

# LACE CUFFS AND FISTY CUFFS: THE COMIC FORCE OF INNUENDO, EUPHEMISM, AND IMPLICATURES IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*, *TWELFTH NIGHT*, AND *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

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## ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's use of language is often perceived as prestigious, often even pretentious, with his use of poetic language such as extended metaphors and iambic pentameter. However, as his audience has changed over time (from groundlings and gentry in the Elizabethan and Jacobean era, to working, middle, and upper classes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) so has the understanding of his use of language. Though much has been written on Shakespeare, it is only within the past century that scholars have started writing about the bawdiness of the bard's work (such as Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947)). In order to examine how language within Shakespeare's plays works, I have been looking at the social impact of particular aspects of communication. This research explores Shakespeare's use of language, with a particular focus on innuendo (an allusive, suggestive remark), euphemism (indirect remarks), and implicature (implied meanings), and how interpretations of such devices have changed over time. Through this, I have found that the original (and somewhat crass) comedy has been lost over time. This could lead to further research into how refocusing on these elements could encourage engagement in young adults and other groups in which engagement in classical literature is low.

## INTRODUCTION

This article will analyse how comedic features and linguistic theories affect the interactions between the playwright, characters, and the audience, and how this has changed over time. As comedy is, to a large extent, subjective, it is difficult to objectively define it. This article is written with the view that many tools of comedy transcend time given a receptive audience, and that innuendo, euphemism, and implicatures were as comical in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as they are now. Where they differ, however, is in the understanding that those tools have been employed as the specific language used, as well as the demographic of Shakespeare's audience, has changed over time. Resources such as the Historical Thesaurus of English highlight the importance of understanding language and meaning in context, as well as how language has evolved through the centuries. Though there has been much written on Shakespeare, it is only within the past century that scholars have started writing about the bawdiness of the bard's work (such as Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947)). This article will address this gap by focusing on how the comedy of bawdy language has been lost over time due to language change. It will also explore how the change in audience demographic (from groundlings to middle- and upper-classes) has changed how these language tools have been received. This kind of analysis can help to reframe Shakespeare for a wider audience, particularly young adults, by challenging the notion that Shakespeare is neither relevant nor amusing whilst also taking into consideration the challenges raised in the modern social justice climate.

This article will explore innuendo (an allusive, often suggestive remark), euphemism (an indirect remark, often in place of something offensive or suggestive), and implicatures (implied meanings) (OED, 2022), which play a key role in comedy. These features contribute to building humour and bawdiness, and their use provides timeless comedy. A common feature found in this analysis has been how these features contribute to comedic affect by creating an inside joke between servants in the plays and groundlings (audience members who paid a reduced fee by standing in the stalls of the theatre) in the audience. This would have a different effect on modern

audiences of comparable social classes (i.e., working class) as, unlike for groundlings in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is not their common language. Those attending performances at the globe as 'groundlings' for the purpose of authenticity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may already have a deeper knowledge of Shakespeare and are therefore more likely to understand the comedy. The use of comedy as a tool for women to express and defend themselves can also be seen, as many of their few instances of speech are for the addition of comedic affect. However, due to the fluidity of language, the understanding and interpretations of these features have changed over the past four centuries. This article will use face and politeness theories, as proposed by Goffman (1955) and Brown and Levinson (1987), to examine Shakespeare's use of these language features in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), *Twelfth Night* (1602), and *Much ADO About Nothing* (1612).

One theory that this article will use is face theory, proposed by Goffman (1955). Face 'may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' (Goffman, 1967, p.5). Brown and Levinson (1987) build on this by proposing two types of face: positive and negative. Positive face (one's self-image) is the desire for other people to want the same desires as them. Negative face is the desire not to have one's actions impeded. Such faces can be threatened by face-threatening acts. For example, if somebody were to visit a person unannounced, it would be an imposition on the host. If such host wanted to be left alone, the imposition would be a threat to their negative face as it would impede their desire to not be imposed upon. Insults, such as calling somebody 'stupid', would be a threat to their positive face as it negatively evaluates their public self-image. Developing this further, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed four types of politeness. Positive politeness appeals to a person's positive face and their need for validation that their wants align with the addresser's wants (for example, complimenting their outfit). Negative politeness appeals to a person's negative face and their need to not have their actions impeded (freedom to act). This may involve being indirect, such as the use of hedges (a word which reduces the harshness of a statement, for example, 'perhaps...' or 'maybe...'). It may also involve the use of passive speech or

apology, for example, 'I'm terribly sorry to ask this...'. Off-record politeness is the vaguest and perhaps most easily misunderstood. It functions using implications and therefore relies on mutual understanding between speakers, often based on their relationship and nature of past interactions. Lastly, bald on-record is more of an impoliteness strategy than one of politeness. It uses direct speech to address the listener, with little to no effort in minimising threat to face.

Existing literature has used politeness theory to examine Shakespeare's works, often focusing specifically on the application of such theories and how present various politeness strategies are within texts. Holz's *Manifestations of politeness in Shakespeare's dramatic works* (1999) thoroughly examines how well three different politeness theories (from Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; and Brown and Levinson, 1987) can be applied to different works. While it is an extensive analysis, it does little to illustrate the effect such features have on the audience and even less to explore how those affects may have changed as the use and understanding of language has changed. Another thorough examination is Brown and Gilman's *Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies* (1989). This paper focused on tragedies as they 'provide the best information on colloquial speech of the period' (Brown and Gilman, 1989, p. 159). While it is useful to understand what politeness strategies were in use at the time, it does not provide insight into loss of meaning through language change. This article will focus on innuendo, implicature, and euphemism, particularly in relation to comedy, and how interpretations of the implementations of such tools have changed over time. By examining the explicit language used in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries using *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (Partridge, 1947) and contrasting it with modern understandings of the same language, a clear change in meaning can be seen. While *Shakespeare's Bawdy* is a useful tool, it does not comment on the comedic effect of such language, and how this effect has changed over time. This gap will be addressed in this article.

### ROMEO AND JULIET

Shakespeare uses innuendo throughout these three plays, particularly in direct speech between men. The first play I will explore is *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), a tragedy in which two teenagers (Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet) from feuding families fall in love. It is a short-lived romance spanning three days, at the end of which a series of miscommunications lead both title characters to commit suicide. Throughout the play, servants (such as Gregory and Sampson) from both houses express their loyalty to their masters and rivalry with the other house.

In Act 1 Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Gregory and Sampson discuss their rivalry with the house of Montague through a series of innuendos:

*Sampson:* A dog of that house shall move me to stand:  
I will  
take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's.

*Gregory:* That shows thee a weak slave; for the weakest goes  
to the wall.

*Sampson:* True; and therefore women, being the weaker  
vessels,  
are ever thrust to the wall: therefore I will push  
Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids  
to the wall.

*Gregory:* The quarrel is between our masters and us  
their men.

*Sampson:* 'Tis all one, I will show myself a tyrant: when  
I  
have fought with the men, I will be cruel with the  
maids, and cut off their heads.

*Gregory:* The heads of the maids?

*Sampson:* Ay, the heads of the maids, or their  
maidenheads;  
take it in what sense thou wilt.

*Gregory:* They must take it in sense that feel it.

*Sampson:* Me they shall feel while I am able to stand:  
and  
'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh.

*Gregory:* 'Tis well thou art not fish; if thou hadst, thou  
hadst been poor John. Draw thy tool! here comes  
two of the house of the Montagues.

*Sampson:* My naked weapon is out: quarrel, I will back  
thee.

*Gregory:* How! turn thy back and run?

*Sampson:* Fear me not.

*Gregory:* No, marry; I fear thee!

(Shakespeare, 1595, 1.1:10-35)

'Sampson: When I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids; I will cut off their heads'. Though this is a seemingly violent remark, cutting off the heads of the maids is a reference to him taking their virginity, as 'maidenhead' is a euphemism for virginity. As such, Sampson is declaring that he will fight the men and rape the women. He then tries to clarify his confusing attempt at wit with: 'Ay, the head of the maids, or their maidenheads'. This need for clarification, and therefore a poor attempt at wit, would be seen as a character flaw by the original audience. Despite his attempt to conceal his mistake through clarification, he has already revealed himself to be a fool, thereby becoming a comic relief character with the audience laughing *at* him rather than *with* him. However, the use of 'maidenheads' as a euphemism for virginity has significantly declined since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, while modern audiences may understand that Sampson is trying to clarify himself, a broader understanding of his wit (or lack thereof), and as such his need for clarification, has been lost. Not only has the language changed, but also the context. Threatening sexual assault as a form of comedy is no longer acceptable to modern audiences and as such, even if the implications of Sampson's 'joke' were understood in a modern context, they would be less likely to be regarded as humorous.

Despite the friendly nature of the relationship between these two characters, face-threatening acts are present throughout this dialogue. In response to Sampson's "'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh', Gregory quips back at him "'Tis well thou art not fish; if thou hadst, thou hadst been poor-John.' This is a reference to the expression 'neither flesh nor fish' (Levenson, 2008). Fish also had sexual connotations at the time, with 'poor-John' being a cheap, dried fish referencing poor sexual performance (Levenson, 2008). This is reinforced by 'Draw thy tool. Here comes the house of the Montagues'. 'Tool' was used as a euphemism for penis (Partridge, 1947); not only is Gregory insulting Sampson's masculinity, but also challenging him to reveal himself. This latter remark is an indirect face-threatening act because the challenge against Sampson's manhood is implied, rather than a direct statement, that he would disappoint the 'maids' (bald on-record). This implies that, like discourse in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, face-threatening acts were used

between close friends to show intimacy and solidarity as a form of male bonding in a homosocial society. That is, a society in which members of the same gender (in this instance, men) have intimate, platonic relationships, often building on or reinforcing the patriarchy (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014). As the understanding and use of ‘tool’ and ‘fish’ as sexual euphemisms has changed (the former now being a euphemism for a person susceptible to being used by others, the latter now used to refer to the smell of a vagina), the interpretations and comical value of this discourse have changed since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Likewise in Act 2, Scene 1, wherein Mercutio uses fruit as a euphemism for genitalia.

*Mercutio:* Now will he sit under a medlar tree  
And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit  
As maids call medlars when they laugh alone.  
O Romeo, that she were! Oh, that she were  
An open arse, and thou a poperin pear.  
(Shakespeare, 1595/2008, 2.1:35-39)

Shakespeare economises his words whilst maximising his comic potency with the term ‘medlar’, a fruit commonly referred to as ‘open arse’ by maids (Partridge, 1947), and a pun on the verb ‘to meddle’. This would have played to the groundlings as they were of the same social class as the maids and would have used the same language. The middle and upper classes may not have understood as it was not common to their speech (Partridge, 1947), adding extra comic force as an inside joke between Shakespeare, the actors, and the groundlings. ‘Poperin pear’ may have been a treble innuendo as a euphemism for a penis and scrotum, due to the shape, and a pun on ‘pop her in’ as the folk-song *pop goes the weasel* referred to male ejaculation (Partridge, 1947). While Mercutio’s clarification of ‘an open arse’ broadens the reach of the joke to the middle and upper classes, the euphemistic element of the term is no longer in use, having fallen out of usage in the late 1800s (The Historical Thesaurus of English 2013, open-arse < openærs). Therefore, the cleverness of the euphemism, and as such the comic potency of it, is missing in 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of Shakespeare. Additionally, the class of audience member to understand this joke has inverted. As only those with a deeper understanding of Shakespeare’s use of language would understand the references made here, his use of comedy that was once accessible to lower classes is now less accessible to the modern working class. It is also worth noting the sodomic nature of the sex referenced by Mercutio. Some interpretations of the play portray Mercutio as queer and/or flamboyant, such as Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* and Baz Lurhmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (Stockton, 2018). However, Bacchiocchi (2013) argues that the intimacy between Mercutio and Romeo was simply the nature of male relationships in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, supporting the idea of a homosocial society. As the understanding of these features has been lost, so too has the understanding of the intimacy (be it platonic or otherwise) of the relationship between male characters in Shakespeare, and how this is expressed in their use of language.

Shakespeare’s use of bawdy language was not limited to the speech of his male characters. Juliet’s own nurse makes crude remarks whilst in the presence of Juliet and her mother:

*Nurse:* “Yea,” quoth my husband, “Fall’st upon thy face?”

Thou wilt fall backward when thou comest to age.

Wilt thou not, Jule?” It stinted and said “ay.”

(Shakespeare, 1595, 1.3:57-59)

To fall on one’s back referenced Juliet’s predicted sexual activity once she ‘comest to age’. Aside from the morally questionable act of making a sexual reference to a baby about their future self, the nurse fails to code switch (to change her speech to suit her audience, a lady who is both her employer and social superior). Although she was quoting a remark her husband made, her recount of it alludes to the bawdy language used between women in each other’s company. Though this innuendo would have added comedic affect at the time, it is no longer in usage and therefore the comedic effect has been lost. Similarly to Sampson’s rape joke, the maid’s sexual joke about an infant would have been affected by context. There is far more awareness and intolerance towards child abuse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than there was in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, with such jokes less likely to be accepted as comedy by modern audiences. Not only has the change in language use affected the perceived humour in Shakespeare, so too has the change in context.

## TWELFTH NIGHT

Like in *Romeo and Juliet*, the hierarchical place of servants is challenged in *Twelfth Night* (1602), wherein face acts are used to create a bond between some characters and the audience at the expense of other characters. In this comedy, two siblings are separated after a shipwreck. In a foreign land, they take on aliases, with the sister posing as a man. Before encountering other characters, the social status and dynamic of the other characters is presented to the audience using face acts. My analysis will focus on this dynamic and how it is presented.

In Act 1 Scene 3, Sir Toby encourages his friend, Sir Andrew, to engage in sexual relations with his maid, Maria, yet is misunderstood, much to the humour of both the maid and the audience:

*Sir Andrew:* (to Maria) Bless you, fair shrew.

*Maria:* And you too sire.

*Sir Toby:* Accost, Sir Andrew, accost.

*Sir Andrew:* What’s that?

*Sir Toby:* My niece’s chambermaid

*Sir Andrew:* Good mistress Accost, I desire better acquaintance.

*Maria:* My name is Mary, sir.

*Sir Andrew:* Good Mistress Mary Accost.

*Sir Toby:* You mistake, knight. ‘Accost’ is front her, board

her, woo her, assail her.

*Sir Andrew:* By my troth, I would not undertake her in this company. Is that the meaning of ‘accost’?

(Shakespeare, 1602/2008, 1.3:43-55)

Sir Andrew’s naive lack of understanding portrays him as both stupid, as he does not understand the joke, and kind, as he is unsuspecting of such an act being asked of him.

This naivety is further conveyed through his misunderstanding of Maria's metaphor:

*Sir Andrew:* An you part so, mistress, I would I might never draw swords again. Fair lady, do you think you have fools in hand?

*Maria:* Sir, I have not you by th' hand.

*Sir Andrew:* Marry, but you shall have, and here's my hand.

*Maria:* (*taking his hand*) Now sir, thought is free. I pray you, bring your hand to th' buttery-bar, and let it drink.

*Sir Andrew:* Wherefore, sweetheart? What's your metaphor?

*Maria:* It's dry, sir.

*Sir Andrew:* Why, I think so. I am not such an ass but I can keep my hand dry. But what's your jest?

*Maria:* A dry jest, sir.

*Sir Andrew:* Are you full of them?

*Maria:* Ay sir, I have them at my fingers' ends. Marry, Now I let go of your hand I am barren.

(Shakespeare, 1602/2008, 1.3:59-75)

Maria's implication that Sir Andrew is a fool ('Sir, I have not you by th' hand') is a face-threatening act to which Sir Andrew is oblivious, creating an inside joke between Maria and the audience. She then tells him to 'bring [his] hand to th' buttery-bar, and let it drink.' While a buttery-bar was a ledge within the buttery (liquor store) (Crystal and Crystal, 2004), this line was likely meant as a euphemism for Maria's breasts (Warren and Wells, 2008). Not only does Sir Andrew's lack of understanding emphasise his character, it is also a face-threatening act as Maria is goading him and he does not take the bait. As both a man and a nobleman, Sir Andrew holds authority over Maria (a servant); however, this is not the power dynamic presented between these two characters in the play. As the wittier character, Maria commands more respect from the audience and the other characters in the play, enabling her to meet her negative face needs of autonomy—such as making Sir Andrew, her superior, the butt of her jokes—without consequence. However, it is important to note her continued use of the honorific 'sir', usually a mark of respect, which may have undertones of sarcasm. This would further Maria's connection to the audience, especially the groundlings, many of whom would have held negative views of the middle and upper classes.

### MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Lastly, I explore another comedy—*Much Ado About Nothing* (1612)—in which face-threatening acts are used to develop intimacy between the two protagonists. Set in Italy during a wedding, Beatrice and Benedick frequently quarrel and taunt each other, eventually realising their love for one another. Though much of the comedy in *Twelfth Night* comes from a connection between servant characters and groundlings, Shakespeare did not exclude the higher classes in his humour. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, labelled the most sexual of Shakespeare's comedies (Partridge, 1947), the dialogue between Beatrice and Benedick closer resembles that of the

witty face-threatening acts between *Romeo and Juliet's* Sampson and Gregory than that of lovers:

*Beatrice:* I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior 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 Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.

[...]

*Benedick:* God keep your ladyship still in that mind! so some gentleman or other shall 'scape a predestinate scratched face.

*Beatrice:* Scratching could not make it worse, an 'twere such a face as yours were.

*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, i' God's name; I have done.

*Beatrice:* You always end with a jade's trick: I know you of old.

(Shakespeare, 1612/2008, 1.1:112-141)

This opening game of wit establishes rapport between the two for the rest of the play, as their dialogues are filled with bald on-record face threatening acts throughout. Beatrice's first lines to Benedick 'I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you' are a face threatening act as she informs him that nobody notices his remarks. His response, 'my dear Lady Disdain! are you yet living?', is also a face threatening act that would be particularly socially unacceptable if it were not then established that the characters are already acquainted: 'You always end with a Jade's trick: I know you of old'. The honorific 'Lady Disdain' is a double slight as it attacks not only her wit, but also her physical appearance by claiming that Beatrice goes unnoticed. Though there are some witty, argumentative couples in Shakespeare's other plays, such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, Beatrice and Benedick 'refuse to abide by the conventions of genteel decorum' (Gay, 2016).

In Act 4 Scene 1, the couple set aside their insults to profess their love for one another (and talk of avenging Hero's honour):

*Beatrice:* You have stayed me in a happy hour: I was about to protest I loved you.

*Benedick:* And do it with all thy heart.

*Beatrice:* I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

*Benedick:* Come, bid me do any thing for thee.

*Beatrice:* Kill Claudio.

*Benedick:* Ha! not for the wide world.

*Beatrice:* You kill me to deny it. Farewell.

*Benedick:* Tarry, sweet Beatrice.

*Beatrice:* I am gone, though I am here: there is no love in you: nay, I pray you, let me go.

*Benedick:* Beatrice,--

*Beatrice:* In faith, I will go.

[...]

*Benedick:* Hear me, Beatrice,--

*Beatrice:* Talk with a man out at a window! A proper saying!

*Benedick:* Nay, but, Beatrice,--

*Beatrice:* Sweet Hero! She is wronged, she is slandered, she is undone.

*Benedick:* Beat--

(Shakespeare, 1612/2008, 4.1:283-314)

In this dialogue, the face threatening acts are not witty remarks, but rather Beatrice's frequent interruption of Benedick. Once more, this goes against conventions and further portrays Beatrice as a determined character, even after a declaration of love. Benedick also commits a face-threatening act when he refuses to 'kill Claudio' ('Not for the world', 'you kill me to deny it'), failing to use politeness strategies to soften the rebuttal. This suggests that Beatrice must have known Benedick would not do what she asked, and so her demand of him is more of an assertion of her conversational dominance rather than a lover's request. Such dominance disempowers Benedick by force, rather than Beatrice's more usual skill of wit.

After this, the couple return to their witty banter for the duration of the play. The strong wills of both characters are consistently portrayed by their refusal to abide conventions, even in Act 5 Scene 4, the final scene when they are wed:

*Benedick:* Soft and fair, friar. Which is Beatrice?

*Beatrice:* [Unmasking] I answer to that name. What is your will?

*Benedick:* Do not you love me?

*Beatrice:* Why, no; no more than reason.

*Benedick:* Why, then your uncle and the prince and Claudio have been deceived; they swore you did.

*Beatrice:* Do not you love me?

*Benedick:* Troth, no; no more than reason.

[...]

*Beatrice:* I would not deny you; but, by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion; and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption.

*Benedick:* Kissing her Peace! I will stop your mouth.

(Shakespeare, 1612/2008, 5.4:72-97)

Much of the dialogue between Beatrice and Benedick consists of face-threatening acts, including their lack of accommodation. The act of accommodation, 'how people adjust their speech behaviours to match others' (Giovanelli et al., 2015, p.288), is commonly used as a tool to gain approval from the other party, as similarities increase likeability (Giles and Ogay, 2007). However, discourse between Benedick and Beatrice lacks accommodation, with neither character changing features of their speech to match the other; continuing the idea that they are both strong, independent characters, with little regard for being liked by the other. It may also be argued that they mutually converge downwards by emphasising 'non-standard aspects of their speech' (Giovanelli et al, 2015, p. 288), such as witty remarks. However, these are standard aspects of their speech even when conversing with other characters: 'he shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long' (Shakespeare, 1612/2008, 2.1:47-48). Despite their matched wit, Beatrice is silenced in the end by Benedick: 'Peace! I will stop your mouth'. While it is portrayed in a romantic way, with Benedick kissing her to silence her, she does not speak for the rest of the play. As such, her voice, and therefore defence through use of witty remarks, has been silenced. This calls into question whether Beatrice's witty remarks were part of a matched game of wits, or her fighting against domination by Benedick, thus contributing to the pattern of humour being utilised to express the gendered dynamics of relationships. While there is an abundance of wit used in *Much Ado About Nothing*, there is less bawdy language used than in the previous two plays analysed. This may have been a result of the Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606, 3 Ja. 1, c.21), which prohibited profanity from being spoken in dramatic productions.

## CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of these plays, this article has shown that the interpretation of comedy used in Shakespeare has changed substantially due to an evolution in both language and context. Throughout the plays, innuendo, euphemism, and implicatures are used as tools for comedy. While the use of face threatening acts remains comical, there is a reduced understanding in modern audiences that such acts have been used. There has also been a clear shift in the demographic of the audiences, and which members understand the lewder aspects of Shakespeare. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, much of the bawdy comedy within Shakespeare was directed towards the groundlings, however modern audiences of Shakespeare are likely to be better educated. Therefore, the relationship between Shakespeare and his plebian audience is not transferred to the working class of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as much of the language used is no longer interpreted by the same audience in the same way, such as Mercutio's 'medlars' (Shakespeare, 1595/2008, 2.1:35). The comic relief provided by such language features is significantly lessened as a result. In *Twelfth Night*, the challenging of social hierarchies can be understood through the existing dynamic between employers and employees; however, the extent of it (and as such, the comic force) is lessened due to the reduction of many words and phrases, such as Maria's 'buttery-bar' (Shakespeare, 1602/2008, 1.3:65), from the English language. This is particularly relevant to modern working-class audiences, who may be more likely to be interested in social justice issues. This analysis has shown the importance of understanding Shakespeare in context and by excluding working-class audiences, the appreciation for much of the contextual comedy (such as the challenging of social hierarchies) is lost. While the comical language used between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* transcends class divisions, it has still been affected by language change. However, the dynamic between the two friends-come-lovers stands the test of time with many modern romantic comedies

following a similar dynamic (Scheff, 1993). While the silencing of Beatrice's comedy, and therefore her voice, may be interpreted as problematic by modern audiences, it is still a modern trope in romance-comedies and is, therefore, a theme easily understood by modern audiences. Furthermore, as the meaning and usage of certain expressions has changed, the comical meaning behind them has been lost (or shifted, as in the case of 'tool' and 'fish' (Shakespeare, 1612/2008, 1.1:29-30)). Not only has the understanding of some jokes changed, but also the acceptability of such jokes. Topics such as sexual assault (for example, Sampson's rape joke (Shakespeare, 1612/2008, 1.1:21-23)) are less likely to be considered acceptable comedy by modern audiences, particularly those more concerned with issues of power abuse and social justice. Likewise, the comedy of Maria's 'buttery-bar' (Shakespeare, 1612/2008, 1.3:65) may seem less comical and more alarming to modern audiences than to those of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as there is a clear subversion of power dynamics. Therefore, regardless of language change, some of the comedy in Shakespeare (particularly that involving women) has still been lost. However, it is worth considering that much of the comedy surrounding women in these three plays incorporates them as participants of the joke, rather than punchlines, contributing to the concept of comedy as a tool for female expression in

Shakespeare. Emphasising this use of comedy and female expression while questioning the ethics behind less socially acceptable humour would increase engagement in younger modern audiences, especially those interested in social justice. While Shakespeare is a compulsory component in most curricula, acknowledging the bawdy language would not necessarily increase engagement. It may, however, increase enjoyment as teenagers and young adults are more likely to actively engage in material that is more relevant to them (for example, the sexual ambitions of youths in *Romeo and Juliet*). Through acknowledging the original intended audience of much of Shakespeare's comedy as groundlings, as well as emphasising his characters and jokes that made fun of the upper classes, the bard can be made more engaging to working-class audiences. This article has commented on and called into question how comic language has been used in Shakespeare, and how the understanding of such language has changed and been lost. As Shakespeare is a key historical literary figure, it is important that the plays are further contextualised so that modern audiences are not understanding them divorced from their original context.

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