

Shakespeare's TWELFTH NIGHT

When Maria tells Feste, "my lady will hang thee for thy absence," Feste replies, "Let her hang me: he that is well hanged in this world needs to fear no colours" (1.5.3-6).¹ Challenged to "[m]ake that good," he replies, "He shall see none to fear"—"A good lenten answer," according to Maria (lines 7-9).

Some years ago, Leslie Hotson suggested that Feste's response has a bawdy sense undetected by previous commentators:

[Feste's] boastful pun, "He that is *well hang'd* [i.e., handsomely furnished or adorned with virility] in this world, needs to fear no colours [no deceptions or foes]" is taken up by Maria. She tells him, "Make that good [Prove that statement in a decent sense]." And Feste's lenten answer blandly reverts to the dismal but innocent gallows-meaning. . . .²

According to Lothian and Craik, however, "There is no reason to suppose with Hotson . . . that the Clown meant 'well hanged' indecently and that Maria here [line 9] reproves his answer" (21n).³ Yet there is more to be said in support of Hotson's reading than this summary dismissal suggests. To begin with, such a pun is linguistically possible: Hotson (168n) cites both Cotgrave's *Couillatris*, "well-hang'd," and the phrase "When they saw how I was hang'd . . .," from *Wit at Several Weapons*. In this play, Pompey the fool (or clown) brags about the charms that would be visible if he were seen "all over":

If you had seen me swim t'other day on my back, you would have
sed you had seen, there was two Chambermaids that saw me, and my
legs by chance were tangled in the flags, and when they saw how I
was hang'd, they cryed out, Oh help the man for fear he be drown'd.
(2.1)⁴

Similarly, in William Rowley's *A New Wonder, or a Woman Never Vexed*, the widow who gives the play its title tells the "well-limbed" gamester Stephen, about his dicing, ". . . it is not the course that I dislike in thee, / But that thou canst not supply that course, / And out-cross them that cross thee: were I as thou art—." "You'd be as beggerly as I am," Stephen interjects. The following exchange ensues:

Wid. I'll be hanged first.

Steph. Nay, you must be well hanged ere you can be as I am.

Wid. So, sir: I conceit you. Were I as well hanged, then, as you could imagine, I would tell some rich widow such a tale in her ear—. (2.1)⁵

To these examples one may add a passage from James Howell's *Epistolae Ho-Eliae* concerning the dismemberment of the Duke of

d'Ancre: ". . . they cut off his Genitories (and they say he was hung like an Ass). . . ." ⁶

It seems to me, then, that Hotson is right. Realizing (or at least suspecting) that Feste is making words wanton, Maria demands that he explain himself. But Feste's position is somewhat precarious: already out of favor with Olivia, he can hardly risk offending Maria, his potential advocate, as well. And though I doubt that Maria's "make that good" has the moral sense that Hotson finds in it, something in her tone or manner induces Feste to take the safe way out. Maria, however, is not content to let matters rest there, for her reference to Feste's "lenten answer" shows that she is aware of the jest's bawdy implications: "a lenten answer" is not merely "thin repartee" (Lothian and Craik 21n); the term connotes an absence or deficiency of flesh. ⁷

What, one may ask, would have been a "carnival" answer? For audiences in Shakespeare's time, indecency would have lurked not only in "well hanged," but in a possible play on the sexual sense of *cul* (Latin *culus*), and related words such as *culier* (the latter defined by Cotgrave as "Of, or belonging to the taile, arse, or fundament"). ⁸ Shakespeare, indeed, employs the *cul*-joke in *Love's Labour's Lost*, when Armado refers to "the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon," and Holofernes finds the metaphor "well cull'd, chose, sweet, and apt . . ." (5.1.89-90; 93-94). ⁹

Feste, who is wise enough to play the fool, might well regard any wantoning with the posterior possibilities of "colours" as excessively bold. ¹⁰ In any event, a moment later Feste again demonstrates his capacity to generate bawdy innuendo without violating the technical limits of decency. Far from being crushed by Maria's reproof, he produces a second proverb with "hanging" in it: "Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage" (19). ¹¹ Here the connection between "hanging" and women becomes more obvious than in "He that is well hanged in this world needs to fear no colours." But a decent way out has already been established. And Maria, who has already received one "lenten answer," does not ask him to "[m]ake that good."

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NOTES

1. Ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1975).
2. *The First Night of "Twelfth Night"* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 168-69.
3. Elizabeth Story Donno, in her recent New Cambridge Shakespeare edition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), makes no reference to even the possibility of bawdry. See,

however, Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1989) 52 ("Colour/choler/collier").

4. *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*, ed. Arnold Glover and A. R. Waller, vol. 9 (1905-12; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1969) 89. The play is now regarded as the work of Fletcher and Middleton. See David Lake, *The Canon of Middleton's Plays: Internal Evidence for the Major Problems of Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) 198-214.

5. *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, ed. Robert Dodsley, 4th ed., rev. W. Carew Hazlitt, vol. 12 (15 vols. 1874-76) 130.

6. Ed. Joseph Jacobs, vol. 1 (London, 1892) 52. The letter is dated September 8, 1620.

7. Donno, who glosses "lenten answer" as "less than sufficient, as in the season of fasting," cites Hamlet's reference to "lenten entertainment" (58n). But see Mercutio on the subject of "lenten pie" and his song: "An old hoar hare, / And an old hoar hare, is very good meat in Lent . . ." (*Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Brian Gibbons, Arden Shakespeare [London: Methuen, 1980] 2.4.130ff.).

8. *A Dictionary of the French and English Tongues* (1611; rpt. Columbia, S.C.: U of South Carolina P, 1950). See Rubinstein 52.

9. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

10. It is notable that Maria shifts the conversation from "well hanged" to "saying . . . 'I fear no colours'" (10), a phrase that she says arose "in the wars, fool, and that you may be bold to say in your foolery" (11-12). The advice is at once sensible and "safe," and I take "bold" to be ironic. For other interpretations see Lothian and Craik 21n and Donno 58n.

11. The pun is noted by Rubinstein (129), "Hang(ing)" (note 3 above).

Shakespeare's HAMLET

In his first speech, Claudius asserts that despite the general grief at King Hamlet's death, in himself "hath discretion fought [so far] with nature / That we with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves." In using the word "discretion," Claudius implies that his powers of moral judgment and discernment are keen and bear witness, in the words of the *OED*, to the "prudence, sagacity, [and] circumspection . . ." of his own conduct.

His opponent in this moral contest, nature, he construes as a primitive, prerational force that he must quell. The words "think" and "remembrance" reinforce "discretion," in that both are intellectual activities apparently free of the taints of "nature." Yet the ghost of Hamlet's father proclaims Claudius to be an "adulterate beast," guilty of a "murder most unnatural!" The play as a whole defines "nature" or "natural" as good, and "discretion," as Claudius represents it, as evil.

Later in the play, Hamlet tells Horatio, ". . . let us know, / Our *indiscretion* sometime serves us well, / When our deep plots do pall" (italics