

Response to Manford Hanowell's Response to "Homonyms before and after Lexical Standardization"

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I thank Dr. Hanowell for his querying of my article; his objections are precisely of the kind I hoped my article would provoke, for they indicate directions for further thought and research. Rather than extending his fictitious dialogue, I would like to comment on those directions.

Dr. Hanowell is, of course, correct in pointing out that what we call puns can be found in the Middle Ages as well as in the Modern period. What I believe he would also grant, however, is that this particular linguistic feature was singularly pervasive in literature of the Renaissance. It seems to me that we have not yet fully recognized how integrally puns work in Renaissance writing; nor do we have a history of language that accounts for their importance. My article of a modest twelve pages undertook, however gesturally, to enlarge our sense of how Renaissance puns work by tracking the *bear* homonym in *The Winter's Tale* and to suggest that during the pre-lexical generative phase of the vernacular, language was more free to work through the phonetic and graphic slippages that pervade Renaissance texts of all genres.

It seemed remarkable to me that the *bear* homonym gave to the play the kind of coherence that we are used to looking for from such critical staples as character, plot, imagery, theme. At the pivotal moment of the play, the stage direction—"Exit pursued by a bear"—calls for the extraordinary spectacle of a deadly bear (whether natural or artificial) which triggers wordplay on bear's homonymic variants. The bear spectacle is framed by two other spectacles: a pregnant queen and the coming to life of a statue, the former leading to the mother's natural bearing of a daughter, the latter to the daughter's artful (and preposterous) bearing of a mother. These three

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spectacles, all three giving visual form to the equivocal *bear* sound, awaken our awareness of the extent to which issues of bearing motivate the tragic-comedy: at the tragic high level, the obsession of both kings with their lineage; at the comic low level, the chance acquisition of the status of "gentlemen born" by the shepherds. By offering this schematic and compressed reading of the play, my essay attempted to demonstrate how the play embodied and enacted phonetic/graphic interrelations to semantic and thematic purpose. In doing so, it displayed how puns once served an integral function quite different both from the commercial one for which Feste expects payment and from the subversive one with which Hamlet alienates himself, easier types for us to recognize, perhaps, because each has modern analogues, for example, in advertising and Deconstruction respectively.

In addition, the essay suggested that the event that curtailed and trivialized punning was the emergence of dictionaries as the fundamental tool for linguistic standardization. Dictionaries, I maintained, officially put an end to the semantic plasticity that allowed words to slip into one another, phonetically and graphically, but also semantically. It was only after lexical regulation that certain determinations could be made, including I would insist, those made by Dr. Hanowell concerning "correct" etymology, the distinctness of one word from another of the same pronunciation or orthography, even, perhaps, the literal as opposed to the figurative use of a word. This is not, of course, to say that dictionaries put an end to punning, but rather that puns could no longer function normatively as a legitimate and integral component of the language, functioning instead to display ostentatiously a speaker's usually strained and convoluted ingenuity.

What my essay did not address was why puns have been the subject of increasing critical attention in this century. In literature, Joyce must be credited with releasing words from a classically mimetic function and allowing them instead to interrelate promiscuously with one another. In linguistics, Saussure had a similar impact by insisting that language be understood as relations of signifiers among signifiers rather than of signifiers to signifieds. Both Joycean usage and Saussurian theory, then, spring language from a basically Lockean

(and therefore Johnsonian) program that insists on the relation (or non-relation) of words to world and ideas about the world. In an important sense, unlike Johnson's Shakespeare, we are no longer at risk of losing the world by succumbing to quibbles, for the world (existential or imagined) from a post-Joycean, post-Saussurian vantage is no longer sustained by non-quibbles. We have, as it were, nothing to lose by taking puns seriously, which is why Dr. Hanowell and I can now in good conscience spend time quibbling over them.

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