

→ ROBERT ARMIN

From Quips upon Questions, or A Clown's Conceit on Occasion Offered

1600

The verbal mastery that made Armin famous is put on conspicuous display in another of his jest books, *Quips upon Questions, or A Clown's Conceit on Occasion Offered*, published the same year as *Fool upon Fool* by the same publisher, with the same attribution to "*Clonnicus de Curtanio Snuff*." This time, the title page continues, the collection of jests is set up as "A Moralized Metamorphoses of Changes upon Interrogatories." Each joke comes in three parts: first a question or a remark from a bystander, then Snuff's improvised verses on the subject at hand, followed by a one- or two-line moralization. "Metamorphoses" seems to be precisely chosen to recall Ovid's long poem, which was often published during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with the kind of moralizing commentary we sampled from George Sandys's edition in Chapter 2.

The whole of *Quips upon Questions* presents itself as a transcript of extemporaneous performance in the theater, even if individual jokes reveal their origins in the world outside. Common to all the jests is Armin's virtuosity in using multiple voices: he is the questioner, the improvising clown, and the quipping moralist. In some of the jests he adopts even more voices. In response to the question "What's near her?" for example, he speaks a dialogue-within-the-dialogue as he argues back and forth for two possible answers: her smock and her skin. Similar ventriloquizing skills are on display in *Twelfth Night* as Feste plays Sir Topas. His great moment comes when he plays himself and Sir Topas at the same time:

MALVOLLO: Sir Topas!
 FESTE: [*In Sir Topas' voice*] Maintain no words with him, good fellow. [*In his own voice*] Who, I, sir? Not I, sir, God b' w' you, good Sir Topas. [*In Sir Topas' voice*] Marry, amen. [*In his own voice*] I will, sir, I will.

MALVOLLO: Fool! Fool! Fool, I say!
 FESTE: Alas, sir, be patient. What say you, sir? I am shent for speaking to you. (4.2.78-84)

Several of the "interrogatories" in *Quips upon Questions* touch on matters likewise addressed in *Twelfth Night*: who plays the fool — the clown who plays or the man who plays the clown who plays? what wished the widow? why is this man drunk? what wit succeeds?

From Quips upon Questions, or A Clown's Conceit on Occasion Offered

WHO BEGAN TO LIVE IN THE WORLD?

Adam was he, that first lived in the world
 And Eve was next. Who knows not this is true?
 But at the last he was from all grace hurled,
 And she for company, the like did rue.
 Was he the first? Ay, and was thus disgraced,
 Better for him, that he had been the last.

*Quip. Thou art a fool. Why? For reasoning so,
 But not the first, nor last, by many mo.¹*

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HE PLAYS THE FOOL

True it is, he plays the fool indeed,
 But in the play he plays it as he must.
 Yet when the play is ended, then his speed
 Is better than the pleasure of thy trust,

For he shall have what thou that time hast spent,
 Playing the fool, thy folly to content.

He plays the wise man then, and not the fool,
 That wisely for his living so can do.
 So doth the carpenter with his sharp tool,
 Cut his own finger off, yet lives by it too.

He is a fool to cut his limbs say I,
 But not so, with his tool² to live thereby,

Then 'tis his case³ that makes him seem a fool,
 It is indeed, for it is antic made.

Thus men wax wise when they do go to school,
 Then for our sport we thank the tailor's trade,⁴

¹ mo': more. ² tool: with a pun on penis. ³ case: (1) situation, (2) motley garment, (3) cod-piece. ⁴ tailor's trade: tailors were proverbial for lechery.

Robert Armin, *Quips upon Questions, or A Clown's Conceit on Occasion Offered* (London: William Febrand, 1600), A1, B4v-C1, D1v-D2, E2v-E3, F2v-F3.

250

255

260

And him within the case the most of all,
That seems wise foolish, who a fool you call.

Meet him abroad, and he is wise, methinks,
In courtesy, behavior, talk, or going,⁵
Of garment: eke⁶ when he with any drinks,
Then are men wise, their money so bestowing,
To learn by him one time, a fool to seem,
and twenty times for once, in good esteem.

Say I should meet him, and not know his name,
What should I say, "Yonder goes such a fool?"
Ay, fools will say so, but the wise will aim
At better thoughts, whom reason still doth rule:
"Yonder's the merry man, it joys me much,
'To see him civil, when his part is such."

*Quip. A merry man is often thought unwise.
Yet mirth in modesty's 'lowed'⁷ of the wise.
They say, should he for a fool go
When he's a more fool that accounts him so?
Many men descendant⁸ on another's wit,
When they have less themselves in doing it.*

WHAT WISHED SHE?

A widow⁹ wished, hark and I'll tell thee what.
Choice of a thousand things. What things, I pray?
Content thyself, man, and imagine that,
Think what she wished, and hit it if thou may.
What, was she rich? Ay, so a number say.

'Tis hard to jump with thee in what she would,
For women often wish not what they should,

She wished a husband that was rich like her.
That wealth to wealth were joined, was it not so?
Although in heart she could hit nothing near.

⁵ going; walking.
for lust.

⁶ eke; also. ⁷ 'lowed: allowed. ⁸ descendant: comment.

⁹ widow: proverbial

Then she wished wit, to govern it? Fie, no.
Then she wished health, to enjoy it? Yet ye go
Far from her meaning, yet you came¹⁰ so near,
As you will hit it by and by I fear.

Oh, then I have it: women covet honor.
Honor is glorious, yet you want her mind.
Now fortune yield her wish so light upon her,
For I am senseless in her wish, and blind.
I cannot think her thought, how she's inclined:
So wild are women in their thoughts and deeds,
As no wise man knows where their humor breeds.

Now I will answer thee what wish she craved.
Not gold, she had enough, nor wit to keep it,
For when some thought she spent, she nearly saved,
And covetously together would she sweep it.
Let them alone, too well can women heap it.

All wishes set apart, her eye being pleased,
Her wish is granted and her heart is eased.

*Quip. Her eye to please is endless, not to do,
Whose scope, no power can compass therewith.
Well, let her wish but ne'er relieved thereby,
Whose belly's sooner pleased, than is her eye.*

WHY IS HE DRUNK?

I know not why, unless I knew his mind,
But many besides him is thus inclined.
Perchance for company he is disguised,
Or 'tis his nature to be thus sufficed,

Or tasting good beer never found before,
Against his will is drunk of his own score.

It may be his weak brain can bear no drink.
I am not of your mind, so well to think.
Then knowing his own weakness, he should shun,
Thus to be loathsome, as he has begun.

¹⁰ came: with a pun on ejaculation.

How e'er it is I know not, but these people,
Are all brained with a brewer's washing beetle.¹¹

*Quip. Company causeth cuckold's,¹² most men say,
But shall this proverb bear it so away?
Ay, it must needs, for it is held least jeopardy,
When men go to the devil for company.*

HE HAD MUCH WIT

He had much wit, else had he ne'er been rich,
For what he hath, he had it through the fire.
He had much wit, and there are but few such,
That with their wit can purchase their desire.
A number live that wisely would be thought,
When their wit fails them, and doth come to nought.

Houses he hath a number, and much land,
His purse is stuffed, and he hath a full hand,
But of his store, what gives he to the needy?
Nothing at all, in that he is not speedy.
His purse is tied fast, and his mind is sparing,
And for the poorer sort hath little caring.

Had he much wit to get this world's increase
And hath he no wit left rightly to use it?
He hath no wit then now, and therefore peace,
Such as have God's true blessing, and abuse it,
Had better be still poor, for fellow credit me,
He hath but little wit, and far less honesty.

*Quip. He that gets much and little gives,
He seems a living man, but little lives.
He that had wit himself to thrall,
Better say I, he had no wit at all.*

¹¹ washing beetle: wooden bat for beating clothes during washing, whose wives have had sex with other men.

¹² cuckolds: husbands

Theories of Laughter: Superiority

As Quintilian notes, the difficulty of defining just what it is that makes people laugh has not stopped theorists from trying. John Morreall's survey of those attempts in *Taking Laughter Seriously* distinguishes three types: theories based on superiority, on incongruity, and on relief (4–37). In this section of the chapter we shall sample texts arguing all three viewpoints before considering Sir Philip Sidney's argument for a fourth possibility. The oldest group of theories, those based on superiority, goes back to Plato (427?–347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle offers an account of the origins of tragedy and comedy that depends on distinctions that are both social and ethical. Poetry, he explains, broke up into two kinds, according to the character of the poets themselves: “for the graver among them would represent noble actions, and those of noble personages; and the meaner sort the actions of the ignoble.” Poets of the first sort produced panegyrics, or poems of praise; poets of the second sort produced invectives (1448b). The idea that comedy is all about the reproving of vices in other people — especially one's social inferiors — was congenial to the Greek and Roman rhetoricians, to Christian writers of the Middle Ages, and to humanist writers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The superiority theory remained the dominant theory of laughter in Shakespeare's day, as witness Thomas Heywood's explanation of comedy in his *Apology for Actors*. Of anti-theatricalists like Philip Stubbes, Heywood asks,

What is then the subject of this harmless mirth? Either in the shape of a clown to show others their slovenly and unhandsome behavior, that they may reform that simplicity in themselves which others make their sport, lest they happen to become the like subject of general scorn to an auditory, else it intreats of love, deriding foolish inamorates who spend their ages, their spirits, nay themselves in the servile and ridiculous employments of their mistresses. (F4)

By this account, *Twelfth Night* is a warning against Feste's slovenly and unhandsome behavior and Orsino's love-longing. The shortsightedness of such an approach is easy to see. Feste the clown presents himself as the moralizer of other people's follies, not as the possessor of follies himself. Ridicule, nonetheless, is Feste's stock in trade. As a writer, Armin seems to have the superiority theory in mind when he offers *Quips upon Questions* as *moralized* metamorphoses, always ending in a gnomic tag. The emblem of a fool in George Wither's *A Collection of Emblems* (1635) likewise drives home