

**WHAT DO YOU MEME: A LOOK AT HISTORICAL AND LITERARY
IMITATIVE HUMOR**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

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May 2020

Major: English

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ABSTRACT

What Do You Meme: A Look at Historical and Literary Imitative Humor

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Literature Review

Scholarly studies of contemporary imitative culture such as *Because Internet, Memes in Digital Culture, and Still Life with Rhetoric*, discuss the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of memes. The term “memes” was coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Gene*, which studied the evolution of cultural transmission, and in one specific chapter he gives us the groundwork for the word ‘meme’. Dawkins likens the way of cultural transmission to the altruistic and replicative form that genes take, essentially, any idea that can be imitated and transferred, is a meme. Gretchen McCullough in her 2019 book *Because Internet* gives us an internet linguists’ view of what memes mean for our culture and language. *Memes in Digital Culture* and *Still Life With Rhetoric* both are concerned how rhetorical images help us understand the time and community that they exist in. They are also important for understanding how to interpret the ‘memes’ that will come up in the literature from the classical period and early modern era.

Thesis Statement

The goal of this manuscript is to explore the phenomenon of imitative humor in settings by studying a particular niche of historical-literary memes by considering memes in history and memes reflecting history.

Theoretical Framework

To study the phenomenon of imitative humor during specific periods of history and literature we must look to two specific methodological analyses: Foucauldian archaeology and a comparative textual media framework. The former showing us the continuities throughout time for imitative humor and the latter helping us understand the imitative properties and the connection between content and medium.

Project Description

Scholarly studies of contemporary imitative culture—books such as *Because Internet*, *Memes in Digital Culture*, and *Still Life With Rhetoric*—discuss the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of memes; however, they often lack a nuanced discussion of the historical aspect of meme culture. In the time periods this thesis focuses on, two prevailing examples of memes in history are the graffiti in Greek bath houses and Shakespeare's innuendos, the concept of circulating his material and the cultural effect. By looking at these types of memes, we are able to draw interesting parallels and origins between contemporary and historical contexts. Some forms of memetic humor have traceable origins, for example, the *Philogelos*, a book of 265 jokes (Hierocles, Philagrius, & Thierfelder 1968) was the source for a Monty Python Sketch, The Dead Parrot. Those who are familiar with Shakespeare and his sincerity in absurdity might already be accustomed to his novelty gags and innuendos that spread across The Globe. Not one to be too subtle, even some of his titles brought in laughs, such as *Much Ado about Nothing*, in which

“nothing” was an Elizabethan euphemism for a woman’s genitals. By studying a particular niche of historical-literary memes, I can consider memes in history (i.e. Shakespeare as a viral, circulating text in early modern England) and the imitative humor of the Greeks that reflects our own imitative humor today.

KEY WORDS

Archeology of Knowledge

Image Macro

Imitative Humor

Material Repeatability

Meme

Internet Memes

Meme Culture

Template

Motif

INTRODUCTION

When you are told a joke, or shown a funny meme from the internet, do you wonder “who did it first?” In the digital age, it is significantly easier (albeit still somewhat arduous) to track down the origins of virilized jokes and images that were used on the internet because of the longevity of internet data. If we are to research internet humor, practically all of the data is available to us on the World Wide Web. But there is so much data that one would need to sift through a significant amount of rubbish to find anything. For instance, if you Google “definition of a meme” approximately 332,000,000 results come up. However, knowledge of a more ancient humor and circulation (humor used in Greece and circulation in the 17th century are the two focused on in this thesis) is a niche area of study: its comprehensive data scant, often buried beneath close readings historical texts and authors or sometimes entirely lost over time. The discussion of memes in relation to history has not yet emerged as a serious discourse. As of now, they are two mutually exclusive discourses, one under the field of “memetics” and the other is typically a collection of essays about the jokes and humor during a particular time. I intend to bridge the gap between the two in order to find continuity in imitative humor throughout history that seems to be a reoccurring characteristic of constantly evolving societies and cultures.

There is not yet an accurate or distinct way that memetists have agreed to define “meme”, the center of the entire discussion. Contemporarily, memes refer to humorous image macros that are circulated, typically via internet. Imitative humor”— the broader term for “meme” used in this thesis— consists of image macros, writing, or traceable material. Not much has been done to categorize these results either. The issue that many contemporary memetic scholars have is with the original definition of “meme” that is still referenced as the informal definition. The term

meme was first defined by Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, as any unit of culture (an idea, belief, pattern of behavior, etc.) that reproduces itself in the minds of individuals analogous to how genes are reproduced and spread (Dawkins 192). Richard Dawkins used biological and evolutionary models to summarize cultural phenomena. Dawkins says: “examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins 192). Dawkins goes even further to say, by quoting N. K. Humphrey, that “...memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically.” (Dawkins 192). It can be said that these examples are indicating that *anything* can be a meme.

While Dawkins’ definition presents certain obstacles, first clarifying the primary analogy in *The Selfish Gene* will explain my own re-definition of “meme” for this thesis. Dawkins’ concept of the “selfish gene,” central to his book’s argument, provides the model for a meme, as well:

Genes are competing directly with their alleles for survival, since their alleles in the gene pool are rivals for their slot on the chromosomes of future generations. Any gene that behaves in such a way as to increase its own survival chances in the gene pool at the expense of its alleles will, by definition, tautologously, tend to survive. The gene is the basic unit of selfishness (Dawkins 36).

Dawkins uses this same model to describe a new replicator for a unit of imitation of cultural transmission. Assuming their independent existence, he states:

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins 192)

There are two issues that many have with Dawkins' definition— the first is what many of his critics agree on: the impreciseness of the metaphor and definition; what can be considered a meme by his definition includes an innumerable amount of aspects in culture; "...tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.", causing the discussion of memes to become diluted. To Dawkins, a meme could be the Theory of Relativity, or ritualistic greetings (such as the rhetorical question "How are you?" when passing an acquaintance), or even the concept of God (Dawkins 192). All of these things qualify as a meme because (1) they are an element of culture, and (2) are replicable (Dawkins 194-195).

The second issue is that Dawkins considered genes to be autonomous, self-reproducing units. He then extends his analogy, by comparing memes to cultural reproductive units, but this further complicates what he is trying to explicate. In one example he defines an "idea meme" as "an entity that is capable of being transmitted from one brain to another." (Dawkins 196). It is hard to accept ideas as entities— ideas are thoughts produced by an entity, rather than having an independent existence. The definition is not technical enough and Dawkins is making the claim that the concept of a meme (as well as the genes) have autonomy while undergoing a random natural selection process for their survival, which Dawkins describes as the fecundity of any one copy of a meme (Dawkins 194).

In *Virus of the Mind*, Richard Brodie tackles other definitions of "meme" that have since developed. He acknowledges that the definition of a meme depends on who you ask. He observes three distinct definitions from biological, cognitive, and psychological perspectives. The biological definition is Dawkin's perspective. Daniel Dennett, a cognitive scientist and philosopher defines a meme as "...an idea, the kind of complex idea that forms itself into a distinct memorable unit. [Memes are] ... spread by vehicles that are physical manifestations of

the meme.” (qtd in Brodie 8). This definition is better than most because it asserts that a meme is formed by idea-creating minds, not that they implicitly exist, and that they are spread not like a virus but by “vehicles” such as the internet or word-of-mouth (which also implies that it is a deliberate action). Psychologist Henry Plotkin’s defines a meme as, “...the unit of cultural heredity analogous to the gene. It is the internal representation of knowledge” (qtd in Brodie 7). Once Brodie establishes the different perspectives for defining memes, he reworks these three definitions in an attempt to offer a new understanding: memes are “a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds.” (Brodie 11). He also claims that “what causes you and everyone else to think and behave as they do” (Brodie 16) is considered the aspect of what memes perform. The influence that memes have on people is rhetorical work which results in the circulation of the meme rather than carbon copies. The distinction here is (1) that memes are often never exactly the same as these definitions suggest and (2) memes are influenced by culture rather than the other way around. One example that Brodie gives is that T.V. shows are memes that “infect” you, the same way a virus infects organisms. I argue that T.V. shows and commercials can certainly *produce* a meme (only when it is a select unit/image macro extracted from the larger whole). The scope of what is a meme becomes too large with the broad definitions that Dawkins, Brodie, and others offer. A meme is not an entire episode of a popular T.V. show, rather it is a line of dialogue or a memorable facial expression that is then extrapolated, replicated, and disseminated across cultures and subgroups.

The definitions offered by the field of memetics do not reflect the current, popular usage of “meme”. There is a need for a definition that focuses on humor and, specifically the easily shareable “image macros” that juxtapose text and image to create meaning. Clearly, the usage of

memes in today's culture is quite different from when it arrived in our vocabulary. Yet, we continue to rely primarily on these definitions offered despite the term changing contextually. Firstly, the context of memes has shifted to primarily convey templated humor. Secondly, memes are physical manifestations or reproductions of an idea (such as an image macro) and not merely ideas that are independent actors. Thirdly, memes represent knowledge that may be specific to a time period or demographic (this is often true of most any cultural phenomenon). And lastly, memes require a process that is deliberate not autonomous. One way to understand the process is to imagine a play in which an actor says a funny or memorable phrase, you then extract that unit from it's whole (decontextualizing it) and circulate that unit, it then becomes a meme. The meme if successful enough, may become a solidified characteristic for the time it circulated. Internet users often make "meme calendars" to track what memes were the most popular for a particular month (Adam 2017). Another example of the process needed is if one person saw a stock photo, then added a humorous caption to it, thus making it an image macro, and then sharing it on the internet for it to be circulated. In the chapter on Shakespeare, *figure 7* and *figure 8* show this process in action.

This thesis proposes to further investigate these processes in a form that can be considered a precursor to our memes from historical pieces of work. In the spirit of evolution, I would like to offer a new way to understand memes, one evolved to match the times. The main properties of a meme, in any medium, are that it is (1) easily propagated (and most often humorous) material that is (2) textually or pictorially reproduced and (3) "consumed" by humans. The definition I will be operating under is a meme is a unit— either a digital image macro or a material that has been extracted/appropriated for circulation— that is an easily propagated element of a culture. This definition is meant to be simple, and encompass the

understanding that a meme is not merely an idea in people's heads but the physical manifestation of an idea that imitates and reflects the culture it was created in. The idea of an imitative culture is the beginning of understanding why memes are so popular; humans are bound by the instinct to imitate one another, and so with memes, humorous memes, it becomes a way for us to connect with each other over a good laugh.

To begin my study, I reviewed literature on contemporary imitative culture—books such as *Because Internet*, *Memes in Digital Culture*, and *Still Life with Rhetoric*—which discuss the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of memes. These focused on the contemporary circulation of memes, while I am interested in engaging with a nuanced discussion of the same concepts in terms of historical meme culture. In the time periods this thesis focuses on, we can find instances of imitative humor, such as graffiti in Greek bath houses, and Shakespeare's most famous innuendos and jokes that have lasted despite the ebbs and flows of cultural changes. By studying the humorous nature of these earlier forms and their virality, we are able to draw important parallels between contemporary and historical contexts for understanding memes.

This thesis investigates where exactly we can identify earlier forms of memes. To start with, there are some forms of memetic humor with origins we can trace in a relatively straight line—for example, the *Philogelos*, a book of 265 jokes (Hierocles, Philagrius, & Thierfelder 1968) is a source for Monty Python Sketch, The Dead Parrot. Those who are familiar with Shakespeare and his sincerity in absurdity might already be accustomed to his novelty gags and innuendos that spread from The Globe Theatre to across the globe. Never one to be too subtle, even his titles brought in the laughs, such as *Much Ado about Nothing*, in which “nothing” was an Elizabethan euphemism for a woman's genitals. *Much Ado about Nothing* is a perfect example of how the cultural context (in that case, the language) is important for understanding

the relationship people had to humor during that time. Therefore, in order to fully appreciate the hilarity of these memes of history we must also keep in mind the historical contexts in which they were created and what they meant to the people that were consuming them. By studying a particular niche of historical-literary memes, I can consider memes in history (i.e. Shakespeare as a viral, circulating text in early modern England) and memes that recur throughout history.

CHAPTER I

UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION AND USE OF MEMES

Because Internet

Because Internet, by linguist Gretchen McCullough, addresses the question of how we interpret and use language in our rapidly evolving digital world—specifically acronyms, memes, punctuation, and emoji. The purpose of this book is not to cement the linguistic rules of internet grammar; *Because Internet* elaborates the fluidity of informal language, and how we assign emotional meaning to what McCullough calls “expressive typography.

Not only does McCullough write about the linguistic format that memes have taken, but she also asks an important question: when does a meme become a meme? She begins the discussion of memes by starting from the beginning as I did—with Richard Dawkins—or at least the beginning of the coining of the word, and continues the meme chapter by describing the spread, protocol, and how the world of memes has changed since its digital conception. She says, “The first time I see a cat or dog with peculiar grammar, I’m somewhere between mildly tickled and simply confused. It’s around the third or fifth version that the humor kicks in...”

(McCullough 257). *Figure 1* is an example of the cat with peculiar grammar, it is from a web blog featuring “lolcats¹” (Dubs). The cat or dog that she sees are caricatures—stock characters and personifications. Cartoons, TV shows, and Bible stories all have stock characters, so why aren’t they memes too? McCullough says that memes are not just participatory, but they’re exclusive. They’re units of a culture that may not be understandable to an outsider. Sometimes that means an outsider to internet culture or it could be an outsider to a language or country.

¹ Dubs, Jaime. “LOLcats.” Know Your Meme, 12 Dec. 2008, knowyourmeme.com/memes/lolcats.

“Memes can be a linguistic recruitment tool: observers want to be part of the in group that gets the memes, whether benignly...or for more nefarious purposes.” (McCullough 258)

McCullough’s conception of a meme in linguistic terms is something that would be “an atom of internet culture”.



Figure 1: LOLCat

What Memes are Made of

Jokes, memes, and any other type of imitative humor, whether it is in literature, on the stage, or in the bathhouse, typically follow a pattern. What connects the terms “jokes” and “memes” is that they both share similar imitation and circulation of humorous material. This is because in the modern meaning of the term “meme”, one of the functions it serves is to be humorous, just as a joke does. In *The Anatomy of a Joke*, Jim Holt explains what exactly the jokes are made of, and therefore memes. Both memes and jokes contain stock characters, familiar themes, and typically captions. Stock characters include but are not limited to the drunk, the miser, the braggard, the sex-starved woman, the misogynist and the man with bad breath.

Familiar themes include but are not limited to husband and wife, the poor man and rich man, fart jokes, sex jokes, and the culturally ever present “toilet humor” (Holt).

We know that memes do not always work alone. They are often grouped together into what is called a memeplex. A memeplex is a group of memes that reinforce each other's replication. In January 2009 a series of comic strips known as “rage comics²” were created in the Subreddit “f7u12”, named after the “rageguy³” character seen in *Figure 2*. A collection of characters was created by various Reddit users and this eventually led to a plethora of other characters who express emotion, humor, and all the themes that Jim Holt described. Some of the more successful characters were the f7u12, Forever Alone Guy (*Figure 3*), and Y U NO guy (*Figure 4*). These comics are usually only a few panels in length and have a quick progression from a problem or situation to punchline. This follows the pattern described by Holt who says, “...the joke proceeds with arrowlike swiftness, resolving its matter in the form of a two liner... or even a one liner... Often it is signaled by a formulaic setup...” (Holt, 88). This “formulaic setup” is seen anywhere from the bathhouses of ancient Greece to the internet.



Figure 2: Rageguy

² “Rage Comics.” Know Your Meme, 20 May 2011, knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/rage-comics.

³ Dubbs, Jaime. “Rage Guy (FFFFFFUUUUUUU-).” Know Your Meme, Know Your Meme, 15 Jan. 2009, knowyourmeme.com/memes/rage-guy-ffffuuuuuuuu.



Figure 3: Forever Alone

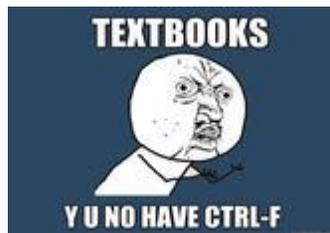


Figure 4: Y U NO Guy

The Meme Machine

Susan Blackmore covers a broad spectrum of meme-related topics in her book, *The Meme Machine*. She starts out with her intervention with Dawkins and discusses important issues with memetics while attempting to be clear about her concept of memes, the connection between memes and sexual phenomena, the internet, and language. The part of Blackmore's book that intersects with this thesis, is in what she says about language and the internet. Firstly, she only loosely follows the same definition as Dawkin's with the caveat that there must be an understanding of the difference between imitation and learning. Dawkins said in his book that a particular way of building an arch could be a meme because it is replicated; Blackmore counters with defining that as learning. So, the primary argument concerning memes and how to define them is that there is and should be a clear difference between imitation, which makes a meme, and things that are learned, such as how to build an arch efficiently.

CHAPTER II

ANCIENT GREECE

In ancient Greece, most notably in Athens, politics played a crucial role in the management of society. And where there is politics, there is satire. One of the most famous Greek comedic playwrights, Aristophanes, was most well-known for his satire. He exaggerated and characterized the politicians of his day for the sake of political commentary and no doubt for comedic relief. This is what the Greeks categorized as “Old Comedy”, which satirizes the life of the polis (city state). In the oldest known jest book, *Philogelos*, or laughter-lover, there are over 200 jokes that cover just about every occupation, ability, and relationship. *Philogelos* falls into the category of what is called “New Comedy” which is a comedy that concerns itself with human rather than political relations. Looking at *Philogelos*, we can see that humor from the fourth century AD can be surprisingly modern—Some jokes get old, but these did not: in *Philogelos*, there are a handful of jokes that would not be seen as out of place in today’s culture despite being over 2,000 years old. These are truly ancient memes, and are proof that the nature of humanity, is that every so often history will repeat itself.

Laughter Lovers from the 4th Century AD to Today

The jokes told in the 4th century AD are very much the same ones we share today. A commonality between jokes and memes is that they are both relatively short; the longer the meme, the less likely it is to be widely imitated and spread (that’s what comedy plays are for). “Jest books”, which are exactly what they sound like they are, were not uncommon throughout the literate periods of human history, although unfortunately, they are largely lost artifacts. One of the first Jest books we have access to is *Philogelos* or *Laughter Lover*. This was written in the

4th century AD by a man named Hierocles and is the oldest surviving joke book. Prior to the 8th Century BC, the Greeks had many of their stories and jests performed aloud by aoidos, who were oral performers in Greece, the same way that the Iliad or any other piece of work was circulated until the alphabet was developed in 8th Century BC, which has allowed us to enjoy artifacts such as *Philogelos*. We are aware that due to the popularity of oral dissemination of these works during this time period, there was no *one* version. This resulted in a continuing variation of the jokes to develop, as they were shared. The concept of “no one true original” parallels the way that our memes are circulated via the internet—there isn’t one true meme, instead there are many versions of a meme, deriving from the same template. One person can create an image macro digitally, the way one person would enunciate a piece of humor, and each would be circulated between people while changing based on audience, situation, and other demographical variations.

In *Philogelos* there are a handful of jokes that we see in modern-day imitative humor.

*Figure 5*⁴ and *Figure 6*⁵ are image macros found online that parallel jokes found in *Philogelos*.



Figure 5: Doctor and Patient Meme

⁴ What seems to be the problem meme. *iFunny*, 06 Oct. 2016. <https://ifunny.co/tags/doctor>

⁵ Police and le drunk me. *9gag*, 03 Nov. 2012. <https://9gag.com/gag/4747308>

The joke corresponding to *Figure 5* found in *Philogelos* says: “A man went to an egghead physician and said, ‘Doctor, whenever I get up after a sleep, I feel dizzy for half an hour, then I’m all right.’ ‘Then wait half an hour before getting up,’ advised the doctor.” (*Philogelos* 1). In the Greek version the egghead doctor is another way of describing someone, often one of intellect, that is out-of-touch with ordinary people. In the image macro, nothing explicitly tells us that the stock photo is of an “egghead physician”, but by reading the caption one can make their own inferences about the disposition of this doctor. In Jim Holt’s *Stop me if you’ve heard this*, he describes a handful of elements that make up jokes and one of the most important elements is the stock character, “the drunk, the miser, the braggard, the sex-starved woman, and the man with bad breath, as well as [the egghead]”(Holt 11). The stock character depicted in *Figure 5* is the egghead—in *Philogelos* the jokes are conveniently ordered based on stock characters such as the egghead, braggart, misogynist, etc. This tells us two things: (1) the immutability of human archetypes/stock characters is clearly exhibited in the stock characters from the 4th Century AD being relevant in today’s comic entertainment. And (2) the way that the Ancient Greeks shared jokes and interacted humorously with each other is parallel to today’s interactions; be it oral or internet, the meme persists. Essentially, the mordant sense of wit and humor of the joke about the egghead doctor was just as relatable in the 4th century AD as it is today.

Joke #191’s stock character is an “ill-tempered man”, but its corresponding meme features a different stock character: the drunk. The Greek version of this meme, corresponding to *Figure 6*, goes like this: “In answer to the question ‘Where do you live?’ an ill-tempered man replied, ‘At home.’” (*Philogelos* 36). The internet meme in *Figure 6* contains the same motif of “literal humor” as the joke in *Philogelos*. “Literal humor” is often a reliable motif because it

Philogelos (Adams 2008). The original joke (and I use that term loosely) is only a few lines long, “The slave you sold me has died,’ a man complained to an egghead. ‘Well, I swear by all the Gods, he never did anything like that when I had him!’” (*Philogelos* 4). In *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* skit, the same joke ends up as a long conversation between two men: a buyer and shopkeeper at a pet store. The buyer enters an animal shop with a cage and a dead bird and complains to the shopkeeper that the bird he was sold was, in fact, dead. But the shop keeper insists that the bird is sleeping. This exchange goes back and forth and is drawn out until another character from a previous skit enters, claims that the skit has become “too silly” and puts an end to it. The importance of the parallels drawn between these two cultural artifacts is that they both function as a reflection of the society it was created in while still following a central motif. Based on Foucault’s classifications this exhibits material repeatability. Material repeatability is essentially an enunciation⁶ that functions as a material artifact, and that material artifact can lead to a series of other unique narratives containing the original underlying enunciation. One of these is a Greek joke and the other is an English skit—these are not exactly bonafide memes, but they do give an example of how humor is a long practiced imitative form and how *Philogelos* is a truly impressive artifact and reference for such humor.

⁶ An enunciation, as defined by Foucault, is how we understand a statement by the terms in which it was said and its effect on the discourse—rather than understanding a statement rhetorically or grammatically.

CHAPTER III

THE LEGACY OF SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare was quite a favorite of Queen Elizabeth, a patron of the arts (Brown) which is one reason he enjoyed so much artistic liberty; he performed for the rich, the poor, the foreign, and all types of people because his plays encompassed intricacies of English life and tastes so well that the people of England could not help but be attracted to his performances. Today Shakespeare is widely seen as a highbrow man and form of literature (that is not to say that his plays were not a feat of both performance and writing, because they absolutely are), but anyone privy to some more intimate knowledge of William's life knows: Shakespeare himself was not a highbrow man, and one needs to look no further than his comedy. As a staple of English studies, much of what is said about Shakespeare contains that which any other famous author enjoys in the classroom: reverence, study of rhetoric, potential meaning, pupils memorizing the sonnets, and contextual information. However, unlike these timeless concepts, Shakespearean humor is often embedded in the cultural particularities of Elizabethan England, a context often lost on us when reading the plays as great literature. The humor that Shakespeare used in his plays were not his own invention; his comedy fits the into the same classifications of Old and New Comedy that the Greeks noted centuries before, only adapted to an Early-Modern English context.

To recap, Old Comedy, as mentioned in Chapter II with the Greeks, features an interaction with political content and New Comedy features common social relationships—these classifications of comedy will inevitably reoccur so long as we shall exist. Shakespeare was clearly well aware of the comedic traditions and the conditions in which he created his content; the political and social environment of England had ripe pickings for both Old and New

Comedy. His plays were so rhetorically rich, aiding in the ease of decontextualization and circulation, that when parts of his plays were extracted and circulated, even out of context they were successfully recognized. In Louis Lord's book, *Aristophanes: His Plays and His Influence*, he references the writer George Jean Nathan who "wonders if any really good comedy has been written since Aristophanes...he is the greatest comic poet, except Shakespeare, of the world." (Lord 172).

Circulation and Virality

Back in the 17th century, there was no such thing as copyright, so those who attended his plays and were literate enough would regularly extract lines from his various plays and repurpose them into other areas of English culture. *Dramatic Extracts in Seventeenth-Century English Manuscripts*, by Laura Estell, establishes that "readers and audience members jotted short sayings into their playbooks and also selected passages from plays to copy into other books and manuscripts." (Estell 1). This act is known as commonplace writing or commonplace books. This was certainly not the beginning of copying and sharing material, but it is a crucial part of memetic history as we can see the way British citizens imitated or appropriated the works of Shakespeare into popular culture.

The importance of the commonplace books to this thesis is how circulation occurred with specific pieces of Shakespeare's work, compared to how circulation on the internet functions in very much the same way. The 17th century cultural response to extraction of popular media mirrors memetic transmission today. J. F. Bernard says of the transmission of theater: "[Play's] survival rests in its capacity to successfully communicate its stories to audiences that can disseminate them beyond its walls...appealing to the human need for storytelling..." (Bernard 225). The dissemination of content is another way to describe how his audiences extracted and

propagated content. What we can understand from Bernard's assertion is that, without the dissemination, plays and select extractions from the plays would not be successful, the success of the theater relies on our human need for storytelling. The same goes for memes—without the propagation of a meme in various places and mediums, it would not be a successful meme, therefore memes rely on the human impulse to imitate and share humor. For Shakespeare, it was the audience members and readers that attended the plays who originally disseminated parts of his plays by word of mouth (we can assume) and with commonplace books. We, in comparison to our 17th century counterparts, are able to disseminate/propagate such things with lightning speed with the aid of the internet. To create memes out of Shakespeare's work, some part of the play was first decontextualized—a smaller element of the larger play being extracted for imitation. Then, they would be reappropriated in either another person's manuscript, or shared simply as decontextualized pieces. A common practice for comedic extracts was to have them organized under generalized headings; this could be either familiar themes or topics, the same way that *Philogelos* was set up (Estell 147). Once again, we see how the use of archetypes of stock characters are important for the success of a comedic bit.

Memes of Shakespeare

A quality of memes is that they contain formulaic set ups or templates, this is what makes some of the more popular memes instantly recognizable. For commonplace books it was a similar deal. The commonplace books that had a closer relationship to understanding a play as a whole, made the extractions more successful. Being able to understand the theme and purpose of the play or meme template is important to being able to make a successful meme. Estell says of one popular commonplace writer, John Abbot, that “[his] commonplaces can decontextualize the extracts from their original moment in the plays, but they also indicate that he read and

understood the play in its entirety; that is to say, his extracts are paradoxically separate from and connected to the play.”, and this is what ultimately made the circulation of *his* work successful (Estell 116). Those who were familiar with the play were able to find the extracts relevant but they were decontextualized in such a way that even those who may not have been familiar with the play were still able to understand the extract because it was separate from the play. Gretchen McCulloch mentions ingroup jokes as an element of meme culture—some memes are understandable only to what she calls “internet veterans”, but there are also memes that those unfamiliar with the intricacies of the internet can still find funny. Take a look at *Figure 7*, known as the “distracted boyfriend meme”. This started as a stock photo in the database iStock and became a meme sensation a couple years later. To create the meme, users added titles to each person in the picture; the woman is red signifying something that the man should not be doing or focusing on, and the woman in blue being something he should be doing or focusing on. Those who are more familiar with Shakespeare than they are with the internet might find *Figure 8* a better way to explain the theme/template of this particular meme. *Figure 8* is an artist’s (and literature fan) rendition of the distracted boyfriend meme drawn by Binah Q. from Tumblr. Hamlet, donned in his “nighted colour”, is distracted by the ghost of his father, while his faithful friend Horatio stands beside him worried that the ghost of his father may drive him insane.



Figure 7 *Distracted Boyfriend*



Figure 8: Q, Binah, *Shakespearean rendition of distracted boyfriend*

The only difference between these two memes, is that one is about Shakespeare and the other is not. Otherwise, they are fundamentally the same meme, adapted to different contexts, most likely based on the desired audience. The original stock photo/meme template would reach a wider internet audience, while the Shakespeare version would more likely get a chuckle out of those who have read *Hamlet*—although if you understood the first meme, you would understand the basic meaning of the Hamlet version.

We can see how Shakespeare is enjoyed for many typical reasons such as an appreciation of the arts and his ingenuity, but also, interestingly, for his colorful insults. His insults can be found on posters, cups, shirts and are used in image macros that circulate largely in literature groups on various social media sites. I want to single out an insult from Macbeth that was particularly popular. Macbeth is not a traditionally comic play at all, however, because of Shakespeare’s novel insults (to those from the 21st century at least) it seems hardly surprising that the insults would be extracted and shared. *Figure 9*⁷ is an example of an image macro using a quote from Shakespeare’s Macbeth—the quote “What, you egg?” followed by the stage direction “stabs him” is superimposed on an image from a news report about a real man who, evidently, was stabbed.



Figure 9: What you Egg? Meme

The quote is from Macbeth, but the meme that was a result of it began on Tumblr when users shared some of their favorite quotes from Shakespeare⁸. Then, it was popularized on other social media sites and circulated by other users. *Figure 9* is not the original meme, but an iteration of the insult used in memes. Just as Laura Estell says of the seventeenth-century people, “...late seventeenth-century readers... saw plays as changeable and modular texts that could be taken

⁷ Tuxedokit. *Tumblr*, 11 Jan. 2020, tuxedokit.tumblr.com/post/190199362824.

⁸ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/what-you-egg-he-stabs-him>

apart, recopied and reused.” (Estell 150), so too do we see many things in the digital world as something that can be “taken apart, recopied, and reused”. *Figure 9* is also great example of how something is taken, the quote” and recopied from an original meme in order to be reused for a new image macro.

CONCLUSION

Memes are an evolving concept, and the original understanding can only lend so much to the way memes are used and understood in today's culture. The part that the internet plays in memes now is most important to the shift in context (from blanket imitation to imitative humor) for memes. Much of what we know and do today is a product of thousands of years of cultural and technological evolution. Humor is no different. There is no origin of humor, but we can reliably trace events, books, artifacts, etc. to show that not only is humor often imitated via oral, written or digital communication but it is also something that can provide a long lasting motif that is easily adaptive to new cultures. Memes are merely the modern-day manifestation of imitative humor that has been around from eons. For the Greeks they imitated humor orally and sometimes written or graffitied. In Shakespearean England people used commonplace books to extract and circulate. Today we share memes via the internet and saving pictures to our phone. What made our ancestors laugh in the 4th century AD, continued to make us laugh all the way until today when we adapted the jokes to fit into meme culture, where they can continue to be successfully circulated.

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