expectations, rules and proscriptions to which people orient their attempts to … adopt a demeanor appropriate to a given situation, avoid embarrassing themselves and others and so on. (summarized in Sidnell, 7)

Similarly, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw the rise of the theoretical understanding of conversation as a powerful tool for shaping civil society. Jennifer Richards has done much to illuminate how a network of friends and acquaintances, running from Ascham through to Harvey and Spenser, used their own conversations and letters to explore “ways of managing the relationship between self-interest and social duty, self-restraint and freedom and competition and cooperation” (*Rhetoric* 2).

The critical construct of communities of practice is useful on several fronts when considering characters and their speech in Shakespeare’s plays. The first is that it recognizes that any conversation takes place in a network of “standards, expectations, rules, and proscriptions” that are shared to a greater or lesser degree between participants, and are to a greater or lesser degree explicit or implicit. Moreover, it is easily arguable that the participants themselves would be aware – if not of what those conventions are, exactly, then certainly that they existed. The educational origins of the community of practice model are also a useful counterweight to arguments stressing the discursive limitations of self-fashioning; the ongoing negotiation of conversational norms represents a communal exercise in self-invention. The idea of a community
of practice also emphasizes the possibility of exclusion, and hierarchy: the community is, after all, limited to practitioners. In terms of exclusivity, Dogberry serves as a useful example of a would-be conversationalist who is excluded from the community. And in terms of prestige within the community, there is, for instance, no clearly established hierarchy in Leonato’s household; members of Leonato’s nuclear family, more distant relations such as Beatrice, and servants mingle freely. Despite this, Margaret clearly imagines – and Benedick seems to accept – the existence of a defined hierarchy. But it is Beatrice, rather than the nakedly ambitious Margaret, who better understands the rules governing the community in Messina. It is Beatrice who, through the tactical manipulation of civil conversation, is able to secure the favour of her “betters.”

**The Plays**

Although the focus of this dissertation is on those who successfully negotiate the creation and tactical deployment of social distinction, I begin by using New Historicist methods to examine a case study in the failure to do so. The second chapter considers the role of dueling and insult, primarily in *Romeo and Juliet*; crucially for my argument, I see banter, insult, and dueling as aspects of a single spectrum of practice stretching from the verbal into the physical. While the social matrix of the tragedy has begun to receive serious critical attention, far too little notice has been given to the all-pervasive sense of anxiety about social status in Verona. The city itself is a community of practice that furnishes its members with a limited – and dangerous – repertory of practices for self-fashioning. The duels that punctuate the action are more than the mere engine of the plot; they are the all-too visible sign of a concern with status that has terminal results. Likewise, the displays of wit that are so important in Romeo’s circle of friends are the lighter side of that jostling for prestige, as each speaker demonstrates his intellectual agility. Those displays, too, are linguistically difficult to distinguish from outright insult; only a careful set of
conversational conventions keeps social aggression in check. In the banter that marks Romeo’s group, it is a solecism to stray too far from the thread of the conversation, or to take too long a conversational “turn.” When those conventions are violated by aggressive performances of wit they escalate to insult, which can all too easily escalate into violence – whether conforming to the conventions of the *duello* or not.

Shakespeare’s foregrounding of the practices of the *duello* is doubly telling, though, for central to that institution is the notion of the lie. A duel was not initiated by the party insulted; rather it was initiated by the man whose insult was repudiated as a lie. To give someone the lie – to assert a fundamental disconnection between their language and reality – cuts to the heart of the practices of social distinction that I am examining. To assert that someone needs to resort to a lie is to assert that they are, in Helen’s words “shut … up in wishes.” That the lie should be the central concept in disputes of honour is thus fitting.

Chapter three is, in some ways, the paradigmatic chapter of the dissertation. It considers the role of aggressively witty speech in shaping social status in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The play charts a pronounced adjustment in the value of specific markers of social status, as the military valour of the male characters proves out of place in civilian Messina, while that gender-specific marker of status is paralleled by the women’s interest in fashion. The sexes come together, though, in the domain of conversation, where aggression and display are both *de rigueur* and socially dangerous. Beatrice’s judicious balancing of display and effacement is contrasted with Margaret’s self-defeating self-promotion and her tactical borrowing of Hero’s dress. Wedding conversation analysis and historical formalism, I use a comparison the genre of the jest-book to demonstrate that Beatrice, far from directly appropriating her wit out of the *Hundred Merry Tales*, deploys stylization as her dominant conversational mode, carefully adopting the idioms of other characters, and she deploys paradiastole as her dominant rhetorical
trope. The ambiguity of the trope (which expresses blame as praise, or praise as blame) allows Beatrice to minimize threats to the face of her interlocutors, promoting and prolonging the medium of social exchange in which she excels: civil conversation. Even in this, though, Beatrice sails close to the wind, for to elicit laughter is to force a physical response on one’s interlocutor. Humour carries with it an element of coercion, even violence.

Chapter four modulates the project’s central concern with the embodiment of speech and its role in asserting status to examine the role of speech that is metonymically underwritten by bodies – specifically the bodies of the aristocratic and royal women and children. Midwives, gossips, and nurses, so indispensable to the rearing of aristocratic children, were also a locus of profound anxiety, as their access to the bodies of both mother and child gave them status beyond their rank. Early modern conceptions of obstetrics and nursing, moreover, compounded the concern that these women might have too much power over their charges, or influence on the households in which they served.

After a brief discussion of the centrality of social distinction to the opening scenes of The Winter’s Tale, I move on to a consideration of a character not usually thought of as self-effacing. Although outspoken, Paulina justifies her assertive speech in part by speaking on behalf of her Queen. She also, self-protectively, assumes several metaphorical roles in the course of her defence of Hermione: mid-wife, gossip, and nurse. Such women occupied a deeply problematic role in early seventeenth-century England, as they were guarantors and frequently assessors of female chastity. A close reading of the insults Leontes deploys to attack Paulina demonstrates her role as a focal point for his anxieties surrounding female chastity and honesty. I also consider Paulina’s response to that attack. While we have seen in chapters one and two several verbal tactics underwritten by physical practices, Paulina borrows rhetorical power from the display first of Perdita’s body, and then of Hermione’s. It is a power that, in its queering of family
relationships, undermines the traditional delineations of power in Leontes’ court, even as Paulina uses that power to uphold the monarchy. I also consider the comical manifestation of her problematic role in the second half of the play, examining how the elevation of the Shepherds to “gentlemen born” recasts the play’s treatment of monstrous births in a more benign light.

Finally, I turn my attention to one of Shakespeare’s other notable pregnant women: Helen in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Helen carries the technique of stylization to its extreme in her pursuit of Bertram: not only does she appropriate both the discourse of service and the words with which Bertram attempts to reject her, but she also manages to efface the need for speaking, keeping her stylization at the level of listening instead. Drawing on Mieke Bal’s analysis of the book of Judges, I consider how the play of speech act genres allows the subordinate Helen to turn Bertram’s words to her own end, by further subordinating herself to one reading of his words. This rhetorical sleight of hand – or ear? – gives Helen the opportunity to engage in acts made lawful by her husband’s words, and allows Helen’s wish to “have a body in’t.”

Throughout these four plays, I will trace two key tactics for self-promotion through speech. The first is an insistence on the embodiment of speech in action or in materials: the settling of verbal scores through duels, the enforcement of laughter and the display of clothing, or the underwriting of verbal performance by the aristocratic body. The second is a consistent tendency on the part of successfully ambitious characters to hedge their moments of self-assertion, effectively acting off the record. Through careful self-effacement, the heroines of *Much Ado About Nothing, The Winter’s Tale*, and *All’s Well that Ends Well* are able to achieve what the tragic heroes and heroines considered by Whigham do not. Tactic by tactic, through the slow accretion of almost imperceptible adjustments to their speaking position, they are able to exert greater power, command greater authority, attain higher status, and sometimes even secure higher rank.
Chapter 2 –
“A word and a blow”: Duelling, Insult, and Social Status in Romeo and Juliet

The means whereby men from time to time have bene preferred euen to the highest degrees of greatnes and dignitie, haue euer been and are of two sortes: Armes and Letters ….

(Vincentio Saviolo His Practice, B1)

This chapter of the dissertation is the exception that proves the rule: in order to establish the conditions for successful assertion or acquisition of social status, it examines a signal failure. Unlike the characters we will be considering in later chapters, the Veronese in Romeo and Juliet compete for social position in the most overt, even violent terms. The competitive displays of wit, the insults traded, the brawls and the more formal duels – all these form a discrete spectrum of action from words to deeds, and together are the equivalent of Frank Whigham’s seizures of the will, moments in which a character “seizes something else, an external thing, another being, the self as made” (1) in order to assert his (and in this play it is almost always his) will. Each act of assertion provokes a reaction in an escalating spiral of violence, first verbal, and then physical.

In order to offer such a reading, and in order to demonstrate the centrality of both social anxiety and of this dynamic of assertion and counter-assertion to the play, I draw on a wide range of critical and historical sources. The chapter has a centripetal motion; few scholars of early modern duelling have much interest in linguistic pragmatics, while very few sociolinguists have, understandably, given sustained attention to the duel. Similarly, while patriarchy and violence have received sustained critical attention from readers of the play, the idea of social distinction and anxiety about that distinction being strong forces in the play have received only glancing attention. Some of the observations about status and competition most germane to my reading of the play come in critical works focussed on very different matters. As a result, I have been a
critical magpie, picking out insights here and there, engaging in an act of *bricolage* to build my case.

The chapter thus has three starting points, each leading into the text from a different angle. First, I offer a summary of the scholarly work on the duel and its role (as promoted by Vincentio Saviolo and others) in creating and maintaining social distinction in early modern England, moving through an analysis of how Shakespeare represents this institution in its near-ideal form in *Twelfth Night*, and on to an examination of the opposition to duelling (primarily through the work of Thomas Churchyard). This section will historicize the anxieties surrounding the feud in the play, as they are manifested both in the opening brawl of the lower orders and the series of duels in act three. The second section of the chapter explores the sociolinguistic role of insult, drawing on the play for examples; since duels were the response to affronts to honour, it is important to have a clear understanding of the form those affronts take. Crucially, this section demonstrates how difficult it is to define a linguistic boundary between an insult and quip or a joke based strictly on form rather than context. That understanding makes it plain how the day-to-day conversational practice of the young men in Verona almost inevitably must escalate into duels. Finally, a survey of the principal critics who have written on the feud – from Kahn, through Holmer, Levenson, and Snyder through to Callaghan, Fitter, and Evett, each of whom contributes key insights that inform my reading of the play – leads into a study of the play’s relation to its sources, and a close reading of the play itself.

*Romeo and Juliet* is at its core a tragedy of social ambition. Verona is a community in which order is maintained through patriarchal power. I use the term patriarchy in its most literal sense: the rule of fathers, each head of household being responsible for the well-being and orderly behaviour of both his family and his servants. Verona is also, though, a community of
practice, with certain shared practices and ideas that inform everyday interactions, and acts of self-representation. The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* is that Shakespeare’s Verona is a community that provides its members with too limited a repertory of discourses and practices for carving out a place in its hierarchy. The dominant idiom is Petrarchan, and the dominant practice is the code of the *duello*. These two media, initially designed to channel competition into less aggressive forms, feed into each other, and build on each other. Ultimately, the very institutions and practices intended to preserve order in Verona, to manage the competing social ambitions of the Veronese, end up consuming themselves, promoting the violence they are intended to forestall.

*The Ideal Function of Duelling: The Case of Twelfth Night*

Despite its supposed medieval origins in the trial by combat, duelling was a relatively new arrival in Tudor England from the continent. Joan Ozark Holmer has already established Shakespeare’s indebtedness to the popular fencing manual of Vincentio Saviolo, *Saviolo, His Practice*. It is not necessary to rehearse the whole cultural history of duelling here, but for the purposes of this chapter, I would like to summarize some salient points. The first is the duel’s immediate and obvious function: it is a means of defending and establishing the honour and status of the winner. In Brian Parker’s words, a duel establishes what a gentleman’s “personal place should be in the hierarchy of the elite” (cited in Low, 21). Certainly the duel’s popularity increased noticeably in a period when, in Jennifer Low’s words, the aristocracy, “acutely concerned with their status under the Tudors, were constantly jostling for precedence in both figurative and literal ways” (21).

I would go further than this. As I argue in the introduction, the moment in which an individual attempts to establish his or her position in a given hierarchy is a moment of extreme
risk: either that claim may be rejected, or the very bases for the hierarchy may become open to question. Furthermore, every instance of self-assertion is a reminder of the constant need for such assertion, and also of the instability and ephemerality of even a successful claim to status. There is no such thing as a singular “personal place” for anyone in the constantly renegotiated and always reticulated hierarchy of early modern England. And yet, for an anxious aristocrat, the duel provided the fantasy of fixity. To defeat someone in a duel is to establish, both in public perception and in a violently embodied way, one’s superiority over that opponent.

The second way in which the duel served to shore up the status and authority of its participants is slightly more abstract. The duel offered a means for both of its participants to assert that, regardless of the outcome of the fight, they were indeed gentlemen. Saviolo addresses this in a section entitled “Who is not to be admitted to the proofe of Armes”:

Forasmuch as Duello is a proofe by armes, which appertaine to gentlemen, and that gentry is an honourable degree, it is not meet to admitte proofe by armes to any but to honorable persons…. (Cc3r)

To Saviolo, it is inconceivable that base persons should be permitted to have recourse to duelling. Indeed, duelling was in many ways a practice that consisted of mutually reinforcing assertions of status. Regardless of who won or lost, to be “admitted to the proofe of Armes” was to be acknowledged a gentleman.¹ Markku Peltonen goes so far as to argue that a central feature of duelling was the irrelevance of the outcome of the fight for the ultimate purpose of the ritual. The duellists were engaged in the fight to demonstrate their sense of honour by being threatened with death rather than to achieve a definite result. (2)

¹ This point is particularly problematic in the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets; to challenge an opponent to a duel was at once to claim superiority and to acknowledge the relatively small difference in status.
Perhaps it is too much to say that the combatants wanted to demonstrate their willingness to face danger *rather* than to win. Entering a duel in the hopes of losing would be suicidal, while a gracious surrender could not be counted on; the goal was decidedly to win. The victor in a duel, unlike the loser, would have established his superiority over at least one competitor. In the ever-shifting and contingent hierarchy of early modern England, such a victory could attest to a major assertion of superiority over the leader of a coterie, or it could be a very minor point, but it was nonetheless tangible. For the loser, of course, there was significant loss of face – or life. A more modest statement than Peltonnen’s is Jennifer Low’s observation that usually to “participate in the duel was to become known for one’s courage, and even the losers seem to have gained renown for having fought” (18). There were thus strong incentives to participate in a duel even if winning was far from guaranteed.²

If the idea sounds ridiculous to modern ears, it was widely enough accepted in late Tudor and early Stuart England that the duel was quickly established – yet viewed with ambivalence. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare plays with the idea both ways, at once satirizing the conventions and assumptions of duelling, while simultaneously resorting to the duel as the means of establishing order at the end of the play and establishing Sebastian’s aristocratic credentials. It is important to demonstrate that in *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare presents duelling in a very different, more

² A good example of the sense of entitlement generated by participating in a duel actually comes in one of the quieter moments of *Romeo and Juliet*. After Mercutio taunts Romeo after the Capulets’ ball, mocking his lovesickness, he departs, leaving Romeo to come forward. Romeo dismisses Mercutio’s jests with the telling analogy “He jests at scars that never felt a wound…” (2.1.44). Although the syntax is tangled (the antecedent to “that” is “he,” not “scars”), and although Romeo is speaking metaphorically, the logic is clear: one earns the right to speak of the injury and duelling by being injured. Likewise, one earns the right to speak of the injuries of love in being injured. The words of Mercutio, who has never suffered as Romeo has suffered, or risked as Romeo has risked, are empty. The tenor may be determined by the immediate circumstances of the scene, but Romeo’s choice of vehicle is socially scripted. He has bought quite wholly into the central importance of duelling for establishing authority and status, even for the wounded loser.
positive light from his earlier representation in *Romeo and Juliet*. The intensely negative portrayal of the *duello* in the tragedy is thus not simply a product of ingrained habits of thought; rather, it is the product of a conscious and deliberate artistic choice. The plays engage with the practice of duelling in different ways, as Shakespeare uses it to explore very different aspects of social ambition.

*Twelfth Night* has attracted sustained attention from critics interested in its playful exploration of gender and sexuality. Recently such scholars as Nancy Lindheim and Barbara Correll, however, have argued forcefully for refocusing critical inquiry on the question of status and social distinction in the play, and with good reason; social anxiety is the engine of the sub-plot, and thus shades the main plot. The plot and sub-plot are quite clearly delineated along lines of rank: Orsino’s wooing of Olivia is the negotiation of an explicitly aristocratic alliance; the “below-stairs” sub-plot describes the punishment of Malvolio’s ambitious desire to woo and wed above-stairs. Even in the main plot, though, anxiety surrounding issues of status hovers in the background, as Sir Toby insists that Olivia will “none o’th’ Count. She’ll not match above her degree, neither in estate, years, nor wit, I have heard her swear’t” (1.3.102-4). Viola initially wishes to serve Olivia “Till I had mine own occasion mellow / What my estate is” (1.2.43-44). And later, when confronted with the infatuated Olivia, “Cesario” will insist that his parentage is “Above my fortunes, yet my state is well. / I am a gentleman” (1.5.267-69).

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3 Yet even Malvolio claims, while imprisoned, the status of “gentleman” (4.2.83), while Maria is both Olivia’s “gentlewoman” and a “wench.” In some respects, the exclusion of Malvolio, Maria, Toby, and Andrew represents an abjection of questionable or corrupted gentility from the aristocracy.

4 Cf. Nick Potter 109-110. Potter’s discussion of Viola and Sebastian’s unclear “estate” emphasizes just how often the issue of social status or rank is raised without the twins’ exact rank ever being established.
For the bulk of the main plot, though, questions of rank and status are raised only to be dismissed. Viola’s assertion of her birth is accepted unproblematically by Olivia. In stark contrast, the characters of the sub-plot exist at the upper margins of what might be called below stairs. Maria is a servant, but that term could apply to a woman of fairly low birth, or to a woman of rank almost equal to that of the woman she served. Sir Andrew and Sir Toby are knights, although the first lacks the mental resources and social capital to profit much from his rank, and the second clearly lacks the financial means to live as he would like. Unsurprisingly, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are very concerned with the outward signs of rank, and the sign that most insistently informs the action is duelling.

The idea of duelling as the sign of gentility or nobility appears early in *Twelfth Night*, in two different keys. In the first below-stairs scene, the knights are presented with challenges to their status. Maria reprimands Toby for his drunken behaviour while openly questioning Andrew’s status and his right to pay court to Olivia. Maria complains that Andrew Aguecheek is a “great quarreller, and but he hath the gift of a coward to allay the gust he hath in quarrelling, ’tis thought among the prudent he would quickly have the gift of a grave” (1.3.28-30). Maria at once appeals to the standards of duelling to condemn Aguecheek, and implicitly questions those standards. Sir Andrew’s sense of his status prompts him to court quarrels, asserting his honour and his right to issue challenges.

Maria’s subtle formulation contains two pairs of ironic statements about Sir Andrew and about the conventions of the *duello*. First, his cowardice is at once the quality that bars him from “legitimate” access to the proof of arms, and what saves his life. Although insistent upon his rank and its perquisites, by the very standards he invokes, he has no claim to nobility. Second, though more implicitly, Maria criticizes duelling as being at once the prerogative of gentry, and yet
lethal to those who enjoy it. Typically, Maria shows an awareness of, and ambivalence towards, the workings of power and status: as in her dealings with Sir Toby, she is a marginal figure at once envious and resentful of those workings. Sir Toby, for his part, shows no such concern about the dangers of duelling, or at least not for the dangers it poses to Sir Andrew. Disappointed in his protégé’s social skills, he wishes “thou mightst never draw sword again” (57-58). For Toby, as for Saviolo (and, as we shall see, Thomas Churchyard), the right to proof of arms is fairly unproblematically the hallmark of gentility.

It is Sir Andrew, though, who most insistently returns to duelling as a means of asserting his status, although each insistence reveals how he fails to achieve the standards to which he, as a knight, ought to adhere. When insulted by Malvolio, for instance, he comments that “’Twere as good a deed as to drink when a man’s a-hungry to challenge him the field and then to break promise with him, and make a fool of him” (2.3.188-20). Sir Andrew, of course, is blind to the fact that his issuing a challenge to “any but honourable persons” would mark him as ungentle, and that “to break promise” would only reinforce that assessment. Consistently, Shakespeare uses the code of duelling and Aguecheek’s misprision of it to hold him up to ridicule, exposing his pretensions. It is a delicate balance between mocking Sir Andrew by invoking the standards of duelling, and mocking those standards themselves.

The abortive duel between “Cesario” and Sir Andrew serves to throw into further relief the inadequacies of the knight, while continuing to present the institution of duelling in an ambivalent light. Aguecheek knows enough about the protocol of duelling to send the challenge

5 Maria’s implicit satire of the duelling code is picked up and expanded by Richard Wilson (Shakespeare in French Theory); in fact, he reads the play as essentially condemning the violence of the duel. “The social aggression that explodes at the end of Twelfth Night could be seen, then, not as the exception to the festive rule, but the realisation of those maimings and punishments which menace all of Shakespeare’s comic plots” (203).
by letter, but otherwise plays fast and loose with what is expected of him as a gentleman – or rather simply, in issuing his challenge, he demonstrates that he has no business challenging anyone. Although easily convinced by Sir Toby that “there is no love-broker in the world can more prevail in man’s commendation with woman than a report of valour” (3.2.33-35), Sir Andrew’s cowardice is apparent in the wording of his challenge, which shows him pathetically eager to “keep o’ the windy side of the law” (3.4.159). If Aguecheek shows up some of the absurd aspects of duelling, though, the absurdity is more the result of his complete unsuitability to the practice. His reluctance to face “Cesario” is reflected in “Cesario’s” reluctance to face him; a coward and a woman should not, under the terms of the duelling code, have recourse to proof of arms.

Their fear in the face of an impending duel is implicitly contrasted with Sebastian’s alacrity in challenging the knights when they offend him, a willingness that is implicitly endorsed by the logic of the play’s conclusion. While Olivia orders that Sir Toby’s and Andrew’s wounds be tended to, no one comments on Sebastian’s account of what happened, or his justification of his actions:

I am sorry, madam, I have hurt your kinsman,
But had it been the brother of my blood
I must have done no less with wit and safety.
You throw a strange regard upon me, and by that
I do perceive it hath offended you. (5.1.202-6)

Olivia’s look, of course, is occasioned by perplexity rather than offence. Perhaps under more normal circumstances, Sebastian’s violence would have attracted comment or disapproval, but the silence of the entire _dramatis personae_ on the matter suggests that his handling of his challengers does not, _pace_ Wilson, mean that “Sebastian’s victory, which heralds a ‘golden time’
for Illyria… would have been compromised… by this contemporary debate over the problem of social violence” (204). Unlike the abortive confrontations between the two knights and their challengers “Cesario” and Antonio, Sebastian’s resort to violence ends the chain of misprisions. Irving Wardle suggests that the main lovers (and Malvolio) are “intoxicated with their own reflections” and that Viola and Sebastian cure them by putting them through “an Ovidian obstacle course” (cited in Warren’s introduction to the Oxford edition, 14). Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are likewise intoxicated with their own deluded visions of themselves, but the ultimate cure comes not in the form of love, but rather in the form of Sebastian’s sword. In terms of the duelling code, too, the sketchy description of what has taken place offstage offers further justification for Sebastian’s action. The social status of the characters in the “below-stairs” plot is problematic in ways that it is not for the lovers. Sebastian effectively ends the debate, and the play ends with the exclusion and shaming of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew.

The ending of *Twelfth Night* sees the establishment of order, however shadowed that order may be by the events of the play, and that order depends on the establishment of two aristocratic households – one whose male head’s authority depends on his prowess as a dueller. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare offers a relatively unproblematic representation of the conventions and functions of the duel. As befits a comedy, however shaded, the social institutions of Illyria are eventually upheld. Duelling in Tudor London, however, was considerably less effective at keeping the peace.

**The Realities of Duelling: Tudor London**

The *duello*, as a result, was far from meeting with unanimous approval. Its consequences for participants were all too real, and all too deadly – and it was seen, from quite early on – to be satisfactory in establishing true social superiority. Crucially, though, advocates both for and
against duelling never seem to question the basic assumption that honour can, and should, be defended, even by violence. And the practitioners of the duelling code locate the greatest assault on a gentleman’s honour in the lie – the implication that his word is invalid. As Lisa Hopkins, writing on Ford, notes: “losers may talk, but talk... signifies nothing” (101); only losers need to lie.

While Bacon’s later objections to duelling are better known, even as early as 1593 Thomas Churchyard was decrying “a new devised wilfulness that our old Fathers taught vs not, nor scarsely was known, till our youth beganne to trauell straunge Countreyes, and so brough home strange manners” (59). For Churchyard, at least, the duel bore the taint of foreign practice, and more than a hint of corruption. It is worth noting that a number of Churchyard’s objections have echoes in the plot (and occasionally the dialogue) of Romeo and Juliet. He decries the fact that

now life is sought in England for an Italian lie, and nothing but blood and death can pacifie mens furies, men are become such Cockes of the game, they must fight in a sharpe, scrat out each others eyes, and thirst so much for blood, that nothing can mitigate their wrath till one bee out of the world, and the other bee fled God knowes whither. A prettie quarrell that compells men to bee fugitiues, for playing of beastly parts and bringeth such repentaunce as breedeth both beggerie and extremitie of Fortune, and namely when friends shall forsake you, and weeping can not helpe. (60)

While the parallels with Romeo and Juliet may well be coincidental, they are nonetheless striking. Duelling is here identified as an Italian import, in keeping with the prominence of Italian fencing masters in London. Romeo’s exile and his complaint that he is “fortune’s fool”

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6 Not French, again pace Wilson.
are prefigured in Churchyard’s condemnation of the duel, as is Romeo’s breakdown and fit of futile weeping in Friar Laurence’s cell.

But even Churchyard, in decrying the importation of foreign habits, made concessions to the necessity – or at least the utility – of the institution:

It must be graunted and necessarie to bee allowed that weapons shall be wore (alwaies of equall length) and vsed in causes of defence. And further for slaunders, naughtie reports in absence, and present spitfull speaches, men ought for the mayntenance of good name, somtimes vse an lawfull manner of correction (this spoken not of the scripture) for the sharpe sworde makes a blunt blockhead beware how hee vseth his tongue, and if bold bablers were not snibbed for their sawsines, this world would bee full of talkatiuie merchants, and no man would care what he spoke, if wordes should not be wisely set to sale, and in the end of an ill market be dearly bought. (59)

Churchyard, although nominally opposed to the institution of the duello, nonetheless accepts, apparently without question, the bulk of its underlying assumptions and the central assumption is that a man’s honour is worth defending with force. The suspect class are “talkatiue merchants,” which is to say that “naughtie reports” that undermine a gentleman’s reputation are the product of decidedly non-gentle speakers, “bold bablers,” whose words are overvalued by careless listeners.

For ultimately, it is the valuation of words – or more particularly, the valuation of a gentleman’s word – that is at stake in the duello. One of the key ideas running through this study is just how much status depends on a speaker’s ability to match words and deeds, and the giving of the lie was one of the most significant challenges to that marker of status. In his work on speech acts and literary theory, Sandy Petrey observes that it is “doubtful that world literature furnishes a more explosive instance of constative-performative interpenetration and of language’s coordination with social norms than the things Spain’s Golden Age dramatists
represent ‘You lie’ as doing” (92). What *siglo d’oro* dramatists make explicit, Shakespeare leaves implicit; moreover, the stage combats of Shakespeare’s play seldom conform exactly to the prescribed forms of the *duello*.

Saviolo, though, takes great pains to explain why it is the man who repudiates an insult, rather than he who gives it, who must be the challenger:

> the lawes haue no regarde of the wordes, or the force or efficacie of them, but provide that the burthen of the challenge shall euer fall on him that offereth the injurie: for it is thought that euery man is honest, just, and honourable vntill the contrarie bee proued. And thefore as in common triall by ciuill judgement and order of lawe, whosoever is accused of anie crime, is by simple denying the same delivered from condemnation, vnlesse further proofe thereof be brought agaynst him…. whosoever speaketh of another man contrarie vnto that which is ordinarily presumed of him, it is great reason that the charge of proof should lie vppon him…. (343/S1r)

While both the insult and the giving of the lie constitute a bald, on-record threat to the face of the listener, the giving of the lie threatens not just the reputation of the listener, but also the assumptions that make day-to-day conversation possible. The giver of the lie impugns his interlocutor not only by attacking his character, but also by questioning the very basis on which he can be considered part of society at all. To put it crudely, a man may do many things wrong and remain a gentleman; to lie puts him beyond the pale, and robs his words of any value.

Duelling served the dual function of allowing the individual to assert the value of his words, and, by reserving the proof of arms to a select few, allowing an entire class to deny the value of the words of the lower orders.

That denial, though, was clearly unstable, for implicit in Churchyard’s condemnation of “wordes… not wisely set to saile, and … of an ill market dearly bought” is the very fear that prompted duels – the sense that the need to assert social superiority in a contested hierarchy is so
great that violence is justified. This fear is the very ideology that informs the feud in *Romeo and Juliet*, running through the unspoken but powerfully constitutive assumptions and practices of day-to-day life in Verona. But Churchyard’s words also carry another fear about duelling: apart from its inherent violence, there was always the risk that the violent means of settling social disputes might be illegitimately appropriated.

For as with other markers of social status – courtesy, or clothing, for instance – the duel was susceptible to appropriation by those it was supposed to exclude. Just as courtesy manuals allowed the rising middle class to appropriate the manners of their “superiors,” and money allowed them to appropriate their clothes, the very fencing manuals and schools that so aggressively distinguished between “honourable persons” and their inferiors popularized the duel in the public imagination. François Billacois argues that, in France at least, duelling was “a way of proclaiming and realising equality between the gentry of the Commons and the Lords of the Upper House” (30). As with other markers of status, though, the assertion of the right to bear arms led to the possibility of that assertion being challenged. And, unlike a would-be wit who bettered him or herself by reading the *Hundred Merry Tales*, an aspiring swordsman had to expect that a challenge to his status might be terminal. The very certainty that duelling seemed to offer in settling questions of social superiority made its appropriation risky – and not merely on the social level.

The Italian fencing masters in London seem to have taken deliberate steps to prevent this appropriation, in marked contrast with the native sword-fighting instructors, who “taught mainly

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7 Contrast with Snyder (“Ideology” 88 and following).
8 Cf. *Much Ado about Nothing* 2.1.130 – and chapter three.
lower orders in society” while the Italian masters “focused on teaching a more restricted group of gentlemen” (Peltonen, 93). George Silver’s long campaign against the interlopers included issuing a challenge to Vincentio and Jeronim Saviolo to an exhibition using several different weapons; the Saviolos declined the public demonstration (Peltonen 95). The difference in attitude is striking. On the one hand, the English fencing masters saw themselves as teaching a craft, one that can be taught to many, and a piece of common, English, cultural capital; as Peltonen points out, defenders of traditional sword fighting insisted that it was useful in wars, and so of greater value (94). The Italian fencing masters, on the other hand, seem concerned with protecting the secrecy and exclusivity of duelling techniques.

Saviolo’s reticence about public display notwithstanding, the citizens of London were scarcely inclined to leave swordplay entirely in the hands of the élite. At least until the 1580s, Londoners inclined to watch or participate in fencing contests could repair to Smithfield. As Edmund Howes describes it:

> This field commonly called West Smithfield, was for many years called Ruffians hall, by reason it was the usual place of Frayes and common fighting, during the time that Sword and Buckler were in use. When every Servingman, from the base to the best, carried a Buckler at his backe, which hung by the hilt or pommell of his Sword which hung before him. This manner of fight was frequent with all men, until the fight of rapier and dagger took place and then suddenly the general quarell of fighting abated which begun about the 20. yeare of Queen Elizabeth, for untill then it was usuall to have frayes, fights, and Quarells, upon the Sundayes and Holidayes; sometimes twenty thirty and forty Swords and Bucklers, halfe against halfe, as well by quarells of appointment as by chance. (1024-25) 

9 Note that the numbers of participants fighting “halfe against halfe” offers some support for Silver’s assertion of the utility of traditional methods of combat in training men for war. By the same token, it is also easy to see how limiting combat to a private duel, instead of pitched confrontations on this scale, held a certain appeal.
This passage has several key points worth noting when considering the historical role of Smithfield, and the role of the brawling servants in *Romeo and Juliet*. In looking back fifty years into the past, Howes offers a thumbnail sketch of the very process described by Stone and Peltonen: the arrival of the duel, a foreign practice, served to curb the commonplace violence of the Tudor period. By 1630, judging by this description, Howes clearly assumes only the “best” servants, rather than the “basest,” to be bearing arms. But the reduction in violence follows an unclear trajectory. He first states that “suddenly the general quarell of fighting abated,” implying that the rapier and dagger very swiftly put paid to the propensity of Londoners to fight with sword and buckler. But in specifying when this took place, Howes states that the practice of fighting with rapier and dagger began “about” 1578 or 1579. That is to say, he first paints a picture of Smithfield at its height, but then leaves it unclear just how long this eclipse of sword-and-buckler fighting took. If Edelman is indeed right in his surmises, and the servants in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* are returning from the Veronese equivalent of Smithfield, it would suggest that an audience in the mid-1590s would see little unusual in the servants conducting themselves as they do.

This refusal of the lower orders to give up their wonted pursuits entirely, and their insistence on participating in fights that so clearly echo their “betters” is, moreover, a crucial assertion of self and status in the face of legal and cultural attempts to control them. They are not merely appropriating the marker of high-status individuals. Indeed, appropriation is hardly the term. Samson and Gregory are not, after all, claiming the right to engage in formal duels; nor were their historical models, who gathered at Smithfield. Rather, their fighting is one of the

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10 Edelman (35) makes the suggestion that Samson and Gregory are in fact returning from the Veronese equivalent of Smithfield, as discussed in further detail below.
“strategies available to subordinate groups too weak to resist openly,”\textsuperscript{11} those “hidden forms of defiance or subversion, such as grumbling, subversive jokes, and unauthorized meetings which create times, spaces, and networks beyond the control and knowledge of the ruling elites” (Capp 24-25). To use de Certeau’s term, they are mobilizing the “tactic” of sword-and-buckler fighting against the “strategy” of the codes of the duel, and the popularity of rapier-and-dagger fighting amongst the aristocracy.

This lower-status practice exhibits the key features of de Certeau’s description of tactics. First, the fighters at Smithfield took the institution of the duel and adapted it to their own station – an act of \textit{bricolage}.\textsuperscript{12} Second, the tactic is entirely time-dependent and opportunistic; while the gentry, inhabiting the “proper” of those with a “legitimate” right to duel, had, at all times, to be prepared to respond to a challenge, Howes notes that the sword enthusiasts met at Smithfield “\textit{upon the Sundays and Holidayes}” – when their workaday duties did not interfere. Finally, like other tactics, the fights at Smithfield did not serve to alter the proper fundamentally; rather they served to make it habitable, briefly circumventing its restrictions. This has fairly obvious implications for how we are to understand the conduct of the servants, whose insulting banter leads to the opening mêlée. But in order to understand duelling, a response to insults and other slights to honour, it is important to consider the function of insults themselves.

\textsuperscript{11} Note that Capp is not using the term in de Certeau’s sense.

\textsuperscript{12} Samson and Gregory, certainly, are clearly as invested in their prowess with sword and buckler – the weapons permissible for them to carry – as any of their social superiors are in their prowess with rapier and dagger.
The Pragmatics of Insult

Since the 1980s, linguists studying the pragmatics of politeness have relied heavily on a model proposed by Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson, which recognizes that, in Lynne Magnusson’s summary,

the most commonplace speech acts negotiated in everyday conversation – advising, promising, inviting, requesting, ordering, criticizing, even complimenting – carry an element of risk, for they threaten potential damage to the persona of either speaker or hearer (or to those of both)… Politeness, in the special sense that Brown and Levinson define it, consists of the complex remedial strategies that serve to minimize the risks to “face,” or self-esteem of conversational participants. (17)

Brown and Levinson’s seminal work concerns itself with those remedial strategies, at the expense of considering why the strategies might not be used, or why speakers might deliberately opt to use impolite speech. Even so, their model notes that a speaker might neglect to engage in polite behaviour if he or she is much more powerful than the hearer. Despite a paradigm shift in sociolinguistics – current researchers do not assume as readily as Brown and Levinson do that language is essentially collaborative – their model remains one of the most useful formulations for analyzing polite and impolite linguistic behaviour.

Collaboration need not mean co-operation, however, and more recent work in the field has begun to take note of what Leslie Beebe calls “instrumental” impoliteness – that is to say, impoliteness that “fulfills a function that the speaker intended” (166). Juhani Rudanko’s work on the function of what he calls “imprecatives” moved the field forward significantly; in a nice twist, he uses characters from Shakespeare to illustrate his claims:

The rudeness of imprecatives and derogatory epithets serves to reduce, and indeed to deny the possibility of, solidarity and camaraderie [between speakers]. For Coriolanus they are an important means of self-identification: his sense of
self is to a large extent based on the importance of social distinctions and social hierarchies and of self-detachment and self-imposed isolation. (Case Studies 20)

The important terms here are “distinctions” and “hierarchies.” Imprecatives or insults serve to distinguish between an in-group and an out-group; the servants of one household insult the servants of the other, marking them as “other.” Seen in this light, Samson and Gregory’s baiting of Abraham actually serves a valid function, in that it allows the servants to express and amplify their identification with their households. But the insults also carry an hierarchical implication. As Brown and Levinson note, a disparity in the relative status of the speakers can lead to dispensing with politeness. As a corollary, dispensing with politeness can imply a disparity in the relative status of the speakers.

In abandoning the collaborative model of language that informs Brown and Levinson, we can gain a clearer understanding of group dynamics in general, and in Romeo and Juliet in particular. For in their model it is the shared goal of conversational participants to save face. But Beebe’s consideration of instrumental impoliteness shows how the cost/benefit analysis can shift: if a direct threat to the face of an interlocutor can assert superiority over him or her, it may be worthwhile, despite carrying the risk of retaliation. In fact, this linguistic dynamic is strikingly similar to the calculus that informs the duelling code; in order to protect his honour (or, as Brown and Levinson would put it, face), a gentleman might very well have to risk both his honour and life – and that of an opponent – in a duel. It is worth noting that many got that calculus wrong, as even the staunchest defenders of duelling admit: “men vpon euerie light cause enter into more actions of defiance, than for any iust occasion offered in respect of iustice and honour” (Saviolo 449).
In the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, the servants’ brawl presents just such a distorted calculus. Samson and Gregory, determined to fight, seek an “occasion” that is “just” merely in offering them legal immunity. Their concern for the position of the law – and their prolonged provocation of Abraham – also draws attention to the fact that the text of the play is littered with occasions for offence to be taken that do not result in challenges. In part, this absence is because some characters display the “wisdome and discretion” (399 Bb/1/r) that Saviolo accounts the true measure of a man, but is also because insults serve more than one function. They serve to exclude and demean, as in the servants’ exchange, but by virtue of their face-threatening nature insults can also, paradoxically, serve to assert bonds within a group.\(^\text{13}\)

Bearing this in mind, it is useful to add another term to this consideration of insults in the play, and that is Lave and Wenger’s idea of communities of practice. A community of practice is (as explained on page 19) “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 464). While it is easy to see how a community of practice would emerge around a clearly defined shared project, it is also important to remember that the ongoing process of self-definition within a community can also constitute “mutual engagement” in an endeavour – the engagement need simply not be strictly collaborative. Verona, in the play, can be fruitfully considered as a large community of practice, consisting of a number of smaller, overlapping communities.

\(^{13}\) It is worth noting that there is little or nothing to distinguish linguistically between an insult offered earnestly and one offered in banter; the distinction is context-dependent, and there is a real risk of crossing the line between banter and genuine hurt.
Rudanko’s discussion of the function of insult throws into relief the importance of recognizing the fine shadings of status within groups for understanding Mercutio’s coterie, where witty insults are *de rigueur.* Mercutio, as kinsman to the Prince, may be the nominal leader of the group, but at any point in his banter with Romeo, Romeo might have the upper hand. This instability stands true for how we must understand the rivalrous banter of the servants: social superiority is constantly negotiated. If we understand the social stratification within and around such groups as complexly reticulated, the insults begin to serve a more cogent social function. To insult another member of the group without provoking violence is at once to assert the party offering the insult is possessed of superior wit; the distinction in status offers him the right to speak rudely. The absence of violent – or otherwise negative response – confirms that the exchange has taken place within a group that is sufficiently cohesive that it need not be taken seriously. Insults offered to those outside the group – such as Tybalt – or outside and below – such as the Nurse – assert their exclusion and (frequently) their inferiority. But such an assertion is always open to challenge, and the practice of duelling offered a dangerous opportunity for the slighted party to deny the charge. In theory, at least, victory in a duel provided irrefutable proof of social superiority.

**The Feud in Verona: Sources and Criticism**

It is that question of the struggle for social superiority that impels the feud. There can be little doubt that the feud is of central concern for Shakespeare, rather than a mere instrument for advancing the plot, for he gives it a prominence found in none of the play’s literary antecedents. Early versions of the story omit it entirely. Masuccio Salternitano, in one of the earliest Italian

14 My reading of Mercutio’s coterie on the one hand, and the always negotiable relationship between Samson and Gregory, contrasts strongly with David Evett’s, who states that “They have a hierarchy, but it is a simple one: leaders and followers” (86).
versions of the story, manages to marry the lovers in secret, and have Mariotto, Romeo’s precursor, exiled without embroiling the whole town:

Mariotto, in an argument with another honourable citizen, passed from words to deeds, dealing him a fatal blow to the head with a stick, from which he died a few days later. Mariotto went into hiding and, having been sought diligently but in vain by the authorities, was not only condemned to exile by the city lords and podestà, but was also proclaimed an enemy of the city. (20)

Although it is highly unlikely Shakespeare was aware of Salternitano’s version, it is worth considering because the spectrum of action it suggests – from words to deeds, and violent words to violent deeds – is the focus of this chapter. The spectrum seems to exist in Shakespeare’s Verona as a clear progression: words lead to deeds, insult leads to violence, and the two expressions of aggression both serve to assert the status of the aggressor.

The feud becomes established from Luigi da Porto’s version of the story (ca. 1524) onwards, and the two young lovers are named as the children of the Capelletti and Montecchi. Da Porto, however, seems largely unconcerned with the causes of the feud. After offering two possible explanations, he finally retreats into admitting that he does not know:

Thus as I said, there lived in Verona… two very noble families, both equally endowed by heaven, nature, and fortune with wealth and men of valour. For whatever reason a most bitter feud reigned between them, as frequently happens with great families. (29)

It is Shakespeare’s immediate precursor, Arthur Brooke, who first offers an explanation as to why the two households are at odds, and his sustained analysis is in keeping with da Porto’s more throwaway comment that this sort of rivalry “frequently happens with great families.” For
Brooke, that greatness is itself the cause of the feud, a conclusion that gives him fruitful grounds for his habitual moralizing:

There were two ancient stocks, which Fortune high did place
Above the rest, indued with wealth, and nobler of their race,
Loved of the common sort, loved of the prince alike,
And like unhappy were they both, when Fortune list to strike;
Whose praise, with equal blast, Fame in her trumpet blew;

The one was clepé Capulet, and th'other Montague.
A wonted use it is, that men of likely sort,
(I wot not by what fury forced) envy each other's port.
So these, whose egall state bred envy pale of hue,
And then, of grudging envy's root, black hate and rancour grew
As, of a little spark, oft riseth mighty fire,
So of a kindled spark of grudge, in flames flash out their ire:
And then their deadly food, first hatched of trifling strife,
Did bathe in blood of smarting wounds; it reavéd breath and life.... (25-38)

The families are “loved of the prince alike”, and are of “likely sort” and of “egall state” (emphasis added). While Levenson notes that “Brooke stresses the cause of rancour between the families by using the word envy three times in three lines” (“Invention” 47), the root cause of that envy is equally important – pun intended. For assertion of social status requires difference – distinctions that must continually be created and enforced. Implicitly, for Brooke, it is the very equality of status between the families and the envious desire for distinction produced by that equality that lead to conflict.

Brooke’s discussion of the feud, though, comes after he has carefully established the city and its Prince, as he comes ever closer to the subject that he has laid out in the argument and the opening sonnet. It is instructive to compare how Brooke uses the Petrarchan format to open the poem, as it establishes what is for him the central theme of the story:

Love hath inflaymed twayne by sodayn sight.
And both do grant the thing that both desire.
They wed shrift by counsell of a frier.
Yong Romeus climbs fayre Juliets bower by night.
Three monthes he doth enjoy his cheefe delight.
By Tybalts rage, provoked to yre
He payeth death to Tybalt for his hyre.
A banisht man he scapes by secret flight.
New marriage is offred to his wife:
She drinkes a drinke that see
mes to reve her breath.
They bury her, that sleping yet hath lyfe.
Her husband heares the tidings of her death.
He drinkes his bane. And she with Romeus knife,
When she awakes, her selfe (alas) she sleath.

Despite observing the formal conventions of the sonnet, this introductory poem exhibits almost none of the standard tropes of the genre. Indeed, the language is notable for its relative lack of figurative speech, and its lack of virtually any development of theme or imagery whatsoever.¹⁵

For Brooke, *Romeus and Juliet* is the tale of two young people who

neglecting the authoritie and advise of parents and frendes, conferring their principall counsels with drunken gospyppes, and superstitious friers (the naturally fitte instruments of unchastitie) attempting all adventures of peryll, for thattaynyng of their wished lust... abusyng the honourable name of lawefull marriage, the cloke of shame of stolne contracts, finallye, by all means of unhonest lyfe, hasting to most unhappye death. (284-85)

Accordingly, he invokes the form of the Petrarchan lyric – but not its usual content – to describe an immoral love, unsanctioned by society or by truly lawful marriage. The feud itself is clearly of – at best – secondary importance to Brooke.

In sharp contrast, Shakespeare’s focus on the conflict between the two families is immediate and sustained. That the Montagues and the Capulets are at odds is the first fact of the play to be established, even though the families themselves remain unnamed until the play

¹⁵ It is interesting that the one image, of paying Tybalt death for his hire, is mercantile; this ties in with Brooke’s overall representation of Verona’s prosperity, a concept that may linger behind Shakespeare’s quiet but steady foregrounding of status and mercantile language.
proper begins. In the Chorus’ opening sonnet, the conflict between the two families is introduced in the first quatrain, while the children of those houses must wait until the second. Nor is this ordering simply determined by temporal priority. The third quatrain gives equal weight to the love affair and to the feud:

The fearful passage of their death-marked love,
And the continuance of their parents’ rage –
Which but their children’s end naught could remove –
Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage. (Prologue, 5-8)

Although the syntax is complex, it clearly gives equal weight to the “passage of their... love” and to “the continuance of their parents’ rage.” This precedence, moreover, is the same in the two most different early versions of the play, as the truncated poem that introduces the first quarto gives significant weight to the “household friends alike in dignity” and the “death-marked passage of their parents’ rage.” If the feud is the backdrop to the romance of the play, then the romance is the mechanism by which the play interrogates the feud.

The past thirty years have seen increased attention being paid to the social matrix in which the tragedy plays out, and it is hardly surprising that the feud has been a central critical concern. Beginning with Coppélia Kahn’s seminal work, scholars have read the feud as a representation of all that is wrong with Veronese society, and as embodying the range of values which Juliet and Romeo’s love rejects – or seeks to reject. For Kahn, the project of the play is actively “excoriating patriarchal violence in the play” (Goldberg 1994, 220), and the driving force of the action is “a conflict between manhood as violence on behalf of fathers and manhood as separation from the fathers and sexual union with women” (Kahn 83). This perception stands, thirty years later, as one of the defining critical insights into the play; later readings may adapt
Kahn’s argument, or take its implications further, but it runs through virtually every major reading of the play since the early 1980s.

In work that follows directly on from this, Jonathan Goldberg and Dympna Callaghan read the ideological function of the play as strongly reifying the heteronormative order. In both cases, the comments on the text most relevant to my work are given in asides. For Callaghan

*Romeo and Juliet*

articulates a crisis in patriarchy itself – specifically the transference of power from the feuding fathers to the Prince so that sexual desire in the form presented here produces the required subjectivities and harnesses them for the state above all other possible allegiances. (72)

Callaghan’s characterization of that crisis differs from mine. *Romeo and Juliet* does articulate a crisis in patriarchy: the order that patriarchy is supposed to ensure is eroded by the institutions and practices of the patriarchal system itself. While few would dispute that “the atrophied, macerated power of the belligerent secular fathers is rendered in comic fashion,” it is difficult to see just what about Escalus’ ineffectual actions in the play leads Callaghan to see them as “the civil and civilizing intervention of the Prince” (72). In making this statement, moreover, Callaghan invokes the very words from the text that undermine her point: if the Chorus claims “civil blood makes civil hands unclean,” then the Prince’s actions may indeed be civil, but they signally fail to have any noticeably civilizing effect.16 Royal power in Verona is as compromised as domestic patriarchal authority. The complex mixture of strategies that make up the patriarchal

16 Angela Locatelli notes the prominence Shakespeare – in contrast to Brooke – accords to civility in his description of Verona (79).
order are too easily eroded by the tactics of self-invention adopted by members of the community.

Goldberg, too, reads the play as normalizing heterosexual desire, and although his principal argument centres around sexuality, his comment on the ending of the play is tantalizing:

the corpses of Romeo and Juliet continue to have a social function, indeed that make possible the union of the two opposing houses.... The marriage of their corpses in the eternal monuments of “pure gold” attempts to perform what marriage normally aims at in comedy: to provide the bedrock of the social order.... (219)

But apart from questions of sexual normativity, just what social order do the lovers, even in death, provide “bedrock” for? The term bedrock, indeed, is perhaps slightly misleading in its implications of solidity and permanence, for the social order in Verona is, as Goldberg and Callaghan note, always shifting. The “resolution” of the play is not so much the union of the two houses as a shift in the form of their competition for status,\textsuperscript{17} from violence to ostentatiously mourning the victims of that violence.

Just outside this stream of critical inquiry is Susan Snyder’s consideration of the feud, not as caused by or reifying any ideology, but rather as ideology itself. For Snyder, the feud itself is “the major constituting force that operates” in the play.

Like ideology in Althusser’s classic formulation, the feud has no obvious genesis that can be discerned, no history. It pervades everything, not as a set of specific ideas but as repeated practices. (88)

\textsuperscript{17} Callaghan notes that in Q1 the line about the statues reads “no figure shall at such price be set,” reflecting Capulet’s “concern with financial gain and social status” (82).
This argument can be further refined. The feud is, of course, a set of “repeated practices” and its participants may indeed not articulate the “set of specific ideas” underlying it, but that is not to say that the ideas had not been articulated elsewhere, or that the characters who enact those practices would be unaware of the ideas informing their actions. Snyder’s treatment of the feud as ideology yields one key insight to which I will return, as she observes that “the feud, like ideology, flattens out personal differences, slotting individuals into predetermined roles” (89), rendering the community both rigidly hierarchical and rigidly split by household allegiance. To treat the feud as ideology in and of itself is to neglect the ideology that informs those practices, an ideology that was in fact both specific, articulated, and a major contention in Tudor England: that is to say, the practices of the duel and, just as importantly, their justifications. What makes this gap in Snyder’s important argument particularly frustrating is that a fuller account of the ideology of the duel would reveal the paradox at the heart of Snyder’s insight. The duel was an institution whose fundamental purpose was social distinction: recourse to duelling was the prerogative of a gentleman, and victory in a duel was supposed to assert the superiority of one gentleman over another. The conventions of the duel, although problematic, are widely accepted by the Veronese of the play; that acceptance reflects their unproblematic investment in the importance of social status. Yet far from affirming the superior status of one family or the other, that concern with status and those very conventions intended to assert it have created the feud, which actually “flattens out personal differences.” The Veronese reduce themselves to simply one faction or another, Montague or Capulet, while failing to assert any vertical distinction between the two families.

Four critics give in-depth consideration to the role of duelling in the play, recognizing that the duello was a recent arrival in England at the time of the Romeo and Juliet’s composition.
Joan Ozark Holmer and Jill Levenson both draw on Vincentio Saviolo’s fencing manual to advance almost diametrically opposed views of the play’s representation of duelling. Holmer proves conclusively that Saviolo was Shakespeare’s main source for the vocabulary of duelling in the play. She further argues that a clear understanding of the ideals of fencing illuminates how “Shakespeare's use of Saviolo's duello ethic is a genteel and gentle counterpoise to the aggressive, masculinist ethos that we have come to see as dominant in Elizabethan culture” ("Draw" 189). Levenson, drawing on the same primary sources and reading the same text, comes to the conclusion that “[impelled] by duelling and fighting, Romeo and Juliet consistently deprecates them both” ("Alla stoccado" 93). My position is closer to Levenson’s: while Saviolo may have seen his ethos as “genteel and gentle,” he is very clear that he is talking about matters of life and death. The direct result of the application of that ethos – at least in Romeo and Juliet – is the death of three young men in duels, and the suicides of two teenagers – hardly a ringing endorsement.

More importantly for my argument, Levenson, almost in passing, offers a key insight into the question that Snyder elides: what exactly motivates the characters – not just the Montagues and Capulets, but also Mercutio – to fight in the first place:

violence in Romeo and Juliet complements the political implications of the sonnet idiom, the play’s literary code: mastery in each demanded skill and had as its purpose establishment of social position. ("Alla stoccado" 92)

Reading the play with Levenson’s argument in mind, that sense of social insecurity, the ideological underpinning of the feud, becomes apparent in virtually every scene, so much a part of the social environment of Verona as to be easily overlooked. Her assessment of the all-pervasiveness of the violence in the play, however, is focused on the duels themselves, reading the involvement of the servants as a “parody of the duelling code” ("Alla stoccado" 90). While
the parodic certainly is an element of the scene, it does not fully account for the prominent position of the encounter, or the amount of stage time devoted to it. The prominence of violence in the play is a result of Shakespeare’s focus on the Veronese obsession with the “establishment of social position” identified by Levenson, and made manifest through the violence of the feud.

Chris Fitter’s reading of the violence in *Romeo and Juliet* shares my concern with such explications, pointing out that they focus too narrowly on aristocratic codes of honour at the expense of broader social trends. For Fitter, the play represents a wider-ranging view of violent action in early modern England, relating the conflict between the servants of the two households to prevailing concerns about the violent urban underclass in the context of the dearth riots of the 1590s. “The quarrel is between our masters, and us their men” – in this syntactical ambiguity, Fitter locates a conflict generally overlooked in modern readings of the play, which he reads as “permeated by... turbulence, class antagonism and passionately contested injustice”; Romeo is at once the “reckless rebellious hero” and a “sneering, well-fed patrician” (163), an embodiment of the instabilities and injustices bred by patriarchal aristocracy. Fitter’s assessment of the feud is that it is a quarrel between masters and men as much as it is a quarrel between masters, enabled and extended by their men. While Fitter occasionally makes Shakespeare into a sort of sixteenth-century Orwell, the tension he identifies between the social strata of Verona is certainly present on stage.

On the violent aspects of the play in particular, Fitter makes the valuable point that the violence is strongly inflected by social status:

... the play is manifestly concerned to address street violence directly, too, hurling it repeatedly across center stage from the opening cross-class mêlée to pointedly blood-drenched finale. Just as Elizabeth had notoriously authorized torture as a response to the riots, Shakespeare’s Prince Escalus confronts “Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace” with threatened “pain of torture” (1.1.79, 84). In the heated contemporary
context, however, such draconian monarchical measures had been directed exclusively against lower-class violence, so that Shakespeare’s treatment of violence and punishment assumes the aspect of a populist counter-indictment. *Romeo and Juliet* lays the blame for “mutiny” and civil bloodshed, even by the lower classes, at the door of the urban nobility....

There is thus far more to the play’s portrayal of violence than generalized, “patriarchal” definition of masculinity through violence of which critics have written: in a context of class-generated violence, of officially allocated class culpability, and of differential class punishment, the play unsurprisingly dramatizes class-differentiation in the character of violence. (165)

I follow Fitter in identifying a tension between Samson and Gregory (and other below-stairs characters) and their masters. After all, Benvolio’s first onstage action is to draw his rapier to beat down the servants’ swords. But there is more to the play’s representation of violence than a simple dramatization of an existing class-inflected difference in the form of violence, determined by the social status of the brawlers. Rather, the play interrogates the role that violence – particularly in the form of the duel, but also amongst the servants – plays in establishing social distinction. Prince Escalus’s “brace of kinsmen” and the various Montagues and Capulets are not merely participating in some aristocratic contest of arms. Rather, the violence that pervades Verona is just that – pervasive – and therefore best seen as a continuum of behaviours, rather than the discrete codes of the nobility and their servants. As Markku Peltonen observes in his history of duelling in England,

historians of early modern England have emphasized the ubiquity and central importance of honour and reputation not only for the male elite but also for many other social groups as well. (8)
In other words, the code of conduct that binds the aristocratic characters is available for appropriation, with some adaptation, by the servants of each household, and indeed by every other socially ambitious Veronese.

David Evett takes this argument further, arguing that the tensions between patriarchal authority and the actions of its “rebellious subjects” are a driving force of both the play’s plot and its ideological agenda. Evett follows Kirby Farrell’s work on patriarchy in the play in reading Tybalt’s violence against Romeo as a sublimated reaction-formation against his inability to accept that he is “resentful of the constraints of patriarchal authority” (89). He goes on to suggest that the opening brawl should be read in a similar context, and that:

These socially marginalized men announce their intention to marginalize others, to claim the center, and … Samson’s aggression must be displaced from the masters who dominate him to his fellow-servants in the other family…. (91)

This reading is psychologically plausible, but it does not answer the more fundamental question: while Capulet’s theoretical right to “dominate” his men is never questioned, that dominance is strikingly ineffectual. In other words, Evett takes for granted the existence of patriarchal authority, rather than examining how exactly it is constituted. This is not a question neglected by the play, which insistently locates violence as simultaneously the ultimate source of aristocratic, patriarchal power, and the cause of its unravelling. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the status and authority theoretically conferred by the duel constitute a wildly destructive self-consuming artefact. The opening brawl and the satirical representation of Old Montague and Old Capulet make it apparent from the opening scene that Shakespeare does not take patriarchal authority for granted. Rather,
the play continually questions the legitimacy of that authority, based on questionable claims to social superiority.

_Punning on Stage in Verona_

That concern with social superiority is the principal concern of this chapter. We have seen already how the Chorus’ opening sonnet foregrounds the “dignity” of the houses – but it is easy to allow that concern to recede into the background, at least for a modern audience; the original audience of the play, more attuned to the negotiation of status in Tudor England, might have recognized its prominence more readily. Yet if social ambition remains in the background, it is all pervasive. The stage direction following the prologue is well-known: _Enter Samson and Gregory, with swords and bucklers, of the house of Capulet_ (1.1.0sd). The full implications of the stage direction require some explication, and some consideration of the effect of seeing the scene in the theatre, rather than on the page. For it is all too easy to forget that Samson is never named in dialogue. To the audience, rather than the reader, these servants draw their identity almost solely from the household in which they serve, and whose livery they wear. While the text provides a set of speeches (and highly individualized speeches at that) for two individuals named “Samson” and “Gregory,” a theatrical audience knows the two servants almost exclusively by their social role. The two servants, moreover, participate in this elision of individual identity – or perhaps, more accurately, in the creation of individual identity through group associations. Both servants quibble and jest, but although each asserts verbal mastery (and suggests sexual superiority) over the other, neither asserts a subject position that is distinctive from the other’s.

The content of Samson and Gregory’s jokes also hints at the anxieties that prompt them. Samson opens the exchange with the avowal that the men “will not carry coals,” a phrase that
neatly associates the figurative sense of the expression – to endure insult – with the more literal – to do dirty work, work associated with the poorest of men. Whatever has prompted this statement, it reveals fundamental insecurities about status on his part, insecurities that quickly find expression in Samson’s assertion of physical and sexual prowess – both expressed in violent terms. The opening of the scene – apparently in mid-conversation – is at once disruptive and suggestive: the anxiety that underlies the exchange between the servants immediately – and automatically? – escalates to aggression and violence. If we consider Verona as a community of practice, then the repertory of “doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values” available to the servants seems to consist mostly of sexual humour and physical aggression.

The long exchange between the Capulet servants has received a good deal of attention for its content – its fusion of the sex and violence – but far too little attention has been paid to its form. The banter between the servants consists principally of brief conversational turns, and conforms to a kind of banter that Jennifer Coates has dubbed “sparky one-at-a-time”: an “interaction … composed of witticisms with loose semantic links and a competitive edge” (cited in Dynel 245). This dynamic of witty back and forth also shares certain features with what Bakhtin calls “stylization,” and while the analogy is not perfect, it is suggestive. “Sparky one-at-a-time” banter requires that each conversational participant continue the chain of semantic links, picking up what the other participants put down, overtly appropriating their words, and re-fashioning them. In Bakhtin’s terms, stylization is the use of someone else’s discourse for his own purposes, by inserting new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own. Such discourse, in keeping with its task, must be perceived as belonging to someone else. (Dostoevsky 189)
The difference between stylization, strictly understood, and the conversation between the servants is fairly clear. There is no attempt to conceal their appropriation of each other’s words. But the similarities between banter and stylization are suggestive. The game requires as a basic pattern that Samson and Gregory maintain the semantic chain, and advance by only one link per conversational turn. Either to break off the chain or to advance more than one link per turn violates the conventions of banter, an implicit act of aggression, however minor. That is to say, the speaker in a bantering exchange who engages in an act of outright invention asserts his wit at the expense of the other player or players. As in Bakhtin’s more strict definition of stylization, rupture from the established discourse by claiming too many turns, or by resorting to flat out invention, lays bare the workings of the conversational strategy, cutting off other participants – an essentially aggressive act.

Of greater significance for the play is the way that stylization provides a middle ground between aggressive self-definition – which is itself a threat to the face of others in the conversation – and slavish deference to existing idioms. Kiernan Ryan sees the crux of the play as Romeo and Juliet’s attempt to carve an identity for themselves in spite of the “social and ideological constraints which continue to divide men and women from each other” (“Language” 109). He goes on to elaborate

how the members of this society are locked into its regime of division and repression by their very language, by the ruling discourses of their world. The kind of language people use determines the way they see themselves and the way they see their reality: it defines their assumptions, their values, their expectations…. (113)

18 Cf. *Much Ado About Nothing* (1.1.140), where Benedick ends “with a jade’s trick,” and my discussion of this passage in chapter three.
Yet the verbal displays of both the servants and Mercutio’s coterie complicate this statement. The people of Verona, particularly its young men, seem almost entirely confined to the Petrarchan idiom as a means of expressing themselves, while their servants replicate a more literal, physical, visceral form of this language. But the long semantic chains of the bantering exchanges show that the Veronese are keenly aware of how to shade meanings to serve their turns, how to invent on the sly. The standard mode of expression in the play is not simply a repetition or parody of the idioms of Petrarch and Saviolo. The opening parody of those discourses shows the half-occluded space for appropriation and invention in even the most banal exchanges.

The tragedy of the play is thus not a lack of opportunity for self-invention, but rather the limited register in which this invention is undertaken. That is to say that the discursive limitations on the characters stem not from a lack of capacity to invent, but rather from their habitual use of the same tropes of invention. Stylization may offer the servants a means for self-invention, but the limitations of the schema ensure that they hew closely to the available symbols of status: wit and aggression.

And indeed, in this exchange, there is more than wit on display; there is some real aggression that manifests itself most clearly when Gregory violates the conventions of banter. Samson’s opening joke invites Gregory to join him in asserting a shared status – “we’ll not carry coals” rather than “I.” Initially, Gregory plays along, but by the fourth line, Gregory has turned the conversation into a direct competition. His directive to Samson to “draw your neck out of collar” (1.1.4) directly dismisses his macho assertion of his fighting abilities, associates the terms instead with the punishments for fighting. Indirectly, though, the comment gestures
unflatteringly towards Samson’s low status, prohibited from fighting, and subject to hanging – the method of execution for the lower orders.

Gregory’s aggression seems to intensify rather than diminish as the exchange progresses. His statement that Samson “is not quickly moved” (l. 6) hints cruelly at impotence, and he then proceeds directly to bald on-record insults, claiming that Samson’s words show him to be a “weak slave” (l. 12) before concluding the exchange with the conceit that if Samson were fish, he would be “Poor John” (30). There is a clear hierarchy amongst these two followers: Gregory is by far the more aggressive, and Samson – rather than responding insultingly in turn – is left attempting to recast his words in a more favourable light. Moreover, in his move to more offensive jokes, it is Gregory who first breaks the pattern of stylization that has characterized their banter. Whereas the conversation starts off as a fairly orderly exchange of conversational turns, at line eight Gregory moves through three links in the semantic chain, ending in attack on Samson’s bravery: “if thou art moved thou runn’st away.” Form, in other words, suits content, and Gregory’s bald on-record insults are matched by a formal insult, denying Samson his turn to improvise. It is small wonder, then, that Gregory rejects Samson’s instruction to quarrel, leaving it to him to engage with Abraham. Small wonder, too, that the servant whose performance in the competitive display of wit was least impressive is most eager to fight. This is entirely in keeping with Evett’s reading of the servants as “socially marginalized men” who

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19 This moment is important when trying to understand the significance of Mercutio’s “Queen Mab” speech. The exchange with Romeo in 1.4 is an example of banter that flirts with breaking the rules throughout, as Romeo and Mercutio take longer conversational turns than might be expected. From line 25 onwards, however, Mercutio begins to take longer and longer turns, asserting his dominant position in the group. This culminates in the 43 lines and countless conceits of the speech. This willingness to take centre-stage at the expense of his conversational partners foreshadows his aggression in dealing both with the Nurse and, fatally, with Tybalt.
“announce their intention to marginalize others” – and the most marginalized is the quickest to draw.

As with a formal duel, the brawl begins with Abraham, Montague’s servant, giving Capulet’s men the lie. His objection is first to their insistence that they serve “as good a man as you” – and then to their escalation in insisting that they serve a better man. There are two important implications in this.

The first is ambivalent: either the servants see the identity of their masters as being utterly central to their sense of self-worth, deriving their value from the quality of the man they serve, and they are willing to risk maiming or death to assert that quality, or they are aware of the risk they are taking in asserting themselves, and consequently exaggerate their personal investment in their masters’ status as a pretext. Like Coriolanus, Samson and Gregory assert their social worth by denigrating that of others, but where Caius Martius can earn the title of Coriolanus through his own military prestige, the servants live vicariously through their masters. This sense is strengthened if, as David Evett argues, the long chain of puns on “collars” incorporates a visual element, as the two men would be wearing “the collar with its household badge that would have been in the Elizabethan marketplace the most visible sign of Gregory’s servitude” (91). Every reference to its homophone would draw attention to the visible markers of the retainers’ rank.

The second implication poses more of a problem for Veronese society. Although the servants are considered the famuli of their respective households, ranked in the domestic hierarchy below the children of Montague and Capulet, these men seem to have no problem appropriating the duel, albeit with less fashionable weapons, as a prerogative of their station. Rather than deriving their sense of value solely through their masters, these men are determined
to fight as their masters do. Samson and Gregory act out the tensions and contradictions imposed by patriarchal order, a system which, as Kirby Farrell argues, “like religion... provides crucial symbols which validate the self” (86) and yet in which “only self-effacement brought a share in the father’s power” (88). Yet if identity depends on the father of the household, then enhancements to the father’s prestige enhance the status of his dependents, making self-effacement that much less likely. What we see operating here is a form of stylization much closer to Bakhtin’s original definition. The brawling servants are engaged in appropriating the discourse of the *duello* for their own ends, while denying that appropriation. To assert their own identities, they will fight in their masters’ names.

That appropriation, however, is also a violation. Levenson describes the brawl as an “unintended parody of the duelling code” ("Alla stoccado" 90), but something more complex is going on here. The very fact that servants are duelling, in however debased a form, is a violation of that code – and a violation that seems to echo some of Saviolo’s phrasing. The first line of the play that names the parties to the feud is Samson’s, as he complains that “a dog of the house of Montague moves me” (1.1.7). Saviolo warns his readers not to mistreat other men’s servants, as the man will feel the injury himself, and the injunction takes the following form:

> For whosoeuer seeth his servants abused, wil think him selfe wronged, and will therefor endeuour to revenge such wrongs, as offered vnto himselfe: according to the proverbe, loue me and loue my dogge. (P4r)

For Saviolo, the risk is the inverse of that depicted in the opening scene: a gentleman’s sense of self depends in part on the respect accorded to his servants; the house of Montague’s “dog” should be well-treated out of respect for Montague himself. Here, it is the “dogs” who start the fight themselves.
What Shakespeare is deliberately dramatizing here – and the verbal echoes of Saviolo strengthen this reading – is the gap between the ideals and the reality of the duelling code. Holmer convincingly argues that Saviolo’s instructions are a “genteel and gentle counterpoise” to an “aggressive, masculinist ethos,” but Levenson argues that the play represents a failure (and presents a parodic deprecation) of that counterpoise. Historically, the duel found favour for a while in England because of two key features:

… the two important features of the duel are that it normally involved the principals alone and not their friends or servants – for in England the group duel never caught on in the way it did in France – and secondly that it was strictly controlled by rules which assured fair play. (Stone, Crisis 243)

But in Romeo and Juliet there is little evidence of the fair play in any of the three (or four, depending on how you count) fights; rather the play dramatizes the failure of what Stone describes as “a set of rules and conventions of almost theological rigidity” (243). Rules designed to exclude the servants from recourse to arms, once applied in the context of the early modern patriarchal household, are appropriated and distorted by the very people they are intended to control.

This partial appropriation of the prerogatives of gentility is dramatized as something quite frightening. An audience familiar – as Chris Fitter points out – with urban riots might not have found this parody amusing; many would have seen street brawls firsthand. Wilson’s arguments about the unsettling nature of the violence in Twelfth Night would apply as well, if not better, to the opening scene of Romeo and Juliet. After all, while Samson and Gregory’s jokes may be funny at first, they swiftly turn to images of sexual violence, before their words escalate into violent deeds. This unease would be compounded by the tableau of Benvolio – rapier drawn to beat down the swords of his family’s servants – entirely unable to restrain them. As a member of Montague’s family, Benvolio ought, in theory, to be able to keep at least Abraham under control,
but he is largely ineffectual in containing the brawl. The servants of both households are manifestly the sort of young men evoked by the *Statute of Artificers* when it maintains that “Until a man grow unto the age of twenty-four years he... is wild, without judgement, and not of sufficient experience to govern himself” (Thomas, “Age” 217) and their position below stairs in each household, in theory, ought to keep them under the control of their “betters.” Benvolio’s status is implicitly underwritten in no small part by his investment in the masculine economy of the duel, but that investment proves worthless. After all, what is status without the ability to parlay it into authority? The dominant image of the opening brawl is Benvolio’s rapier, drawn in an ineffectual show of authority over the servants’ swords and bucklers. For all his theoretical status, the servants appropriate their masters’ prerogatives and “break to new mutiny.”

If Benvolio’s attempt to keep the peace is futile, so too is Samson and Gregory’s jockeying for status through the brawl. The townspeople – quite literally with one voice – and the Prince all condemn both parties, in terms of absolute equality:

Clubs, bills, partisans! Strike, beat them down!  
Down with the Capulets, down with the Montagues! (1.1 69-70)

Three civil brawls bred of an airy word,  
By thee old Capulet and Montague,  
Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets.... (1.1.85-88)

The citizens make no distinction between the brawling households. The Prince, far from trying to establish blame in this case, simply includes this incident in a long history of disturbances for which both families share equal responsibility. The feuding households, impelled by a code of conduct that has as its goal ennoblement and distinction, are humiliatingly beaten back by the decidedly ungenteel clubs and partisans of Verona’s citizens, and condemned alike, frustrating any chance of distinguishing themselves in degree or in kind from each other. If anything, the
brawl “flattens out personal differences” (Snyder, “Ideology” 89) between the members of the two households. In the next scene Capulet will ruefully note that he and Montague are bound “In penalty alike” (1.2.2), stressing the equality of their punishment. His comment, though, that “ ’tis not hard I think / For men so old as we to keep the peace” ought to raise doubts in an attentive audience. For the two old men did not instigate the brawl, and the one member of those households who attempts to hew to the conventions both of the duello and the patriarchal household is entirely ineffectual at wielding the power that patriarchy is supposed to impart to him. They may be able to keep the peace, in that they will not seek conflict, but their prospects of maintaining full control over the young men of their respective households are dim from the outset.

The Capulet Household

While Capulet repeatedly exercises control over the members of his household – with varying degrees of success – the masked ball is perhaps the apogee of his domestic patriarchal authority; significantly this scene at once presents his role at its most ideal, and also dramatizes the social tensions that made a strong paterfamilias desirable in the first place. When considering the importance of duelling in the play, it is important to note that unlike the opening brawl or the swordfight at the tomb, the duels in act three are both deferred – that is to say that the offence is given without immediate response. Romeo kills Tybalt only after Tybalt (for no apparent reason) returns to the stage. Similarly, Tybalt’s planned duel with Romeo is prompted by the perceived slight of Romeo’s presence at the masked ball; the lag between the giving of the offence, the issuing of the challenge, and the actual fight is representative of the civilizing effect that the conventions of the duello could have. The ball, then, represents a space in which Capulet’s power over his fractious family is most assured, and where he is most able to hold his nephew to the commonly shared standards of aristocratic competition; this is one of the few instances in the
play of patriarchal authority being successfully deployed to maintain order. But the extremity of Tybalt’s reaction to Romeo’s presence suggests that the ball is also a crux in the establishment of that patriarchal social order, and it is worth considering why.

The Capulets’ “ancient” feast is at once a celebration of the stature of the family and an attempt to assert that stature. The terms in which Old Capulet invites Paris to the feast, and to meet his daughter, make this plain:

This night I hold an old-accustomed feast,
Where I have invited many a guest,
Such as I love; and you among the store,
One more, most welcome, makes my number more.
At my poor house look to behold this night
Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven light. (1.2.20-25)

Despite the self-protective claim that his house is “poor,” it is quite clear that Capulet expects Paris to be impressed by the lavishness of the hospitality and the quality of the guests. Mercantile language inflects Capulet’s description of his regard for Paris, who becomes one of his store. Moreover, the gradation amongst the guests (“Such as I love”) allows for Paris’ “most welcome” worth to be held in higher esteem than the others. The phrasing also suggests another point to Capulet’s generous inclusion of so many guests; and that is the exclusion of certain others.

What is implicit in Capulet’s invitation becomes explicit in his servant’s off-the-cuff invitation to Romeo: “My master is the great rich Capulet, and if you be not of the house of Montague, I pray you come and crush a cup of wine” (1.2.81-83). In other words, the process of

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20 Compare this to the opening brawl, where the servants’ cruder sense of jockeying for social position makes explicit the implicit insecurities of both families.
drawing up the guest list for the feast establishes who is in, and who is out: for there to be
difference in degree, there must also be some sort of difference in kind. Once again, Shakespeare
ensures that the mechanics of the plot – Romeo must meet Juliet somewhere, after all – align
with the all-pervasive sense of social insecurity. Moreover, we see in the unrefined invitation of
the servant an echo of the dynamic in the opening scene. The servant – unnamed onstage, like
Samson – is also at pains to emphasize the wealth and stature of his master, as though deriving a
sense of his own status from that of Capulet.

The feast’s importance as a means of creating social difference in part explains why
Tybalt’s reaction to Romeo’s presence is so strong: his being there undermines the very purpose
of the feast. In daring to be present, the “villain” Romeo denies the difference that the feast is
designed to assert. Tybalt’s choice of language is suggestive: Romeo is first a “slave” (1.4.168)
and then three times a “villain” (175, 177, 188). While Tybalt is generally hot-headed, the
intensity of his anger at Romeo’s supposed slighting of the “stock and honour” of his “kin” (171)
is striking. As with Samson and Gregory in the opening scene, his immediate reaction to the
perceived slight of Romeo’s presence is to call for his rapier – but in doing so, he reveals some
of the many contradictions of the duello, and the assumptions about status endorsed by the
institution. For if Romeo is indeed a “villain” and a “slave,” then Tybalt has no business drawing
his rapier on him: he is not “to be admitted to the proof of arms.” Rather, if Tybalt draws on
Romeo as part of a duel, it confirms Romeo’s status as a gentleman, and renders the logic of the
insult null and void: his presence at the feast is an insult only if his exclusion is valid, and his
exclusion cannot be valid if he is sufficiently Tybalt’s equal to meet him in a duel.

There are two further points to note about this scene. The first is that Romeo and
Benvolio are able to enter the feast and mingle with the guests for some time before Tybalt
realizes that Romeo is a Montague. This, as Susan Snyder has noted, clearly implies that there is nothing in the dress or deportment of the families that denotes them as different. In part, this clarifies why Tybalt’s reaction is so extreme: the ongoing act of creating and maintaining distinction between the households is made difficult by their similarity. This difficulty is only highlighted if David Evett is right in speculating that the servants of the households wear “the collar with its household badge… the most visible sign of… servitude” (91). The servants are then more visibly Montague or Capulet than any of the “gentle” members of the families. The fact that Romeo is so easily able to infiltrate the party threatens to undermine the distinction on which the members of the households base their sense of individual and collective self-worth.

Tybalt is caught in the paradox of patriarchy suggested by Kirby Farrell, a system which “provides crucial symbols which validate the self” (86) and yet in which “only self-effacement brought a share in the father’s power” (88). Tybalt is caught between his desire to defend the honour of old Capulet, as the symbolic source of his own social status, and his obligation to obey Capulet’s injunction to keep the peace. The masculine symbolic economy of Verona depends on the familial sense of honour of its patriarchs to maintain the peace, yet that sense of honour depends on regular, more or less orderly breaches of that peace.

Straining Courtesy

Even amongst friends and nominal equals, the tension remains, and manifests itself in the witty conversation of Mercutio’s coterie. As I have suggested earlier, David Evett’s contention that the hierarchy in this group is simple does not account for the prolonged displays of wit. The

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21 It also raises the fascinating, though possibly unanswerable question of just what it is about Romeo’s voice that gives him away as a Montague. Is there something distinctive about the families’ voices, or (more likely) is Tybalt recognizing Romeo personally, and then in his reaction simply reducing Romeo to an unindividuated member of the household?
exchanges of the coterie both before the ball and after make it quite clear that there is competition between Romeo and Mercutio – a competition Benvolio largely seems to forego.

Benvolio’s inability to control the servants can be partially explained by his relatively low status in the Montague family. First, although Benvolio outranks the servants, he is Montague’s nephew, rather than his son, and is thus further from the centre and source of patriarchal authority. But hierarchy is never fully fixed. In the ongoing negotiation of status within the group of young men, Benvolio does not perform aggressively. Benvolio, as his name implies, wishes everyone well, and he is the peacemaker in Romeo’s circle of friends. It is apparent from the interplay in the group, though, that he is far from being its leader. This should not be a surprise: the youth of Verona clearly set great store by duelling, wit, and sexual sophistication. In such a group, a polite well-wisher is unlikely to cut much of a figure.22

An examination of Romeo and Mercutio’s banter in 2.3 will serve to illustrate how Benvolio’s comparative reticence leaves him on the margins of his group. Mercutio initiates a rapid back-and-forth of witty banter: “Signor Romeo, bonjour: there’s a French salutation to your French slop. You gave us the counterfeit fairly last night” (2.3.42-44). The conversation that follows consists entirely of brief conversational turns, taken by Romeo and Mercutio. The dialogue conforms to Coates’ “sparky one-at-a-time,” as the conversational participants deploy “witticisms with loose semantic links and a competitive edge” (cited in Dynel, 245). But Benvolio is excluded – or excludes himself – from the exchange. The conversation stretches on

22 Consider, though, the ominous implications of this fact: in Twelfth Night it is Malvolio, proud and ambitious, who is censured by both the characters and the comic logic of the play, while in Romeo and Juliet, it is Benvolio who is relegated to the second string. Verona is not a community that values good will.
for twenty-five conversational turns – or thirty-three lines of prose in the Oxford edition – before Benvolio speaks, despite an apparent invitation from Mercutio to join in at the fourteenth turn.

The structure of the exchange is significant. Each participant advances a jest, which must be met and returned by the other. Broadly speaking, Mercutio makes a thrust, which Romeo must parry, and Mercutio must then parry in turn. The physical dynamic of the duel is reproduced verbally, as Mercutio and Romeo engage in a fundamentally friendly competition for rhetorical superiority. The pattern of turn-taking, too, is important, as the conversation proceeds in an orderly manner, largely without interruption. Although this is a competition of wit, and as such presents a series of threats to the face of all participants, it is a competition between friends, following certain rules, and imbued with an odd courtesy. As with the servants’ banter in the opening scene, the order of the day is stylization, as each conversational participant advances the images offered by the preceding speaker, developing a long and communally developed set of jokes.

At first glance, the communal nature of the language games here suggests a major difference between the bantering – some of it fairly insulting – and the actual hostility of a duel, but the practices as represented in the play are more similar than different. For as we have seen in considering Tybalt’s position, the challenge to a duel is an act of social solidarity almost as much as it is an act of social assertion; in seeking to establish the finer-grained distinctions of social status, each participant acknowledges the gentility of his opponent. Unlike a duel, of course, the contest of words does not end with the death of either participant; verbal supremacy can last only as long as the next conversational turn. Assertion of wit is an ongoing, never-ending process of one-upmanship lacking the finality of a conclusive duel. The conversation foreshadows that finality, though, for with eerie prescience Mercutio asks his friend to “Come
between us, good Benvolio, my wits faints” (64-65). In this duel, intervention is not fatally
dangerous, but still the shyer Benvolio declines.

The arrival of the Nurse throws into relief the dangers of this form of banter as a form of
social bonding – and relates it directly to the duel. Not for nothing does Saviolo insist that “when
men light into the companye of honorable Gentlemen, they ought to haue a great regarde of their
tung” (P3r). The competitive jesting of the young men, while permissible amongst friends, is
dangerous with anyone outside a tight-knit group. Mercutio shows signs of being akin to
Churchyard’s “bold bablers … not snibbed for their sawsines.” Not recognizing the danger, and
wedded as always to verbal display, he continues the banter at the Nurse’s expense, and his
mockery prompts her to complain to Peter “thou must stand by too and suffer every knave to use
me at his pleasure” (144-45). Peter’s response, although superficially funny, carries disturbing
implications:

I saw no man use you at his pleasure. If I had, my weapon should quickly have
been out. I warrant you, I dare draw as soon as another man, if I see occasion in a
good quarrel, and the law on my side. (146-49)

His bravado is amusing, but the reminder that “another man” might be more willing to draw
should give an audience pause. Had another man entered, a duel could have been the result – and
it will be the result in the third act. Neither royal proclamation nor parental prohibition is enough
to check the aggression of the younger generation.

**The Younger Generation**

That younger generation is both younger in the play than in the sources, as Susan Snyder
notes (“Ideology” 87), and better populated. Both changes are significant. Coppelia Kahn’s
reading of the play as documenting the process of two adolescents attempting to grow up, in
effect to invent themselves, is crucial to understanding the extreme youth of the protagonists. But as is apparent in the preceding pages, they are not the only young people engaged in that attempt. While Tybalt has clear antecedents in the sources, both Benvolio and Mercutio play significantly larger roles in Shakespeare’s play than in any of its sources.

I have already discussed Benvolio’s emblematic role in the opening scene, as the image of frustrated aristocratic power, confronted with a scene of social disorder that he is unable to quell. It is also true that the shift from prose fiction or narrative verse can in part account for Benvolio’s greater prominence; certainly, the role of confidant is more important on stage, where exposition must be delivered through dialogue, rather than in narrative prose or poetry.  

But Benvolio serves two other key functions in my reading of the play. It is in part through Benvolio that the play insistently foregrounds conversation as a practice. The presence of Benvolio and Mercutio allows Romeo to engage in conversation with both a more diffident partner and a more exuberant one. Benvolio’s other conversation, though – his exchange with Montague and Lady Montague in the first scene – stands out as a suggestive loose end, and is the basis for my suggestion of Benvolio’s final dramatic function, as a further example of a younger generation adrift.

Asked whether he has seen Romeo, he answers that “a troubled mind” drove him to walk out before dawn. Romeo catches sight of him, but avoids the encounter.

I, measuring his affections by my own,
Which then most sought where most might not be found,
Being one too many by my weary self,
Pursued my humour, not pursuing his,
And gladly shunned who gladly fled from me. (122-26)

23 Joseph A. Porter describes Benvolio as “the chronic reporter” (113).
Nothing in the text specifies what exactly has troubled Benvolio; when he does meet Romeo the talk is of Romeo’s problems, not his. But, like Antonio’s elaborately described and unexplained melancholy at the outset of *The Merchant of Venice*, Benvolio’s “troubled mind” ought to give us pause. Levenson notes that Benvolio “describes himself as suffering wakefulness, a classic symptom of melancholy in general and love melancholy in particular” (1.1.116n). But whom does Benvolio love? I do not presume to have an answer, nor do I wish to insist that Benvolio is in love. Whatever the source of his anxiety, though, he expresses it in terms that associate him with the love-stricken speaker of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition. Nor is this simply a matter of him describing himself in those terms; his melancholy manifests itself in one of the forms prescribed by the sonnet tradition, the dominant idiom of Veronese youth. Benvolio experiences anxiety in the terms prescribed for him by the dominant register of speech and thought in Verona, a register that “flattens out personal differences, slotting individuals into predetermined roles” (Snyder, “Ideology” 89).

If Benvolio, in this reading, is confined by an idiom in which he is well-versed, but to which he is ill-suited, Mercutio is altogether too free from that confinement for his friends to understand. Whereas Benvolio is ill-suited to the cut and thrust of conversation, and whereas his description of his melancholy obscures as much as it reveals, Mercutio is the conversational nonpareil of his coterie, and yet is also capable of transcending its standard idiom. We have already seen how Mercutio is able to parry Romeo’s verbal thrusts in their banter, but it is also important to consider Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech, his most prominent departure from conversational decorum.
As I have noted above, the speech is the culmination of a conversational sequence in which Mercutio takes progressively longer conversational turns. The forty-three lines describing Mab and her power over the dreams of humans demand attention, standing out as starkly as they do from the play around them.\textsuperscript{24} This arrogation of the conversational centre is a highly risky act of verbal assertion: Mercutio is amongst friends, and takes extreme liberties. The speech is striking, standing out in terms both of form and of content from the established social context of Verona and the conversational norms of the group. Mercutio has already demonstrated his ability to move between the registers of abstracted, Petrarchan language, and its more bawdy, physical counterpart,\textsuperscript{25} but the Queen Mab speech moves beyond that stylization. Whereas before Mercutio was responding to Romeo’s words, literalizing and adding a bawdy edge, here he invents freely, drawing upon materials that lie far outside the sonnet tradition, and couching them in a register that is neither the crude physicality of the servants, nor the rarefied abstractions of Romeo’s early speech.

Queen Mab herself is wildly out of place in Verona. However much the city may reflect London of the 1590s, Shakespeare is careful to preserve scenic touches of his Italian location: the Prince demands that the parties meet him at “old Freetown, our common judgement place” (1.1.98), while Catholic Juliet confesses to her Friar. Mab, whatever the exact folkloric derivation of her name, is a thoroughly English fairy. Her actions call to mind those of Robin Goodfellow (another very English fairy, slightly out of place in an Athenian wood), while also reflecting a whole dimension of social life that is glimpsed in \textit{Romeo and Juliet} without being

\textsuperscript{24} Baz Luhrman, for instance, incorporated the speech into his film of the play by making it a flight of drug-induced fancy: Queen Mab is no larger than an agate stone, as she is Queen Tab – a hit of ecstasy. This is an extreme case, but amply demonstrates the striking disjunction between the speech and the rest of the play.

\textsuperscript{25} See E.A.M. Colman (68-71) for a more full account of Shakespeare’s use of Mercutio’s bawdy.
fully explored. The play represents the rivalries of the servants, the Nurse’s continuing negotiation of her place in Capulet’s household, and the financial concerns of the musicians, but here is a catalogue of what is left out. She is “no bigger than an agate stone / On the forefinger of an alderman” (1.4.53-54), calling to mind the civic government headed by Prince Escalus. She has a full team of servants and tradesmen, or at least a wagoner (62) and a joiner (66). The materials for her wagon are rural junk and pests. More importantly, the dreams she shapes are those of lovers, courtiers, ladies, parsons, and soldiers. The dreams she brings are obstinately material: ladies dream of kisses, not love, and lawyers dream of fees. In many ways, this speech constitutes the return of the repressed: the material excluded from the rigid Petrarchan idiom of Verona, the stuff of daily life, comes tumbling out of Mercutio, disjointed and dream-like, in a form his friends cannot comprehend, and must dismiss: “Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace, / Thou talk’st of nothing” (93-94).

Romeo’s insistence that Mercutio is speaking of “nothing” highlights one of his principal limitations, and one of Mercutio’s defining characteristics. Romeo and Benvolio are trapped by the limited range of materials from which they can construct their social selves – and at this point in the play, Romeo is largely unaware of that constraint. Mercutio’s Mab speech suggests that he is aware of that constraint. Dympna Callaghan notes the extent to which “desire is already socially scripted here (ladies and maids do not dream of cutting soldiers [sic] throats)” (73). This eruption from Mercutio, then, both expresses that which Verona represses, and gestures towards the mechanism of that repression. Every speech and every action in the play is, like the dreams of Mab’s sleepers, shaped by social position and convention – even the rebellious speeches and actions of the servants and the young lovers.
Finally, it is important to consider how the social tragedy of Verona carries over into the love story, the element of the play that has guaranteed its long-standing popularity onstage. Critics since Kahn have seen Romeo and Juliet as the victims of various ideologies: patriarchy in Kahn’s case, competing modes of patriarchy in Callaghan’s case, and so on. Kiernan Ryan identifies the lovers’ private moments as utopian spaces of resistance going so far as to argue that the lovers come to embody the possibility of a “more satisfying form of sexual relationship, free of the social and ideological constraints which continue to divide men and women from each other” (109). Ryan sees their ultimate failure as the product of the “world’s law,” but it is equally possible to read it as a failure of the imagination. More specifically, it is a collective failure of a community to offer its young the means for inventing and asserting their social selves.²⁶

Although Romeo and Juliet translate the idioms available to them into something lyrical and private, thus modifying their ideological thrust, they remain fundamentally a product of Verona. Ryan reads the private space of Juliet’s bedroom as utopian, but the very fragility of that Utopia underlines the fact that the private space of Juliet’s bedroom is insufficiently occluded from the public space of the piazza. Rather, the private encounters of the lovers, couched in the idiom that they develop, constitute an autopoietic system, that is to say one that engages with other systems around it, but not on a fixed one-to-one basis; rather, an autopoietic system is self-referential, taking in and translating information from its environment (or other systems), but expressing that information in ever-shifting terms that do not match up to the outside.²⁷

²⁶ In private conversation, Lynne Magnusson has drawn my attention to this idea as an interesting similarity between the play and its musical adaptation, West Side Story. Although Bernstein and Sondheim’s disaffected and impoverished gang members seem worlds away from the glittering wealth of the Montagues and the Capulets, the lovers in Shakespeare’s play are nonetheless living in a deprived community – symbolically and imaginatively deprived, despite their material wealth.

²⁷ Cf. Halpern, 188-89.
Marianne Novy, while noting their mixed success, sees the lovers as appropriating the language of Verona and transforming its tropes of patriarchal domination into something more positive:

*Romeo and Juliet* uses the image of woman as property in a way that transcends its source in female social subordination; both of them are far from that financial interest that Lady Capulet suggests in her praise of Paris…. (*Love’s Argument* 105)

But it is worth bearing in mind Bakhtin’s comment on the limitations of stylization, specifically that any appropriated discourse “already has, and ... retains, an intention of its own” (189). In creating their private space, Romeo and Juliet remain wedded to the terms – however translated – of the Veronese idioms of sonnets and duelling. During their first encounter, freed (as Ryan notes) from the constraints of their names, they remain nonetheless constrained by the formal strictures of the sonnet; if Juliet rejects the role of the cold-hearted Petrarchan mistress, she replies to Romeo in a form that only takes that rejection so far.28

Even the actions of the young lovers remain shaped by the assumptions of their society. Romeo may, after meeting Juliet, abandon the language of violence as a means of expressing love,29 but his response to Tybalt’s killing of Mercutio is further violence; he has only partially escaped the assumptions behind the conventions of dueling. Similarly, he, Juliet, and the Friar will continue to think of Juliet as someone whose enclosed domestic space is to be penetrated, rather than someone to liberate: the Friar “encourages Juliet to pretend obedience and death through his potion, rather than helping her escape to Romeo” (Novy, *Argument* 107), a plan of action clearly determined by assumptions of female passivity, assumptions central to Petrarchan love poetry.

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28 Levenson shares my scepticism about the lovers’ ability to transcend the cultural codes of Verona (“Introduction” 42-44).
As with the servants’ dialogue in the opening scene, more attention has been paid to the content of the couple’s self-invention than its form. In taking the idioms at hand and painstakingly extending them only so far, they are engaged in an act of self-assertion that mirrors that of the servants. Not for the lovers a sudden rupture from the discourses of sonnets and duels, but rather a tentative, secretive appropriation that ultimately fails.

**Finis**

As a whole, *Romeo and Juliet* reflects the struggle for self-invention of an entire community. The failure of the central couple to free themselves from the various repressive ideologies that constrain them is mirrored by the supporting characters’ inability to assert themselves in terms that break with convention, as any such break is met with the threat of violence. The image of Benvolio, rapier ineffectually drawn to beat down the servants’ swords, is the central image of my reading of the play, amplified in Capulet’s ineffectual calling for his long sword. Verona, like Shakespeare’s England, has entrusted its peace to institutions that are self-consuming. In consequence, Veronese society consumes itself: act five ends with virtually all the members of the younger generation dead.\(^3\) The “two households, both alike in dignity” have as their principal function keeping the peace and ensuring their continuance in a younger generation. These two households’ “mutiny” has instead killed their young.

Even in the death of the young lovers, the two families prove unable to move beyond the feud that has served as their primary constitutive force. The ostentation of the funerary statues – “beautiful, precious, and lifeless” (Belsey, “Name” 64) – neither mitigates the tragedy of their

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\(^3\) As noted above, in the first quarto, a report of Benvolio’s death completes the wholesale slaughter.
deaths, nor does it guarantee the “concord” that Catherine Belsey sees them as signifying.\textsuperscript{31} The exchange between Montague and Capulet, like the banter of the dead young men, is an exercise in one-upmanship:

\begin{verbatim}
Capulet    O brother Montague, give me thy hand.
           This is my daughter’s jointure, for no more
           Can I demand.
Montague  But I can give thee more;
           For I will ray her statue in pure gold,
           That whiles Verona by that name is known,
           There shall no figure at such rate be set
           As that of true and faithful Juliet.
Capulet    As rich shall Romeo’s by his lady’s lie,
           Poor sacrifices to our enmity.  (5.3.296-304)
\end{verbatim}

As long as Montague and Capulet are breathing, this exchange implies, there is scope for them to continue their rivalry; the “concord” in this scene is reserved for the dead and co-opted Romeo and Juliet. While their fathers begin with the insistence of fraternity (both in the explicit “brother” and in their use of “thee”), patriarchs’ reconciliation is wanting.\textsuperscript{32}

Jill Levenson comments in the notes to her edition on the “material kind of valuation” implicit in the language of this passage (5.3.301n), and indeed the language of commerce is shared by both speakers: jointure, figure, rate, rich. But the exchange is one of steadily growing competition: Capulet can demand no more than a handshake for his daughter, so Montague will outdo his generosity with a statue. When Montague goes so far as to boast that the statue will exceed all others, Capulet in turn counters that Romeo’s will be “As rich.” The fathers, even at the conclusion of the tragedy, are still less able than their children to imagine themselves outside

\textsuperscript{31} Belsey notes their signification without suggesting that the concord is real or permanent.

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Snyder: “If mercantile competition played a part in their feud, it has never been so noticeable as in this moment of supposed reconciliation” (“Ideology” 96).
the restrictive confines of their rivalry, consumed even at the close of the play by their obsessive anxiety about social distinction and status. Although the terms of competition may change, they give the last word to their “enmity.”

The key points to remember in moving forward to future chapters are as follows. First, that every character in the play (with the possible exceptions of Juliet, Benvolio, the Friar, and Lady Montague) exhibits strong concern for his or her social status. The witty interplay of Mercutio’s coterie, the coarser but no less clever banter of the servants, Capulet’s over-the-top hospitality, Tybalt’s fetish for dueling, Lady Capulet’s concern with an advantageous match for Juliet, and the Nurse’s prickly insistence on her status as Juliet’s nurse, and Peter’s duty to defend her honour – these are all manifestations of a seldom articulated but always present social anxiety. This anxiety, the sense that there is a strong yet unstable hierarchy, and that maintaining one’s place in it is essential, is the ideology that underwrites the feud and impels the characters of the play to participate in social customs and practices that demand risk, and on their face offer no advantage in exchange.

The second point is that this anxiety requires each Veronese to pay close attention to self-presentation. Every exchange, whether verbal or physical, is shaped by the strong need to present a social self that can take advantage of the cultural assumptions of Verona. That very need to appeal to existing codes of status and behaviour, though, restricts the raw materials available to the young Veronese for the creation and maintenance of social personae. Effectively, they are obliged to improvise their relations with each other through the dominant verbal idiom of Petrarchan love poetry, and through the practical codes of the duello. On the rare occasions that a character speaks in a register outside of these terms, the response is at best mute.
incomprehension, as when Benvolio and Romeo silence Tybalt, or violence, as when Tybalt cannot understand Romeo’s refusal to fight.

In the next chapter we will see how the characters in Much Ado’s Messina are similarly circumscribed: men must be fighters, and may be lovers, while women must know fashion and may be witty. The difference between Romeo and Juliet and the plays that follow is that in the comedies the characters are more adept at working within the terms dictated by their communities of practice. Beatrice, Paulina, and Helen all manage to deploy tactical deviations from the social norms that constrain them. Hewing closely to what is expected of them, stylizing the discourses of their surroundings, and asserting themselves covertly, on the perlocutionary level, they manage to achieve in life what Romeo and Juliet achieve only in dying, a status beyond the one which their societies would prescribe for them.
Chapter 3 – The Regulation of Jesting in *Much Ado About Nothing*

“…if a pleasantry is to be nicely turned, it must be flavoured with deceit, or dissimulation….”

Baldassare Castiglione

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare takes the matter of comedy and turns it to tragic purpose: a standard new comedy plot, complete with obstructive parents and a gossipy servant as confidante, is turned steadily towards a tragic ending by the narrow scope Verona allows for self-invention. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare reworks similar materials into a comedy. Messina, like Verona, is a fairly detailed and recognizable representation of a social and civic community, ranging in rank from prince (Don Pedro) to the tradesmen who make up the Watch. If anything, the opening scene of *Much Ado* contains more worrying elements than that of *Romeo and Juliet*: although there is no opening brawl, the men are returning to Messina from war, bringing with them the rivalries and rough camaraderie that provide much of the social tension in Shakespeare’s Verona.

Not only that, but *Much Ado About Nothing* is also much more obviously concerned with social ambition than *Romeo and Juliet*. The main plot concerns the efforts of a gentleman’s family to marry the daughter to a count. The sub-plot revolves around a woman who lives as the poor relation in her uncle’s household marrying a man she has dismissed as a social parasite. And finally, the complication to the main plot is a deception involving a waiting gentlewoman being persuaded to indulge both her lust and her desire for status, impersonating her mistress while meeting her lover. Put in these reductive terms, the matter of the play sounds unappetizing, crude, and hardly the stuff of romantic comedy, but *Much Ado* succeeds in the theatre in part
because it is also centrally concerned with self-presentation. How do characters for whom social status is a central concern present themselves? Moreover, how – within a small community – can status be asserted without so threatening the other members of the group that they respond by denying that assertion? If the play’s wit is shadowed, hinting at darker depths, it is in part because the action of the play dramatizes not only attempts at self-representation and self-assertion, but also the censorious responses of a community to those it deems to be speaking out of place or out of turn. How does Shakespeare’s Messina regulate the speech of its members to preserve the existing social order?

In this chapter, I bring together four modes of analysis to essay answers to those questions. The first is an attempt to place the witty conversation in the context of early modern jesting, as Beatrice’s outrage at Benedick’s suggestion that she cribs her “good wit out of The Hundred Merry Tales” (2.1.117-18) gives a starting point for a generic consideration of the jest. In particular, I consider the very specific social functions of laughter in the jest-books as opposed to those in Beatrice’s conversation in Much Ado About Nothing. Significantly, this historical formalist approach highlights the exclusionary function of laughter in jest-books, which feature tales in which “a speaker jests in order to create or reaffirm an alliance with his listeners at the expense and exclusion of the comic butt” (Holcomb 24). In contrast, Beatrice’s humour is notable for her willingness to make herself the butt of the joke – and then to redefine the terms of the joke, redeeming the butt, and using laughter to affirm an alliance between the butt and the audience.

In order to understand how a literary genre might or might not be adapted to – and received in – conversation, I turn secondly to contemporary linguistic pragmatics. A comparison of the generic features of jests and the social conventions of turn-taking in conversation
highlights the gulf between the humour of the jest-book and Beatrice’s “powers of witty improvisation,” which “are continually on display” (Munro 92). Crucially, Beatrice’s wit, with rare exceptions, is formally distinct from the tales and fabliaux of the jest-book; her wit, like Benedick’s, is improvisatory and, even more than his, hers is generated as part of an on-going engagement with her interlocutors, discursive rather than declamatory. Beatrice, in other words, aims to promote conversation rather than simply to dominate it. Beatrice’s concern with the correct form of wit bears out Lynne Magnusson’s observation that “the unauthored art of mundane conversation itself has a complex and interesting rhetorical organization, and ... Much Ado About Nothing both recognizes and foregrounds this” (163). In particular, I wish to argue that Beatrice – like Romeo and Benvolio – makes consistent use of Bakhtinian stylization, continually appropriating the semantic content of her interlocutors and turning it to witty purpose.

Beyond this, Beatrice’s concern with protecting and prolonging civil conversation reflects her understanding that she, like every courtier or participant in civil conversation, is working in a medium for self-invention and self-display in which the “relations between praise and blame, flattery and slander… shift uncontrollably at every turn” (Whigham, Ambition 42). I consider that understanding through the lens of my third mode of inquiry: that of classical rhetoric. While Bakhtin’s concept of stylization provides a strong theoretical understanding of Beatrice’s conversational tactics, it cannot adequately ground those tactics in their historical context. I contend that two rhetorical devices dominate Beatrice’s conversational tactics: antistrophon and paradiastole.

Antistrophon is a rhetorical trope concerned with the content and logic of an argument. It is the adoption by one speaker of the argument of an opponent, only to turn that argument against
its originator. It is closely related to (or even a specific form of) *argumentum ex concessis* – an argument in which a speaker willingly or unwillingly adopts the definitions of another speaker. On the one hand, antistrophon can be a devastatingly condescending tactic; it is the trope at play when one debater shifts from one point to another with the transitional phrase “even if we accept my opponent’s (implicitly fallacious or mendacious) definition, argument, or assumption.” Antistrophon can thus operate to show a speaker or writer’s lack of concern in facing a wholly inadequate opponent. On the other hand, outside the arena of formal debate or argument, in day-to-day conversation, antistrophon is just as likely – if not more likely – to be the trope of the underdog. It is the tactic necessarily adopted by a speaker who lacks either the topical authority or the social stature to question the terms laid out by his or her “superior” interlocutor. Antistrophon and stylization, for obvious reasons, are therefore often deployed simultaneously. The semantic content of a dominant speaker can be accepted, and then clandestinely redefined or redeployed. The stylized discourse, however, can never be fully freed from its original context or purpose, and the effect is a subversion disguised by ambiguity and ambivalence.

A related trope, and one on which Beatrice relies heavily, is paradiastole. Paradiastole, in its most restrictive definition, is the tactical description of vices in terms of virtue: in Peacham’s phrase “to cover vices with the mantles of virtues” (Skinner, “Paradiastole” 157). The term is, however, sometimes applied to the opposite tactic of describing virtues in terms that make them seem like vices.¹ Quentin Skinner’s definition and discussion of paradiastole follow Puttenham

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¹ Donald McGrady has noted in the play a “topos of inversion of values.” His reading, though, makes no consideration of such an inversion as a purely rhetorical concept. “An awareness of the age-old topos of the ‘inversion of values,’ as applied to lovers, allows us to identify – for the first time – Beatrice’s criticism of her wooers as a rhetorical commonplace. An acquaintance with the motif also tells us something about Beatrice’s personality: since the time of Plato, it has been considered natural for lovers to excuse their beloveds’ faults, praising their physical and mental blemishes as positive attributes; by inverting that tradition, Beatrice reveals a serious psychological flaw of her own” (476).
in using only the first definition, defining it against the second, which he classifies as a form of meiosis. In *The Art of English Poesie*, Puttenham suggestively Englishes the term to “Curry-Favel”:

But if such moderation of words tend to flattery, or soothing, or excusing, it is by the figure of *paradiastole*, which therefore nothing improperly we call the Curry-Favel.² As when we make the best of a bad thing, or turn a signification to the more plausible sense: as to call an unthrift, a liberal gentleman; the foolish-hardy, valiant or courageous; the niggard, thrifty; a great riot or outrage, a youthful prank; and such like terms, moderating and abating the force of the matter by craft and for a pleasing purpose. (269)³

In this definition, paradiastole is a trope of flattery or hypocrisy, and this definition has dominated contemporary discussions of the trope. Paul Hammond, for instance, has argued persuasively and in great detail how it enables the expression and justification of homoerotic feeling in the sonnets.⁴ Craig Dionne reads Parolles as a flatterer who relies extensively on paradiastole to excuse both his vices and Bertram’s. In discussing Beatrice’s conversational tactics, though, I will use the broader definition of paradiastole, including certain instances that Puttenham would classify as meiosis, or as he calls it, the Disabler. In Puttenham’s first definition of the term, meiosis is the figure in which “you diminish and abase a thing by way of

² Curry here is used in its sense of stroking or rubbing down (as in a horse). The *OED* defines “favel” as a synonym (adjective or noun) for a fallow horse, specifically the “fallow horse proverbial as the type of fraud” (B2) and hence “used as a mere personification of fraud, cunning, or duplicity” (B3).

³ While I do not wish to make the case for Puttenham as a direct source for the play, it is interesting that the main plot revolves around an “outrage” perpetrated by Don John that is excused in Claudio as a “youthful prank”; as Zitner argues in his introduction “Immaturity explains and extenuates... Claudio’s too-quick suspicions and his ready acceptance of Don Pedro’s offer to woo Hero in his stead” (24). He also notes the profusion of epithets that both identify Claudio as young and mock him for it.

⁴ Cf. *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester*, especially chapter one.
spite or malice, as it were to deprave it” (269). His broader discussion of meiosis begins to blur the absolute distinction with paradiastole.

After the advancer followeth the abaser, working by words and sentences of extenuation or diminution. Whereupon we call him the Disabler or Figure of Extenuation. And this Extenuation is used to divers purposes: sometimes for modesty’s sake and to avoid the opinion of arrogance.... It may also be done for despite, to bring our adversaries in contempt.... (304)

We use it again to excuse a fault, and to make an offense seem less than it is, by giving a term more favorable and of less vehemence than the truth requires.... such like phrases... fall more aptly to the office of the figure Curry-Favel before remembered. (305)

My reasons for choosing the broader definition are threefold. The first is that the tropes are effectively the same action, taken in different directions. Puttenham awkwardly slides from discussing meiosis into discussing paradiastole and has to reassert the distinction after the fact; the distinction is nebulous. The second reason is specific to the play. Beatrice uses paradiastole extensively in the narrower sense; her less frequent use of meiosis is generally at the expense of Benedick, although she also deploys it against herself and, crucially, Margaret. The third reason is broader and somewhat more tendentious. As I have suggested briefly above, Whigham asserts that paradiastole, in its broader sense, permeated courtly conversation in Elizabethan England, with the result that “relations between praise and blame, flattery and slander… shift uncontrollably at every turn” (Ambition 42). It is in this abruptly mutable and therefore highly charged medium that Beatrice seeks to display her wit to her social advantage. In such a treacherous medium, the jester may become the butt in a split second. And it is this very same mutability and danger that render Hero vulnerable to slander and disgrace.
In considering the formal attributes of jest-book humour, I would like to emphasize the relationship between that slander and the humour that it disrupts. The verbal violence inherent in Claudio’s public denunciation and shaming of Hero, despite its extremity, is merely a magnification of the violence and control that underlie the jokes and banter of the more normal conversation in the play. As in the jests of early modern jest-books, Claudio’s ritual shaming initially presents an apparent paradox: a Hero who is ambivalently chaste or not chaste. As in those jests, the ambiguity is resolved in favour of (mistaken) certainty, and the butt of the shaming is ostracized. In this case, the violence inherent in the dynamic of the jest is obvious.

But in the triangular relationship between jester, butt, and audience, there is another form of violence present in humour, particularly as it was conceived in early modern England: for a speaker to move laughter was to take control over the body of the listener. Matthew Steggle has highlighted the extent to which laughter on the early modern stage was represented as violent, building on Quentin Skinner’s argument that in the Renaissance laughter and weeping were viewed as “almost unnaturally vehement reactions to some inner movement of the soul” (“Hobbes” 143). The power to elicit such an inner movement of the soul is thus threatening in the extreme; the power of rhetoric to move mirth or sadness, to force another person’s body to an involuntary reaction, is frightening. Steggle provides ample evidence for such a view of the coercive nature of mirth, citing scenes in which laughing characters hold their aching sides, or even need to be physically supported by their friends (36).

A jesting speaker was thus not merely enacting verbal violence on his or her comic butt. To jest successfully was to exert a control over

5 Steggle’s most extreme example is drawn from Jonson: “In Jonson’s Epicoene, Dauphine requires similar support while in the grip of a laughter he describes as life-threatening: ‘Oh, hold me up a little, I shall go away i’the jest else’” (37, citing 4.1.20).
one’s listeners, a control that could overwhelm them physically and emotionally. The jokes that both weave the social fabric of Messina and threaten to tear that fabric are thus not as distinct from the threatened violence of the play as they might seem; outright violence and joking are different parts of a spectrum of actions intended to assert and consolidate social superiority.

**Jesting: Generic Conventions and Social Risks**

Before continuing, it is important to consider what features define the jest as a genre, and just why Beatrice takes offence at being associated with that genre. Most obviously, Beatrice is offended by the insult to her capacities of invention: her quality as an entertaining speaker is her stock-in-trade in Messina, where everyone (except, notably, Don John) seems to have polished his or her wits. The *Hundred Merry Tales* in particular would have carried with it a strong whiff of staleness, since it was originally published in 1526 and by “Shakespeare’s time it had become a byword for bad jokes” (Ghose 61). Moreover, Ian Munro has established that *Much Ado* posits a significant difference in content and tone between “vulgar print and oral sophistication” (98). The dialogue at the masked ball alludes indirectly to the sort of humour an Elizabethan reader could expect from the *Hundred Merry Tales*, as Beatrice alleges that Benedick “is the Prince’s jester…” (2.1.137).

Only his gift is in devising impossible slanders. None but libertines delight in him, and the commendation is not in his wit but in his villainy, for he both pleases men and angers them, and then they laugh and beat him. (2.1.138-42)

This suggestion of both vulgarity and violence corresponds quite closely with the sorts of pranks played by the tricksters in the jest-book, in particular the close connection between laughter as a means of bringing together a group who then violently exclude the butt of their joke. Even her suggestion of Benedick’s “villainy” carries with it an oddly appropriate status-consciousness: the
characters of the fabliaux in the Hundred Merry Tales tend not to come from the upper echelons of society. Beatrice’s anger at being associated with the vulgarity of printed jest-books is thus a product of understandable, if slightly snobbish, sensitivity about status.

But I would like to pay attention to the formal aspects of jesting rather than the vulgarity of jest-books, or the cachet ascribed to invention over repetition. Even a cursory reading of the Hundred Merry Tales highlights one of the limitations of the jests on offer: although the jests may represent witty exchanges, they are far from being quips or seemingly off-the-cuff remarks. They are stories. More particularly, they are long stories, if not by the standards of print, certainly by the standards of conversation. Thomas Wilson, in advising his readers on the use of humour, cautions on this very point.

Some can prettily, by a word spoken, take occasion to be right merry. Others can jest at large and tell a round tale pleasantly, though they have none occasion at that time given. But assuredly that mirth is more worth which is moved by a word newly spoken than if a long tale should be pleasantly told. (164-65)

Wilson here looks forward to both Munro’s point about Beatrice’s indignation (that she wants recognition for her novelty and originality) and mine: brevity, for Beatrice, may not be the soul of wit, but it is an important component quality, and her humour for the most part is integrated into the conversation rather than interrupting it. The jests in the Hundred Merry Tales very clearly fall under the heading of “round tales” rather than moving mirth by “a word newly spoken.”

Wilson’s assertion of the value of brevity is borne out by modern sociolinguistic studies of polite conversation. Since Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson’s pioneering study in 1974, linguists have studied the largely unspoken rules by which conversational turn-taking is
organized. One of the reasons for this study’s lasting influence was the authors’ determination to set out principles for the organization of conversation that were at once “context-free and capable of extraordinary context-sensitivity” (699). Some of their crucial observations have remained largely unchanged, such as the rule that generally only one conversational participant will speak at any given time.  

Other observations have been significantly refined and extended in the intervening years. Rule 4.6, for instance, states that “Turn size is not fixed, but varies” (709). This self-evidently true rule has invited closer scrutiny. Examining conversational participation in quantitative terms, David Gibson notes further that “participation in group discussions tends to be far from equal” and that this disparity is “typically attributed to status differences” (134).

From a purely quantitative standpoint, then, it stands to reason that longer turns or more frequent turns should correlate to speakers of higher standing in the group.

Let us consider the conventions of turn-taking in the light of interactional meanings (or perlocutionary constatives), as discussed in the introduction. To deploy any speech act or speech genre is to assert implicitly that the generic and social conventions of that speech act are being met. In joking with Don Pedro, for instance, Benedick makes strong implicit claims both to social status (he is sufficiently intimate with the Prince to tease him) and to wit (he is clever and funny enough to craft jokes that will be well-taken). If Gibson is right, then in conversations in which turn length is not generically fixed, the speakers who claim the floor more often or for longer terms are making a strong perlocutionary claim to status or authority. To use the example of *Romeo and Juliet*, Escalus’ long condemnation of the feuding families in the first scene is justified by his rank and status; he is the Prince, and the citizens of Verona, his subjects, are

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6 Or, more precisely, that overlapping speech is frequent but brief, quickly corrected. Cf. Rules 4.2 and 4.3 (706).
obliged to listen. Friar Laurence, in the final scene of the play, speaks at some length because of his authority, in spite of his assurances that his “short date of breath” will keep him “brief” (5.3.229); he is the character on stage who can best explain what has transpired, and this authority both entitles and requires him to speak a longer turn. To turn to Much Ado About Nothing, much of the uneasy comedy in act three, scene five stems from the disparity between Dogberry’s assessment of just how long a turn he can take and Leonato’s much less flattering assessment of the same matter.

Leonato What would you with me, honest neighbour?

Dogberry Marry, sir, I would have some confidence with you that decerns you nearly.

Leonato Brief, I pray you, for you see it is a busy time with me.

Dogberry Marry, this is it, Sir.

Leonato What is it, my good friends?

Dogberry Goodman Verges, sir, speaks a little off the matter – an old man, sir, and his wits are not so blunt as, God help, I would desire they were. But in faith, honest as the skin between his brows.

Verges Yes, I thank God, I am as honest as any man living that is an old man and no honester than I.

Dogberry Comparisons are odorous. “Palabras,” neighbour Verges.

Leonato Neighbours, you are tedious.

Dogberry It pleases your worship to say so, but we are the poor Duke’s officers. But truly, for mine own part, if I were tedious as a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all of your worship.

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7 This is an instance where the distinction between authority and status is apparent; although he can speak authoritatively about the marriage and suicides of Romeo and Juliet, his participation in the clandestine arrangements leaves his status very much in doubt. Escalus’ comment that “we still have known thee for a holy man”(5.3.270) is ominous in its use of the present perfect tense. What the Friar’s standing will be after the play is left unsaid, but Brooke’s Friar is compelled to retire to a hermitage.
Whether Dogberry is simply socially inept, or whether he thinks the information he has for Leonato lends him authority to speak for longer, he is clearly violating the conventions of polite conversation as Leonato understands them. His very verbosity makes a strong perlocutionary claim to the right to speak at length. In keeping with my argument about the interpellative force of repeated perlocutionary constatives, Leonato’s immediate reaction is atypically rude. When his so-called “good friends” (8) speak for too long, he quickly moves to a bald, on-record face-threatening act: “Neighbours, you are tedious” (17). In the space of nine lines, Leonato has radically changed the contours of his conversational dynamic from the complimentary to the overtly rude. The implications of his rudeness are clear: “You are not my equal. My time is worth more than yours. Stop wasting my time.” The upstart is swiftly put down. Such indirect claims to status unavoidably pose a threat to the face of conversational participants. And to jest, in the sense of the *Hundred Merry Tales*, is to stake out a claim to a prolonged conversational turn. Jests are thus a risky conversational strategy.

Wilson’s preference for off-the-cuff witticism also highlights another key problem of jest-book humour, as he notes that even good storytellers may launch into a tale “though they have none occasion at that time given.” In other words, a quip may arise out of the conversational matter at hand; witty tales are more cumbersome, and are less likely to be prompted by the conversation in which they are embedded. This objection is less well served by the analytical tools of linguistic conversation analysis, but perhaps the terms can be usefully adapted. Linguists considering the organization of conversational turn-taking generally measure turn units in terms of starting or stopping speaking. Running parallel to this system of

*Leonato*  All thy tediousness on me, ah?  (3.5.1-22)
organization is the question of what might be called “semantic turns.” In *Much Ado About Nothing*, for instance, the banter between most characters consists principally of brief conversational turns, and conforms to a kind of banter that Jennifer Coates has dubbed “sparky one-at-a-time”: an “interaction … composed of witticisms with loose semantic links and a competitive edge” (Dynel 245). A speaker who initiates or changes a topic is, in this context, taking a turn; a speaker who covers more than one topic in a given speech has clearly taken more than one turn. Clara Calvo, in her analysis of turn-taking in *As You Like It*, recognizes that choosing or changing a topic represents a privilege, and is the preserve of dominant parties in a conversation; therefore, to take more than one semantic turn, like taking a longer turn, threatens the face of other conversational participants.

The issue of the semantic turn is also significant for another formal feature of the jest: the punch line or moral – selected by the jester. In the case of the punch line, Chris Holcomb notes that “a speaker jests in order to create or reaffirm an alliance with his listeners at the expense and exclusion of the comic butt” (24). In the case of the moral, Ian Munro observes that it “functions as the final riposte, reinterpreting again the words of the story... taking the last word away” (105) from the jester within the tale, and assigning it to the speaker of the jest. In either case, the closure of the jest constitutes an invitation to the audience (excluding the butt, if present) to laugh. In modern conversation, as Elizabeth Holt has demonstrated, “shared laughter precedes the introduction of a new topic/activity sequence, thus forming the end of the prior topic” (1524). To elicit a laugh on any given subject, then, is to achieve a paradoxical effect of uniting a conversational group around shared values, while at once creating difference within the group. To joke is not merely to entertain one’s partners in conversation; it is to take control over the conversation, once again asserting dominance.
Jesting makes another assertion of dominance: the speaker knows the punch line, while the audience is obliged to wait on him or her. The speaker thus adopts a one-up position relative to his or her audience. Once a speaker has begun telling a joke, barring an unusually abrupt dismissal or an accidental repetition of a joke known to the listeners, the listener depends on the speaker to end the suspense. The dynamic is similar to that of a riddle; as we shall see in more detail in chapter five, riddles are a genre of speech in which the speaker exploits an explicit advantage over the listener: the speaker knows the answer to the riddle, and the listener wishes to learn it. In the case of the jest, the jesting speaker knows the punch line while the audience has to wait.

Conversational dominance posed at least two problems for an early modern speaker. As Holcomb argues, if “jesting confers power on speakers and increases their ability to manage diverse social situations, then decorum seeks to hold that power and ability in check” (24). That decorum was, moreover, no mere matter of convention. Jennifer Richards has traced through the work of a network of writers – from Cheke, Smith, and Ascham to Harvey and Spenser – a shared interest in the fostering of civil conversation, and a shared recognition that without “‘honestas’ – that is, without the restraint of potentially domineering speakers – there can be no conversation” (Rhetoric 2). Although each conversational participant stood to gain from witty self-display, there was also a shared interest in the promotion and continuation of that conversation, in order that the performance might continue.\(^8\) The ideal conversation, in Richards’ formulation, is one “which is capable of nurturing shared aspirations and sociability” (4). As Delia Chiaro observes, “a joke… is likely to disrupt a ‘normal’… conversation” (114), and

\(^8\) Whigham notes that, for similar reasons, Emilia Pia will not allow philosophy at her Urbino evenings, preferring “clear and witty ‘good points’” to “complex extended structures of developed argument” (Ambition 30).
conversation in Shakespeare’s Messina is the principal medium for self-invention and self-display. Its continuance is thus in the interests of all conversational participants, but they must weigh that interest against the selfish wish to have the last, most impressive word – to deliver the punch line.

The other problem for a speaker intent on self-display speaks to a central problem of social ambition. That is that the moment of self-assertion is the moment most likely to elicit a repressive response. In Katherine Eisaman Maus’s memorable formulation, “class distinctions are oppressively enforced almost as soon as they are overthrown” (57-58). Perhaps it is more accurate to say that hierarchy never needs to be enforced until it is overthrown, for that overthrow threatens the carefully maintained social positions of everyone invested in that hierarchy. The word overthrow, though, is also slightly misleading: even small violations of social or conversational decorum can pose a threat to the ego of all members of a community. This recognition has been front and centre in the study of conversation since Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson first argued

that the most commonplace speech acts negotiated in everyday conversation – advising, promising, inviting, requesting, ordering, criticizing, even complimenting – carry an element of risk, for they threaten potential damage to the persona of either speaker or hearer (or to those of both). Politeness, in the special sense that Brown and Levinson define it, consists of the complex remedial strategies that serve to minimize the risks to “face,” or self-esteem of conversational participants. (Magnusson 17)

To that list of speech acts and genres we might very well add jesting.

9 The other two, highly gendered media are fashion (for the women, although Benedick intrudes on this) and success in arms (for the men, although Beatrice wishes she could intrude upon it).
The rest of this chapter will consider how Beatrice manages to balance the competing demands of self-display and self-effacement that are required of her as a jesting speaker in civil conversation.\(^\text{10}\)

**The Good Continuer and the Jade**

I will begin by conceding at the outset that many of Beatrice’s speeches seem, at first blush, to be the exceptions to the above discussion. When speaking with Benedick, certainly, Beatrice takes very little care to preserve his face, as she freely and openly denigrates him. This behaviour is in keeping, though, with Wittgenstein’s description of laughter and play as summarized by Indira Ghose: “While laughing we briefly enter a game that, as Wittgenstein demonstrated [sic], makes sense only according to its own rules. Above all, it is an awareness of the situation being just a game that marks both play and laughter” (7). In other words, in the rarefied atmosphere of her “merry war” Beatrice is being perfectly polite by taking Benedick on his own terms. If this is a merry war, it is one in which both sides seem to think they have a firm handle on the rules of engagement; much of the real friction between Beatrice and Benedick comes from a flouting of those rules.

I must also concede that while speaking with Don Pedro and her uncle, too, Beatrice frequently takes longer turns than her interlocutors, and certainly seems comfortable remaining at the centre of attention. Yet when she does apologize for her speech, excusing herself to Don Pedro that she “was born to speak all mirth and no matter” (2.1.303-4), he immediately assures her of the value of her speech: “Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes

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\(^{10}\) There is no space in this chapter to enter into a full discussion of, or distinction between, civil and courtly conversation. It is fortunate, then, that Leonato’s household straddles both fields. He is a neighbour to Dogberry and yet Governor of Messina, and his household has attributes of a minor court.
Clearly Beatrice is doing something right. As I have outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the two tactics that Beatrice most frequently deploys to minimize the risks to her conversational partners are stylization and paradiastole.

When I say that Beatrice makes use of stylization, I am using the term in Bakhtin’s sense, for whom stylization is a speaker or writer’s “use of someone else’s discourse for his own purposes, by inserting new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own” (189). It is the dominant mode of her wit, and indeed is the dominant mode of wit for friendly bantering speech. Jennifer Coates’ description of “interaction … composed of witticisms with loose semantic links and a competitive edge” suits the repartee between Beatrice and Benedick perfectly. This “sparky one-at-a-time” banter, however, requires that its participants follow several rules. The first is to alternate speakers in a series of short turns. The second is that each turn must have a semantic link to the one that has come before. As in a game of dominoes, Beatrice and Benedick can advance the conversation only so far in a given quip, and each in turn has the chance to change the direction of the conversation. Their first exchange will serve as a good example:

**Beatrice**  I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick; nobody marks you.

**Benedick**  What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

**Beatrice**  Is it possible Disdain should die, while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signor Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain if you come in her presence.

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11 William McCollom’s more formalist approach to puns in *Much Ado* complements Bakhtin’s more theoretical angle. For McCollom, “the pun is a sign of harmony… it is heavily dependent on what has just been said, and may tacitly accept it. When Don Pedro declares he will get Beatrice a husband, she replies that she would rather one of his father’s getting. The new meaning does not reject the old but merely improves it” (170).
**Benedick** Then is Courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain that I am loved of all the ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for I truly love none.

**Beatrice** A dear happiness to women – they would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. (1.1.110-23)

Leaving aside for the moment the direct insults they trade, Beatrice and Benedick here engage in a remarkably even-handed exchange. If Benedick calls Beatrice Disdain, she will accept it, and introduce the notion of Courtesy. If Courtesy itself will disdain Benedick, then he will disavow Courtesy. In the course of this turn, though, Benedick breaks the rules – or at least bends them. Beatrice has obligingly picked up his personification, and replied with another. Benedick begins his turn playing the same game, but then turns the conversation to his own heart. In other words, where Beatrice advances the semantic chain only by a single link, Benedick jumps forward by two; in his one conversational turn, he takes two semantic turns.

Beatrice, significantly, resists this tactic. While she is bold enough to insult Benedick to his face, she is clearly playing by a set of conversational rules. The first half of her turn replies directly to Benedick’s statement that he loves no woman. Rather than exercising her right to advance the semantic chain, though, Beatrice turns back to the question of Benedick’s heart, albeit indirectly, through the question of his humours: “I thank God and my cold blood, I am of your humour for that: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow, than a man swear he loves me” (123-26). The conversation restored to its original arc, Benedick picks up from that turn, referring to her mind instead of her heart (or humour), but then uses the second half of his turn to extend the conversation further than the implicit rules would deem appropriate: “God keep your ladyship still in that mind, so some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratched face” (127-29). While it is possible to argue that Benedick is alluding to Beatrice as a cat, and
continuing the conversational tour of the household menagerie, this seems a stretch. Beatrice again confines herself to a joke based entirely on the semantic contents of the previous turn, while allowing herself to engage in some real aggression: “Scratching it could not make it worse, an ’twere such a face as yours” (130-31).

I am in no way trying to suggest that Beatrice’s joking here conforms to what might commonly be called politeness or civil conversation. In the very specific, sociolinguistic sense of politeness, though, it is possible to see that Beatrice is actually engaging in some significant repair-work as the conversation progresses. If we take the bald, on-record insults as in and of themselves not serious, the real pragmatic work of the conversation seems to be that Beatrice and Benedick give each other a forum in which to demonstrate their inventive abilities. The deviations of Benedick’s turns from their immediate semantic precursors, in this light, can be read either as a failure of his inventive abilities when compared to Beatrice’s, or as an unreasonable imposition on her patience and thus a violation of the conversational rules.

The last few lines of their exchange make the pattern even plainer. Benedick either returns to the chain of animals (although animals do not feature in Beatrice’s previous turn) or turns to a whole new topic, implying that Beatrice is an imitator, rather than original:

*Benedick* Well, you are a rare parrot-teacher.

*Beatrice* A bird of my tongue is better than a beast of yours.

*Benedick* I would my horse had the speed of your tongue, and so good a continuer. But keep your way, o’ God’s name; I have done.

*Beatrice* You always end with a jade’s trick. I know you of old. (132-39)

Suggestively, Beatrice is indeed in some senses imitative; her wit grows out of the conversational context, rather than being pure invention. But it is that imitation that makes her
wit conversational. By confining her wit (for the most part) to responses to, and elaborations on, her interlocutors’ ideas, Beatrice effaces the power of her own invention. Her “honestas” lies in pursuing wit that furthers conversation. Benedick, in contrast, invents freely. When outmatched, he ends with a “jade’s trick” – a unilateral end to conversation that angers the more civilly-minded Beatrice.

Before moving on to consider Beatrice’s speech in exchanges with others, I must return to my two earlier concessions, and offer some clarifications. It is true that, in speaking with other characters, both Beatrice (occasionally) and Benedick (frequently) take longer turns than their conversational partners. But in exchanges between the two, he almost invariably takes the longer turns. Moreover, in exchanges with others, Benedick takes far larger liberties with turn length than Beatrice. Consider, for instance, Benedick’s response to Don Pedro’s suggestion that he has wronged Beatrice. “O, she misused me past the endurance of a block,” (2.1.238) he begins, and continues a steady stream of invective against Beatrice for twenty-one lines of prose; in those twenty-one lines he finds at least nine different ways to characterize Beatrice as unfair (“an oak with but one green leaf on it would have answered her”), vicious (“She speaks poniards, and every word stabs”), pestilential (“she would infect to the North Star”), emasculating (“infernal Ate”) and demonic. In its own way, this outburst is comparable to Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech. Both are sudden eruptions of verbal invention that showcase the virtuosity of the speaker, and both, in doing so, violate the norms of conventional conversation. Mercutio and Benedick claim the floor for significantly longer than their interlocutors. Benedick’s violation of conversational norms is all the more striking because unlike Mercutio, who is amongst friends,

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12 And, as a close kinsman of Prince Escalus, he is technically the highest-ranking of the Montague coterie.
Benedick is speaking to his commander; his blunt imperative, “Come, talk not of her” (253) borders on insubordination. Whatever Benedick’s criticisms of Beatrice’s wit, he himself serves as a benchmark against which she can be measured – and found significantly more civil than he.

Talking Up

When Beatrice talks to her “superiors,” she takes a markedly different approach. Unsurprisingly, in her conversations with Leonato and with Don Pedro (civilians, as it were, in the merry war), Beatrice is more conventionally deferential than Benedick – and more conventionally deferential than when she is speaking with Benedick. This is not to say that Beatrice is not inventive. Two of her longest speeches (or conversational turns) in act two, scene one are, indeed, highly inventive, but they are inventive within certain strictures. Significantly, they are speeches that respond directly to praise or criticism, and both lean heavily on paradiastole, converting praise to blame, and blame to praise. Whigham states that the “basic function of the trope is the ongoing adjustment of public information by redescribing an utterance or action in such a way as to reverse the polarity of its meaning” (Ambition 40). In this formulation, “praise and blame interpenetrate absolutely.” As in stylized discourse, though, no utterance can fully be rewritten; the original meaning of the utterance can never fully be overwritten.

Beatrice’s response to Antonio’s accusation that she is “too curst” (2.1.18) will serve as a good example of how she combines antistrophon and paradiastole, and will also serve to illustrate the very delicate position that those rhetorical devices allow her to construct and maintain. I am not the first to observe that Beatrice’s wit allows her to maintain a via media
between Hero’s submissive silence and Margaret’s aggressive and overt self-promotion, but too little has been made of the form that wit takes. Her response to Antonio is typical.

“Too curst is more than curst,” answers Beatrice. “I shall lessen God’s sending that way; for it is said that ‘God sends a curst cow short horns’ – but to a cow too curst he sends none” (19-21). Rather than refuting the charge, Beatrice accepts it, yet turns it to a virtue. She will have no husband (and therefore no cuckold’s horns), making her apparent misfortune lucky. At one stroke, she is able to accept and yet defuse her uncle’s criticism, while also showing off her quick wit. Yet behind the display is an acceptance of the terms under which she stands condemned for being too shrewd: the discourse still, as Bakhtin notes, “must be perceived as belonging to someone else” (189) – as indeed it does.

Beatrice here engages in the same quick-witted wordplay as any of the jesters in the Hundred Merry Tales, yet crucially she is more modest. We have seen already how delivering the punch line is an act of conversational dominance, and significantly the last word is not hers; Leonato supplies the zinger for her, making clear her meaning: “So, by being curst, God will send you no horns.” Another aspect of Beatrice’s conversational pattern becomes clearer as the exchange continues, proving that her opening match of wits with Benedick was the rule and not the exception: the punch line, for Beatrice, is not the end of the joke, but rather the prompt for the next joke. Beatrice, as the good continuer, does not want the joking exchange to end. Leonato’s prediction that she will not marry therefore prompts another sally of Beatrice’s, as she

13 Contrast this reading with Mihoko Suzuki’s contention that in Much Ado “the comic form works to repress anxieties about unruly women to displace them onto male scapegoats: ... the illegitimate and resentful Don John and his subversive retainer Borachio” (130). Don John and Borachio’s villainy does indeed serve as a partial scapegoat – all the more obviously so, owing to Don John’s explicit refusal to explain why he is a “plain-dealing villain” (1.3.130) and to Borachio’s repentance. But the tension obvious between Beatrice and Margaret in 3.4, and the peculiar exchange between Benedick and Margaret in 5.2, highlight Margaret’s importance as a scapegoat – or at least as a foil whose behaviour serves to show Beatrice’s in a more favourable light.
calls this a blessing for which she says prayers of thanksgiving “upon my knees every morning and evening. Lord, I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face. I had rather lie in the woollen” (2.1.27-30). Her comment disparaging beards elicits from Leonato the comment that she “may light upon a husband that hath no beard” (31), which then prompts her to rewrite that quality as a flaw: “What should I do with him? Dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting gentlewoman?” (33-34).

The exchange is notable for two reasons. First, it conforms to the general critical consensus that Beatrice mocks the conventions of marriage, and indeed of gender, while nonetheless imagining herself to be deeply invested in those conventions. But secondly, and for my purposes more importantly, the exchange highlights the mechanism of Beatrice’s wit, explaining in part why she is able to speak so freely. In deliberately redefining vice as virtue and virtue as vice, Beatrice’s mockery of convention does not amount to a sustained critique; she adopts no clearly staked-out position. Moreover, in taking the topics of her wit from her interlocutors, she displays a kind of conversational modesty or “honestas” that is lacking in Benedick.

An analysis of how Beatrice responds to flattery and compliments in the same scene will serve to bear out that observation. After her comparison of marriage to dancing, Leonato pays her an ambivalent compliment: “Cousin, you apprehend passing shrewdly” (78). His insistence

14 Note the slightly snobbish inflection of her claim, too. Zitner glosses the line with the observation that “Beatrice’s fastidiousness has class overtones, woollen homespun being the cloth of the lower orders....”

15 “Beatrice does not question that wedlock, if she chooses it, requires such subservience. She laments that there are no men of superior substance, by whom she could be ‘overmastered’ without considering it an insult and to whom she could ‘make an account of her life’ without being debased. The sharp irony of Beatrice's comments on matrimony reveals that she harbors a genuine longing for the type of inclusion in society which marriage allows, coupled with resentment that a wedding ring is a prerequisite for such inclusion” (Friedman, “Hush’d” 354). Cf. also McCollom 169, Zitner 32, amongst many others.
on addressing her as “Cousin” is, I think, an act of repair work, necessitated by his ironic praise. Beatrice does perceive shrewdly, but Leonato’s choice of word is double-edged, as it recalls his warning that she will never marry “if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (18). Beatrix’s reply is telling: “I have a good eye, uncle; I can see a church by daylight.” The first half of her answer strips Leonato’s irony of its double meaning, and treats his words as entirely complimentary. It is a compliment, though, that she at once disavows and diminishes, using a homely analogy to argue that her wit really is nothing special. Once again, blame turns to praise, and is then dismissed, and the line between flattery and criticism shifts so rapidly it becomes impossible to discern.

Beatrice will be equally cautious in accepting praise from Don Pedro – if not more so.

The announcement of Claudio and Hero’s engagement produces an exuberant mood, in which Beatrice ventures a number of witty sallies, instructing the mute Claudio to speak, and the equally reticent Hero to silence him with a kiss when he does speak.

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16 Note the shift from “Niece” to “Cousin” and the shift from “thou” to “you” in the intervening sixty lines. Leonato is at once addressing Beatrice more as an equal, but the shift also suggests a greater social distance between them. Beatrice, in challenging – even fairly modestly – the conventions of gendered behaviour, is carving out an unusual position for herself in the hierarchy of the group. Twice in this scene, Beatrice’s interlocutors turn from her to Hero, unable as they are to keep up with Beatrice’s invention (cf. Straznicky 157-58): Antonio at line 49 and Leonato at line 81. Much as Romeo and Benvolio can reply to Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech only with puzzlement, the old men have no response to the inventive and self-protective wit of Beatrice as she at once does and does not defy patriarchal convention.

17 It is possible, too, to see Beatrice’s use of proverbial language as a deliberate tactical choice. In deploying a proverb “a speaker makes his hearer aware of or convinces him of their common group membership or cultural heritage…” (Norrick 146), but running counter to that is their capacity to allow off-record “talking back.” As Neal Norrick argues:

A speaker who uses a proverb falls back on the traditional store of ready-made utterances, instead of forming an utterance of his own. Seen in this way, utterances of proverbs are speech acts of quoting. But the speaker does not quote an individual author; he quotes the linguistic community itself. (147)

In other words, proverbs offer a speaker a tool to soften criticism, or to mitigate the presumption of offering advice.
Don Pedro: In faith, lady, you have a merry heart.

Beatrice: Yea, my lord. I thank it, poor fool, it keeps on the windy side of care. – My cousin tells him in his ear that he is in her heart.

Claudio: And so she doth, cousin!

Beatrice: Good Lord, for alliance! Thus goes everyone to the world but I, and I am sunburnt. I may sit in a corner and cry “Heigh-ho for a husband.” (2.1.310-17)

Note that this is the first of three instances of the Prince addressing Beatrice as “lady” in the space of a dozen lines. In the first and third instance, the use of the honorific on its own may be simple courtesy. The second address, though, as “Lady Beatrice” (318) seems to be conspicuously talking up Beatrice’s actual status. Don John has stated flatly of Hero’s interest in Count Claudio that she “is no equal for his birth” (2.1.166). While we need not accept his statement uncritically, Don Pedro as a Prince ranks higher than a Count. And whatever Beatrice’s actual rank (she has been played as everything from an orphaned heiress to a decidedly poor relation), Don Pedro’s insistence on her status as a lady is notable, and perhaps excessive. Beatrice is quick to revise the terms in which Don Pedro praises her. Although he expresses approval of her wit, Beatrice is quick to ascribe her merriness to luck – as though her heart could keep “on the windy side of care” without her volition – and to her heart’s innate caution. Caution is hardly the attribute of a self-displaying jester. Beatrice is also quick to change the topic away from herself, drawing attention to the private whisperings of the young couple. Tellingly, she then proceeds to make a joke at her own expense, highlighting her status as an

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18 The honorific for Beatrice is inconsistently used or omitted throughout the play. Cf. also 3.4.36.

19 The exchange is slightly puzzling. Zitner glosses Beatrice’s “Good Lord, for alliance” as “Beatrice’s comic response to being called ‘cousin’ by Claudio, by whom she is obviously unimpressed.” If this is a direct expression of her lack of enthusiasm for the match, it is oddly out of character for Beatrice. On the other hand, if this is a
unmarried woman, and suggesting that this is because she is not, by conventional standards, attractive. The joke does, in some ways, replicate the dynamic of jest-book humour, as a group forms to the exclusion of the comic butt – but Beatrice herself is the butt.

Her self-deprecation, however, prompts Don Pedro to engage in significant, unexpected, and apparently disproportionate repair work. He opens with the offer to get her a husband – perhaps not surprising, as he has just done the same for Hero and Claudio: “Lady Beatrice, I will get you one” (2.1.318). Beatrice, who has previously expressed her distaste for a young beardless husband as too feminine for her, uses his choice of word to make a pun and offer a compliment: to get can mean to beget, and so she pretends to refuse an offer that Don Pedro never really meant to make: “I would rather have one of your father’s getting. Hath your grace ne’er a brother like you? Your father got excellent husbands if a maid could come by them” (319-22). Typically, Beatrice is at her boldest when speaking well of Don Pedro, rather than ill. Her open flattery of him prompts him to go one step further and to ask “Will you have me, lady?”

What exactly the Prince is doing here is unclear. Is he joking? Is he seriously offering marriage under the guise of a joke? Or is he entirely earnest? The scene can be played any number of different ways on Don Pedro’s side, but Beatrice’s refusal is clear, and a perfect example of repeated deployments of paradiastole:

\[\text{Beatrice} \quad \text{No, my lord, unless I might have another for working days. Your grace is too costly to wear every day. But I beseech your grace, pardon me; I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.}\]

momentary lapse in which she too openly expresses distaste for Claudio, it makes some sense of her subsequent self-mockery. Her unimpressed response at being called “cousin” prompts her to use a joke at her own expense to reassure Claudio of his place in the group.
Don Pedro   Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you; for out o’ question, you were born in a merry hour.

Beatrice   No, sure, my lord, my mother cried. But then there was a star danced, and under that I was born. (324-32)

No matter how politely phrased, to reject a proposal of marriage is to risk offending the suitor. Beatrice, clearly aware of this risk, couches her rejection in almost fulsome praise of Don Pedro. Now it is her turn to pull out the stops, calling the Prince “my lord” and “your grace” in each of her three short sentences in a flurry of placatory honorifics. To claim that Don Pedro is not a suitable husband because he is of too high rank for her is paradiastole in its narrowest definition. Beatrice then begins to apologize for any impertinence by inverting the trope, and turning the Prince’s praise of her into blame. While he has spoken warmly of her wit, Beatrice recasts that into a vice: to speak “all mirth and no matter” is to carry the virtue of wit too far.

For the actors playing Beatrice and Don Pedro, this scene requires that they choose between a surprisingly large number of interpretive possibilities. Is the Prince genuinely disappointed, or is this all a game? Is Beatrice seriously concerned that she has overstepped the bounds of propriety, or is she simply being cautious? Immediately after the quoted passage, Leonato will interrupt, asking “Niece will you look to those things I told you of?” (335-36). In doing so, is he giving her an excuse to exit with dignity, or is he cruelly reminding her of her dependent and subordinate place in his household – or both?

Two aspects of Beatrice’s conversational tactics are clear, though. The first is that Beatrice insistently reinvents the terms in which praise or blame are bestowed on her. If she was born under a dancing star, she nonetheless caused her mother pain; if she is merry, she speaks all mirth and no matter. This is a self-protective move on both the tactical level and the strategic
level. In making each quip or joke, Beatrice (with the exception of her skirmishes with Benedick) carefully runs ahead of her critics, ensuring that she is the butt of her own brand of humour. How do you criticize someone for a trait she has just mocked in herself? In broader terms, too, the repeated deployment of paradiastole helps neuter criticism, as the ease with which Beatrice reverses praise into blame also speaks to how well she could reverse blame into praise. This is a significant achievement in a play in which, as Carol Cook argues, “To read others in [Much Ado] is always an act of aggression; to be read is to be emasculated, to be a woman. Masculine privilege is contingent on the legibility of women” (187). Beatrice’s repeated insistence on redefining the terms in which she is assessed disrupts that legibility. To extend Cook’s metaphor, any attempt to read another person in this play is followed by an act of writing, speaking, or publishing: Claudio reads Hero’s blush as a confirmation of her guilt, and then relays that reading to the congregation. Don Pedro reads in Beatrice a “merry heart” – but as he moves to praise her, she rewrites that praise.

Crucially, too, Beatrice also creates more opportunities to earn that praise. Confident in her abilities, Beatrice promotes a particular kind of witty conversation. Significantly, paradiastole is a trope that always has one eye on what is past. Unlike a jest, building inexorably to a punch line, a paradiastolic quip must always return to the initial utterance or action that has occasioned it. By always returning to her interlocutors’ points, Beatrice crafts a style of conversation that aims to promote its own longevity. If the witty banter in Romeo and Juliet is

20 Cf. also Jonathan Hall: “The drive to clarification, the desire to get behind appearances to a supposed truth, is a violent desire” (179).

21 Cf. Anthony Dawson: “...the wedding scene focuses on the process of signifying. It offers us the spectacle of a dramatic clash of interpretations. Hero's appearance and behavior are textualized, raised to the level of a sign, and interpreted” (219).
analogous to the duels in that play, Beatrice’s style is singularly different. Rather than straining to have the last word, she aims for there to be no last word.

The second point is that, unlike any other character’s in the play, Beatrice’s speech is explicitly licensed by royal authority. Her careful self-deprecation (or meiosis) in speaking with Don Pedro elicits a direct statement from him that he values her speech: “Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you…” It is common to read in literary and sociological criticism of dissenting voices being silenced by dominant social forces; all too often the exact mechanism of silencing is left unspecified. Here is an instance of the exact opposite: a (cautiously) dissenting perspective is not merely granted licence to speak but implicitly ordered to do so by royalty.

**Regulating Wit in Messina: The Gendered Social Economies of Much Ado**

Having considered just what sets Beatrice’s speech apart from that of other characters, I would like to move on to see just how she turns that difference to profit, as she negotiates the social hierarchies of Messina. We have already seen how, in some local exchanges, she comes out of a conversation in a stronger position, thanks to her powers of witty improvisation. Confronted with criticism from her uncles, she is able to reduce them to silence without serious reproach. In amusing the Prince, she elicits a proposal from him. Each of these instances, though, represents at best a tactical victory; as an unmarried woman Beatrice has no fixed, approved place in Messinese society – or indeed in Leonato’s household. At best, she is a well-to-do orphan, and at worst she is a dependent poor relation. How is she to parlay her status as the group’s most entertaining speaker into some more enduring position?

In order to consider Beatrice’s use of wit as currency, I need to rehearse a few well-established arguments about the social economy of Leonato’s household in particular, and
Messina in general – and the different, yet overlapping, economies for men and women. The first is that the characters in the play are very conscious of the importance of rank and status, as indicated by the arrival of the messenger, who announces gratefully that in the recent war, Don Pedro has lost only “few of any sort, and none of name” (1.1.7). In this scene we see in operation one of the many valences of the title’s pun on “much ado about nothing.” I argue that a particular sense of the verb is coming into play, one that entails both appraisal and the marking of an object to reflect its worth; as the fourth definition of the verb “to note,” the *OED* offers “to mark with a distinguishing sign.” The relation between outward signs and inward value, and the possibility of assigning such markers, figure prominently in the play. A noted soldier would be mourned; an unnoted death is forgotten.

The “distinguishing signs” of rank and status in the play have been the subject of extensive commentary. Both Jean Howard and David Ormerod have discussed the role of fashionable clothing from slightly different angles. Howard’s reading of *Much Ado* in the light of anti-theatrical pamphlets highlights the anxieties of Puritan writers such as Philip Stubbes, whose diatribes against the luxurious apparel reflect an anxiety that clothing, as a marker of rank, can be so easily appropriated, and that “fixed hierarchies within the social order are no longer stable and no longer reliably marked” (166). In this context, Margaret’s crucial appropriation of Hero’s dress becomes not merely a personal theft, or an exercise in wish-fulfillment, but rather an attack on the very hierarchy that underwrites Hero’s superior social position. David Ormerod writes from a different perspective, considering primarily the role that fashion plays in *Much Ado* as an indicator of the men’s abandonment of martial values in favour of the more feminized mores of

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22 Cf. Hockey, where it means observing (353-58); Zitner, focusing on the bawdy aspects (14); and McEachern, on assessment (“Introduction” 42).
peace time (97), and as an indication of the fixation on mutable surfaces that leads to the play’s multiple confusions.

I wish to consider the extent to which fashion and wit are actually analogous in the play – an analogy to which Benedick alludes when he responds to ribbing from Don Pedro: “Nay mock me not; the body of your discourse is sometime guarded with fragments, and the guards are but slightly basted on neither. Ere you flout old ends any further, examine your conscience” (1.1.274-77). Benedick compares wittiness to a garment that may be donned or doffed without the wearer understanding the relation between the disparate scraps that make it up. As Camille Wells Slights argues:

Benedick understands language as the material of the social self, the means by which people present themselves to others, and prides himself in his witty, elegant language. (113)

But as “the material of the social self” language can be borrowed, put to new purpose by a second-hand owner – stolen out of the Hundred Merry Tales. For the men of Much Ado, jokes and banter play the same role as they do for the young men of Verona. That is to say, they form the medium for witty self-display and for sublimated aggression, as shared laughter creates both a distinction between in-group and out-group, and provisional hierarchies within those groups. The same spectrum of action that we saw in operation in Romeo and Juliet – from words, to aggressive words, to physical aggression – is in play in Much Ado, although the progression is

\[ \text{23 Slight also argues that “Beatrice recognizes that while language is an expression of power, it can also function to create an illusion of power” (118). I am not sure that the distinction between real and illusory power is fully tenable, so I would refine this to a question of language being the badge of social status, and that it can also function to create an illusion of stably-held status. Benedick’s amusement value keeps him in the company of a prince and a count, while he is merely “Signor” Benedick – but his long-standing acceptance by Don Pedro and Claudio clouds – even if it never fully effaces – the differences in rank between them.} \]
reversed, as the men returning from a real war begin a merry war. The Prince and his men move from a world in which Claudio “hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion” (1.1.13-15) to a world in which the threatened violence of duels is an eruption to be contained and averted.

The aggression in the fifth act, as first Leonato and Antonio and then Benedick attempt to challenge Claudio, is less starkly condemned than in *Romeo and Juliet* – in part because it is averted. The fantasy of the *duello*’s ability to redress slights against honour is not put to the proof. Martial prowess remains the fundamental measure of a man’s worth, but that measure is kept offstage, rendered harmless by distance. Wit is its surrogate, its sublimation, “a fashionable accessory you put on for lack of something else to do” (McCollom 169). But if wit can serve to sublimate aggression, it runs the risk of provoking real violence if the wit itself becomes too aggressive. Benedick’s complaint about Beatrice, that “She speaks poniards, and every word stabs,” (2.1.246-47) is funny, but a real indictment of someone who has carried the game too far. Later, he will disparage Don Pedro and Claudio in terms that make the parallel more insistent, and that demonstrate a more mature understanding of the harm words can do: “You break jests as braggarts do their blades, which, God be thanked, hurt not” (5.1.183-84). He is referring, of course, only to the jokes his companions are making at his expense – Claudio’s earlier slanders of Hero have hurt a great deal.

Implicit in this representation of wit is its gendered identity. Wit is a rapier, a poniard; the butt of a joke stands “like a man at a mark, with the whole army shooting at me” (2.1.245-56). Messina clearly values wit differently in men than in women. For the men, there is a pretty clear hierarchy of markers of social status. Military accomplishments are clearly the highest, with wit as a *faute de mieux* surrogate in peace time; implicitly there is also the uncomfortable suggestion
that in peace time aggression may be out of place. Well below these two is fashion, a marker of status, but highly suspect. Don Pedro, for instance, alleges that Benedick “goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit!” (5.1.196-97). For women, the value of wit is less clear. We have seen how Beatrice opens herself to accusations of shrewishness from her uncles, and cruelty from Benedick. As Maurice Hunt observes, “Beatrice’s acerbic speech, compared to the qualities of patriarchal language, appears at times more conventionally male than female” (166). Yet her wit is valued – and not merely by Don Pedro. In order to understand why Beatrice is so successful, we will need to contrast her mode of speech (witty, yet paradiastolic) with that of Hero and of Margaret.

**Regulating Wit in Messina: The Women’s Part**

The clear divisions between the masculine world of Don Pedro and his coterie on one side, and the world of the manifestly older Leonato and his mostly female household, make it impossible to consider the regulation of speech in men and women at the same time. In isolating the women, I am taking as my starting point the insights of Michael Friedman, who reads Margaret as a scapegoat onto whom anxieties about outspoken women can be diverted – away from Beatrice (“Hush’d” 357). I work, also, from Carol Cook’s argument (esp. 187), later taken up by Kasey Evans (esp. 278-80), that to be silent in *Much Ado About Nothing* is to open oneself to reading and interpretation; that silence is gendered as female, and the prerogative of interpretation is assumed to be masculine. My intention is not to contradict these readings. Rather, I wish to demonstrate that the patterns Cook and Friedman identify operating in symbolic terms can be traced through Shakespeare’s representation of the complex co-authorship of daily conversation. It is not enough that the logic of the plot indicates Beatrice as a *via media* between
the too-passive Hero and the too-aggressive Margaret. The play insistently dramatizes just how Beatrice defuses anxiety about her wit, and just how Margaret goes beyond wit to aggression.

Aggression in the men is prized; it is not in the women. Significantly, too, for women to be concerned with fashion is not seen as inappropriate. There was good reason for this. Clothing formed an important part of the performance of status for the nobility and gentry of both sexes, and for aristocratic women in particular it was a performance of great complexity. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass cite the concerns of Lady Mary Verney who in 1646 wrote anxious letters to her husband, in exile in France, about the possible loss of her “chamber maide,” Luce Sheppard. Without such a maid, she would not be able to travel to France to see her husband as there would be no one capable of dressing her. In fact, Mary Verney had another servant, Bess, but Bess was of a different class from Luce (who was a gentleman’s daughter), and not trained in the complexities of aristocratic fashion: “I cannot take Bess next to me because I know she cannot starch and beside she can never learn to dress me. I am in a great strait.” Dressing and undressing the fashionable was a major undertaking. (23)

The actual size of this undertaking is reflected in the fact that the process of dressing Hero for her wedding is given its own scene.

Act three, scene four is the still point at the middle of the play. Beatrice and Benedick have both been deceived about each other’s love, and Claudio has been deceived about Hero’s chastity. The audience knows both that Claudio intends to shame Hero in the church, and that the Watch have already apprehended Borachio and Conrad. More than a mere pivot in the action, though, the dressing scene highlights the changes in the women that their changing romantic

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24 Zitner’s comparison of Margaret’s dissatisfaction with her place and Ursula’s apparent acceptance of hers is instructive (“Introduction” 43).
fortunes will bring. Beatrice is no longer the merciless critic of men and marriage (if indeed she ever was; see below). Hero, who has already commented to Ursula that she will be married “every day, tomorrow” (3.1.101), looks forward soberly to marriage with a heart that is “exceeding heavy” (3.4.24).

These changes are played out against the backdrop of preparing Hero, the daughter of a gentleman, to marry a count. It is important that she play the part well; and Margaret, eager to prove her authority with regard to fashion, will not be distracted from the topic of Hero’s dress. I am using the term “authority” here to highlight a direct tension between Margaret’s rank and her claims to knowledge. As with so many servants, attendants, and ladies-in-waiting, her exact rank is not at all clear. Her reference to “my Lady Beatrice” (4.3.36) suggests that whatever Beatrice’s indeterminate position in the household is, she nonetheless outranks Margaret by some degree. I would also venture that Hero’s choice to dress with Margaret’s assistance, while sending Ursula to wake Beatrice, argues that she prizes Margaret more highly when it comes time to dress for a special occasion. Margaret’s sense of how she is valued is thus, perhaps, not too misplaced, but her sense of how to capitalize on it is. Margaret seeks to emphasize her authority on matters of fashion, in a sense very close to its Latin root, auctoritas. Margaret sees herself as offering her mistress insight into the workings of fashion;25 she clearly expects authority, in the sense of mastery of a subject, to translate into authority, in the sense of a right to speak and advise. Hero is having none of it:

*Margaret* Truth, I think your other rebato were better.

*Hero* No, pray thee, good Meg, I’ll wear this.

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25 Her claim to have seen the Duchess of Milan’s gown firsthand constitutes an indirect claim to be closer to the sources of fashion than Hero has, perhaps, been; Milan certainly outshines provincial Messina. Whether or not we are to take these claims seriously is another matter.
Margaret: By my troth, ’s not so good, and I warrant your cousin will say so.

Hero: My cousin’s a fool, and thou art another; I’ll wear none but this.

(3.4.6-11)

Margaret is so keen to demonstrate her knowledge of fashion – to prove that she is “Luce” and not “Bess” – that she clearly oversteps what Hero sees as an acceptable role as an adviser. Her first attempt to showcase her skill as fashion adviser is gently refuted, while her second draws an outright insult from the usually peaceable Hero. Margaret, clearly not taking the hint, then launches into an extremely unfortunate comparison between Hero’s dress and that of the Duchess of Milan, which she claims to have seen, despite Hero’s comment that it “exceeds, they say” (16). Despite Hero’s attempt to disavow the comparison, Margaret rhapsodizes about the dress, which boasts “cloth o’ gold, and cuts, and [is] laced with silver, set with pearls, down sleeves, side sleeves, and skirts round underborne with a bluish tinsel” (17-20). Whatever dress the Chamberlain’s Men had laid on as a prop, it was clearly not quite as sumptuous, as Margaret must conclude with the rather limp and unconvincing pivot that “But for a fine, quaint, graceful, and excellent fashion, yours is worth ten on’t” (20-22).

Margaret’s very clear faux pas here is an excellent example of how her attempts to generate social capital differ from Beatrice’s. Her attempts to advise Hero are, in some respects, understandable. A knowledge of fashion is, after all, her stock-in-trade as a servant in Leonato’s household. To advise too persistently, however, is to put her in a one-up position in relation to her mistress. If fashion served in large part as a form of conspicuous consumption, the ability to select “graceful and excellent” fashion was also the hallmark of rank. In truth, as Lady Mary Verney’s letter reveals, aristocratic and gentle women were in fact highly dependent on their servants to achieve the effect of taste, and to keep up with constantly changing fashions. In
practice, Margaret’s insistence upon her authority threatens to upset the supposedly stable hierarchy that conspicuous fashion was intended to reinforce.

When Margaret’s attempts to showcase her sense of style fall flat, she turns to wit. She meets Hero’s confession of a heavy heart with a bawdy joke about bearing the weight of Claudio; and when called out on her presumption she launches into a spirited defence of the legitimacy of women’s sexuality within marriage, hinting that Hero is being prudish: “Is there any harm in ‘the heavier for a husband’? None, I think, an it be the right husband and the right wife; otherwise ’tis light\(^{26}\) and not heavy” (33-36). In glossing this passage, Zitner argues that “the issue is not only Hero’s supposed prudishness as against Margaret’s plain speaking, but also one of taste; there is a touch of vulgarity in Margaret.” There is indeed a touch of vulgarity in Margaret, but the more important question is of who, exactly, has the prerogative of determining what is tasteful and what is not. Hero’s refusal to comment on Margaret’s comparison of her dress with the Duchess of Milan’s suggests obliquely that the comment was tasteless. Her shocked reaction to Margaret’s bawdy joke is far more forthright: “Fie upon thee, art not ashamed?” (27). In Hero’s view – in the view, that is, of Margaret’s mistress – the comment so outsteps the bounds of propriety that it requires immediate rebuke, a rebuke that Margaret determinedly rejects. Margaret’s attempts to redefine her comment as “speaking honourably” has some of the hallmarks of Beatrice’s characteristic paradiastolic mode; Margaret has been accused of inappropriate behaviour, and so she sets out to redefine her actions as appropriate. Unlike Beatrice’s cheerful acceptance that she is “curst,” though, Margaret’s tone here is combative rather than subversive. There is little here of argumentum \textit{ex concessis}.

\(^{26}\) In the sense of “wanton.”
As Beatrice enters, Margaret becomes, if anything, more aggressive. She rejects Beatrice’s claim to have a cold, hinting at Beatrice’s love-sickness and very nearly giving away Don Pedro’s match-making plot. She couples this with a form of wit that makes Hero and Beatrice the butt of her jokes, in marked contrast to Beatrice’s tendency to laugh at herself. Her insistence on Hero’s prudery is at least redeemed by her defence of sexuality within marriage. With Beatrice, she is less circumspect, responding to Beatrice’s complaint of congestion with a joke impugning her chastity:

**Beatrice** I am stuffed, cousin; I cannot smell.

**Margaret** A maid, and stuffed! There’s a goodly catching of cold.

**Beatrice** O, God help me, God help me. How long have you professed 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. (61-68)

Margaret, eager to display her wit as becoming her rarely, like an exquisite piece of clothing or jewellery, exceeds the bounds of polite conversation. Whereas Beatrice is accustomed to poking fun at herself for the amusement of others, Margaret implies that Beatrice is promiscuous. She is clearly speaking in jest, but the slander uncomfortably foreshadows Claudio’s imminent shaming of Hero, and shows up the relatively high risk that Margaret takes for very little comic return.

Despite Margaret’s overt aggression, Beatrice’s response is guarded, questioning Margaret’s sudden boldness, but without passing judgement, or objecting. Margaret’s subsequent demand for praise makes plain why she has assayed this sally of wit; she feels that Beatrice’s more subdued behaviour has opened up space in the household for another woman to begin speaking more assertively. In asking for that approval, though, Margaret finds herself in the double bind experienced by an ambitious courtier, as identified by Whigham in *Ambition and Privilege*: in
presenting her wit and her authority in matters of fashion, hoping for praise from her peers and from her social “betters,” she is forever left performing in the hopes of praise that may be withheld.

Beatrice neither withholds nor offers that praise. Her response to Margaret, typically, is couched in terms that blend praise and censure, terms that immediately rewrite Margaret’s use of the word “rarely.” Margaret means to say that her wit is at once superlative and fittingly so. Beatrice takes it in the more literal sense: she has not often seen Margaret be witty. She softens the blow, though, by offering qualified encouragement. “It is not seen enough. You should wear it in your cap,” is at once censure for claiming a reputation as a wit without having earned it, and an encouragement that she may, with time, come to earn that reputation.

Before examining the contrast between Hero and Beatrice, I would like to finish my analysis of Margaret’s role by considering her final staged conversation – with Benedick. Act five, scene two, is a curious scene. It adds nothing to the plot: Benedick asks Margaret to fetch Beatrice, and she agrees. Its thematic importance, however, is out of all proportion to its brevity and to its lack of action. It is worth considering the exchange in full.

**Benedick**

Pray thee, sweet Mistress Margaret, deserve well at my hands by helping me to the speech of Beatrice.

**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?

**Benedick**

Thy wit is as quick as the greyhound’s mouth; it catches.

**Margaret**

And yours is as blunt as the fencer’s foils, which hit but hurt not.
Benedick A most manly wit; it will not hurt a woman. And so, I pray thee, call Beatrice. I give thee bucklers.

Margaret Give us the swords; we have bucklers of our own. (5.2.1-19)

The play of wit is as rapid-fire as in the earlier exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick, but the aggression is more naked. Benedick’s opening offer to tip Margaret for fetching Beatrice is perhaps a little insensitive; certainly it is strongly inflected by the difference in their rank, and Margaret asks instead to be rewarded as a lady, with Petrarchan tributes to her beauty. Despite Benedick’s easy agreement, and his praise of her good looks, she cannot let go of her anxiety about status: will no man want her if she keeps below stairs? Must she always remain in service? It is at this point that the conversation takes on a harder edge. Benedick, surprisingly, makes use of paradiastole in his reply; he praises her wit for its speed and its ability to seize a topic – but is a comparison to a dog’s mouth ever entirely flattering? Margaret’s response is immediately hostile, and (unlike Beatrice’s back-and-forth) comes out of her own invention, rather than reflecting the turn that has come before: Benedick’s wit is dull, and does not penetrate. Implicitly he is less than manly. The attack on his masculinity prompts him, once again, to return with a paradiastolic quip: a truly manly wit will not harm a woman, like Margaret. Despite his use of the trope, he then tries to end with the jade’s trick, offering Margaret coins (“bucklers”), and returning their relationship to one of a gentleman guest paying a servant for services rendered.

I wish to consider Margaret’s rejoinder very specifically, for in demanding that women be given “swords” she assays what Beatrice does not. Throughout the play, Beatrice has humorously highlighted her incompatibility with the place reserved for her in Messina. She is

27 Or, in the narrower definition, meiosis.
unwilling to marry a man she sees as her inferior, it is true – but she never seems to put in doubt the commonly held view that marriage is the proper goal of women. In highlighting her own exceptionalism, she defuses the threat that she poses to the norm. Her standard *modus operandi* of uniting her listeners in laughter at her expense, and restoring herself to a place in the group, is vastly at odds with Margaret’s implicit demands in 5.2. Margaret has no wish to stay below stairs, and longs for a man (of suitable standing) to come over her. Margaret, in demanding swords for all women (that is to say, demanding that all women be allowed to speak as freely as men, equating masculine, penetrating wit with rapiers), voices a critique of the patriarchy that Beatrice leaves implicit, deniable, off-record.

Let us return, briefly, to the happier moments of the masked ball, when Beatrice makes possibly her most pointed criticisms of patriarchal assumptions about marriage. Her explanation for why she will not marry is as follows:

> Not till God make men of some other mettle than earth. Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust, to make an account of herself to a clod of wayward marl? No, uncle, I’ll none. Adams’s sons are my brethren, and truly I hold it a sin to match with my kindred. (2.1.58-63)

What opens with an admittedly reductive account of man as dust, becomes by the end an assertion of confraternity. Men may be a “clod of wayward marl” – but so is Beatrice, and all are shaped in God’s image. Criticism is tempered with humility, even a patina of piety.

Beatrice’s other notable inversions of patriarchal order, although not couched in such modest terms, are also notable for one point: she does not challenge that order on her own
In the first, she encourages Hero to refuse any husband Leonato chooses for her that is not to her liking:

Yes, faith, it is my cousin’s duty to make curtsy and say, “Father, as it please you.” But yet for all that cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, “Father, as it please me.” (51-55)

This is not – on the surface, at least – an act of presumption on her own behalf. Beatrice has already exempted herself from the institution of marriage, and thus is asking for no special licence. She is, though, balancing filial piety against the need for a marriage based on the compatibility of the partners, rather than the needs of familial alliance. The same dynamic is in play when she instructs Hero to speak, or to kiss Claudio: “Speak, cousin; or, if you cannot speak, stop his mouth with a kiss, and let him not speak neither” (307-9). In encouraging a temporary inversion of the roles of husband and wife, Beatrice is arguing for balance, as both Hero and Claudio will be silenced, and also for a celebration of their union. To kiss is not to carp; Hero is not to silence Claudio forever, or even to speak and silence him. The image is celebratory rather than critical. Both these instances foreshadow Beatrice’s most impassioned moment of anger at the patriarchy, as she rages at her inability to retaliate against Claudio for his slandering of Hero – but that rage is deployed in defence of her cousin, not herself.

Finally, I turn to Hero, whose silence takes on a slightly different tenor when we consider that she enjoys a remarkably eloquent defender in her cousin. The Hero that is usually provided in critical literature is chaste, too silent, too passive – allowing herself to be defined by

These are two isolated instances of a pattern we will see emerge more fully with Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*, who speaks forcefully on behalf of Hermione, but seldom directly on her own behalf. Like Paulina, but to a lesser degree, Beatrice in effect borrows the authority of her higher-ranked cousin in order to provide an oblique and off-record criticism of the patriarchal structures that she finds restrictive.
the men around her, and their expectations of a young heiress. While this picture is not entirely inaccurate, it must be qualified. Hero is indeed modest in her dealings with Claudio, insistently and ostentatiously so. She is silent, preferring to whisper in his ear rather than make a public statement of her acceptance. At her wedding, too, she is unable to summon adequate words for her defence against Claudio’s tirade. But in quieter moments, she is not afraid to speak when speech is called for – or even when it is not. In a small but telling detail, Hero’s first line in the play is in response to a question Leonato poses to Beatrice; the shyer of the two cousins is not, perhaps, as different from Beatrice as she seems.

The dressing scene, too, bears this impression out, as Hero actively polices Margaret’s edgy attempts at repartée. At times she is relatively polite, simply refusing Margaret’s advice, or changing the subject. But when Margaret produces a joke she finds indelicate – a joke of which Hero is the butt – she upbraids Margaret for violating an implicitly communal standard of decency: “Fie upon thee, art not ashamed?” Where Beatrice puts Margaret down with paradiastolic quips that neatly take the edge off criticism by mingling it with praise, Hero feels no such reticence. Her phrasing in fact implies surprise at having to intervene at all to remind Margaret of what standard of decorum is expected. In point of fact, although Hero maintains strict propriety in criticizing Margaret, while Benedick resorts to crude innuendo (implicitly calling her a bitch), they are both less cautious than Beatrice in preserving Margaret’s feelings; even with her “inferiors,” Beatrice is careful not to stray too far into aggression.

This verbal aggression casts a slightly different light on the “gulling” scene, as Ursula and Hero carefully ensure that Beatrice overhears their praise for Benedick, and their criticism of her. Hero opens with a damning enough assessment of her cousin as “disdainful. / I know her spirits
are as coy and wild / As haggard of the rock” (3.1.34-36). This is nothing, though, next to the flurry of condemnations she unleashes when she really hits her stride, alleging:

Nature never framed a woman’s heart
Of prouder stuff than that of Beatrice.
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,
Misprising what they look on, and her wit
Values itself so highly that to her
All matter else seems weak. (3.1.49-54)

As Marta Straznicky observes with droll understatement, Hero is here using “decidedly harsh terms” (152). They are, however, perfectly calculated to bring Beatrice in line with the kind of decorum that Hero herself is careful always to maintain. Given the liberty of speaking directly to her cousin – while ostensibly alone – Hero criticizes her in terms that far outstrip Antonio and Leonato’s milder admonitions. She expertly isolates the points on which Beatrice – who admits to being witty, and who prides herself on her clarity of vision – prides herself and exploits the one point on which they are imperfect. Only Benedick can come close to matching her powers of verbal invention, which suggests that her sense of superiority over him is misplaced, whether it is “misprising” or defensive self-deception. Ultimately, whatever larger social forces are depicted as being at work in the play, and however reticent Hero may be in her own defence, she is the one character in the play who is actually able to rein in Beatrice. It is Hero’s judgement to which Beatrice defers when she accepts that she stands “condemned for scorn and pride so much” (3.1.108), and it is to Hero’s standard of behaviour that she resolves to hold herself when she wishes adieu to “maiden pride.” Neither Don Pedro not Benedick could achieve so much.

**Social Stasis as Social Mobility**

Beatrice begins *Much Ado About Nothing* in an uncertain social position. However valued she is for her witty conversation, she remains a dependent relation in her uncle’s
household, dependent on the very structures that so obviously frustrate and constrain her. In de Certeau’s terms, she is able to wield a good deal of tactical power, shaping interactions with her family and friends to suit her ends, winning herself the recognition she clearly desires as an intelligent and amusing member of the community, while avoiding as best she can the strictures of behaviour that her subordinate position entails. This is not, however, sustainable, for Beatrice lacks a “proper” – a base from which she can consolidate her social assets. The obvious proper is one which she approaches with a mixture of desire, envy, and fear – and that is marriage. Her desire not to be “overmastered” informs much of her merry war with Benedick. The play’s ending is ambivalent: will Beatrice decline into marriage, or are there many more battles in the war? Will the war remain merry, or will it, too, descend into something more acrimonious?

I have not attempted to answer those questions in this chapter, but I have tried to demonstrate that Beatrice’s careful management of her interaction with other characters allows her to reach the “proper” of marriage on her own terms. Her outrage at the suggestion that she has cribbed her jokes from the Hundred Merry Tales suggests that she strongly values both her powers of invention and her ability to manage the conventions of civil conversation. Her expert deployment of paradiastole and her careful use of stylization ensure that she preserves the face of her interlocutors, and preserves and promotes the witty conversation in which she can show herself to best advantage. From textual evidence, there is no way to know whether Beatrice is marrying up or down in terms of rank, but to be married rather than to face a dependent and uncertain future alone, and to be married to a favourite of a Count and a Prince, offers her a slightly more secure social status. Her apparent social stasis is, in fact, a consolidation of her position.
Chapter 4 – The Winner’s Tale: Paulina’s Appropriated Authority in

*The Winter’s Tale*

In *The Winter’s Tale*, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, social ambition and its attendant anxieties are the largely unacknowledged engines of the plot. Questions of status move to the foreground in the fourth act as Perdita and Florizel contemplate a marriage across boundaries of rank, and later as the Shepherds celebrate their promotion to “gentlemen born” (5.2.125), but crucially I argue that those same issues are present, looming behind and over the action, in the first three acts. The second half of the play, which foregrounds the question of social mobility, features characters who are strikingly benign in their ambition: although the Shepherds are pleased with their elevation in status, they do not pursue it. In the first half of the play, while the issue of social status is less overtly acknowledged, social competition is presented in a more troubling light. The counterpart of the Shepherds in the scenes at court is Paulina, who, like them, acts as a guardian for Perdita. Paulina’s ambition is striking, despite her apparent fixity of status: she begins the play as a high-ranking noblewoman, and ends it with her rank unchanged. Rank is the key word, though. For if her rank is static, her status at court, the authority she wields over the King, and the extent to which she is able to accomplish her ends through speech all radically alter over the course of the action. Although she seeks no advancement in rank, she is startlingly ambitious, and that ambition is central to my dissertation for three reasons.

First and foremost, Paulina’s initial inability to help the Queen is an illustrative instance of the limitations of rank as an index of power, and consequently a salutary reminder that social

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1 Whigham offers a more extreme example of the limitations of rank in *The Duchess of Malfi*. He reads the protagonist’s assertion that she is “the Duchess of Malfi still” in the light that “in reiterating her freedom’s origin (in rank), she inevitably also reminds us of her deep inscription in that system. Webster insists that she is... one born to be trapped in rank...” (*Seizures* 210).
ambition need not be directly tied to a wish for promotion, narrowly defined. This is all the more important because in her conversation with the Jailer, Shakespeare actually dramatizes the process of Paulina’s learning the limitations of appealing to discourses of rank, and her improvisatory attempts, in response to that lesson, to appropriate discourses more favourable to her.

Secondly, Paulina’s determined bid for power in the Sicilian court also serves as a reminder that social ambition need not necessarily be selfish. In this case, while her wish to exercise power at court is undeniable, it is born out of a very real, sustained love for Hermione, whose tireless advocate she is in the face of Leontes’ accusations, and over the course of sixteen long years. That love has startling effects on Paulina’s sense of her position in relation to all members of the royal family. Ultimately, it has the effect of distorting power relations, of course, but it does so by radically rewriting the affective bonds of the royal family; it queers familial relations just as insistently as it disrupts the political dynamics of Leontes’ court, and indeed the play’s depiction of social hierarchy.

Finally, the means by which Paulina achieves and secures her influence over Leontes aptly fits the overall pattern of successful upstarts that I have outlined. Paulina’s ambition is born of frustration: her speech carries too little weight, she has no way of making her wishing “have a body in it.” In short, she finds it hard to do things with words. As I shall demonstrate, Paulina’s most successful moments of self-assertion come about through apparent moments of weakness or deference. In her conversation with the Jailer she uses stylization in an attempt to appropriate the most advantageous discourse possible. More notably, in her confrontation with Leontes, she allows his offensive interpellation of her to stand, and makes use of the perlocutionary implications of the new subject position he has offered her, as a combination of midwife, nurse,
and godmother to Perdita. This role, which allows her wishing to “have a body in it,” is crucially dependent on the pregnant body of Hermione, and later the physical body of the infant Perdita, for its authority.

In order to understand Paulina’s struggle to assert herself in Leontes’ court, I first wish to establish the centrality of social ambition to the thematic structure of the play, and to clarify just how the currents of ambition inflect every conversation at court. When the play is staged, it becomes much more apparent than on the page just how important the pageantry of diplomatic missions is to the opening scenes; Polixenes’ nine-month sojourn in Sicilia may be a visit between friends, but it is also a meeting of two kings. The historical example of the Field of the Cloth of Gold (which Shakespeare would go on to render in dramatic narrative in Henry VIII) will serve as a useful benchmark, both for understanding how the tensions inherent in such events shape the speech of Archidamus and Camillo, and for understanding the implications those tensions have for earlier readings of the homosocial bond between Leontes and Polixenes, and of Leontes’ jealousy.

Once that context has been established, it will be possible to consider a gynosocial (or indeed, as I will argue, gynoerotic) relationship between Paulina and Hermione – a relationship too often overshadowed by the friendship of the kings, and too often allowed to be effaced by the lapse of sixteen years between acts three and four. It is the relationship between the women that prompts Paulina to take a stand against the King, and the means by which she does so. Ultimately, Paulina is most successful as a proxy midwife to Hermione and Perdita; yet as she appropriates the authority of the role, she is unable to do so without evoking the anxieties that such women provoked in early modern England. In Bakhtinian terms, she is engaging in
Finally, I will turn to a brief consideration of how the apparent disparity in Florizel and Perdita’s rank in act four replays the issue of status in a comic vein. Paulina’s social ambition, which is so disturbing to Leontes (and all the more disturbing for its lack of open acknowledgement), is recast in wholly benign and comic terms in the two Shepherds: acutely conscious of their “place” yet always overstepping it, and relishing being made “born gentlemen” while still clearly (and indeed safely) being nothing of the sort. This final section of the chapter differs from the rest in methodology; whereas most of the chapter relies on close readings to emphasize both the concern with social status that bubbles under the surface of the Sicilian court, and the subtle erotic currents generated by that concern, the final section of the chapter is concerned more with the broad patterns of the plot. The movement of The Winter’s Tale from tragedy to comedy hinges on the last two acts re-writing the concerns of the first three in a comic mode; this is not a new observation. But the extent to which certain concerns – legitimacy, monstrous births, adoptive parenting, heredity, social mobility and incestuous attraction – are repeated bears out my overall reading of how The Winter’s Tale queers Jacobean ideals of social hierarchy.

The Interaction of Desire and Social Distinction

It is first important to consider the centrality of social distinction and competition to The Winter’s Tale, a reading advanced most articulately by Michael Bristol, who recognizes that despite the “atmosphere of generosity and liberality that seems to prevail as the action begins” (154) – or indeed because of it – Leontes and Polixenes “are in fact engaged in a bitter and potentially deadly struggle for honor and prestige” (156). Constance Jordan differs slightly from
this reading, understanding the tension between Leontes’ and Polixenes’ courts to arise out of misunderstanding: “The relations of hospitality that the courtiers celebrate reveal their fragility when they are challenged by opposed intentions and described not in the language of love but rather of business” (112). I suspect that Bristol’s less forgiving, less generous, reading is the more accurate description of early modern courtly exchange, but Jordan’s identification of commercial diction at play here is also key: underlying the careful displays of friendship are mercenary concerns. Whatever linguistic register is appropriate to the sentiments of the kings, it is important to note the context in which they are meeting: this is a prolonged exercise in international diplomacy, and whatever “love” the men may feel for each other is indissolubly linked to the “business” of rule.2

Polixenes uses the language of love to describe his childhood friendship with Leontes, but his words too are freighted both with the language of commerce and with an acute awareness of the royal status both young princes shared. The speech in which he describes their “innocent” love for each other begins in a pastoral vein, but soon shifts gears to something more troubling:

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i' th’ sun,
And bleat the one at th'other: what we change
Was innocence for innocence.... (1.2.66-68)

What is initially a memory (or fantasy) of innocent equality and love is abruptly figured in terms that invoke both business and sex, even as they seek to exclude those connotations. The verb “changed” (or exchanged) implies mutuality, but also a mutuality that is counted and tallied. The language of easy mutuality becomes the language of treaties or contracts. As if aware that he is

2 Hermione, at her trial, will make a comment that raises the point again: “My father was the Emperor of Russia” (3.2.117). There can be no such thing as a purely personal relationship between characters of this rank.
in dangerous waters, Polixenes hastens to assert that what was exchanged between them was “innocence” – but that raises the awkward question of what, other than innocence, might be expected or suspected.

Most readings of this passage emphasize its sexual overtones, and I have no wish to ignore the importance of the (at least) homosocial dynamic suggested between the young princes; Stephen Guy-Bray summarizes it nicely as “homoerotic pastoral” (198). I will argue, though, that there is an equally plausible (and in fact more obvious) explanation for the nature of the kings’ fall: that they grew up and became kings. Queer readings pick up on Hermione’s playful gibe to suggest that fall is from idealized homoerotic attachment into heterosexual desire (or at least, marriage) geared towards reproduction: “Of this make no conclusion, lest you say / Your queen and I are devils...” (1.2.80-81). The suggestion that the fall is primarily erotic is, importantly, Hermione’s rather than Polixenes’, a fact that few critics seem to note.³ Polixenes’ own expression of nostalgic regret is (once again) couched in terms that imbricate questions of sexuality with questions of social status – in this case, specifically royal status:

Had we pursued that life,  
And our weak spirits ne’er been higher reared  
With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven  
Boldly “not guilty”, the imposition cleared  
Hereditary ours. (70-74)

To say that their weak spirits reared higher, at the urging of stronger blood, carries the obvious sexual connotation of arousal and erection. But in a play that puts the “rearing” of children at centre stage, and moreover a play in which Leontes will express regret that Hermione has “too

³ Similarly few critics seem to note that the pastoral image of the twinned lambs comes from the mind of Polixenes, rather than Leontes; it does little to explain Leontes’ jealousy.
much blood in” Mamillius (2.1.58), the much more obvious reading is that Leontes and Polixenes have been reared to be kings, by virtue of their royal blood; primogeniture, rather than original sin, is the “imposition hereditary theirs,” and their accession to kingship is, paradoxically, their fall.

If equality and innocence belong to that idealized pastoral past, and both kings have “tripped since,” at least one mark of the fall must be distinction and inequality, or even the necessity for both. Camillo himself puts his finger on the problem when he tries to reassure Archidamus that:

Since their more mature dignities and royal necessities made separation of their society, their encounters, though not personal, have been royally attorneyed with interchange of gifts, letters, loving embassies…. (1.1.23-27)

In his attempt to demonstrate the continuity of the kings’ affections, Camillo actually highlights their rupture, or at least their modulation into something less intense.4 The “mature dignities” of a king include both the inherent dignity of the rank, and its outward show. Shakespeare was, of course, aware of the importance of conspicuous consumption to royalty, and had dramatized the artificial language of diplomatic compliment from the outset of his career. In Henry VIII, written within a very few years of The Winter’s Tale, the Duke of Norfolk makes the inherent competition of royal display clear in his recollection of the Field of the Cloth of Gold:

Now this masque
   Was cried incomparable; and th’ensuing night
   Made it a fool and a beggar. The two kings

4 There is also the intriguing suggestion implicit in these lines that Polixenes’ nine-month visit is a curious abdication of those “royal necessities.” Of the two kings, he is the one who speaks most warmly of their childhood friendship (as Camillo speaks on Leontes’ behalf in the first scene). Is he perhaps, as the play opens, engaging in an immature regression to childhood, abandoning the affairs that he claims drag him homeward?
Equal in lustre, were now best, now worst,
As presence did present them. (1.1.26-30)

Between Henry VIII and Francis I there was very little love lost, and the competitive dynamic of their pageantry is in the open for all to see. In *The Winter’s Tale*, regardless of how sincere we find the protestations of Camillo and Polixenes regarding the love between the kings, it is inescapably inflected by – even tainted by – the necessities of royal pageantry: “gifts, letters, [and] loving embassies” are all very well, but can anyone really love by attorney? The competition between the kings is unavoidable; the love between the kings is debatable. Guy-Bray perceptively notes that this pastoral vision “is related rather than represented ... literary, insofar as it only exists in language” (198). Without dismissing the literary as necessarily false, it is important to recognize in this nostalgia for past love a strong element of fantasy, and to note that the fantasy is more Polixenes’ take on their childhood than Leontes’.

It is important to consider more exactly the form that the love between the kings has taken. Certainly it fits with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s broad definition of desire as “the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged that shapes an important relationship” (2). The breadth of the definition is useful, as it will allow consideration of both fully erotic and largely non-erotic desire. The eroticism expressed in Polixenes’ recollection participates very strongly in a mode of eroticism that Valerie Traub sets in strong opposition to possessive desire: “… is your arousal dependent upon a process of identification with or desire for an eroticized object? To state it simplistically,
do you want or do you want to be” the object of desire (Desire, 100-1)? The distinction is particularly useful in this instance as it points to a difference in the desire hinted at between the idealized, memorialized homoeroticism prompted by similitude (they are twinned lambs, after all), and the possessive heterosexual desire of Leontes for Hermione. This contrast will be maintained when we turn to the relationship between Paulina and Hermione.

The problem with desire based on similitude or a wish for similitude, however, is that it can be experienced only by its imperfection or its lack. Attainment of perfect similitude with the desired object would erase all distinction between lover and beloved, rendering the concept of similitude meaningless. Rather, the desire experienced by the young princes for each other can be apprehended, if at all, only after it has been lost; the differentiation acquired in the course of the fall is what makes understanding of the desire possible. Likewise, Paulina’s strong identification with Hermione will be shot through with an insistence upon difference.

This observation in turn brings us to the paradox of Polixenes’ nostalgia for the relationship he and Leontes enjoyed. It is a relationship that takes on an erotic, or a desiring, aspect only in its loss, only after the fall into difference. As such, it is a relationship that is profoundly abject, threatening the stability of Leontes’ and Polixenes’ own identities with memories, at once desired and feared, of undifferentiation. Gail Kern Paster argues that the two kings are best read as having been frères de laict (265), but it is important to read that closeness, that twinning, that sharing of mother’s milk (equated in the early modern period with her blood) in light of Kristeva’s elaboration of the abject:

6 I am not sure that Traub’s distinction between identification and desire is fully tenable; certainly the “affective... force” of Sedgwick’s definition of desire can be prompted by identification as much as a wish to possess, but most forms of desire participate in both modes of desire, with elements of identification and elements of possessiveness, to different degrees at different times.
It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal…. (Powers 4)

Leontes has, for the nine months of his wife’s pregnancy, been confronted with his childhood friend, both desirable and threatening. Polixenes is threatening because of his status as a rival king. He is desirable because he brings with him the wish for a return to pre-lapsarian similitude – but that very wish must also be understood as threatening and abject. Can there be any wonder that Leontes starts to see all around him “the traitor, the liar, the criminal”?  

The final, and most disturbing, element to this dynamic of wished-for-yet-feared similitude, and needed-yet-oppressive distinction, is what it suggests about the relationship between both kings and their sons. Leontes muses on what he sees in Mamillius:

Looking on these lines
Of my boy’s face, methoughts I did recoil
Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched,
In my green velvet coat, my dagger muzzled
Lest it should bite its master and so prove,
As ornaments oft do, too dangerous.
How like, methought, I then was to this kernel,
This squash, this gentleman. (1.2.152-57)

7 Significantly, the language Leontes uses to describe Hermione’s imagined infidelity also appeals to notions of social distinction. Jennifer Richards comments that:

Leontes’ concern with social, as well as sexual, transgression is indicated in his depiction of Hermione as “As rank as any flax-wench that puts to / Before her troth-plight” (1.i, 274-5). As Leontes’ pun on “rank” suggests, Hermione’s imagined infidelity is socially demeaning. She has forgotten her place in the social order, and has behaved little better than an undisciplined country-girl. (“Social Decorum” 76)

Just as importantly, in committing adultery with Leontes’ imagined twin, Hermione is threatening to erode the distinction between the two men – a distinction that is tenuous enough in Leontes’ imagination, and an erosion that he at once desires and fears. He is determined that Hermione must have committed this crime, and equally determined that she must be punished for the transgression.
The verb “recoil,” which Leontes uses to convey his sense of being thrown back in time, is peculiar; usually one does not merely recoil, but rather recoils from someone or something – in this case, Mamillius. In Leontes’ relationship to Mamillius we see the same dynamic of wishing for and recoiling from an idealized double; while there is less overt eroticism in this speech than in Polixenes’ reminiscences, the collapsing of Leontes and Mamillius has uncomfortable tonal echoes of that passage, as does Polixenes’ description of Florizel as “all my exercise, my mirth, my matter; / Now my sworn friend and then mine enemy” (1.2.164-65). What ought to be a charming description of fatherly devotion is tainted by its context: Leontes has similarly been Polixenes’ all, and will within this scene prove his enemy, despite being his sworn friend.  

The young Leontes, so vividly conjured up by his adult self, with the handy visual aid of Mamillius, is dressed up, following the early modern tradition, in skirts, according to Orgel’s gloss of this line. The choice of the word “gentleman” is surely significant: young Leontes is imagined in the skirts of the younger aristocracy, yet is nonetheless armed with a dagger or a miniature sword. An unbreeched child, still living effectively in a world of women, is already armed with a phallic adult weapon that may “prove… too dangerous” purely as a symbol of status – this is the image Leontes conjures as a charming cover for his momentary distraction. At

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8 Leontes’ description of Mamillius in these terms therefore has unfortunate undercurrents of desire, at least in the broad sense that Sedgwick offers, and in the mode of desire that Traub defines. There is certainly an element of Leontes wanting to be Mamillius, and once he has convinced himself of Hermione’s infidelity, his response to imagined erotic betrayal is intense possessiveness towards his son. On a purely symbolic level, Mamillius is implicated in the erotic economy of the court. It would be easier to dismiss this unsettling reading as tenuous if it were not for the fact that in Pandosto Greene has the King kill himself out of guilt for his incestuous infatuation with his restored daughter.

9 Compare with the importance of swords as emblems of social status in chapter two, or Michael Neill’s reading of Arden of Faversham’s murder, where Mosby wields his reclaimed sword, “the only instrument with which he can fitly” lay claim to “his genteel status” (Putting 55).
a court where expressions of friendship are indistinguishable from political displays, and where desire seems born mostly out of frustration, Leontes’ jealousy of Polixenes no longer seems so surprising; rather, it seems almost overdetermined. This is the environment in which Paulina will have to launch her defence of Hermione.

“*My mate, that’s never to be found again*”

When Paulina announces that she will retire to her country estate, she is ostensibly planning to engage in the long-delayed mourning for Antigonus. But Paulina’s relationship with Antigonus is noticeably marginalized; their three daughters appear only in the abstract as he vows to geld them (2.1.147) as a testament to his loyalty to Leontes, and little else is said of the married life of the couple. Indeed, Paulina engages in two more notable “domestic partnerships” in the second half of the play: one publicly with Leontes, in which she becomes his closest counsellor, his conscience, and his link with his lost daughter; and one privately with Hermione, who spends sixteen years at Paulina’s house. Who, then, has a greater claim to being Paulina’s mate? Or, perhaps more to the point, to whom would Paulina like to lay claim as a mate?

While the relationships between Hermione and Paulina or Leontes and Paulina are not explicitly eroticized, Paulina’s place in Leontes’ household shares attributes with that of a wife, including her privileged role in determining his marital, sexual, and reproductive activities. The relationship with Hermione, more fleetingly glimpsed, is even more intriguing, and yet it has, understandably, received less sustained attention. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Paulina certainly loves the Queen she serves, and her expression of that love borrows from the language of erotic love. During the sixteen-year gap between acts three and four, Paulina appears to have moved as a husband would between the private sphere of her home and the public sphere of court, while Hermione remains carefully confined to the privacy of Paulina’s house. More
suggestively, the commissioning of the “statue” puts Hermione’s physical beauty quite literally on a pedestal, intended to be the subject of the admiring gazes of both Paulina and Leontes, suggesting, however obliquely, a shared sensual dimension in their relationships with the Queen.

At first glance, the union – whether simply domestic or not – of Hermione and Paulina seems to conform to the pattern Traub identifies as typical of the fictional representation of female same-sex coupling in early modern literature:

- often represented at the moment of its passing, female homoerotic desire and contact can be glimpsed by attending to the textual edges and margins. Particularly in the narrative forms of stage plays and prose, homoerotic friendship tends to be excluded, negated, overwritten, as it were, by the structural imperatives of marital alliance…. (“Renaissance” 257)

Certainly, this domestic partnership is marginalized by the play’s teleology of repairing the heterosexual union between Leontes and Hermione. But the inclusion of Time as a narrator also serves to foreground the elided events of the sixteen years between acts three and four, and serves to highlight the lack of critical attention paid to the second pairing. Caroline Bicks briefly foregrounds Paulina and Hermione only to pass over their relationship, arguing that the more obscured relationship between Paulina and Hermione is equally if not more important to the text’s narrative movement. Paulina and Hermione establish a bond similar to the mother/midwife relationship in that for sixteen years Paulina helps the queen preserve herself “to see the issue,” her daughter Perdita (5.3.128). We never hear a word about those sixteen years; nor do we see Paulina performing her healing arts. Both are significant omissions, for they speak to the irretrievable nature of those all-female communications. (38)

Significantly, the degree of attention paid to the relationship seems to vary inversely with recognition of the erotic potential of the pairing. Guy-Bray’s discussion of homosocial aspects of
the play quickly skips over Paulina and Hermione in order to focus on Leontes, despite his statement that

Camillo and Paulina have also – and for my purposes, crucially – continued, although in different forms, the homosociality that is so prominent in the play’s first scenes, the former with Polixenes and the latter with Hermione…. (214)

In contrast, Dorothea Kehler gives significant attention to the relationship between the women during the sixteen-year interlude, but insists on denying any hint of erotic potential in it. She argues cogently for Paulina’s role in preserving the King’s celibacy, but then extends that argument – perhaps tendentiously – to Paulina’s household, where apparently “she lives productively in female community with the celibate Hermione and her own virgin daughters” (53). Both Kehler’s insistence on celibacy and virginity and Guy-Bray’s insistent focus on male homosociality represent a lack of imagination.10 While the text does not insist explicitly upon an erotic dimension to the union between Hermione and Paulina, it certainly creates a space in which that dynamic can plausibly be imagined, and given the unavoidable eroticism in the relationships between Leontes and Polixenes, and Leontes and Camillo,11 it would be strange not to consider the relationship in this light. Moreover, elements of the relationship – specifically its associations with midwifery, witchcraft, and artistic representation – bring with them more than a hint of the erotic. This section of the chapter will initially take up that challenge and attempt to

10 So too does Theodora K. Jankowski’s insistence (“… In the Lesbian Void”) on the explicit eroticism of the relationship between Paulina and Hermione. While Jankowski’s vehemence is a useful corrective to Kehler’s insistence on celibacy and Guy-Bray’s inattention to female relationships, it is too dogmatic. It is possible for the relationship between the two women to be erotic without consummation, or even to be simply deeply passionate, borrowing the language of eroticism, without being in itself sexual. I do not see how anyone can dismiss the erotic charge of Paulina’s language when speaking about her Queen, but Hermione never speaks of Paulina. This contrast opens up a wide range of possibilities for the relationship between the two.

11 For Camillo, cf. Weil 77 ff.
recuperate from faint textual traces the contours of Paulina and Hermione’s relationship – one that hinges on Paulina’s role as a passionate advocate for both Hermione and her infant daughter – and the ways in which Paulina parleys that relationship into a position of enhanced status and authority in Leontes’ court. I will then turn my attention to the comic replaying of Paulina’s social ambitions in the two Shepherds and in Autolycus, to consider how the closing acts of the play rework the first three.

**Courting Danger**

Paulina, unlike the other ladies of Hermione’s circle, does not appear until after the Queen’s confinement – in the sense of both her imprisonment and her labour. The following section of this chapter will trace how Paulina skillfully exploits the conventions of service and of the birthing-room to insinuate herself into the legal proceedings against Hermione. I will be contrasting those moments in which she is most successful with those in which she most notably encounters resistance, and in that contrast a pattern emerges: Paulina is most successful as an advocate for the Queen when she is most self-effacing. Admittedly, self-effacement is not a trait usually associated with Paulina. But when she asserts herself on the basis of her duties as a servant and surrogate midwife, or when she invokes natural law, she is infinitely more successful than when she tries to speak in her own right, or when she tries to invoke the authority of rank.

From the start, Paulina justifies her presence and actions by appealing to the conventions of the birthing-room, traditionally an all-female space. Paulina’s sudden appearance at the prison is implicitly warranted by the birth of Perdita, as Hermione herself foreshadows. Sent to prison, she asserts her right to be attended:

Who is’t that goes with me? Beseech your highness
My women may be with me, for you see
My plight requires it. (2.1.116-19)
Her pregnant body stands as the visible justification for her accompaniment by women. Her gentlewomen are not, in Hermione’s careful formulation, the prerogative of rank, but rather the proper assistance owed to a woman in her “plight” – but, despite her protestations, they insistently remain the visual embodiment of that prerogative. Hermione, in other words, exercises her privilege while claiming to disavow it. This is a prime example of an off-record assertion of rank or status. The outward show of rank is disguised as mere necessity.

The sex of Hermione’s attendants, moreover, amplifies their role as markers of her status. Kari Boyd McBride notes that, as a result of the disparity in utility between male and female servants, in the early sixteenth century “women of all social ranks were outnumbered in aristocratic houses by as much as 20 to one, and all of the servants in the aristocratic house, with few exceptions, were male” (“Introduction” 8). The men, in other words, capable of doing more labour on estates, or more able to engage in the transactional business of a household, tended to repay the investment on their livery to a greater degree than female servants, whose work was more sharply circumscribed and confined to the private sphere.12 As a result of this imbalance, “female service became associated with non-productive functions and the advertisement of wealth and status, becoming in itself a low status occupation – a particular form of conspicuous consumption” (P.J.P. Goldberg 21).

There are two points worth noting about Hermione’s argument that she should retain her attendants. The first is that Hermione, in keeping with the dynamic that is central to this

12 Consider, for instance, that the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet does not walk the streets of Verona unattended; she is accompanied by Peter. Or consider the range of services that Antonio fulfills for the estate in The Duchess of Malfi.
dissertation, draws attention to her weakness as a means of paradoxically strengthening her position. Because of her frail physical state, she will retain many of the trappings of power and, just as importantly, a network of friends and supporters to act on her behalf. The other point is that Hermione here (again, as so many other speakers in this study have done) deploys what Michel de Certeau would describe as a tactical power: confronted with the established, entrenched, strategic power of royal authority, Hermione makes use of her condition, which is limited and temporary, to open up a space for negotiation. Much of that negotiation will be handled by Paulina as her surrogate, an informal godmother.

While Paulina is not present at the birth, Bicks argues persuasively that in early modern England, the “gossip, the nurse, the midwife, and the mother (distinct women to be sure) at times become interchangeable in the texts that portray them” (12); this conflation of roles is crucial for understanding the anxieties Paulina provokes. Indeed, despite Paulina’s exclusion from Hermione’s confinement, she goes to the Queen to receive news of Perdita’s birth, and immediately becomes her principal spokeswoman. Her exchange, first with the Jailer and then with Emilia, is richly suggestive of the conventions to which Paulina is appealing.

The keeper of the prison, call to him;
Let him have knowledge who I am. …
   Now, good sir,
You know me, do you not?

_Jailer_ For a worthy lady,
And one who I much honour.

_Paulina_ Pray you then,
Conduct me to the Queen.

_Jailer_ I may not, madam;
To the contrary I have express commandment. (2.2.1-8)
Paulina opens her negotiation with a carefully couched appeal to the Jailer’s knowledge of her status. She herself does not directly raise the issue of her rank, depending rather on her attendant’s announcement of her arrival, and on the Jailer’s prior acquaintance with her. The Jailer’s response, flattering though it is, makes it plain that Paulina’s status as a “worthy lady” yields before the express command and authority of a king. In a play that is much concerned with the extent and degree of kingly authority, and which was performed at James’ court at least twice between 1611 and 1613 (Orgel, “Introduction” 80), the exchange between Paulina and the Jailer is more than an incidental detail; Shakespeare is ringing the changes on the central political question of the play: how can a subject accord a king the obedience he is due, when the king acts against his own best interests? What are the limits of a king’s authority over his subjects?

The legal terminology of Paulina’s second appeal for access to the Queen’s circle reflects the direction the debate has taken, as she first attempts to appropriate or stylize the legal discourse of the Jailer, and as she tests the extent to which monarchical authority can overrule natural law.

Paulina

Here’s ado, to lock up honesty and honour from
Th’access of gentle visitors. Is’t lawful, pray you,
To see her women? Any of them? Emilia? (9-11)

Her plea begins in the former language of natural privilege of gentility, before modulating into the language of law. Finally, in asking to see any of Hermione’s “women,” Paulina elides status altogether: they are neither ladies nor gentlewomen, but simply women; moreover, in order to secure his final agreement, she is required to dismiss her attendants, whose presence makes her

13 Suggestively, the Jailer insists that he much honours Paulina, a formulation that echoes Leontes’ assertion that Hermione is honourable but not honest (2.1.68). If the Jailer is preserving this distinction, it suggests he respects Paulina for her rank rather than anything else.
rank visible on the stage. Her request granted, it is mordantly funny that Paulina reverts to her previous diction, strongly inflected by status; her dropping of the formalities showed shrewd diplomatic skill; her immediate abandonment of the tactic shows the limits of her ability to sustain that rhetorical register. The Jailer, hitherto “you,” is instead acknowledged with a slightly familiar and dismissive “prithee,” and she explicitly greets Emilia as a “gentlewoman” (19).

In securing Emilia’s and the Queen’s permission to take the baby to Leontes, Paulina skilfully mixes the registers of law and nature.

These dangerous, unsafe lunes i’th’King, beshrew them!  
He must be told on’t, and he shall; the office
Becomes a woman best. I’ll take’t upon me…. (2.2.29-31)

In assuming the role of messenger to the King, Paulina is blurring the lines between gossip and midwife. While “the midwife was the first person to touch newborns and declare their sex” (Bicks 2), it is Paulina, not present at that birth, who has elected herself spokeswoman for the Queen and her attendants. The role of midwife also blends into the role of courtier. The “office” that Paulina claims as her own is the duty, verging on treasonous, of confronting the king with his “lunes,” and the explicit connection to midwifery, the idea of bringing the child to her father, only emerges in the following lines. Even the first audience of the play, if attentive to the logic of the scene, would likely have understood Paulina’s intent, but her careful deployment of the conventions of feminine supervision of childbirth and children can only have partially mitigated the strong sense of danger evoked by her direct reference to the King’s insanity – a reference that is, after all, made in front of the Jailer, an onstage audience whose “honour” for her has clear limitations.
These limitations surface again in his reluctance to allow the baby to be removed from prison: “I know not what I shall incur to pass it, / Having no warrant” (56-57). Paulina, though, has played the midwife card, and secured the enthusiastic co-operation of Emilia, whose expression of optimism about the prospects of the plan’s success reflects the tactic the women are embracing.

Most worthy madam,
Your honour and your goodness is so evident
That your undertaking cannot miss
A thriving issue. (41-44)

The “thriving issue” reflects not only Stephen Orgel’s gloss, a “successful outcome,” but also the product of birth. Paulina, absent for Hermione’s labour and Perdita’s birth, will now midwife a reconciliation between the King and Queen, centred on the “pure innocence” of the latest issue of their union. It is as though the process of Perdita’s birth has not yet been completed, lacking the acknowledgement of her father, and Paulina is charged with this final aspect of delivery.

It is a task Paulina embraces with relish and confidence, quickly overruling the Jailer’s concerns with a reassurance that, typically, marries the questions of her rank and of natural law.

You need not fear it, sir;
The child was prisoner to the womb, and is
By law and process of great nature thence
Freed and enfranchised, not a party to
The anger of the King, nor guilty of –
If any be – the trespass of the Queen….
Do not you fear; upon mine honour, I
Will stand betwixt you and danger. (57-65)

Paulina’s confidence in her suit, she claims, comes from a natural law that supersedes even the rights of kings, while her rank will serve to protect the Jailer if she has misjudged. Those ranged against Leontes’ opinion are “party” to his anger; rhetorically, the King is reduced to the litigant
in a civil suit, rather than the ultimate source of the authority on which that suit will be judged. He, the Queen, and Paulina are, in this formulation, subject to the sovereignty of nature, and it is from this sovereignty that Paulina asserts the rights and duties of her “office.”

Implicit in Paulina’s understanding of the sources and limitations of her authority is a tension that participates strongly in the central dynamic I trace in this dissertation. As with other socially ambitious characters we have seen, Paulina wavers between an understanding of her rank and status as fixed by her birth and an understanding that recognizes the negotiable role played by access and custodial duties to Perdita. At this stage of the play, both of those understandings are crucially flawed. As always, the value of innate rank is subject to far more negotiation than Paulina imagines; while she may outrank the Jailer, she must operate within the terms dictated by what is “warranted” and what is not; that is to say, the Jailer is not merely the someone she wishes to influence, but also the deputy of the King, and working on his behalf. Neither her power nor Leontes’ is actually a fixed value. They are both subject to the Jailer’s assessment of their authority, and his ambivalent courtesy to her does not augur well.

Nor does Paulina’s understanding of her office. She may enter with all confidence, proud of her “words as medicinal, as true” (2.3.37), and determined to address herself to Leontes “About some gossips for your highness” (41), but she fails to note the importance of that possessive adjective. She is counting upon a relationship which Leontes is at pains to disavow; she is only finding gossips for “your” highness if Leontes acknowledges the baby as his own, the very acknowledgement that Leontes is determined to withhold. In the King’s twisted

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Paulina’s insistent invocation of natural-law ties suggests that her invocation of lawful magic at the end of the play is more than a mere momentary convenience; it is a position with which she has carefully aligned herself from fairly early in the play.
understanding, Paulina may serve as a midwife or a gossip – but not to a princess. In his view, she is a “most intelligencing bawd” (69) who is implicated, if not in the initial adultery, certainly in attempts to conceal it.

Paulina as Midwife

Even if Perdita’s legitimacy were not in dispute, the “office” of gossip or midwife would be a double-edged sword, as midwives and other women involved in childbirth provoked significant anxiety. The early modern period marked the beginning of a long process of male physicians replacing female attendants as the principal authorities on, and attendants at, childbirth for the “better sort.” According to Bicks:

Throughout most of sixteenth-century Europe, and well into the seventeenth century in England, it was considered appropriate that only women handle women’s bodies when attending to their gynaecological and obstetrical needs; practically speaking, the midwife was the first person to touch newborns and declare their sex. (2)

It is to this tradition that Paulina is appealing when she gains access to Emilia, and interposes herself in Hermione’s appeals to her husband – and Emilia’s characterization of Paulina’s chances of producing a “thriving issue” associates her figuratively with this privileged position.

But if the position had privileges, they carried with them a freight of anxiety. Those anxieties can be grouped under three headings: ontogenic, epistemological, and erotic. Midwives, it was feared, had too much power over the development of the child they delivered, they knew a dangerous amount about the bodies to which they ministered, and their position during pregnancy and immediately after childbirth came uncomfortably close to that of a husband.

15 There were similar anxieties about wet nurses (Cf. Paster 215-81), as we will see below – another instance where anxieties about midwives, gossips, and nurses overlap.
In the early modern period, it was commonly held that newborns were extremely malleable, open to shaping at the hand of mother or midwife. Parents in the upper echelons of society, anxious to produce healthy heirs, were dependent on the expertise and faithful service of their social “inferiors.” Bicks opens her discussion of midwifery with the story of Louise Bourgeois, who superintended the birth of the Dauphin in 1601. Bourgeois is keenly aware of the need for a male heir, and revels in the power that this need, coupled with a belief in her ability to shape the child, even to the point of determining its sex, gives her. She makes the anxious father wait while she inspects the newborn:

In this fraught exchange between monarch and midwife, Bourgeois appears to operate from a pivotal position, manipulating the foundational moment upon which the king and nation relied. Her choices control the body of the king himself who – in her version of this historical moment – will live or die upon her words. (2)

In so clearly establishing her authority over the nervous father, Bourgeois outdoes Paulina; for Bourgeois acts in this instance not on behalf of the child but on behalf of herself, wielding power, it seems, simply for power’s sake. The potency of the idea that a mother or midwife might, after birth, affect the development of the child is undeniable, and is reflected in Leontes’ expression of relief that Hermione used a wet-nurse for Mamillius:

I am glad you did not nurse him.
Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you
Have too much blood in him. (2.1.56-58)

Leontes’ fear is that his wife has usurped too much of a role in shaping their son; his jealousy in this moment seems to focus as much on the shared parentage of their son as it does on the prospect that Mamillius or Perdita is not his. The idea of a child being shaped post partum arises
in Paulina’s confrontation with the King – but from an unexpected angle, as it is Paulina who absolves the baby of any fault except “that forced baseness / Which he has put upon’t” (2.3.79).

This thread resurfaces obliquely in the third act, when Antigonus is killed by the problematic bear. Discussion of what symbolic weight the bear might carry has ranged through questions of genre, theatre history, and the cultural currency of bears in early modern England. It is a line of inquiry that I wish to pursue. Carol Chillington Rutter’s discussion of doubling in modern productions of The Winter’s Tale teases out a host of associations that the bear might trigger, if played by different actors – the actor playing Leontes, for instance, or even Mamillius. Rutter, appealing to the tradition that bears licked their cubs into shape, argues:

… more than that, the Bear doubles Hermione. One of the universally recorded “facts” about bears passed down from Pliny and Ovid – what everybody “knew” – was the post partum role of the mother, unexampled anywhere in the animal kingdom. She “framed” the child after birth. (Child’s Play 148)

The suggestion is intriguing, but incomplete. For the behaviour was not at all “unexampled anywhere in the animal kingdom.” On the contrary, it was widely held that “when [the midwife] swaddled the malleable newborn body or pressed its head, she molded it into either a deformed or perfect figure that then supposedly shaped the infant’s fortunes and character” (Bicks 4). Considering Bicks’ observation that the various female roles in childbirth were frequently conflated, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the bear doubles for male anxieties surrounding women’s abilities to put their own stamp on the development of children. Ultimately, of course, the bear is most useful as a symbol precisely because it is polysemic. Endlessly suggestive, it can invoke the destructive power of male jealousy, a generic marker for tragicomedy, or any number of other referents. Supplementing Rutter’s persuasive reading of the bear as doubling for Hermione with a more clearly historicized sense of the role that other women in the birthing
room might play in shaping the child adds significantly to our understanding of how an early modern audience might have understood the bear and its role in Antigonus’ death.\(^{16}\)

Maurice Hunt’s seemingly exhaustive examination of the multiple valences of the word “bear” in the play seems to ignore a major possibility that Patricia Parker touches on in passing: a woman giving birth to a child “bears” it – and the play is “filled with wordplay on bearing, bear, and born(e)” (Parker 143). Leontes’ obsession with his wife’s chastity, and the legitimacy of his issue, is part and parcel of a fear that his dynasty depends on that chastity and legitimacy – matters that lie in Hermione’s control. Is Antigonus killed by the embodiment of male anxiety surrounding women’s ability to “bear” children, and then to shape them? In the context of the play, Leontes openly expresses this concern about Hermione, but it also underlies Paulina’s deeply troubling effect on the men at court.

Women charged with caring for aristocratic children remained a source of anxiety well past the infancy of those children, an issue that Shakespeare had dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet*. A brief discussion of the role of the Nurse in that play will clarify the privilege of the position that Paulina is claiming. In fact, the character usually referred to as the Nurse seems to have a name – Angelica – though it is easy to forget this fact, as she is addressed only once by name. Angelica wields considerable influence in Capulet’s household, and is at times quite insistent on the perquisites of her position. The most prominent, but least obvious, instance of this insistence is the effacement of her Christian name. Throughout the play, servants in both households are given significant depth of character, and rich personal detail, yet the detail of Angelica’s name is consistently suppressed. While this can be read as a patriarchal erasure of her individual identity

\(^{16}\) Hermione’s repeated invocations of natural law and magic also open up the possibility that the bear is merely the agent of natural retribution.
(and to a certain extent it is), it is also a steady, repetitive, assertion of her privileged position in the Capulet family. Kirby Farrell’s twin observations that “patriarchy provides crucial symbols which validate the self” (86) and that in patriarchal society “only self-effacement brought a share in the father’s power” (88) sum up the Nurse’s position quite nicely. Service to Capulet provides the essential foundation for her social identity, and the specific role she plays in the household gives her privileged access to Juliet and Lady Capulet. No other servant would be consulted in the matter of Juliet’s planned marriage. Indeed, even the Nurse’s comic garrulity can be read as an insistence on her position, as her “reminiscence takes on perlocutionary force by embodying her silent claim to be present when mother and daughter must talk ‘in secret’” (Paster 222).

Angelica is another example of a character successfully staking out a privileged social position, not through dramatic assertions of will, but rather through a steady accretion of perlocutionary effects. But Shakespeare (and, it is worth adding, Brooke) do not portray the Nurse’s role in a wholly positive light. If neither the Nurse nor Lady Capulet is fully Juliet’s mother,17 they do not add up to a coherent whole, either. Gail Kern Paster, for example, finds in “Juliet’s reckless sexuality the effects of plebeian enculturation” (276). On a more basic level, the Nurse’s access to Juliet’s bedroom, and her freedom of movement about Verona, are crucial to the undermining of Capulet’s authority over his daughter and to the clandestine marriage. While a modern audience, fully supportive of Juliet and Romeo’s relationship, may not find this subversion troubling, there is some evidence that an early modern audience might have been much more ambivalent. Arthur Brooke concludes his poem with the punishment of those who abetted the lovers; while the Friar is allowed to live out his years in a hermitage, the Nurse is banished, completely excluded from society. And it is surely suggestive that John Ford, when reworking

17 Cf. Dunworth’s citation of Guillemeau, who urges women to breastfeed because “by nursing him her selfe, she shall be wholly accounted his mother” (134).
Romeo and Juliet in 'Tis Pity She’s a Whore, names Annabella’s tutoress “Puttana,” or “bawd” – the very accusation Leontes levels at Paulina.

*Epistemology of the Birthing Room*

Angelica’s and Puttana’s failure to preserve the virginity of their charges reflects another source of anxiety about nurses, midwives, and other women in related positions. Midwives were also troubling in terms of the role they played in legal disputes about marriage and divorce. If the chastity of a woman was in question, a panel of respectable matrons experienced in gynaecological matters would be assembled to inspect the hymen; in cases of annulment where consummation or otherwise was in dispute, a similarly constituted panel would be called upon to determine the potency or impotence of the man18 (Bicks 4). Given that the first half of the play revolves around Leontes’ obsessive desire to establish that his wife has not been chaste, the role of such matrons as Paulina has an ironic resonance. For this is not a pre-nuptial examination where a relatively simple inspection was purported to establish chastity, and Paulina’s presence serves to underscore ironically the impotence of the court to determine the truth of the matter.

The role of a midwife in determining virginity was not embarrassing merely to the extent that it made the court reliant on the expert testimony of women. Rather that role was also of concern because it gave these women access to those parts of a wife that were supposed to remain hidden, the exclusive purview of the husband. Even worse, there was a fear that “during routine exams or court-ordered searches, she (it was feared) could break the hymen and so ‘make’ a maid into a woman” (Bicks 4), further usurping the sexual role of a man. At two or even three points in her life, then, a woman might find the role of her *paterfamilias* being

18 This role in determining the sexual capacity of married men will have important implications in the fifth act.
usurped by a woman; the first and third are more important for Paulina’s role in The Winter’s Tale. At birth, a midwife would have disproportionately great opportunity to shape her. Before marriage, a midwife might accidentally supplant her husband in making her a woman. The intrusions onto masculine privilege in the birthing room are subtler and more abstract, but nonetheless resonant. Bicks argues:

Women usually gave birth in cordoned off spaces within their homes, often on or near their marital beds, the symbolic locus of control for the husband over the wife: in it, he hoped to deflower his bride and generate his heirs. It was within this very space that men imagined midwives, with the help of their female entourages, pressing bodies into shape and producing tales of paternity, sexuality, and salvation. (10-11)

Bicks here makes her point too forcefully to be sustainable, as she reads into heterosexual relations a far stronger – or at least far more universal – sense of dominance and submission than can really be borne out. She overlooks, for instance, the fact that “the woman’s body effectively holds all that endows property and purse strings with their value and power to sustain life” (Mueller 123); the sustenance of patriarchy, in other words, depends on the continued participation of women in producing the next generation. But in the context of The Winter’s Tale, much of this argument holds true. Certainly, midwives would have privileged access to the marital bed in the course of an ordinary childbirth, which might well be disturbing to the father of the child. But this is no ordinary childbirth, because Hermione goes into labour not at home, but rather in prison.¹⁹ This actually strengthens Bicks’ argument: if the marriage bed is not as clearly a “symbolic locus of control,” as she would have it, Leontes’ prison for his wife certainly is. And it is as a midwife or a gossip that Paulina insists on access to this “locus of control.”

Paulina lives up, in one sense, to Leontes’ charge that she is “mankind witch” (2.3.67): she, by

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¹⁹ The stress placed by Paulina on Hermione being in “prison” serves to emphasize – under whatever conditions Hermione is being confined, from luxurious house arrest to most Spartan dungeon – the scene of the birth is divorced from the marriage bed.
appealing to the traditional role played by older women, symbolically breaches the all-female space that Leontes so jealously seeks to control.

The very act of giving birth, in fact, undermines that control. The conditions of Hermione’s imprisonment are not specified; she may be kept anywhere from a dungeon to a perfectly comfortable set of rooms. The moment she goes into labour, though, that prison becomes a birthing room, transforming the space and the expectations of who could be admitted:

For early modern commentators, the privacy of the birthroom was essential. It was construed most of all as protection from the outside world and from the sight of men; male intrusions into the birthing chamber were disorderly, lewd and uncivilised. (Gowing 151)

We, like the men at court, experience this exclusion. The entrances and exits of the Gentleman, the Jailer, and Emilia emphasize that Paulina’s negotiations with the Jailer and the conversation with Emilia take place outside of Hermione’s prison. We are dependent on Emilia’s report to know that the Queen is, “something before her time, delivered” (2.2.24) and that the infant is a “daughter, and a goodly babe, / Lusty, and like to live” (2.2.25-26). It is this very dependence that made early modern midwives a threat to male authority – particularly to a man concerned with fathering legitimate children and establishing a dynasty. After all, the “birth we have not seen may be monstrous; the tale we have only heard may be untrue” (Wells 257).

This concern with the possibility of abnormal births returns in a comic mode in Act IV. Much of the action in Bohemia constitutes a comic re-writing of the anxieties of the first three acts. Dorcas and Mopsa’s insistence that the Clown buy them ballads from Autolycus’ selection prompts Autolycus to offer one about “how a usurer’s wife was brought to bed of twenty money-bags at a burden, and how she longed to eat adders’ heads carbonadoed” (4.4.260-63). As Helen Hackett puts it, this plays upon the “proverbial unreliability of midwives [which] is implicit in
his assertion that his ballad of a ‘monstrous’ birth has ‘the midwife’s name to it’” (35). But significantly Autolycus also offers them a song he claims was sung by a “fish that appeared... forty thousand fathom above water, and sung this ballad against the hard heart of maids” (273-76). He glosses the event by asserting that “she was a woman and was turned into a cold fish for she would not exchange flesh with one that loved her” (277-78), and asserts its veracity by assuring the women that it is attested by “Five justices at it, and witnesses more than my pack will hold” (281-82). As with other disturbing elements in the first three acts, the uncertainty of midwives’ testimony returns in inverted form. Here it is not just the testimony of a midwife that is unreliable, but equally the supposed signatures of five justices; here it is not the men who anxiously consider the child’s parentage, but rather women who are entertained by it; here, women are not dangerously promiscuous, but rather so cold that one is “turned into a cold fish” in punishment; and here it is not women who play their husbands false, but the Clown, who woos Dorcas and Mopsa at the same time. As with so many other images and ideas that are inverted in the second half of the play, the comic inversion points to how we must understand the initial anxiety. If Autolycus’ monstrous births and wondrous transformations are the punishment for women who are not erotic enough, the more common concern was that midwives might enable or conceal female promiscuity – straight and queer.

Early modern writings on midwifery and anatomy hint at the sources of that anxiety, and some of it, in keeping with Leontes’ behaviour, has to do with the midwife’s anatomic – and therefore erotic – knowledge of women’s bodies. Throughout the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth century, standard obstetrics texts were not even written by women.20 Writing sixty

20 Sharp’s midwifery manual is the first written in English by a woman. New Historicist considerations of midwifery often rely on Sharp to illuminate literary texts written much earlier, which is a drawback. But earlier
years after the play’s first performance, Jane Sharp’s discussion of the clitoris is notably circumspect in its presentation of information:

[C]ommonly it [the clitoris] is but a small sprout, lying close hid under the wings, and not easily felt, yet sometimes it grows so long that it hangs forth at the slit like a yard [penis] and will swell and stand stiff if it be provoked, and some lewd women have endeavoured to use it as men do theirs. In the Indies and Egypt they are frequent, but I never heard but of one in this country: if there be any, they will do what they can for shame to keep it close. (quoted in Aughterson 129)

Sharp is careful to insist that only lewd women “have endeavoured to use it,” and to emphasize how exotic and foreign the practice is. In laying out for her reader a clear understanding of female anatomy, Sharp insists upon distancing herself from any suggestion that she might even know of women who would stoop to lewd conduct. Her attempt to render her knowledge unthreatening suggests that she was responding, whether consciously or not, to anxieties about her access to such knowledge.

Early queer academic writing on all-female spaces relied heavily on two travellers’ accounts of Turkish bath houses to testify to the anxious, titillating, prospects of an all-female space; the problem with those sources is that one of them is French, while the second post-dates The Winter’s Tale by well over a century. Recent work by Jennifer Drouin, however, has developed our sense of how private all-female spaces could be a locus for eroticism – and handbooks have the limitation of describing male theory, rather than female practice. Sharp’s own book has the limitations of discussing Restoration practice rather than Jacobean.

21 Traub cites Nicholas de Nicholay, and I do so as well – with some reservations. Harriette Andreadis cites Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (9), but for me to use her analysis here would strain the idea of the long Renaissance to the breaking point.
anxiety about that eroticism. In her consideration of the “nunnery” she concludes that to Shakespeare’s contemporaries the term would have been polysemic, embodying both the chaste and the lewd, “a place where chastity is preserved, but bawdy acts, that is, transgressive, non-reproductive sexuality, may occur under the guise of sanctified innocence” (91). Still more suggestively, Drouin’s work emphasizes the multivalent symbolic weight of Diana, whose brother Apollo features so prominently in The Winter’s Tale as the god to whom the oracle is dedicated. She goes as far as to argue that “overseeing lesbianism is a natural extension of Diana’s role as the protector of chastity and women in childbirth” (85).

While a birthing room may not be a strikingly erotic environment, its association with the marital bed, as outlined by Mueller, gives it an overlay of sexual meaning. Hermione’s labour, in some kind of prison, is certainly at one remove from the marital bed. Beyond that, in The Winter’s Tale in particular, the eroticism of female fertility is foregrounded. As I have argued above, much of Hermione’s persuasive power comes from her pregnancy. While my argument related specifically to her treatment in captivity, Kirilka Stavreva outlines how, in Hermione’s speech to Polixenes, her “rhetorical strategies are underscored by the power of theatrically displayed female bodies” (162). According to Nicholas de Nicholay, such bodies on display in Turkish bath houses proved irresistible even to other women, who would sometimes “become so fervently in love the one of the other… they wil not cease until they have found means to bath with them, & to handle & grope them everywhere at their pleasures” (cited in Traub, Renaissance 200). Although de Nicholay wrote in French, his work had been in circulation since the late 1560s, and his voyeuristic interest in female-female eroticism suggests that the idea of an exclusively female space being explicitly erotic was certainly current by the early Stuart period. The touch of another woman, warranted by concern for hygiene, becomes a dangerously
arousing force, and hands that are intended to provide care may offer an entirely different, unlicensed, touch.

Nor, with important implications for *The Winter’s Tale*, need nudity be particularly sensual to pose a threat to established social order, for simply the sight of the naked female body, whether eroticized or not, gave the midwife a disturbing levelling power. An all-female space may be queer without being erotic, as it disrupts the usual power relations between genders. And the exposure of the female body to the female gaze acts as a powerful social levelling – or indeed, inversion. Gowing notes that “attendances at labours brought together women of different social ranks” (155), but she wisely refuses to cast that bringing together in a Utopian light:

> Historians have readily seen in the rituals of early modern childbirth a time when “childbirth belonged to women”: when the collective world of midwives and matrons enabled women to give birth in a supportive environment, when women bonded together to the exclusion of men, and when a lying-in women [sic] and her gossips ran the household and dominated the husband. But the rituals of childbirth divided women as much as they bound them together. Relations between midwives, mothers, and neighbours could be tense and hostile. (154)

The midwife assumes authority over the largely undressed, pregnant woman – regardless of her social status. Paulina herself does not have access to the birthing room; she delivers Perdita only from the prison, not from her mother. But the play presents her taking advantage of the confluence of gossips and midwives in the early modern imagination to construct for herself a subject position that is reminiscent of both. It is a subject position that authorizes her to speak on behalf of the Queen, but that also carries with it a freight of anxieties. Whether Paulina’s rhetorically constructed privileged access to the Queen (an access she obtains through her role as Perdita’s gossip or godmother) takes an erotic shading or not, it certainly acts to give her an authority over the Queen, and later the King, that she would otherwise never have enjoyed.
Paulina’s promise to Emilia, in fact, makes more of her power than of her office. Furious with the King, she swears:

If I prove honey-mouthed, let my tongue blister,
And never to my red-looked anger be
The trumpet anymore. (2.2.32-34)

These are not the words of someone whose focus is on the successful discharge of her duties. Her tongue is to be the “trumpet” to her “red-looked anger,” rather than a disciplined, tactical emissary of the Queen. Paulina may sincerely wish to be Hermione’s “advocate to th’ loud’st” (38), but the office seems to serve the purpose of her anger, rather than vice versa. Even her assurances of her commitment to her task take on an oddly egocentric – and I do not mean the term entirely pejoratively – tone.

I’ll use what tongue I have; if wit flow from’t
As boldness from my bosom, let’t not be doubted
I shall do good. (51-53)

As Hermione demanded to be crammed with praise for having “twice said well,” so too does Paulina imagine being praised for the good done by her wit. This reading is not to dismiss or diminish her good intentions, or her sincere compassion for the Queen’s plight; but in the scene that follows, Paulina ambitiously attempts to occupy a subject-position substantively similar to that of Hermione in order to speak on her behalf, and her attempts to efface the gap that must exist between the two initially meet with failure. The disparity between their ranks is too great, and Paulina’s authority for breaking rank is tendentious.

Paulina’s dramatic entrance with Perdita in her arms faces immediate resistance – as might be expected – from Leontes, and she is immediately obliged to defend her very presence at
court. She pursues two tactics in justifying her actions, first claiming the role of a physician, and then, when this fails to persuade Leontes, asserting her position in the bonds of service to both King and Queen. Leontes’ ultimate verdict about Paulina – that she is a “mankind witch” and a “most intelligencing bawd” (2.3.67-68) – while superficially insulting, is in fact startlingly perceptive. In the course of the play, Paulina will eventually, through knowledge she keeps very much to herself, arrange for the marital reunion of the royal couple; in a very innocent sense, she does indeed play the role of bawd. And Leontes’ calling her a witch has found resonance in more recent analyses of what Kirilka Stavreva calls “witch-speak.”

In the course of his invective, though, Leontes also calls Paulina a midwife, and this interpellation is crucial to her role from that moment on. She has already, in the act of “delivering” Perdita from prison, begun to occupy the symbolic role of midwife, but in this moment, the King, speaking from his position of authority, interpellates his subject, applying to her what he considers to be a demeaning epithet; it is an epithet she accepts, and which she then uses to craft a subject position from which she can challenge the King. As Judith Butler, building on Althusser, observes, “it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible” (5). In other words, in calling Paulina a midwife, Leontes helps solidify a position she has been developing from which to argue back. Paulina’s enthusiastic embrace of the King’s epithet has much in common with Beatrice’s use of paradiastole, or Helen’s tactical rewriting of Bertram’s rejection as an order. Just as Beatrice accepts her uncle’s claim that she is “curst” and then rewrites that claim into a compliment, so

22 Although Leontes does not use the word “midwife” until line 159, his other epithets all come from the same semantic cluster of words that might be applied to women in a similar social position: “mankind witch” (67), “dame Partlet” (75), “crone” (76), and “hag” (107).

23 Cf. also Belsey on witchcraft trials (Subject 190-91).
too does Paulina accept Leontes’ charge that she is a midwife (a gossiping old woman), but rewrites it as an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of her role as an advocate for Perdita and Hermione – a subject position with privileged rhetorical proximity to the Queen and the Princess.

For Paulina’s rhetoric throughout this scene, as in Hermione’s persuasion of Polixenes, is “underscored by the power of theatrically displayed female bodies” (Stavreva 162). The key difference is that while Hermione displayed her own body, Paulina displays Perdita’s and the Queen’s; her witch-speak, like her authority at court, is second-hand and metonymic.

Good my liege, I come –
And I beseech you, hear me, who professes
Myself your loyal servant, your physician,
Your most obedient counsellor; yet that dares
Less appear so in comforting your evils
Than such as most seem yours – I say, I come
From your good Queen. (2.3.52-58)

This speech has the subtle effect of conflating the two services Paulina owes. The first, and longest, section of her address focuses on the paradoxical obligations she bears to the King. To be his “most obedient counsellor” she must disobey his wishes for her to leave; and, unlike those who most “seem” his, she must deny him comfort. It is also possible that, just at the edge of perception, there is lurking here an erotic subtext in Paulina’s self-presentation. Just as she has positioned herself as Hermione’s midwife, with privileged access to her body, she is here the King’s physician – and one who is called upon to offer “comfort” rather than medicine, or physic. It is worth going so far as to ask whether discourses of service could ever be fully dissevered from the discourse of romantic love, so firmly had the traditions of courtly love and
Petrarchism appropriated the language of service. In a final twist to this dynamic of submission, Paulina invokes the power whose agent she is; as the Queen’s servant, she also serves the King – but the two relationships are not fully coterminous. The speech, rather than reconciling Paulina’s competing obligations, serves to show how great the tension between them is, as Leontes’ refusal to accept Paulina’s naming of Hermione as “good” shows just how much separates his actual relationship with his wife from the ideal.

Paulina’s repudiation of Leontes’ slur against the goodness of Hermione undoes much of the rhetorical work of her previous speech. Where her invocation of service served to efface her as a subject (in the grammatical sense), subsuming her completely in the role of subject (in the political sense), her anger and frustration at being a woman, and therefore unable to challenge the Queen’s accusers, bring the focus of the scene sharply back to Paulina as a transgressive woman.

Good Queen, my lord, good Queen, I say good Queen, 
And would by combat make her good so were I
A man the worst about you! (2.3.59-61)

The first line is astonishing in its presumption, as through sheer force of repeated interpellation she seeks to undo the King’s slander of Hermione. Not only that, but she also rhetorically diminishes him, referring repeatedly to Hermione as “Queen,” but to the King as merely “my lord.” A lady’s verily may be as potent as a lord’s, but a lady’s verily is not as potent as a King’s. Her frustration at this fact turns to the question of her sex. As a woman, she may not fight for the Queen’s honour; she lacks the gendered power to embody her speech in action. But in invoking the image of the duel, or of trial by combat, she casts herself in the role of a male aristocrat

defending the honour of a lady. In a romance in which male valour is conspicuous by its absence, Paulina’s momentary borrowing of the image at once undermines the masculinity of the men at court, renders her significantly more masculine, and adds a strong romantic (though not particularly erotic) overtone to her defence of Hermione’s honour.

Leontes’ characterization of Paulina as a mankind witch, as I have suggested, dovetails neatly with several aspects of the rhetorical register she and Hermione share, but it also points to the differences between the two. Stavreva, though more focussed on Lady Macbeth, characterizes witch-speak as

the kind of theatricalised discourse that draws attention to the female body of its frequently eroticized speaker even as this body hardens its nurturing fluids into a masculine “undaunted mettle.” (152)

While this is obviously the case for Lady Macbeth’s desire to be “unsexed,” the case of Hermione and Paulina is more complex. For it is insistently Hermione’s body to which attention – generally erotic attention – is drawn, while it is Paulina who demonstrates undaunted mettle.

The effect of this dynamic is paradoxical. At one and the same time, it underscores the differences between the women and seeks to elide them. Paulina is the loud, “masculine” woman, who must rhetorically borrow Hermione’s chaste body, and the fruit of that body, to lend her speech authority. In highlighting the difference between the women, and in rendering

25 Although Perdita obviously cannot speak, her constant presence in the scene is a visual reminder – whether in Paulina’s arms or at Leontes’ feet – of Paulina’s office, and the source of her authority to carry it out. In the Soulpepper Theatre production (Toronto, 2003), the baby became an even more obvious prop in Paulina’s bid to persuade the King. The line “Look to your babe, my lord” came out as a rushed warning, as she actually tossed the baby in the air. Only after an excruciating pause, in which Leontes caught and cradled the baby, did she continue with “…’tis yours” (2.3.125).
one explicitly more masculine and the other explicitly more feminine, Shakespeare is opening a space between the two in which difference in gender hints at erotic possibilities.

At the same time, Paulina’s determination that she speaks for Hermione, and her borrowing of the Queen’s authority – and baby – amount to a complicated act of ventriloquism in which she seeks to efface much of the difference between herself and the Queen. As when Hermione sought to persuade Polixenes, Paulina alternates between flattery and insult, and some of her terms take on a more complex sub-text when we recall the earlier scene. Hermione gently teases Polixenes about his virility, suggesting that his oaths are “limber,” glossed by Orgel as “flaccid, flabby” (1.2.46n). Likewise, in a much more fraught debate, Paulina first impugns the manhood of the men at court who will not fight for Hermione’s honour. Read in this context, her reference to Leontes’ “weak-hinged fancy” (2.3.118) seems to contain a sly reference to impotence and flaccidity, as well as the more obvious challenging of Leontes’ sanity.26

Paulina’s insistent – if not fully successful – attempts to speak from her mistress’ position suggest a wish to be Hermione (or at least to be an extension of her, freer to speak and act than the Queen) as much as to defend her. And just as the gender difference between the two opens a space for desire, so too do the continued identification and emulation suggest desire as a motive for action. As I have suggested in my criticism of Jankowski’s reading of the play, I do not seek here firmly to classify Paulina’s feelings for Hermione as explicitly sexual, but I do wish to highlight the extent to which her loving service overlaps with the erotic, and how it resonates with Sedgwick’s broad definition of desire. In her relationship with Hermione, Paulina participates strongly in the two modes of desire identified by Traub’s querying of the concept,

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26 This reading is all the more plausible if we recall that midwives were frequently called as expert witnesses in divorce cases, when the potency or impotence of the husband was at issue (cf. Bicks 4).
quoted above: “is your arousal dependent upon a process of identification with or desire for an eroticized object? To state it simplistically, do you want or do you want to be” the object of desire (*Desire*, 100-101, emphasis in original)?

Throughout the course of Paulina’s confrontation with Leontes, we have seen her adopt Hermione’s rhetorical tactics, and speak from a position that wavers between identification with Hermione and gendered difference from her. As with the other socially ambitious characters we have seen, Paulina attempts to derive authority both from supposedly immutable factors – i.e., her status as a lady – and more negotiable access to the discursive and material trappings of power – in this case the dramatically deployed bodies of Hermione and Perdita. We have already seen how, in 2.3, the baby can be used as a crucial prop for Paulina’s argument. In 2.4, directors must likewise choose how they will present Hermione.27 An upright, dignified Hermione can use her poise and posture to underscore her dignity and implicitly to reject charges of excessive sensuality. Likewise, a Hermione upon whose body the effects of imprisonment and childbirth are visible can make a very different point. Alexandra Gilbreath recalls that in the RSC production of 1998-99, her Hermione made a shocking entrance in 2.4.

After her imprisonment I imagined that Leontes would strip her of all her comforts, her beautiful clothes replaced by a long and filthy sack dress and her beautiful hair hacked off; so my entrance into the trial scene was as visually alarming as possible. I also wanted the effects of childbirth still there for all to see, with a huge blood-stain on the back of my dress. (83)

27 My reading contrasts with Dunworth’s, who argues that Hermione can be presented only in a manner fully concordant with her restrained, dignified speech:

Hermione makes her “honourable” private grief available to her audience (on and off the stage) at the same time as she dismisses “vain” public displays of tears. She self-consciously figures her suffering, constructing herself rhetorically as the icon that she will literally become. The private and intimate affections of the mother, so celebrated in Protestant ideology, can only be made available by a shift which recreates the mother as iconic, which separates her from the “vain” passions that would debase her significance. (209-10)
However Hermione is presented, this scene represents an extended contest between her and Leontes to impose an interpretation on her ostentatiously displayed body.

Crucially, Leontes’ rejection of Paulina’s authority, of her very right to speak, is based on a rejection of the premise that Hermione is chaste, and Perdita legitimate; the body that would underwrite Paulina’s “witch speak” fails the basic conditions for the felicity of that speech. When the oracle’s prophecy begins to be borne out by the deaths of Mamillius and Hermione, the basis for Leontes’ objection to her authority vanishes. If Paulina, as a woman, has lacked the ability to embody her words, the deaths of Mamillius and Hermione serve to link her discursive judgement with real power. Confronted with the defeat of his argument against Paulina, her power over him becomes all but absolute.

When Paulina reenters, bringing the news of Hermione’s death, she is prepared openly to challenge the King, casting her defiance in a startlingly masochistic note:

> What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
> What wheels, racks, fires? What flaying, boiling?
> In leads or oils? What old or newer torture
> Must I receive, whose every word deserves
> To taste of thy most worst? (3.2.173–77)

The full import of these lines is not made plain until later in the scene, when Paulina comments on what has driven her to such boldness: “The love I bore your Queen” (226). In this instant, Paulina, who has so recently imagined herself as a knight, fighting for Hermione’s honour, becomes instead the Petrarchan lover, whose devotion to an absent lady makes him/her suffer exquisite torment. Here, though, the cold-hearted beloved of the sonnet idiom is split between

28 Compare this, too, to the erotically masochistic tone of Isabella’s offer in Measure for Measure to “wear as rubies” the “impression of keen whips” on Claudio’s behalf (2.4.101).
two figures, the gentle Hermione, whom Paulina loves, and the cruel Leontes, who tortures her for that love. This is an astonishing moment; the audience knows that Hermione has collapsed, but not yet that she is dead – and that news is delayed for a full twenty-six lines in which Paulina interposes herself between the King and Queen in the image of a sadomasochistic ménage à trois. In the moment of Hermione’s death, Paulina comes closest to speaking from the subject position of the late Queen.

By the end of the scene Paulina has moved from victim to tormentor, as she begins her sixteen long years as the conscience of the King. She and Leontes each attempt to take upon themselves the burden of suffering: “I beseech you, rather / Let me be punished” (222-23), she asks, while he in turn assures her that she “did speak but well / When most the truth” (230-31). This exchange sets up the dynamic that we see persisting between them in the fifth act.

Paulina as Courtier

When we next see Paulina in the fifth act, her equivocal triumph over Leontes has borne fruit. Her assurance that she is his “most obedient counsellor” is at least partially true; she is certainly his closest counsellor, though it is an open question which of the two is most obedient to the other. In examining the relationship, I wish to focus very specifically on Paulina’s priority in advising the King: as Kehler puts it, she is the “character whose celibacy is enforced and who enforces the King’s celibacy” (52). Perhaps the more apt word in this case is chastity. For,

29 For a more detailed account of the rhetorical efficacy of Paulina’s use of suspense, see Russ McDonald’s analysis of the rhetorical and stylistic aspects of the speech (Late Style 63-66). It is also worth contrasting Paulina’s virtuoso use of suspense, as discussed by McDonald, with Diana’s less successful use of mystification and riddling language in the last scene of All’s Well That Ends Well.
despite Paulina’s association with St. Paul, her end goal is not to keep Leontes from all sexual contact, but rather to keep his sexuality to its proper channel, his marriage to Hermione.

This is more, though, than a mere defence of her friend’s position. Leontes’ devotion to his advisor prompts him to a sensual fantasy of what might have been:

Good Paulina,
Who hast the memory of Hermione,
I know, in honour, O that ever I
Had squared me to thy counsel! Then, even now,
I might have looked my Queen’s full eyes,
Have taken treasure from her lips –

Paulina And left them
More rich for what they yielded. (5.1.49-55)

His reverie is interrupted, but he is hardly brought back down to earth. His consideration of Paulina’s virtue leads to an erotic rhapsody, which Paulina then expands upon, suggesting at once the fecundity of the Queen and the appeal of her husband’s kiss. “More rich for what they yielded” is a phrase whose meaning lies ambiguously between suggestions of conception and of sexual satisfaction. This digression makes all the more suggestive Paulina’s imagination of herself as Hermione’s ghost, and her injunction to the King to “Remember mine” (1. 67) seems finally to realize her desire to speak for the Queen, and to efface all difference between them.

That difference, though, resurfaces when the servant announces the arrival of Florizel and Perdita, and praises the beauty of the Princess as “the most peerless piece of earth, I think, / That e’er the sun shone bright on” (5.1.94-95). This elicits an immediate protest in defence of the

30 It is worth remembering, here as before, the role played by midwives in determining the chastity – or otherwise – of women in legal proceedings. Whereas midwives were tasked with attesting to the chastity of women, here Paulina has tasked herself with ensuring that of the King.
beauty of the late Queen – but not from her husband. Rather, it is Paulina who chastises the servant:

O Hermione,
As every present time doth boast itself
Above a better gone, so must thy grave
Give way to what’s seen now. (To the Servant) Sir, you yourself
Have said, and writ so – but your writing now
Is colder than that theme – she had not been,
Nor was not to be equalled; thus your verse
Flowed with her beauty once. ‘Tis shrewdly ebbed
To say you have seen a better. (5.1.95-103)

Here Paulina, who has largely defended Hermione as good, now lends an explicitly aesthetic dimension to the Queen’s appeal. The servant, who has presumably penned sonnets in Hermione’s honour, is now to be held to that praise; his truest verse, Paulina intimates, had better not have been most feigning. This reminder must affect how we understand her commissioning and display of the statue. To make Hermione the subject of poem or sculpture is to set her beauty forth to be the object of a universally admiring gaze.

Certainly, the servant expects all eyes that see Perdita to feel admiration – and apparently admiration that would prompt love in man or woman, despite Paulina’s scepticism:

Women will love her that she is a woman
More worth than any man; men, that she is
The rarest of all women. (110-12)

The messenger, for one, does not share what Valerie Traub considers “the imaginative limitations of us all… [that] we can barely conceive of an eroticism even partially free of gender

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31 Assuming, of course, that the statue is actually a statue, and not a living, breathing Hermione from the start.
constraints” (*Desire* 102). For the servant, Perdita’s beauty can inspire love – and can any love that is aesthetically driven be entirely free of the erotic?

This chapter treats Alan Sinfield’s lament as a challenge: “If the *ménage à trois* were readily available as an option, half the plots of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre would collapse. Yet we have diverse hints already...” (84). From evidence scattered throughout *The Winter’s Tale*, I have argued that not only is a *ménage à trois* “readily available” but also that a curious triangular marriage persists through much of the sixteen years that the play so ostentatiously elides, and that the comic resolution of the play depends on that very complex relationship. To argue that Paulina’s relationship with Hermione – or indeed, with Leontes32 – is unequivocally erotic would, perhaps, be too much weight to ask the text to bear. But in considering the complex erotic dynamics of a play that is, after all, much concerned with “warranted” sexuality, it would be a failure of critical imagination to ignore the way in which various axes of erotic attraction become tangled. Just as importantly, the play is much concerned with licensed speech, and to ignore the role that the complexly imbricated desires of the three characters play in informing the power dynamics of Leontes’ court would be to miss much of how *The Winter’s Tale* queers Jacobean ideas of social hierarchy. The multivalent role that Paulina adopts as a result of her love for Hermione disrupts the prescribed familial bonds of the Sicilian royal family. In doing so, she exposes the extent to which the supposedly fixed and natural hierarchy of primogeniture depends on support from the lower orders to legitimize the prevailing sexual and social order.

32 Paster is insistent that “Paulina is both the placeholder of Leontes’ desire and the agent of his discipline, embodying desire’s memory without becoming its object” (277). But to occupy the place of the desired object for sixteen years, even without explicitly evoking that desire, is deeply problematic.
Pastoral Revisions

It is nonetheless true that the end of the play sees the re-establishment of expected social and sexual hierarchies. The re-establishment of those hierarchies, as in so many of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, involves a salutary interlude in the green world. As Peter Lindenbaum puts it, a “trip to the real countryside becomes a crucial step in the education or cure” of many of the male characters in the play (202-3). But Bohemia, however Shakespeare’s portrayal may self-consciously depart from realism, is not insulated from the concerns of Sicily. That the “pastoral” second half of the play explores the same anxieties as the first half is by no means a new observation. The very consensus of critical opinion on this matter, though, makes it all the more remarkable that certain thematic elements that are foregrounded in the second half of the play receive such scant critical attention for their place in the first half.

What is striking is just how quickly the pastoral inversions begin. Long before Time’s choric interlude, in which he claims he “makes and unfolds error” (4.1.2), even in the midst of the storm, while the bear eats Antigonus off-stage, the Old Shepherd discovers Perdita and her bundle of gold and keepsakes. In this act of discovery, he at once begins to reverse the poisoned and poisoning effects of Leontes’ jaundiced erotic imagination. In the pastoral world of Bohemia, it is the Old Shepherd who will take Paulina’s place: he will become Perdita’s adoptive father, protect her from the elements to which Leontes’ judgement has exposed her, and without realizing it, he will argue against Leontes’ condemnation of the circumstances of her birth. Like Leontes, but with more justification, he concludes that the baby is illegitimate. But where the King reaches that conclusion on the basis of his imagination, and therefore orders the child exposed, the Old Shepherd encounters an exposed baby, and therefore concludes illegitimacy.

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33 Cf. amongst many others Siemon (“Iteration” 54 ff.), Henke (176-80), and Forman (87-97).
And the judgement of Perdita’s two fathers, biological and adoptive, regarding the circumstances
of her birth could not be more different:

Mercy on’s, a bairn! A very pretty bairn – a boy, or a child, I wonder? A pretty one, a very pretty one – sure some scape; though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door work; they were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here. I’l take it up for pity…. (3.3.68-74)

There are just enough superficial echoes of syntax and diction to recall Leontes’ ravings that the contrast between the two speakers is noticeable. Where Leontes catalogues the imagined actions of Hermione and Polixenes in short, clipped clauses – “Is whispering nothing? / Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses? / Kissing with inside lip? (1.2.281-83) – so too does the Shepherd imagine “some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door work.” More to the point, where the King sees his wife and Polixenes as “Too hot, too hot!” (1.2.107), he has the luxury to contemplate the heat of their supposed erotic union. The Old Shepherd, though, poor as he is, comments only on the poverty of the baby’s current situation, recognizing that “they were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here.” Not to force the point, but there are echoes here of Lear, as Perdita’s adoptive father shows his compassion (a compassion Leontes lacks) in response to an unaccommodated child; it is an auspicious beginning for the redemptive movement of the play.

If the Old Shepherd, as Perdita’s adoptive father, occupies a similar position to Paulina, he is at once more radically elevated by his association with the Princess, and less affected – and therefore a less ambivalent figure. As Orgel notes, “though Paulina’s behaviour is certainly vindicated, the instrument of restoration and reconciliation, the play’s ambivalence about her is clear – even her admirers impugn her shrewish tongue and her harsh manner” (“Introduction”)
28). Paulina, as I have suggested above, elicits an ambivalent response because she speaks out of turn, both as a woman, and as a woman of her station. That is to say, her transgression is as much one of social status as it is of gender stereotypes, and she clearly tries to license her transgression through her association with Hermione and Perdita. The Old Shepherd, too, will soon be known in Bohemia as “a man, they say, that from very nothing, and beyond the imagination of his neighbours, is grown into an unspeakable estate” (4.2.38-40). Polixenes’ diction is important: for one such as the Old Shepherd to acquire as much wealth as he has through his investment of Perdita’s gold is “monstrous” indeed – at least in the imagination of his neighbours. To Polixenes, at least, such a departure from the station of his birth renders the Old Shepherd unnatural.  

Any discomfort the audience might feel about the Shepherd’s sudden wealth is carefully allayed on at least three occasions. The first is in the discovery scene. While the storm rages, the Old Shepherd first determines to take the abandoned Perdita in “for pity” (3.3.74). He does so without consideration for the bundle he finds with her, in contrast to Shakespeare’s source materials. Marianne Novy notes that unlike “his counterpart in the source, Greene’s Pandosto, the shepherd at once decides to take up little Perdita, even before he knows that gold has been left with her” (“Adopted” 60). Where there might be ambiguity about the Old Shepherd’s motivations, Shakespeare carefully reworks his source to ensure that his audience will not take the Shepherd’s act of generosity and hospitality as one of greed.

34 It is interesting that Polixenes’ attitude is not reflected by the Old Shepherd’s neighbours, who seem quite at ease enjoying his hospitality at the sheep-shearing. Whether in Bohemia, as in Sicily, the King is more suspicious and reactionary than his subjects, or whether sixteen years of the Old Shepherd’s wealth and good-neighbourliness have worn away at any local resentment or suspicion, Polixenes, like Leontes, expresses his discomfort at breaches in decorum in more extreme terms than anyone else.
As the scene progresses, Shakespeare gives us another instance to reassure us that the Shepherd is not motivated by greed or ambition, as he seems (literally, not figuratively) unable to believe his luck. While his son comments excitedly on how “You’re a made old man! If the sins of your youth are forgiven you, you’re well to live. Gold, all gold!” (3.3.116-17), the Old Shepherd is more sceptical: “This is fairy gold, boy, and ’twill prove so” (118). In other words, the gold cannot be real. The Old Shepherd’s imagination cannot compass the idea that he might be so lucky – and yet he takes up the child anyway. This is a sharp contrast to the Shepherd in Pandosto who takes up the child only reluctantly:

Necessity wished him at the least to retain the gold, though he would not keep the child; the simplicity of his conscience feared him from such a deceitful bribery. Thus was the poor man perplexed with a doubtful dilemma, until at last the covetousness of the coin overcame him – for what will not the greedy desire of gold cause a man to do? (250)

Greene’s attempts to paint the Shepherd in a positive light are perfunctory at best; he has a simple conscience, and while he might not shy away from bribery, “deceitful bribery” is beyond the pale. But the phrases describing the Shepherd’s cupidity are striking, and Greene freely uses consonance to emphasize them. Covetousness of the coin overcame him, as does the greedy desire of gold. Where Greene strives to emphasize the ambiguity of the Shepherd’s choice to foster Perdita, Shakespeare is at pains to emphasize his impulsive generosity and kindness. It is perhaps for this reason that he creates the character of the young shepherd, or Clown. In this scene, at least, the Clown provides a contrast for his father; it is also possible to argue that Shakespeare has effectively split the character of the Shepherd in Pandosto in two, allowing the

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35 The age of the Clown further suggests that he has been added more as a foil for his father, or an alter ego to express what the Old Shepherd must not express, rather than to flesh out the Old Shepherd’s family, or to add verisimilitude. In 3.3, he is old enough for his father to address him as “man” (3.3.79), yet he remains very much a dependent in his father’s house sixteen years later.
Clown to embody the baser aspects of the character, while the Old Shepherd embodies the nobler. His final comment on the matter, too, presents him in a generous and favourable light: “‘Tis a lucky day, boy, and we’ll do good deeds on’t” (3.3.133-34). An opportunist he may be, but in this account he is a generous opportunist.

Greene’s account, too, of how the Shepherd brings the lost baby home differs significantly from Shakespeare’s – as Shakespeare omits the Shepherd’s wife. In Pandosto, the Shepherd’s wife is jealous, and “taking up a cudgel... sware solemnly that she would make clubs trumps if he brought any bastard brat within her doors” (250). Certainly, the omitted outburst of jealousy is too reminiscent of Leontes’ ravings to set Bohemia in a favourable light. But the virtual elision of the Old Shepherd’s wife is worth noting. He mentions her only once, chiding Perdita for neglecting her duties as hostess. Even in his chiding, he focuses on the humility with which his wife offered hospitality. His versatile wife was, apparently, “both pantler, butler, cook; / Both dame and servant” (4.4.56-57). This imagined generosity that mixes both command and humility not only reflects Perdita’s similar bridging of stations – princess and shepherdess, upstart wooer and unknown noble – but also serves to erase any remnants of the decidedly ungracious shepherdess from the source novel.36 Just as importantly, it gives some hope that, if Perdita nursed with this shepherdess, she will have absorbed her more refined, generous and noble qualities.

In Perdita’s imagination, though, the Old Shepherd’s wife does not seem to loom large. Although he makes (brief) reference to her, she does not. And when she does express discomfort with her exalted role at the sheep-shearing festival, she makes no comparison to her foster

36 Lynne Magnusson has drawn to my attention, in private correspondence, the parallels with Hermione’s ostentatious hospitality in the first act.
mother, worrying instead about “these my borrowed flaunts” (4.4.23) and imagining her inadequacy should she be faced with the “sternness” of Polixenes’ presence. As Novy notes, “imaginatively, the play makes very tenuous the role of the shepherd’s wife in nurturing Perdita; Hermione’s place is to be left unfilled until the very end” (“Multiple” 192). Perdita’s reunion with her mother will, according to the logic of the play, be the final, and most important of the reconciliations and reunions, unencumbered by the shadow of a Bohemian foster mother.

The mechanism of that reunion provides further opportunities for the Old Shepherd to efface himself and to disavow any social ambition, rendering him still less threatening to existing social orders. His response to the exposure of “Doricles” as Florizel is tellingly different from his foster-daughter’s. She, although resigned to losing Florizel, still imagines a response to the King that would

\[
\text{tell him plainly} \\
\text{The selfsame sun that shines upon his court} \\
\text{Hides not his visage from our cottage, but} \\
\text{Looks on alike. (4.4.440-43)}
\]

Perdita, in other words, although she seems prepared to relinquish her relationship with Florizel and “queen it no inch farther” (446), nonetheless imagines a response to Polixenes that would deny his claim to absolute difference between royal and common blood. This imagined reply to the King is much at odds with her earlier humility; in her first staged conversation with Florizel, she imagines how the King would respond to seeing the prince “his work, so noble, / Vilely bound up” (4.4.21-22).³⁷

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³⁷ Jordan’s reading gives a sense of how extremely Perdita at first views her transgression of the boundaries of rank: “Her distinction between her own “vile” being and his, which is “noble” suggests that she may see the difference of rank within human kind as a difference in kind; that is, she may equate social with ontological difference, and regard a marriage crossing ranks as a conjunctions of two kinds, a monstrous union” (132).
Perdita, at least in private, offers justification for her upstart romance with Florizel. Her adoptive father, though, is horrified by the match, and his wish to disavow his knowledge of their love once again echoes Leontes.

I cannot speak nor think,
Nor dare to know that which I know. (To Florizel) O sir,
You have undone a man of fourscore-three
That thought to fill his grave in quiet, yea
To die upon the bed my father died,
To lie close by his honest bones; but now
Some hangman must put on my shroud and lay me
Where no priest shovels in dust. (448-55)

Here, he pictures Florizel and Perdita’s wish to marry as disrupting not only the royal dynasty, shattering the chain of royal inheritance, but also his own. The enormity of the match not only disrupts heredity going down the generations – that is to say, disrupts heredity from Florizel and Perdita down – but the shock also runs backward up the family tree. The Shepherd imagines his own descent from his father being retroactively disrupted, imagining himself as an eighty-three-year-old orphan cut off from his patrimony as well as his posterity, buried in a traitor’s grave rather than the family plot. The Shepherd’s fear that he will be blamed for Perdita’s attempted match with Florizel is well-founded. Claire M. Busse draws attention to a “quality of early modern childhood that has often been overlooked by twentieth century critics, the notion of a child’s status as a thing that had economic value” (212). Like the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* or Paulina in the first half of this play, the Old Shepherd might well have been able to finesse Perdita’s status deliberately into social gain for himself. His extensive disavowal of such
ambition, and his vividly expressed horror at the ambition of her match with Florizel, seem calculated to insulate him from charges of social climbing.

His response to Perdita further drives home the reactionary conservatism with which he imagines distinctions in rank. As seen above, he is so horrified by the violation of social and sexual decorum that has taken place in his house, that he would wish that knowledge unknown; he has drunk, and seen the spider. Where exposure leads Perdita to imagine a forceful defence of her actions, the Shepherd imagines his execution – but nothing for Perdita. His mind returns only to the crime he sees her committing.

O cursed wretch,
That knew’st this was the prince and wouldst adventure
To mingle faith with him! Undone, undone!
If I might die within this hour, I have lived
To die when I desire. (455-59)

While the Shepherd’s words are harsh, it is important to note a few features of his speech. The first is that, even here, his words both echo those of Leontes and yet re-write them in a less destructive key. Like Leontes, he uses the word “mingle” to denote an adulterous or adulterating sexuality. Like Leontes, he would wish unknown that which he knows. And like Leontes, he imagines death as a way out of an untenable situation. Unlike Leontes, though, the Old Shepherd imagines no one’s death but his own, wishing he might die before he is punished for his daughter’s transgression.

Like Paulina, who asserts only her devotion to Hermione and Perdita, yet acquires unparalleled status at court, the Old Shepherd asserts only his allegiance to the established social order, and yet through his connection with Perdita he is accorded wealth and rank. Although his
wealth, as we have seen, provokes anxiety in Polixenes, his promotion in act five is presented in terms so preposterous it can only be comical.

The old Shepherd and the Clown are included, yet excluded, in the report of the three gentlemen, present and thanked, yet clearly not central to the reunion. They are not mentioned until the Third Gentleman adds his news to the report: Leontes “thanks the old shepherd, which stands by like a weather-beaten conduit of many kings’ reigns” (5.2.54-55). Novy notes the “depersonalizing image” (“Adopted” 60) used by the Gentleman: the Shepherd is here no more than an instrument, a monument. The instrumentality of the image does not merely depersonalize the Shepherd. It represents the role he has played in Perdita’s life, and in Leontes’ dynasty; he is merely the vessel who has transported Perdita through sixteen years, returning her home, without himself being incorporated into the chain of royal heredity.

What follows is a comic send-up of the very pretensions that the Shepherd has until this point disavowed, but his son clownishly embraces. The fate that caused the old Shepherd so much horror in Bohemia – “to make me the King’s brother in law” (4.4.696-97) – now offers him a chance to advance his children and grandchildren, but in a typically self-effacing manner: “Come, boy, I am past more children, but thy sons and daughters will be all gentlemen born” (5.2.123-24). The arrival of Autolycus, however, brings out the competitive streak in the Clown and, to a lesser extent, the old Shepherd, as the Clown offers to duel against Autolycus to assert his new-found status:

38 Orgel, glossing this passage, notes that in Jacobean usage, this term would not apply before the third generation removed from the Clown.

39 This aggression, although funny, gives the lie to Novy’s reading of the scene as “suggesting utopian possibilities of an extended cross-class family of biological and adoptive parents…” (“Adopted” 61).
You are well met, sir. You denied to fight with me this other day because I was no gentleman born. See you these clothes? Say you see them not, and think me still no gentleman born – you were best say these robes are not gentlemen born. Give me the lie, do, and try whether I am not now gentleman born. (5.2.125-30)

The Clown’s misprision, taking his clothes as proof of noble status, the sign for the thing itself, highlights just how far he has not come; for all his pretensions, he and his father are the rustics they were in act four. Yet the aggression with which he asserts his status to Autolycus is at least slightly disquieting. It replays in a magnified way the tension of competition that existed between the courtiers of Sicilia and Bohemia in the opening scene. That competition may have played itself out in the elaborate language of courtly compliment, but the ruder Clown (like Samson and Gregory in *Romeo and Juliet* or like Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*) resorts immediately to the cruder aggression of proof by arms.

In the Clown’s continued protestations of his status, and his precedence over his father, he both unconsciously lampoons his pretensions to gentle status and reinforces Busse’s insight about the “economic value” of a child’s – even an adopted child’s – status. Eager to assert the priority of his claim to gentlemanly status, he re-narrates the scene of Leontes’ reunion with Perdita, giving details left out by the Gentlemen whose report has preceded him:

... but I was a gentleman born before my father, for the King’s son took me by the hand and called me brother, and then the two Kings called my father brother, and then the prince my brother and the princess my sister called my father father, and so we wept; and there was the first gentlemanlike tears that ever we shed. (134-40)

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40 The difference in the accounts is surely telling. The Gentlemen present an account of the reunion that marginalizes and dehumanizes the old Shepherd, while the Clown offers a narrative in which royal recognition of the familial connection between Kings and commoners is central. If rank and status are contingent upon mutual social recognition, it seems that the Court is not persuaded that the Shepherd or his son rank at all.
Although the passage clearly has nonsensical aspects, the fact remains that Perdita’s rediscovered royal status has reconfigured the hierarchy of relations between her birth family, her adoptive family, and the family into which she is marrying. The old Shepherd, so quick to disavow social ambition, derives quiet satisfaction from his promotion; we are invited to feel more anxious about his touchier son, who is so quick to defend his ambiguous position that his future seems less assured.

**Conclusion: Obliquity and Adoptive Heredity**

Both halves of *The Winter’s Tale* are centrally concerned with social ambition, or at least with the possibility of change in rank or status. More particularly, both halves foreground the possibility of advancement through a quasi-parental relationship with a high-ranking child, in this case Perdita. Both Paulina and the old Shepherd benefit from their roles in raising the princess, and both in turn at once work to shore up the established social order of the play and yet pose serious threats to that order.

The old Shepherd’s case is, on the surface, simpler. As Perdita’s adoptive father, he is charged with her care for sixteen years. Although Shakespeare is at pains to efface in him any trace of ambition, his position at the end is unresolved and problematic. Although modest in and of himself, and although entirely excluded from the statue scene, and marginalized in the Gentlemen’s narrative of the Kings’ reunion with their children, his son’s paradoxical description of them as “gentleman born” and insistence upon their familial ties to both royal families complicate and problematize supposedly simple notions of heredity and rank.

Paulina’s role is more complicated, and more ambivalent, as she enjoys a strong prior relationship with Hermione, and builds a strong, complex, and long-lasting relationship with
Leontes on the basis of her role as Perdita’s godmother. Unlike the Shepherd, she is making a self-conscious bid for authority and power, yet she neither seeks nor achieves a change in rank. Yet more obviously than the Shepherd, whose reticence seems to be instinctive, and whose son embodies coarser aspects of ambition, Paulina must struggle to balance her assertions of her prerogative to speak for the Queen and the Princess with a need to efface herself, to vanish into her role of servant and godmother, in order to insulate herself from accusations of speaking out of place and out of turn.

Like the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Paulina’s authority to speak stems from her close association with a higher-born child for whom she cares. More importantly, though, Paulina’s tactics for effacement have important parallels with Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Helen in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Like Helen, she is quick to emphasize her role as a servant, playing up the intensity of her bond with her mistress, and using that bond to justify uncommonly bold speech. In both cases, a determined gentlewoman with a distinct agenda of her own justifies her actions by casting them as the duties of a servant, rhetorically contracting out her agency. Like Beatrice, Paulina enthusiastically embraces the interpellations of those around her; if Leontes calls her a gossip and a midwife, a midwife and a gossip she will be – but she will assign those terms an entirely different valence.

Unlike those women, though, and like the Shepherd, Paulina ends the play marginalized, no longer Leontes’ surrogate wife, nor Hermione’s close protector, nor Perdita’s surrogate mother. Her unexpected betrothal to Camillo, structurally, reintegrates her back into both the court she has dominated for sixteen years and the patriarchal family structures that her dominance over Leontes has challenged. But Paulina’s actions throughout the play have had a more profound effect than the neatly symmetrical ending suggests. Paulina’s sixteen years as the
effective third member of a marriage, the very queerness of her relationship with Hermione, and her extreme authority over Leontes’ erotic life – all of these disrupt the social and sexual hierarchies that are apparently restored by her actions at the end of the play. Like the Shepherd, who is now a brother to two kings, her very presence acts as a reminder that the social orders she has laboured to protect, and whose structures she has exploited for her own ends, are less stable than the comfortable ending of the play would otherwise suggest.
Chapter 5 – Riddles and Vows, Contracts and Contingency in 
*All’s Well That Ends Well*

*In his youth*  
*He had the wit which I can well observe*  
*Today in our young lords: but they may jest*  
*Till their own scorn return to them unnoted*  
*Ere they can hide their levity in honour.*  
*So like a courtier, contempt nor bitterness*  
*Were in his pride or sharpness; if they were,*  
*His equal had awaked them, and his honour –*  
*Clock to itself – knew the true minute when*  
*Exception bid him speak, and at this time*  
*His tongue obeyed his hand.* (1.2.31-41)

In *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the related questions of social distinction and ambition are front and centre. Just as importantly for this dissertation, the play insistently problematizes and dramatizes the role various speech acts and genres play in reflecting and solidifying status distinctions. The plot revolves around one of Shakespeare’s most extravagantly successful social climbers, as Helen begins the play as a poor physician’s daughter and ends it as the Countess of Roussillon. More accurately, she achieves this promotion in rank halfway through the play, and spends the second half campaigning to legitimize that rank in the eyes of her husband – to translate rank into status. Questions of rank and status do not merely propel the plot; at the thematic core of the play is the debate between Bertram and the King (and indeed between Bertram and virtually every other character) about the relative importance of birth and virtue in determining rank. The play is usually classed as one of Shakespeare’s problem plays, in part because that debate is never fully settled. Is Bertram an unmitigated snob, blind to the advantages of a match with a clever, resourceful wife who has won the favour of the King? Or is the King wrong to assume that by royal fiat and gifts of land and money he can actually
compensate for Helen’s base birth? The answer to that unanswered question complicates critical understanding of the already vexed question of ethics in the play: are we to cheer for Helen’s virtuoso entrapment of the unappetizing Bertram? Condemn her for her monomania? Pity her for success?

These are questions that, without dismissing their importance, I do not intend to answer. Rather, I intend to argue that the very indeterminacy of the debates opens up a fruitful space in which the play explores not so much the ethics of social rank or status, as the operation of language as a means of gauging, asserting, and consolidating both. Taking the epigraph of this chapter as my starting point, I wish to examine the way in which characters in the play describe the operation of speech as a means of effecting change in their social position, and whether those descriptions hold true. Most importantly, though, I wish to focus on the role of the listener or listeners in determining the outcome, and indeed the nature, of speech acts. The previous three chapters of this dissertation have considered how speakers can tailor their utterances to achieve maximum effect; this chapter highlights the crucial dependence of speech acts on consent from listeners, and on the gap that dependence opens up for the rewriting of speech acts, without the knowledge or consent of their speaker.

The King’s words to Bertram in act one, scene two are a useful point of departure, as they establish a benchmark for the perceived relationship between speech and status at the French court. For the King, nobility, as embodied by the late Count of Roussillon, is marked by a perfect accord between word and deed that is lacking in the younger generation. In short, the King expresses one of the fundamental arguments of this dissertation, that the ability to deploy
felicitous speech acts is one of the most accurate indices of power. The King, however, presides over a court and a culture that are infinitely more complex than his summary allows. The protracted negotiation of Helen and Bertram’s marriage, read in light of the Countess’ more cautious approach to defining the relative merits of birth and virtue, offers a more nuanced view of the relationship between speech acts and status. Speech acts are socially embedded utterances, and no one – not even the King – can speak with absolute assurance of felicity, independent of the assent of others. Indeed, performative utterances place speakers in a curious double bind. Hierarchical differences in social position only become tangible as they are challenged or asserted, and the relationships presumed to underlie and authorize various genres of speech become open to challenge in the moment of their invocation.

In order to consider in depth how All’s Well That Ends Well presents the operation of speech acts as an index of power – and how the rewriting, redirecting, or rejecting of those speech acts can subvert the exercise of power based on status or rank – I will begin with a consideration of the “ideal” interrelation of speech and status as constructed by the King in his memorialization of Bertram’s father. From this starting point, it will quickly become apparent just how far Paroles – whose name associates him with empty words – falls short of the idealized harmony between word and deed, and how that shortfall translates into his social downfall.

In order to understand more clearly the mechanisms that allow Helen to pursue her claim to Bertram, I then pass on to a consideration of one of the genres of speech in the play that has attracted significant critical attention: building on work by Lori Schroeder Haslem, I examine how both the Dowager Countess and Diana Capilet manipulate the generic conventions of the

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1 This analysis is complicated by the fact that the King imagines in his memorialization a perfectly proportionate relationship between honour, rank, status, and power, eliding distinctions between the concepts.
riddle to stage manage important exchanges, first as the Countess persuades Helen to confess her love, and then as Diana confronts, accuses, and publicly shames Bertram. Haslem and I both base much of our analysis of how riddles function in the play on Mieke Bal’s seminal reading of the book of Judges, and the importance of speech acts in that book. But I contend that both Bal and Haslem pay insufficient attention to the social contexts in which riddles can exert a meaningful force, leading to a too-simple assertion that to tell a riddle grants a speaker power. In contrast, I will look at how characters carefully manipulate social convention and rhetorical situation to understand both the force of riddles in the play – and the limits of that force.

Certainly, a speaker who offers a riddle is claiming a one-up position over his or her listener in two ways. First, and most obviously, a riddling speaker knows more than the listener, as the speaker knows the solution to the riddle. More subtly, though, to speak in a riddle is to assert conversational dominance, as the speaker claims the right to defer explanation. Like the speaker of one of Thomas Wilson’s “round tales” a riddler imposes on the patience of his or her interlocutors.

With those limitations in mind, I pass on to a consideration of just how Helen is able to successfully subvert Bertram’s refusal to consummate their marriage and convert his refusal into a conditional acceptance. Absolutely key to her successful rewriting of Bertram’s rejection are two elements: the first is that she does not take his letter as an opportunity to talk back, but rather as a licence to act. The second is the public nature of the confrontation she engineers between Diana and Bertram: few plays dramatize as insistently as All’s Well the fundamentally social nature of even apparently private speech acts. Finally I consider what implications the insistent dramatization of the operation of speech acts has for the shifting definitions of rank and status in the play.
How Paroles Fails to Do Things with Words

Although I will argue that the King’s characterization of the relationship between speech and social status is too simple, his programmatic idealization of the late Count of Roussillon provides an ideal of the operation of speech in relation to status and rank. Nor is his memorialization of his friend innocent. A. G. Harmon suggests that at the sadly fallen-off court, “The mere memory of the man’s virtue is restorative…” (117), but the reality seems more that the King is constructing an ideal benchmark of honour, a standard to which he can then hold his current courtiers. The King’s idealized understanding of speech is strikingly similar to the patriarchal, aristocratic ethos of the duello discussed in chapter two: a gentleman or nobleman’s word is his bond, and he is understood to have the martial abilities to defend his honour with physical force. In his present courtiers, the King observes the same wit as the Count used to display, but without the “honour” of military accomplishment as a counterbalance to their levity. The pattern resonates with both Much Ado About Nothing and with Romeo and Juliet. As in Don Pedro’s coterie, here wit is represented as the lesser marker of status; it is a faute de mieux accomplishment, and indeed, in the King’s formulation, it is all the more dubious, as he equates wit with scorn. That scorn, too, can rebound on a witty speaker, as in the complex exchanges of bantering insults in the Montague clique.

The King’s refinement of that masculinist ethos is that he makes the ability to distinguish rank in others a crucial part of the Count’s nobility:

contempt nor bitterness
Were in his pride or sharpness; if they were,
His equal had awaked them, and his honour – ²

² The implication here that an equal could justifiably awake contempt or bitterness, while a “superior” should evoke deference and an “inferior” should evoke condescension, bears out my reading of Brooke and Shakespeare’s implication that the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is a direct and inevitable product of their equality, and their wish for distinction.
Clock to itself – knew the true minute when
Exception bid him speak…. (1.2.36-40).

The King imagines honour as at once worth defending with “sharpness” and yet somehow a
“clock to itself” – measuring itself with no external referent, or need for validation. In this
paradoxical formulation, honour consists in large part of knowing whose rank merits aggression,
and who deserves condescending forbearance. The Count would graciously use “those below
him” as “creatures of another place” (lines 41 and 40) – that is to say, as people of higher station
– and in “their poor praise he humbled” (45). That is to say, accepting the praise of his inferiors
was a sign of gracious humility; their praise does not serve to raise him, but rather his patience in
giving it ear marks him as generous.

Above all, the Count’s “tongue obeyed his hand” (40) – the key difference between his
behaviour and the careless young wits of the current court. The line is subject to two different
readings, both important to the definition of nobility that the King is constructing. The first
meaning of the line, as glossed by Snyder, is that the “hand” extends the clock metaphor: “as the
hand of his honour’s clock arrived at the proper hour on the dial (true minute, l. 39) his voice
responded by taking exception” (emphasis in original). Although the metaphor is somewhat
obscure, the meaning of Snyder’s reading is fairly simple: the Count’s sense of honour correctly
told him when to take exception and when not. Maurice Hunt’s reading, although on the surface
clearer, actually carries with it more complex implications:

By making his tongue obey his hand (by making sure he never made statements
that he could not perform), Bertram’s father never risked becoming a Paroles, a
fop whose braggadocio outstrips the speaker’s capacity for performance.
(“Triumph” 389).
I follow Hunt’s assessment of the King’s project – using the memory of the dead Count to construct an ideal courtier against whom his current subjects (particularly Paroles) will be found wanting. But the syntax of the sentence implies a more rigidly defined hierarchy than Hunt suggests. The tongue is not merely the partner of the hand, carefully restricting itself to the match the limits of the hand. Rather, the tongue is absolutely subordinated to honour (the clock’s hand) and to the means by which honour is achieved (his sword-wielding hand).

Before moving on to consider the manifold ways in which both Paroles and Bertram fail to live up to this ideal, it is important to consider a few points about the ideal as constructed. The first, as I have already mentioned, is that the King imagines perfect truth-value in speech and perfect felicity in speech acts to flow naturally from a pre-existing and a fixed social hierarchy. The image he uses to describe the frustration he feels at being too old to fulfill his duties as a king is telling, as he imagines the court and nobility of France as a giant beehive, and his own position as that of ‘king bee,’ a position he is eager to surrender by dying:

I, after him, do after him wish too,  
Since I nor wax nor honey can bring home,  
I quickly were dissolved from my hive  
To give some labourer’s room. (1.2.64-67).

In the King’s imagination, promotion and inheritance follow the strict hierarchy of a beehive, with room for only one monarch at the top, and lattice-like structure of honeycomb providing a fixed place for every member of society below. This, however, is impossible. If the nobility of France is as fixed a hierarchy as this, and if, as the King imagines, nobility of word and deed

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3 Cf. also Jonathan Hall: “The king constructs a nostalgic myth in accordance with his anxiety and his desire” (133).
4 See Snyder’s glossing of the problematic punctuation of this line for a brief discussion of the “Elizabethan misapprehension of hive-society” (1.2.67n).
flow directly from nobility of birth, then how comes it that the youth of the French court are failing to live up to the ideals that the King ascribes to the late Count? It is possible, of course, to see the present court as a corrupted, compromised inheritor of past glories; certainly the insistent presence of the older generation, all holding their heirs up to a standard that finds them wanting, fits with this interpretation. But the gap between the King’s gold standard and the behaviour of the young courtiers suggests another possibility, namely that the fabled grace of the old Count is just that: a fable, a powerfully imagined story designed to provide the young aristocrats of France with a standard of behaviour to which they should aspire, whether or not it ever existed. As the play progresses, and the King continually defines and redefines what constitutes nobility, the latter interpretation will become not only more plausible, but will indeed become the only plausible interpretation.

The second point worth emphasizing in the King’s account of old Roussillon is his characterizing of the effect of the Count’s words on his listeners. Bertram is assured – and we are, too – that the old Count’s

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{plausible words} \\
He scattered not in ears, but grafted them \\
To grow there and to bear. (53-55)
\end{align*}
\]

The King is emphasizing the caution with which Roussillon spoke, and the value of his words, but there is also here an important aspect of time. The Count’s words are imagined not simply to affect his listeners at the time of utterance, but rather to lodge in their ears and minds, to grow over time, and to bear fruit for the Count. The delay between the utterance of speech and the

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5 Cf. Neely on the older generation: “More fully drawn than in the romantic comedies, it is more emphatically in decline and hence dependent on the marriages of youth for its own rejuvenation” (Broken Nuptials 65).
ripening of its consequences is important. One of Bertram’s main intellectual deficiencies is that he imagines words to have an effect and then to be done with. The King here suggests – and Helen will capitalize on – the afterlife of words, and the possibility that they may take on a life and a meaning never intended by the speaker.

A full understanding of Bertram’s position at the end of the play depends on much more than the idealized symbiosis between honour and verbal felicity that I have just sketched out. That sketch is, however, more than sufficient to understand just how Paroles fails to live up to the ideals of the French court, and why he makes such an effective scapegoat. Critics who explicitly challenge the idea of *All’s Well That Ends Well* as a psychomachia in which Helen-as-virtue and Paroles-as-vice vie for Bertram often do so by making the point that Paroles does little or nothing to induce Bertram to vicious behaviour. Michael Friedman, for instance, argues that “those who charge Paroles with Bertram’s misdeeds do so in a partisan attempt to exonerate the count, in whose rehabilitation they have a considerable stake, at the expense of the social-climber Paroles” (“Male Bonds” 235). Paroles, though, plays much the same role in *All’s Well* that Friedman ascribes to Margaret in *Much Ado*: he embodies all of the traits that, in Bertram, threaten the orderly regeneration of the aristocracy, and his fall from gentleman to jester serves as a symbolic, rather than an actual, punishment for Bertram’s folly.

I do not wish to try readers’ patience by rehearsing at length the extent to which Paroles is a creature of empty words. Nothing in the play contradicts Helen’s initial assessment of him as “a notorious liar” (1.1.102) and “a great way fool, solely a coward” (103). Those traits are all the more important as they are the exact opposite of the virtues that the King extols as indexical of nobility. What success Paroles has as Bertram’s parasite comes in large part from his wit, and
from his understanding of how honour and nobility are supposed to function,\(^6\) as his accounts of past deeds are tailored to the masculinist ethos elaborated by the King. He bids farewell to the First and Second Lords in terms that make very clear the kind of honour he would like to lay claim to:

Noble heroes, my sword and yours are kin, good sparks, and lustrous, a word, good mettles. You shall find in the regiment of the Spinii one Captain Spurio with his cicatrice, an emblem of war, here on his sinister cheek. It was this very sword that entrenched it. Say to him I live, and observe his reports for me. (2.1.38-43)

Paroles, it seems, is one “that never felt a wound” who feels compelled to invent past victories. There is little reason to take seriously that he might have actually injured a Captain Spurio, or even that such a man exists: the “first concrete evidence Paroles advances for his martial experience has a name synonymous with falsehood” (Snyder 2.1.41n). However unconvincing Paroles’ story may be, though, he shows a clear understanding of how military prowess could be parlayed into social status or rank. Opening with an effusive compliment to the departing Lords, he then tries to turn that compliment back on himself, by emphasizing their shared brotherhood in arms. More specifically, his use of certain key words suggests that he is conflating the related concepts of honour through feats of arms, and honour derived from birth: the military experience he claims to share with the Lords makes their swords kin. That is to say that the swords, standing metonymically for their owners, are related by blood or marriage. Moreover, he continues to blur the distinction between honour derived from birth and that derived from deeds by addressing the Lords as “good mettles,” again equating them with their swords through the pun on metal/mettle. The pun, though, serves to highlight their supposedly innate attributes, all while tying them more

\(^6\) In some respects, the relationship between Bertram and Paroles recreates that between Claudio and Benedick, though in an even less flattering register. Cf. Snyder (“Introduction” 43) and Friedman (“Male Bonds” esp. 233-35).
closely with their deeds. The equation here is not particularly persuasive – which makes the King’s attempts to assure Bertram that Helen can earn nobility through virtue seem all the more tendentious.

The very weakness of Paroles’ claims to nobility is further highlighted by his aggression towards Lafeu. While Bertram and Helen make their vows under the King’s supervision, the two courtiers trade barbs.

*Lafeu* Do you hear, monsieur? A word with you.

*Paroles* Your pleasure, sir.

*Lafeu* Your lord and master did well to make his recantation.

*Paroles* Recantation? My lord? My master?

*Lafeu* Ay. Is it not a language I speak?

*Paroles* A most harsh one, and not to be understood without bloody succeeding. My master! (2.3.185-92)

Lafeu, it is true, is needlessly baiting Paroles, cruelly highlighting his subordinate position. Four points about Paroles’ response are worth noting. The first is that he, like Tybalt or Sebastian, responds to slights against his honour by immediately invoking the conventions of the *duello*, promising that if he were to deign to understand Lafeu, there would be bloody succeeding; in other words, he would be obliged to give the lie to Lafeu. The second is that, like Andrew Aguecheek, he is averse to actually following through, and finds reasons not to give the lie – first

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7 I think it is quite clear that we are to understand the baiting as deliberate. In the very first scene, Lafeu demonstrates that he is keenly aware of the solecism Bertram commits in instructing Helen: “Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her” (1.1.77-78). Lafeu’s farewell is offered in terms that are clearly intended to take the sting out of Bertram’s address, highlight both Helen’s gentility and her other virtues: “Farewell, pretty lady. You must hold the credit of your father” (lines 79-80). The generosity and sensitivity highlighted in this scene make his very lack of generosity with Paroles all the more noticeable.
refusing to admit that he has understood Lafeu’s words, and then excusing himself based on Lafeu’s age: “You are too old, Sir. Let it satisfy you, you are too old” (2.3.197-98). For all that Lafeu clearly has the upper hand in the exchange, the move is shrewd; Paroles can lay claim to the right to bear arms (as we have seen one of the principal and most visible hallmarks of gentility\(^8\)) without ever having to prove himself in using them. The third point is that it is Lafeu’s attempt to define Paroles’ social position that prompts this aggressive response. The conversation does not become openly hostile until Lafeu tries to fix Paroles’ social position, forcing him to resist that attempt to define him. This is an inversion of the more common pattern we have seen, in which social distinctions are enforced in response to their being questioned or subverted; here we see them questioned in a direct response to their enforcement.

The final point is just how far both Paroles and Lafeu fall short of the ideal of nobility as elaborated by the King in his memorial of Bertram’s father. It is true that Lafeu’s “sharp verbal wit exposes the pretender not only by what he says but also by the verbal agility with which he [Lafeu] says it, defeating Paroles with his own favorite weapon” (Snyder “Names” 270), but such exposure runs counter to the generosity described and prescribed by the King. The old Count, as we have seen, apparently never spoke in “pride or sharpness” unless his “equal had awaked them.” In so baiting and castigating Paroles, Lafeu engages in behaviour that demeanes himself, according to the King’s ethos. The distinction in behaviour between the lords at court and their supposed social inferior is not as clear-cut as the King would have it, for Lafeu seems to guard his privileged status as jealously as Paroles covets it.

\(^8\) David S. Berkeley and Donald Keese go so far as to assert that in terms of class in Shakespeare’s time “there were only two, armigerous and base” (247).
There is more to this exchange, though, than a simple demonstration of the artificiality of rank based on “noble” birth. The scene marks the emergence of Paroles as more than an index of Bertram’s folly, becoming a scapegoat for it. As I have noted above, Friedman points out that we see no real evidence of Paroles encouraging any bad behaviour in Bertram to which the young Count would not stoop unprompted. Alexander Leggatt, too, observes that “the unmasking of Paroles” does not “do much to change him; he has one illusion less, but his behaviour is not appreciably different” (“Testing” 37). These are both legitimate arguments against our interpreting Paroles as responsible for Bertram’s behaviour, but the social logic of scapegoating does not require such a close causal relationship. Paroles embodies many of Bertram’s deficiencies, and his punishment and fall from grace serve to exculpate Bertram on a symbolic, if not logical, level. Most importantly, it does not matter too much whether the audience is convinced of the legitimacy of scapegoating Paroles. The important question is whether the French court will accept the substitution. In common with Margaret, Paroles is much more aggressive than the figure whose guilt he expiates. Margaret’s exchanges with Benedick are more insistent, less subtle, less accommodating of social realities than Beatrice’s more measured wit. If Bertram and Paroles share a snobbish pride in their station, Paroles lacks the justification of birth, and he defends his station by threatening violence against a man who is clearly, by the standards of the court, his social superior.

Paroles, in Lafeu’s eyes, is an upstart servant, discontented with his state. More serious, though, is his lack of appreciation for the advantages he does have. Lafeu’s invective against

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9 Which they do with alacrity. Amongst many other instances, Lafeu assures the Countess that her “son was misled with a snipped-taffeta fellow there” (4.5.1-2), and she seizes upon this reasoning, blaming Paroles for Helen’s apparent death: “I would I had not known him. It was the death of the most virtuous gentlewoman that ever nature had praise for creating” (4.5.8-10).
Paroles runs through a catalogue of direct insults: he is a “vagabond and no true traveller” and a “knave” (2.3.261-65), he is excessively proud of his finery, including scarves (line 204) and affectedly gartered sleeves (line 251). But in reproving Paroles for his foppery, Lafeu makes a curious statement: “If ever thou beest bound in thy scarf and beaten, thou shall find what it is to be proud of thy bondage” (2.3.226-28). He is here not merely critiquing excessive pride in clothing. Rather, he is suggesting that Paroles’ misplaced pride causes him to resent, rather than take pride in, his relationship with Bertram, in whose service he is. It is Lafeu’s foregrounding of that relationship that Paroles particularly resents. When the older man refers to Bertram as Paroles’ lord and master, Paroles immediately, but ineffectually, tries to refute the phrase, asserting that “He is my good lord; whom I serve above is my master” (2.3.246-47). In other words, he is quite happy to be associated with, and to profit from, Bertram’s aristocratic station, but he wishes to benefit from that association without the taint of servility.

In this resentment, Paroles and Bertram share a narrow view of the bonds of service, at least when considering those to whom they are bound. Bertram seems to exert very little direct control over Paroles. Although we learn that he has been the young Count’s go-between with Diana (4.3.212 and following), their interactions rarely seem to be inflected by a pronounced vertical social distance. Paroles’ resentment, witnessed first by his refusal to accept Lafeu’s use of the term “master,” and then played out more fully in his eagerness to denounce Bertram to his captors, stems from the relationship itself, rather than any abuse we have seen him suffer at Bertram’s hands. The young Count wears his rank lightly in his interactions with his companions.

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10 Wardship and service are not co-terminous, but Bertram’s understanding of his status as the King’s ward is intensely focused on his “subjection” (1.1.5), the common trait of wardship and service. For a fuller discussion of the legal implications of wardship, and its potential for abuse, cf. Zitner (esp. 43) and Sokol and Sokol (esp. 9 and 45).
in arms; but he, like Paroles, explicitly and bitterly resents the service he owes the King. The very first lines Bertram utters in the play, while his mother and Lafeu mourn the passing of the old Count, and worry about the future of the King, express his bitter frustration at his subordinate position as the King’s ward: “I must attend on his majesty’s command, to whom I am now a ward, evermore in subjection” (1.1.4-5). What Bertram sees as humiliating subjection, Lafeu encourages him to understand instead as an opportunity for education, development, and advancement. Bertram will find in him new father, one who “so generally is at all times good must of necessity hold his virtue to you, whose worthiness would stir it up where it wanted rather than lack it where there is such abundance” (1.1.7-11). The syntax is complex, but Lafeu is clearly presenting the King as one whose goodness inspires that same virtue in others, rather than who will seek to find virtuous men deficient.

There is good reason to question both Bertram’s resentful characterization of his wardship and Lafeu’s idealized account; certainly the King’s judgement that the young courtiers are mere “goers backward” (1.2.48) belies Lafeu’s claim of his magnanimity. Critical opinion varies. On one hand it ranges from those who argue, as Harmon does, that the “repositories of true honor have died, and the legacies left to their successors have been squandered” (118). On the other hand, Jonathan Hall contends that “what the king nostalgically clings to [as Lafeu

11 Both Bertram and Paroles, in so vehemently rejecting their positions in service, are arguing that they are exceptional to a degree that is easily lost on a twenty-first-century audience. The institution of service was all-pervasive in early modern England, and the young were particularly likely to be bound in service. As Mark Thornton Burnett has noted, “Usually between 10 and 30 years of age and unmarried, servants were to be found in 29 per cent of all households during the period, and a substantial proportion of young people of both sexes could expect to be servants at some stage of their lives” (1).

12 Syntactical complexity represents a further avenue for exploring my central argument about the need to make claims of status, or elaborations of the ideology that underlies claims of status, off-record and indirect. In *All’s Well That Ends Well* moments of syntactical obscurity often coincide with characters’ attempts to offer moral justification for existing social structures and forms of distinction or domination – or what Hall, citing Deleuze, characterizes as “miraculation” (see following page).
does], is that effect of encoding which Deleuze calls ‘miraculation,’ through which the despot is perceived as the true origin of collective riches” (131). I do not wish to stake too firm a claim to a position on this spectrum; as a play, All’s Well resists easy definition on any front. I will refer again to Kirby Farrell’s argument, though, that patriarchy “provides crucial symbols which validate the self” (86) and yet it is a system in which “only self-effacement brought a share in the father’s power” (88). What Lafeu clearly understands is that – regardless of the ethics of a patriarchal system – social proximity to the King translates into very real benefits.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I would like to extend that very concrete observation by considering Robert Shaughnessy’s objection to Austin’s definition of performative language. Shaughnessy contends that “Austin’s notion of the performative misrepresents a situation in which we are at our most subjected as one in which we, seemingly free to speak and choose, are sovereign” (28). What Shaughnessy sees as an objection to Austin’s definition, I see as an observation that is implicit in Austin’s writing. Speech acts depend for their force on social convention; if the conventions of a speech act are not observed, the act will misfire. Shaughnessy has hit on a key paradox that, even if a speaker deploying a speech act is not sovereign, he or she is engaged in an assertive exercise of will, even while binding him or herself even more deeply to the society whose conventions lend the speech act force. Two of the characters who most clearly understand this point – a point that is entirely lost on Bertram – are his mother and Diana.

*How the Countess and Diana Do Things with Riddles*

Bertram’s mother, the Dowager Countess of Roussillon and Diana Capilet, the young Florentine woman Bertram seeks to seduce, are more than Helen’s allies. They are her supporters, true, as the Countess endorses Helen’s suit for Bertram and her plan to cure the King, and provides moral and material support for Helen’s voyage to court. She also, importantly,
teaches Helen much about language and how it can be used. Diana, too, is more than merely Helen’s agent; she is Helen’s double, acceding to Bertram’s suit so that Helen can replace her in the dark, publicly accusing and shaming Bertram, and receiving from the King the same offer of a husband that Helen receives in the second act. But the differences in social status and position between Helen and her allies are as important as that alliance itself. If all three women are experts at riddles, they use them very differently.

I do not intend to dismiss Haslem’s claims that a riddling speaker has power, or that her power diminishes when the riddle is solved. There is a clear instance of both of these maxims in act one, scene three, as the Countess probes the cause of Helena’s melancholy, while knowing full well that it is lovesickness for Bertram. Helena, torn between her duty to answer her lady honestly and her fear of disapproval, opts to answer in riddling form:

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You are my mother, madam, would you were –
So that my lord your son were not my brother –
Indeed my mother! Or were you both our mothers
I care no more for than I do for heaven,
So were I not his sister. Can’t no other
But, I your daughter, he must be my brother? (1.3.161-66)
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In answering the Countess with a riddle, Helena is not trying to exert direct power over her. Rather, she is trying to honour the Countess’s authority, while evading it. Helena demonstrates what Haslem posits: in speaking words that have a perfect truth-value, but whose real meaning is hidden, Helena gains freedom to express herself without danger. When the Countess solves her riddle, explaining that she can be Helena’s mother-in-law, Helena has no choice but to admit her love, and answer honestly.

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13 Cf. Snyder: “As the girl Bertram wants rather than the one he flees, she is constructed as an opposite to Helen” (“Naming” 272).
But there are two crucial points about Helen’s riddle, and they are the points that imbue the speech genre with force. The first is that the Countess’s rank and status give her an authority to compel Helen to answer. When questioned by the Widow Capilet about her acquaintance with Bertram, Helen answers that she knows him “But by the ear, that hears most nobly of him. His face I know not” (3.5.50-51) – in other words, she glibly lies. Helen’s deference to the Countess, whether born out of respect for her rank, affection for her, or some mixture of the two, will not let her lie. The riddle itself is more an index of the power relationship between the two than it is a factor in producing such a relationship. The second point is that the Countess actually cares about the answer to the riddle: she wants to hear Helen admit her love for Bertram. This is important. Mieke Bal, in describing the operation of riddles, first discusses the genre proper, and then moves on to discuss what happens when a riddle is told with a stake or bet attached:

As a speech act, a riddle is based on a position of power. The subject who proposes the riddle knows the answer, while the addressee does not. Moreover, there is power in the initiative itself. It presupposes the right to be listened to, the obligation on the part of the addressee to invest the effort to find the answer. (5)

This definition is lacking, for it says nothing about how those presuppositions, or perlocutionary constatives, may be rejected; this is a perceptive exploration about how riddles work in myths or stories, but it is insufficient for everyday conversation. A riddle told between friends or acquaintances presupposes a power relationship only insofar as there is an imbalance in knowledge. I can tell a riddle to anyone I like, and he or she will be under no obligation to seek out an answer beyond the promptings of curiosity. To take a classical example, any traveller unlucky enough to come across the Sphinx had better be able to find an answer to her riddle. But the matter is urgent not because the Sphinx tells a riddle, per se, but rather because she will eat anyone who fails to answer her. The power relationship derives not simply from the disparity in
knowledge, but rather from the Sphinx’s claws and teeth. There is a reason Oedipus is not called
on to solve the riddle of the fluffy kitten.

Bal’s discussion of the riddle with a stake conforms more closely to the kinds of riddles
that operate in *All’s Well That Ends Well*: “In the case of a stake, the power is betokened by the
possession of that stake. … Thus they submit themselves to the power of the addresser; they
hope or trust that they can reverse the situation” (5). The stake in Helen’s conversation with the
Countess is Helen’s wish not to confess her love; the Countess’ solving of her riddle reverses the
situation, compelling Helen to make a clear and honest admission – but again it is worth
emphasizing that the compulsion does not stem solely from the Countess’s solving of Helen’s
riddle, but rather from the relationship between the two women.

There is one other feature of Helen’s answer to the Countess that is worth considering, a
feature that suggests she has been paying attention to the Countess’ wordplay. In Helen’s first
line she slips easily from the indicative to the subjunctive: “You are my mother, madam, would
you were…” (1.3.161). This easy flitting between moods is a characteristic Helen shares with the
Countess. In the opening scene of the play, the Countess, meditating on the death of Helen’s
father, quibbles on the word “had”:

*Countess*  This young gentlewoman had a father – O, that “had”, how sad a
passage ’tis! – whose skill was almost as great as his honesty; had
it stretched so far, would have made nature immortal, and death
should have play for lack of work. (1.1.18-22)

This is more than a simple expression of regret at the passing of a good man. The Countess is
meditating on what *could* have been, and the terms of her meditation highlight the double
function of the word “had.” As both preterite and subjunctive, its function in this passage is like
Bal’s elaboration of the riddle: it hovers between two grammatical moods, and – rather than merely exploiting the ambiguity – draws attention to the permeable boundary between subjunctive and indicative.

Helen and the Countess both demonstrate awareness that the subjunctive may indeed become real: conditions may be fulfilled, and contracts honoured. Language itself, though, is not enough to re-shape reality. The Countess has solved the riddle of how Helen may be her daughter and yet not, but the mere knowledge of the solution does not make it so; Bertram’s consent, and more, is needed. Helen has herself commented upon the disparity between words and reality, in noting that her wishes will not be enough to guarantee Bertram’s happiness, commenting that it is a pity “wishing well had not a body in’t/ Which might be felt” (1.1.183-84). It is significant that in a play that deals with the elements of folk tales, the usual folk tale solutions do not work. Wishes do not come true without significant action; riddles may be solved without reward.

What serves to put a “body” into speech, to lend illocutionary force, is social convention, or at least consensus. Diana’s denunciation of Bertram will serve as an illustrative example of this fact, as Diana first capitalizes on her audience’s suspicions of Bertram, and is given remarkable freedom to speak – and then loses the King’s sympathy and interest as she pushes her riddling too far. But Diana, like the Countess, also serves as a foil for Helen, and I would like to consider an apparently throwaway line in her conversation with Bertram. For the two women also share the unusual distinction of having more than one name in the text. Helen is called both Helen and Helena in dialogue, while Diana is introduced in the stage directions of the Folio as Violenta, is addressed by Bertram as Fontybell, and seems, by her own statement and her signature on the letter to the King, to be called Diana Capilet.
Bertram They told me your name was Fontybell.

Diana No, my good lord, Diana. (4.2.1-2)

Perhaps it is a minor point, but I think it is worth noting that Diana’s negotiation with Bertram opens with her very clearly establishing who she is, talking back to Bertram and refusing the name he offers for her. The exchange is at once an intriguing loose end (who told Bertram her name was Fontybell?14 Are we to understand Bertram is really mistaken, or does this represent an attempt to distance himself from the actual flesh and blood woman he is determined to seduce, to reduce her to a throwaway name?) while it also offers an approach to Bertram that stands in stark contrast to Helen’s. 15 While it is hard to imagine Helen contradicting Bertram, it is the first thing Diana does in conversation with him. Whereas Helen adopts a strategy of aggressive submission, Diana is openly defiant. We shall see below, too, that while Helen allows the terms of conversation between her and Bertram to remain fruitfully vague, Diana is insistent upon their being clear to both parties. Diana, indeed, gives explicit consideration in her negotiations to how oaths operate as speech acts:

    Then, pray you tell me,
    If I should swear by Jove’s great attributes
    I loved you dearly, would you believe my oaths
    When I did love you ill? This has no holding,
    To swear by him whom I profess to love
    That I will work against him. Therefore your oaths
    Are words and poor conditions but unsealed,
    At least in my opinion. (4.2.24-31)

14 Cf. Snyder: “In this context the initial opposition of names becomes relevant. ‘Fontibel,’ the name he has been ‘told,’ posits as the natural accompaniment of beauty the sexually suggestive yielding flow of liquid. And in contradiction to his wish is the unyielding fact: not Fontibel, but Diana” (“Naming” 273).

15 Snyder argues that the fact that “this confusion serves no purpose in the plot only puts more stress on the names themselves” (“Naming” 273) before amending her argument with the passage quoted above.
Diana is not here merely questioning the sincerity of Bertram’s oaths – though of course she is – but rather she is also offering a pointed critique of the conditions under which a vow may be made in the first place.

The terms under which she finally accedes to Bertram’s request, though, show her to be less concerned with divine underwritings of earthly vows than she is with the pragmatic social underpinnings of vows. In demanding Bertram’s ring, she is at once making an insistent comparison between the value of her chastity and the value of his ancestral honour, appealing to the tradition of exchanging rings as a sign of engagement or of marriage, and making a calculated demand for some kind of surety in her bargain. But her choice (presumably in accordance with Helen’s instructions) of Bertram’s ring is more than mere symbolism, for the jewel is immediately recognizable. When she produces it at court, the Countess can immediately and confidently assure the King of its provenance:

He blushes, and ’tis hit.
Of six preceding ancestors, that gem,
Conferred by testament to th’ sequent issue,
Hath it been owed and worn. (5.3.195-98)

While many critics have commented on the ring as a symbol of the “great chain of dynastic heirs” (Kehler 70) in which Bertram is a link, the very distinctiveness of the ring is essential to the plot, and to the play’s dramatization of the operation of speech acts. Diana is quite explicit:

And on your finger in the night I’ll put
Another ring, that what in time proceeds
May token to the future our past deeds. (4.2.61-63)

That ring, originally given to Helen by the King, is apparently just as distinctive, as he, Lafeu and the Countess all claim to recognize it on sight as a jewel Helen reckoned “At her life’s rate”
The rings are to act as witnesses to the contract undertaken in secret; in promising Diana his “house”, his “honour,” and his “life” (4.2.52), Bertram is undertaking a bigamous contract de futuro which would, if it were not bigamous, be considered valid upon consummation. Diana and Helen are securing evidence of that consummation. The rings themselves are less important as a symbol than they are as evidence that prompts the King and his court to recognize the truth of Diana’s claims, effectively conscripting the King, Lafeu and the Countess to testify against Bertram. It is that communal recognition, and the force of the social pressures exerted by his mother, his peers, and his King, that are to compel Bertram to recognize and honour his vow.

That is the point with which I wish to end my discussion of Diana. For all that her riddling language in the final scene mystifies her actions, the bare outline of the strategy she and Helen implement for trapping and confronting Bertram is shrewdly pragmatic, grounded in a very clear understanding of the social nature of performative language. While Helen’s plan is in part dictated by the terms under which Bertram has tried to refuse her and abjure their marriage (she needs him to impregnate her, and she needs the ring from his finger), every other aspect is tailored to how oaths work: the public shaming of Bertram may have ritualistic overtones, but at its most basic it is an exercise designed to ensure that he is confronted with his dependence on social and familial ties, and thus with his need for the approval of the King, his mother, and the French nobility.

At this point, though, it becomes clear that Diana has gone too far – and that overreach shows up the limited extent to which riddles can empower a speaker. Diana is initially allowed to speak at court because she has won over one of the courtiers with her “fair grace and speech” (5.3.133). But the King is interested in her suit because he is already investigating Bertram’s
behaviour towards Helen, fearing that, in light of her reported death and of Diana’s accusation, her life “Was foully snatched” (5.3.154). Diana’s initial testimony – despite the critical attention to her riddling – is to the point, brief, and factual. When Paroles, called as a witness, quibbles over whether Bertram has seduced Diana, the King’s response is to complain that he is “a knave and no knave. What an equivocal companion is this!” (5.3.249-50). His impatience with Paroles makes it all the more puzzling as to why Diana should choose to answer evasively.

This ring, you say, was yours?

*Diana* Ay, my good lord.

*King* Where did you buy it? Or who gave it you?

*Diana* It was not given me, nor I did not buy it.

*King* Who lent it you?

*Diana* It was not lent me neither.

*King* Where did you find it then?

*Diana* I found it not.

*King* If it were yours by none of all these ways, How could you give it him?

*Diana* I never gave it him.

*Lafeu* This woman’s an easy glove, my lord, she goes off and on at pleasure. (5.3.270-75)

The exchange is jarring – but that is in keeping with the overall arc of the play. In the first two acts, we have been presented with a folk tale of the clever young woman who cures the King and is rewarded with a husband, but the structure of the play functions to question that folkloric logic. Leggatt writes that with Bertram’s rejection of Helen we come back to earth with a bump. It is as though Portia had said to Bassanio “You may be good at riddles, but who ever said this was a sound basis for a marriage?” (“Testing” 29)
The effect of Diana’s sudden resort to riddling in response to the King’s questioning has a similar effect. Diana may be good with riddles, but who ever said they were an appropriate speech genre for legal testimony?

In fact, long before the riddle is solved, Diana must struggle to hold the attention of the King and Lafeu. Both men, in fact, take her evasive replies as evidence to support Bertram’s accusation that she is “a common gamester to the camp” (5.3.188). Lafeu’s suggestion that she is an “easy glove” leads to the King’s conclusion that she is indeed a “common customer” (286), and he passes the conditional sentence that “Unless thou tell’st me where though hadst this ring, / Thou diest within the hour” (283-84). Threats of death, accusations of sexual incontinence—these are the same threats and accusations levelled against Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*, as she makes her defence of Hermione. It is more than coincidence that Diana’s position should be strikingly similar to Paulina’s. In both cases, an outspoken woman advocates on behalf of a woman of higher status whose social and sexual position is in dispute. In both cases, the aggressive speech of the woman is met with threats of violence and accusations of sexual immorality. Implicitly, if Diana is not chaste, she cannot accuse Bertram of sexual immorality, and she is called a prostitute by no fewer than three men. If Paulina disrupts the marital chastity of the King and Queen, she cannot legitimately speak in Hermione’s defence; Leontes therefore accuses her of being a “most intelligencing bawd” (2.3.68). And finally, if both characters overstep the bounds of “propriety” in speaking, their excess is in part underwritten – as Kirilka Stavreva has argued about Paulina – by the “power of theatrically displayed female bodies”

16 In both cases, there are complex relationships based on substitution. While there is no overt question of Paulina or Hermione taking each other’s place in bed, Paulina does stand as a placeholder in Hermione’s marriage for sixteen years. Similarly, Paulina explicitly offers herself to Leontes as a victim of torture, in an act of implicit substitution (3.2.173-77); I have already argued, too, for the erotic and sadomasochistic overtones of that passage.
In Paulina’s case, the infant Perdita stands in for her mother. Diana, in her case, stands in for Helen – as Helen stood in for her with Bertram – until Helen’s pregnant body can be revealed in a *coup de théâtre*. That very theatricality, though, comes very close to exhausting the King’s patience; Diana’s insistence on delay, on speaking in riddles, very nearly backfires.

**How Helen Does Things with Speech Acts**

Diana’s outspoken condemnation of Bertram, undertaken on Helen’s behalf, often seems to colour readings of Helen’s actual speech. Helen herself seldom speaks in riddles, though she often speaks in *sententiae*, and her syntax is occasionally opaque. In fact, her speech when talking with others is characteristically to the point. Her very first line of the play – asserting that “I do affect a sorrow indeed” (1.1.54) – may not correct the Countess’ assumption that Helen’s tears are shed in grief for her father, but nothing in her statement is riddling. Rather, Helen here is being characteristically reticent and deferential.

The long exchange between the King and Helen, in which they strike their bargain, is an excellent example of Helen’s speech when she is in her assertive mode. Moreover, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is one of the few instances of a character in Shakespeare explicitly negotiating the conversion of one form of social capital to another. Helen possesses a medical authority as her father’s daughter, and she seeks the King’s assistance in translating that authority into both status (in that through her association with the King she will gain prestige and legitimacy) and rank (as she will acquire a title by marriage). The passage usually attracts attention for its fairy-tale elements; its rhyming couplets and its repeated invocations of heavenly grace mark it out for Leggatt as “the high-water mark of romance in the play” (“Testing” 26). Certainly, Helen’s claims to act only as God’s “weakest minister” (2.1.135) play up the supposedly supernatural elements of the cure, and her entreaty that the King not think her
immodest shows her caution. But Harmon notes that the “language [in this scene] works on two levels: first on the level of transaction, striking a deal by creating obligations and duties; second, on the level of nature, implying essences, causes, and effects” (125). It is the second level that usually attracts the most attention, obscuring the first. But what Helen does in striking her bargain with the King is fascinating, and demonstrates the extent to which her plan for winning Bertram depends on the astute manipulation of performative language. To strike a bargain between two people, each makes what is in effect a conditional oath. Each party commits to a certain action, as long as the other party fulfills his or her promised action. But as David Schalkwyk observes, “oaths require a social, historical, and indeed, a metaphysical context in which faith and trust in something beyond human beings is possible” (“Speech” 384). Given the extent to which Helen’s language in this scene is steeped in religion, we might expect her to invoke God as witness and guarantor of her side of the bargain. She does not.

Instead, when asked by the King what she dares venture, she offers her life as the stake in this bargain:

Tax of impudence,
   A strumpet’s boldness, a divulged shame;
Traduced by odious ballads, my maiden’s name
   Seared otherwise; no worse of worst, extended
With vilest torture, let my life be ended. (2.1.168-72)

Helen, previously so concerned that her wishes lacked force, lacked a body, here offers her own body to underwrite her promise. But she goes further, offering that should she fail to save the King’s life, she should be proclaimed a whore, her reputation utterly destroyed. There are two important points to note about this. The first is that the price she offers for failure is directly related to the reward she would seek. If she succeeds, she is to marry whom she chooses, while if she fails, she is to be branded a slut, rendered effectively unmarriageable. If the threat of death is
the folk tale part of the bargain, the extent to which she will risk her reputation is the part more firmly located in the “realistic” mode of the play. Her earlier discussion with Paroles, although reductive in its terms, has already made it clear that her virginity is one of her few assets – a “commodity” (1.1.155) that is “vendible” (1.1.157).\(^\text{17}\) At this moment, Helen is speaking as the tough pragmatist, aware of sexual politics, rather than the “clever wench” of the folk tale. The second point to note is that, far-fetched though the punishment might sound to modern ears, it is exactly the punishment with which Diana is later threatened when the King starts to doubt her accusations against Bertram. Helen clearly understands the man with whom she is bargaining.

She also knows enough about the King to make sure that the terms of their bargain are very explicit – terms that shield her from accusations of excessive ambition. She promises that

Exempted be from me the arrogance  
To choose from forth the royal blood of France,  
My low and humble name to propagate  
With any branch or image of thy state;  
But such a one, thy vassal, whom I know  
Is free for me to ask, thee to bestow. (2.1.193-98)

The King’s response to this negotiation of terms reads like Austin \textit{avant la lettre}, as he confirms that “These premises observed, / Thy will by my performance shall be served” (2.1.199-200). This explicitness is important. The bargain with the King is one of two major bargains Helen makes in the course of the play; structurally, curing the King is the equivalent of performing the “tasks” in Bertram’s letter, and she approaches those bargains very differently. With the King, to whom she is very clearly a suitor, she speaks clearly, frankly, and boldly – indeed so boldly that she needs to temper it with her insistence that she is simply a vessel for holy will, and with a

\(^{17}\) On the second level of the conversation, establishing “essences, causes, and effects”, there is also the suggestion that the King’s cure can be achieved only by a virgin – folk-tale logic.
reassurance that she will not try to marry into the royal family. With Bertram, when she has the upper hand, she is cautious, hesitant, and indirect.

Immediately after her marriage to Bertram, as he abruptly takes his leave of her and of the court, occurs one of the few scenes in which the audience sees Helen and Bertram interact directly, without the mediation of the King, Countess, or Lafeu. Helen’s tone in addressing her husband is servile in every sense of the word, reporting that she has done “as I was commanded from you” (2.5.15), and assuring her husband that she is his “most obedient servant” (2.5.74). Bertram is clearly uncomfortable with this degree of servility from his wife. Schalkwyk contends that, for pragmatic reasons, “His repeated demurral to her pledge of service stems from his desire to avoid the obligation that such a pledge places on him” (“Love and Service” 24, emphasis in original). Judith Weil offers the more charitable argument, drawing in particular on William Gouge, that such a degree of subordination would have been distasteful to an early modern audience (cf. especially 62-63). Both factors may well be in play, as Bertram’s extended explanation for his absence – immediately after calling Helen, while out of earshot, his “clog” (2.5.55) – serves to do repair-work for Helen’s positive face, cushioning his abandonment of her in fourteen lines of prevarication. His reluctance to accept Helen’s pledge of service, when made overtly, is seriously undercut by his willingness to exercise “the prerogative of a husband to order his wife about” (“Love and Service” 24).18 This is, in fact, one of Bertram’s most important misunderstandings in the play. Bertram’s instructions to his wife, after all, are

18 Bertram’s refusal of her request that he kiss her goodbye seems to be in keeping with Schalkwyk’s assessment of his motivations. As Ellen Belton argues,

In fact, of course, the kiss, which Bertram refuses to grant, is not valueless; it represents a symbolic consummation of the marriage, an act that would at least make ambiguous Bertram’s refusal to perform the “ministration and required office” that normally follows the marriage ceremony. (Belton 130)
predicated on the fact that she is his wife. In the opening scene, when Bertram instructs her to be “comfortable” to his mother, he is doing so as an aristocrat to his social inferior, but the actual service relationship is between the Countess and Helen; Bertram has not yet come of age, nor come into the full prerogatives of his rank. When he gives her orders in act two, he is doing so on the basis of his spousal relationship – a relationship he would rather abjure. In giving Helen orders, he is occupying the very subject position he would like to vacate. In Shaughnessy’s terms, the more he would like to enact his sovereign will, the more subjected he becomes to the social position the King has forced him into in marrying him to Helen.

But Helen, too, is constrained by the position she has so aggressively sought. As a wife she does owe Bertram obedience; moreover, given the extent to which her early soliloquies fetishize the disparity between her rank and Bertram’s, it is hard to imagine her talking back to him. Thus constrained, it makes sense that as he leaves for France she asks him in riddling, self-denigrating, indirect fashion for a kiss:

*Helen*  I am not worthy of the wealth I owe,  Nor dare I say ‘tis mine, and yet it is;  But, like a timorous thief, most fain would steal  What law does vouch mine own. …  Something, and scarce so much. Nothing, indeed.  I would not tell you what I would my lord.  Faith, yes:  Strangers and foes do sunder and not kiss. (2.5.81-88)

Unable to speak freely, Helena again turns to riddling to ask for what she desires. Bertram’s refusal to kiss her, in effect, makes her last sentence a riddle with a perfect truth-value, but not the one she hopes for. He sees her as a stranger and a foe. Her response – “I shall not break your bidding, good my lord” – returns her to her position as Bertram’s obedient servant, yet it is from this position that Helena will achieve her desire.
In Helen, once married, we see a dynamic that has already appeared in *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Beatrice takes Benedick’s words literally, and interprets them as an instruction to leave (5.2.44-55). Friedman characterizes the exchange as follows:

> Although Beatrice might appear to converse mildly in this exchange, as Benedick wishes, her affected courtesy merely masks her subversive but literally obedient manipulation of her future husband's language. Such subversion is one of the few forms of verbal power left open to the woman who forgoes wielding pointed wit. (“Hush’d” 356).

Beatrice’s literal submission, covering for her subversion of Benedick’s language, appears only in one scene. For Helen, such submission is her strategy throughout the second half of the play. In particular, she seeks to exploit the divided subject position that Bertram occupies in simultaneously giving her orders, while refusing to acknowledge the relationship that gives him the conventional right to engage in that speech act.

Helen’s approach to Bertram is illuminated by Mieke Bal’s analysis of speech acts in the book of Judges, where, oddly, Helen has a striking parallel in Yael. The historical and thematic contexts that Bal offers for Judges bear interesting analogies to the action of *All’s Well*:

> The crucial issue is the transition from what I call patrilocal marriage, the nomadic form of marriage wherein the woman remains in the house of her father, while the husband, whose relationship to her is much more casual and less permanent, visits her occasionally. (2)

Both texts, then, are concerned with the extent of a husband’s conjugal obligations towards his wife. The tensions in Judges between transient and stable models of marriage are analogous to the tensions, common in Shakespearean comedy, between the homosocial bonds formed between young men, and the heterosexual marriages that replace, or at least displace, them. Bertram, it seems likely, would be much happier with a patrilocal marriage. In both texts, women suffer at
the hands of men, and it is their sex – and indeed their sexuality – that provides the locus for that suffering. Both texts are also concerned with how and when women can speak, and above all the possibility of their speaking back to the men whose relationships define women’s social roles.

Bal’s central example of a woman “talking back” to a man is the story of Yael, whose murder of Sisera is one of the few examples in Judges of a woman coming out ahead. Sisera, fleeing from battle, goes to rest in Yael’s tent, instructing her to tell anyone who approaches that there is no man in the tent:

Is this speech act a riddle, a vow, or something else? It is an order in the first place. But as an order, it misfires. Sisera’s circumstances do not give him the authority required for ordering. The failed order embeds a question of identity that assimilates it to the riddle. … Typically, the negation allows for indeterminacy, and in the space created by that property, both characters respond to the speech act in a different way. For Sisera, the answer was obviously meant to deny his presence; it was an order to lie. For Yael, the speech act was a riddle, and riddles have perfect truth-value. Hence, the answer meant for her: no man. The riddle consists, then, of finding out how a man can be no man. Her answer is: as a dead man, and she acts upon it. … Sisera’s involuntary riddle shares properties with the vow as well. It is emphatically phrased in the future tense, the object is not participating in the dialogue, and, as is systematically the case in the vows of Judges, it leads to death. Turning the misfired order upside down, Yael “obeys” it, but turns the lie into a question of identity. (13)

Here, Sisera believes he has the authority to give an order to Yael. She, rather than taking issue with what he has said and opposing him directly (challenging the “language meaning” as Bakhtin would put it), chooses to oppose the grounds on which he has spoken. But those grounds, the terms under which he – or anyone else – speaks, are seldom, if ever spoken. In treaties or contracts, the relationship between the parties is one of the first things to be established, as it is in
Helen’s bargain with the King: in everyday speech, it is taken to be understood until someone disagrees.\textsuperscript{19}

There is a reason that I put “talking back” in quotation marks: Yael, rather than talking back, drives a tent peg through Sisera’s forehead. For her, talking back is not an option, for to refuse Sisera would be to risk violent reprisal. Yael never challenges Sisera’s right to give her an order – a point that Bal seems to overlook – she simply takes that order to have been offered in a riddling form. This is crucial: \textit{pace} Bal, Yael does not, in fact, challenge Sisera’s authority, his right to issue orders. Rather, she adopts a more active role as a listener, choosing to interpret his instruction in a given light, without questioning that he may instruct. Yael’s resistance to Sisera’s authority comes not from challenging his rights at all, whether directly or indirectly. Rather, she accepts his authority, while silently challenging the form it takes. The example of Yael stands against Bal’s and Haslem’s assumption that only the speaker of a riddle may have power. Yael has not spoken a riddle, nor did Sisera intend to speak one. By choosing to \textit{understand} Sisera’s speech as riddling, while not explicitly questioning him, Yael has created a space in which she is able to change the terms of communication to suit her advantage.

Helen performs a similar conjuring trick with Bertram’s orders to her, with the crucial difference that Yael’s story is mythical, while Helen is acting in a play whose structural logic strongly questions the folk tale aspects of its own plot. Rather than assert her rights as his wife – which might earn her a more explicit rejection, as when she explicitly asks him to kiss her goodbye – she simply goes along with his assumption that he has the right to give her orders.

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Giddens 293.
That is to say, in giving her orders while at the French court, he is invoking a set of perlocutionary constatives that suit Helen’s aims.

Bertram’s rejection of Helen consists of a refusal to put a “body” into a vow: he refuses to consummate their marriage. A vow is, in theory, a binding statement of intent. It expresses a truth about a future action, where truth “is... a perfectly adequate relation between a statement and its referent, between language and the material reality that it represents” (Bal, 12). But Bertram, like Helen, recognizes that words need bodies, and so he denies her his. In the strictly legal sense, Bertram’s refusal to bed Helen and departure from France are dubious grounds for divorce or annulment (Sokol 146), but his exile is certainly a practical impediment to Helen’s exercising her rights as wife. What is more interesting about Bertram is the sheer number of times he explains his intentions, each time with slight variations. He declares to Paroles:

“Although before the solemn priest I have sworn/ I will not bed her” (2.3.271-72). Peggy Munoz Simonds argues that we should note that Bertram does not describe his vow as "solemn" but the priest, thus indicating a disturbing failure to understand the ordinary patterns of language or of religion. (50, emphasis in original)

This is not so much a failure to understand the ordinary patterns of language as a failure to honour them. Bertram knows perfectly well that he is supposed to be solemn when swearing in the course of the marriage ceremony, but with a simple, riddling displacement of the modifier, he attempts to rob the words of the marriage service of their efficacy, to replace his vow before the priest with a new vow he makes to Helen. For his letter to Helen is at once an order and a vow:

When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband. But in such a “then”, I write a “never.” (3.2.57-60)
Bertram does not intend this to be a riddle: it is a statement of fact and intent. But he has too naïve a faith in his own ability to manipulate words. He can riddle his way out of a solemn vow, and riddle a knot into a not, but simply to say “never” is not to make it so. Although Helen could not riddle her way around the Countess, she is better at riddles than Bertram is.

Ultimately, the crucial distinction between Bertram and those who trap him into marriage is that he believes too naively and simplistically in an individual’s ability to exercise unconstrained will. In misnaming Diana as “Fontybell,” he gives her a position from which to speak back. In treating his wife as a servant, he gives her the option of accepting his categorization of her, and then exploiting the contours of the master/servant relationship. To use Judith Butler’s terms, Bertram’s injurious interpellation of both women determines the shape of their response. In terms of classical rhetoric, Helen engages in a kind of unspoken antistrophon, or argumentum ex concessis. Like Paulina in The Winter’s Tale she accepts her interlocutor’s definition of her, and then uses it to her advantage.

For Helena, as for Yael, obedience and disobedience are two sides of the same coin. Helena obsessively returns to the theme of her obedience. As a speaker, her riddles have had no effect. The Countess solves her riddle and forces her to speak. In refusing to kiss his wife, Bertram gives a new answer to her riddle: he sees her as a stranger and a foe. Helena exerts real power by being a riddling listener, recasting Bertram’s words not as a repudiation, but as a highly unusual riddle. Like Yael, she does not solve the riddle verbally, but rather solves it on the

20 “One is not simply fixed by the name one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate the call” (2).
physical plane, giving a body to her wishes, and trapping Bertram in his own word games. When Helen’s pregnant body is revealed as the solution to Diana’s riddle, she does not lose power, for she is also solving Bertram’s earlier unwitting riddle. In solving that riddle, she fulfills the stake involved in his vow, and does so in the most public manner possible. Far more aware than Bertram of the constraints of social convention that underwrite performative language, she is able to negotiate for herself the position she has so long craved.

But even her claiming of that position is – as befits this play, and its representation of speech acts – conditional. Although she has obtained his ring, and is now pregnant with his child, and although he is confronted with these facts before witnesses who are clearly more than ready to take her part, she returns to her self-effacing mode of address to Bertram. At first, she actually disavows her status as Bertram’s Countess: “’Tis but the shadow of a wife you see, / The name and not the thing” (5.3.307-8). Even after he acknowledges her as both, and begs for forgiveness, she appears to give him one more chance to refuse.

O my good lord, when I was like this maid
I found you wondrous kind. There is your ring,
And look you, here’s your letter. This it says:
“When from my finger you can get this ring,
And are by me with child,” etc. This is done.
Will you be mine now you are doubly won? (5.3.309-14)

The show of deference to Bertram is, in some senses, disingenuous; given what has been proved against him, marriage to Helen is his only path to social rehabilitation. Helen, far more aware than he of the importance of his social bonds to family, king, and court, has effectively invoked

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21 A highly disingenuous paraphrase. As Joseph Westlund notes, the original letter required that she produce a child. “That Helena is simply pregnant suits the insistently tentative quality of the play. She stands as a perfect symbol of potential, one which contributes to the play’s haunting sense of longing for something good which may, or may not, be realized” (145).
all those ties to ensure that his vows will “have a body” in them. As Neely argues, “The reconciliation between Helen and Bertram facilitates their equally significant reconciliations with the older generation. Bertram addresses his conditional vows to the King, not to Helen…” (91). If there is any cause to be hopeful for the future of Helen and Bertram, it is that he couches his acceptance in terms that both acknowledge the contingency of vows, and honour the social ties that underwrite those vows.

Coda: How the King Does Things with Social Status

The concern of the play with the social construction of performative language has implications for the hotly debated question of whether the King can, by fiat, ennoble Helen sufficiently that her marriage to Bertram is not a disparagement of the young Count’s rank. By the end of the play, the King’s initial definition of nobility has, under the pressure of political expedience and of inconvenient reality, had to give way. Bertram’s own behaviour gives the lie to the idea of an inherent nobility native to the aristocracy; the King strategically replaces this with a redefinition of nobility as earned by merit, a definition Bertram contests. Can the King pronounce Helen noble, and have it be so? It is certainly within his power to give Helen a title, and to endow her with a fortune, but if that ennoblement does not meet with general consensus, then Bertram is right. The action of the second half of the play can be read as a long process of manufacturing that consensus. The Countess and Lafeu join Helen and the King in stripping away from Bertram every ground he might have to reject the King’s claim of Helen’s suitability. That manufacturing of consensus is Helen’s project in pursuing Bertram. Far better than he, she understands how social relationships shape performative speech, and how they are shaped by it.
Conclusion

Helen stands as an extreme example of the central premise of this dissertation, that judicious manipulation of performative language can, over time, effect lasting change in a speaker’s social status. *All’s Well That Ends Well* insistently foregrounds the connection between social status and performative language and the centrality of felicitous performatives as an index of status. Paroles’ reckless determination to assert his status as a gentleman in the face of Lafeu’s mockery points to the dangers of social assertion in a deeply hierarchical society, while the King’s determination to keep his word to Helen points to the compromises needed to maintain the fragile consensus that such a hierarchy is just and natural.

The social mechanics that the play makes its focus are equally, though less obviously, present in the other plays. David Schalkwyk’s and Lynne Magnusson’s work has led the way in demonstrating that speech act theory and conversation analysis at the micro-level are valuable critical tools for mapping Shakespeare’s representation of the social production of language, and how that language in turn reshapes the society that has produced it. This dissertation has examined fruitful points of intersection between such linguistically-based criticism and other methodological approaches. Careful sustained attention to the social production of language coupled with a historicized account of the practice of the *duello* demonstrates the centrality of social ambition – and anxiety about that ambition – to *Romeo and Juliet*. That play can now be read in contexts that might otherwise seem counter-intuitive. How, for instance, does Shakespeare’s depiction of Verona relate to the city comedies of the late 1590s and early 1600s? The combination of historical formalist attention to jesting and sustained analysis of conversational jests as a speech genre highlights the unspoken conventions governing speech in
Much Ado About Nothing’s Messina, throwing into relief unexpected complexities in the social hierarchy of the play; Hero is far less silent and obedient than she at first seems. Similarly, the cross-fertilization of linguistically-oriented criticism with queer theory cast light on the interpenetration of erotic desire and desire for social status, both affective forces powerfully shaped – even distorted – by disparities in rank and authority.

Running through these varied experiments are two key arguments. The first is of consequence for speech act theorists, while the second, enabled by the first, is of interest for critics interested in the social dynamics that Shakespeare represents in his plays. The first argument concerns the work done by speech acts, and the conventions that lend those speech acts illocutionary and perlocutionary force. A single locution may perform a number of acts, and the various degrees of felicity of those acts are not necessarily interdependent; a spectacular misfire can still serve a secondary purpose. A challenge to duel may go unanswered, but the issuer of the challenge has nonetheless made a strong claim to gentility. Paulina’s petition for access to the imprisoned Hermione fails – but has the perlocutionary effect of allowing Paulina to establish herself in her hybrid role of servant, godmother, and symbolic midwife. Conversely, Bertram’s order to Helen is too felicitous; he secures her obedience, but does so in a manner that cements her position as his wife.

This gap between overt self-assertion through performative language and the more obscure indirect or perlocutionary levels of an utterance opens up a fruitful space for adept speakers to negotiate their social position. A speaker more keenly alert than her interlocutors to the social conventions of speech can deploy those conventions to make tactical, improvised sallies that go unnoticed and unopposed. Beatrice begins Much Ado About Nothing in a tenuous position in her uncle’s household, orphaned and unmarried. Her outspokenness is authorized, at
first, only by her ability to amuse her audience – but she makes a Prince laugh often enough that he explicitly authorizes her to speak. She, like Paulina and Diana, also takes the floor in defence of her cousin – a woman of higher status than her own, whose position has been compromised by slander. Paulina and Diana, speaking more boldly than they would or could on their own behalves, eventually earn approval, respect, and offers of marriage as a result of speech that their communities of practice would usually deem immodest or forward.

Again and again in Shakespeare’s comedies, we see a pattern of social upstarts who are able to carve out a more advantageous social position by means of repeated, incremental, indirect assertions of status. Equally, for almost every Helen there is a Bertram, for every Beatrice a Margaret, for every Maria an Andrew Aguecheek; those who allow their ambition to show too openly or too aggressively meet with strong resistance from those who benefit from the preservation of the status quo. Where Beatrice, Paulina, and Helena set themselves apart from these would-be social climbers is their understanding of the contingent and constantly negotiated nature of social status, and of the complex operation and reception of performative speech.
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