Framing the Sounds of Laughter in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

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Abstract: *This essay explores the jokes and moments of laughter represented in Shakespeare's early comedy* The Two Gentlemen of Verona *from the perspective of frame theory, informed by rhetoric, semantics, and cognitive mapping and developed by critics such as George Lakoff and Erving Goffman. By explaining some of the methods that Shakespeare employs to prompt laughter in* The Two Gentlemen of Verona, *I identify the main frames of laughter that articulate humour in this comedy, represented by sounds of laughter. Focusing on the keys used to elicit laughter—title, character types, and character names—I argue that the Shakespearean comedy frames the sounds of laughter as responses to several distinctive units of incongruity in the construction of the self. Laughter, therefore, is elicited from the audience through the medium of various jokes framed in the context of word-play, character names, and the oddness of the rape scene, accessed by means of culturally or universally understood keys. These aspects of the comedy confirm the humanness of laughter through the introduction of the "character" of Crab the dog. In addition, the ambivalent use of the metaphoric spaces of the Italian cities (Verona, Mantua, and Milan) in* The Two Gentlemen of Verona *generates laughter; the city-space suggesting civility is framed in contrast to the greenwood world populated by bizarre outlaws evolving in the oblique settings of comedy. Sounds of laughter, therefore, are the result of comedic moments that have an impact on theatre audiences and create a particular aural environment.*

Keywords: cognitive mapping, comedy, frame theory, laughter, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*

Laughter is the result of humour as play with words or ideas, especially playing with negative stereotypes. The sounds of laughter emitted by the audience in the reception of comedic moments can be framed in various ways; they are the result of the director's agency manifested in a specific production or sometimes intervene in the process of framing the jokes produced by various characters during dramatic interaction. My paper uses the theory of framing—one informed by rhetoric, semantics, and cognitive mapping—to analyse laughter in William Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Frame theory is most employed today by those interested in the relationship between words and cognitive structures. For example, George Lakoff explicitly references frame theory in his *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame Your Debate* (2004) and implicitly in his work with Mark Johnson *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Both critical texts argue that the words one uses not only reflect one's understanding of the world, but also create that understanding. In essence, the relationship between words and thought processes is symbiotic. Moreover, the sounds of laughter that various members of the audience produce are different forms of responding to the comedic moments in a play, as a result of the framing of jokes through language, gesture, or aural environment.

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To understand how pre-existing metaphorical frames function and their relationship to jokes and laughter in Shakespeare's theatre, a short review of the theory offered by noted sociologist and social psychologist Erving Goffman is in order. In his *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1986), Goffman claims that frame theory attempts to answer the following question: What is going on here? He borrows the term "frame" from Gregory Bateson's "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," which coins the term to distinguish the serious from the unserious. Bateson's work is perhaps most noted for his understanding that, as Goffman writes, "on occasion we may not know whether it is play or the real thing that is occurring" (*Frame Analysis* 7). The question of what is real, what is play, and what internal moves are made to uncover the difference is the impetus for Goffman's work. Goffman claims that a framework is implemented in answering the question: What is going on here? (*Frame Analysis* 8). Goffman's theory is one that works to explain the organization of experience, to uncover the "basic frameworking of understanding available in our society for making sense of events" (10). It is perhaps a little misleading to call this process a "framework," in that the term implies a singular frame. Instead, as Goffman notes, in most circumstances many things are occurring simultaneously. Therefore, many frames may be operating at once.

Three central terms are defined in Goffman's work. Goffman uses the term "strip" to refer to "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity" (*Frame Analysis* 10). A strip, therefore, is one event, one situation, or one "sequence of happenings" (10). In terms of this research paper, a strip may be one joke, one moment of humour within a play, an entire scene, or a particular production. George Lakoff defines "frame" as follows: "Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world" (*Don't Think of an Elephant!* xv). Thus, frames are the organizational structures we use to interpret the world around us, to define and categorize the events before us. The third concept of frame theory is "keying," a notion linked with that of "playing"; it is defined as "the set of conventions by which a given activity … is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by participants as something quite else" (Goffman, *Frame Analysis* 43-44). Keys are, therefore, the signs or symbols that must be interpreted within any given strip that indicate which frame ought to be employed.

What follows is an unpacking of the jokes and sounds of laughter represented in Shakespeare's early comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. My aim is to explain some of the methods employed by the playwright to prompt laughter and to identify many of the main frames of laughter evident in the play in order to better understand the function of humour and laughter. This analysis will focus on the methods or keys used to access frames of not only comedic play, but of laughter as physical sound produced by an audience. First, the keys used to begin the play will be examined, especially focusing on the use of opening monologues and the repetition of key

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terms. Character types most associated with laughter will then be identified. Next, word play and its ability to signal laughter will be analysed, especially focusing on character names. Lastly, a few notable scenes will be analysed to uncover how broad humour—extended humour rather than the moment of a joke—is established and works to elicit laughter. I argue that the sounds of laughter in this Shakespearean comedy is framed in the form of distinctive instances of incongruity in the construction of the self, which elicits laughter from diverse audiences at various moments in the play.

To illustrate the central components of joke frames found within early modern theatre, my analysis focuses primarily upon Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The reasons for this focus are threefold. First, it is one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, if not his first. The *Norton Shakespeare* editors suggest that it may have been written between 1590 and 1591, but submit that it is "one of his earliest plays, perhaps *the* earliest" (Howard 77). The *Oxford Shakespeare* states that it was written "probably in the late 1580s" (Wells et al. 1), a time span also proposed by E. A. J. Honigmann (88). Much has been made of Shakespearean comedy, and the ways in which his framing of the genre might differ from his contemporaries'.[1] However, the earlier the play, the less one can claim that a theatre-going audience of the time would have known how to define a "Shakespearean comedy." In other words, the frames found in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* were accessed by culturally or universally understood keys, not ones that were necessarily cultivated by Shakespeare or have come to be identified as "Shakespearean" by later critics. Hence, while a scholar such as Marjorie Garber might note the play's reputation as "an anthology" of Shakespearean tropes (43),[2] in its original performances an audience would have had no such understanding; instead, audiences would read the keys contextually and culturally and produce sounds of laughter as responsive to these keys.

It is perhaps its reliance upon these types of keys that has given the play a poor reputation. Noted for its inconsistencies and derivative nature, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has been called by scholars such as Harold Bloom "the weakest

[1] See Northrop Frye's "Argument of Comedy" (2004) and C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959), for example.

[2] In *Shakespeare after All*, Marjorie Garber notes the following Shakespearean tropes as evident in this work: a love triangle, involving two "brothers," in which the heroine seeks aid from a friar; a second heroine disguised as a boy, wooing the one she loves on another's behalf; a hero hiring musicians to woo the object of his desire; a band of outlaws who adopt a nobleman as their leader; an elopement plot involving a ladder; a wise clown figure; and, finally, a father who denies his daughter the right to marry the one of her choosing and instead promises her to someone else (43). As Garber suggests, these tropes would later be "crafted into more compelling drama" (43). Just by reading the list of Shakespearean tropes enumerated by Garber it is possible to see the numerous occasions for eliciting laughter in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

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of all Shakespeare's comedies," as it is "so much less impressive, in every register" than his other work (36). It is its weak reputation, however, that makes it ripe for this type of analysis. Evidence of keys within even a weak play confirms the manner in which frame theory works. More importantly, though, is that a close reading of this play's keys can transform how one views its supposed weaknesses. It is my contention that an analysis of framing in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* resolves some of its inadequacies and, therefore, illustrates the value an application of this theory can hold. Not only does this observation confirm the humanness of laughter, but it highlights the most special aspect of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: Crab, the dog. While much of the humour derived from Crab forms part of the comedy, it is his lack of access to frames that make his existence important. Neither the "character" of Crab nor the dog who plays him can read the keys presented by the playwright or access the same frames of laughter that the audience does. Yet, it is his lack of access to these frames that elicits much of the humour; in other words, the frame of "dog" is opposed to the frame of "human." He then becomes a continual reminder of not only how framing works but of how seeking to answer the question that guides frame theory—What is going on here?—is a human pursuit.

Critics have tried to determine what is going on in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in point of plot, character, and action, without succeeding in exhausting the topic. Feminist critics respond to the cult of Petrarchism in Elizabethan England and discuss the incarnations of the Petrarchan lover in the play, with his idealization of the mistress, but also invasive action, such as rape or attempted rape in the comedy. Kirsten Dey, for example, argues that "The idea of rape or attempted rape in response to sexual idealisation on the part of a Petrarchan lover, and rooted in the violent potential of Petrarchan conceits, is introduced at the end of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (which appears to be Shakespeare's first experiment in this regard)" (38). However, as Dey observes, "the comic structure does not allow for a tragic conclusion to take place, and Valentine thus finds Proteus before he can achieve his aim" (38). In this instance, it is the unbending rule of comedy (not laughter) that allows for a happy resolution. Yet the question "What is going on here?" is not answered and the audience is left wondering whether this potentially tragic situation of attempted rape can have a place in a light-hearted play. The incongruity created by this scene of attempted rape and its lamentable failure may, consequently, elicit laughter among members of the audience, whose expectations do not correspond with the events represented on stage.

A doubtful aspect of this comedy is its setting; the play is apparently set in Verona and Milan, but locations are not very precise. David M. Bergeron observes that the Verona place "remains nameless" (427) in the play, even if there are three references to this Italian city. This is different from *Romeo and Juliet*, where Verona is repeatedly mentioned, eleven times in fact. As Bergeron unequivocally observes,

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"the choice of the city of Verona to include in the title of *Two Gentlemen* seems to have come out of thin air, or at least the city gains no precise reference in the play" (428). Moreover, the play's final scene takes place in the woods outside Mantua (since Silvia determines to go to Mantua), so Mantua becomes a destination, as Milan had been earlier in the comedy. For the moment, as Bergeron observes, "Valentine has become a 'gentleman' of Mantua, the place that serves as a point of reunion and reconciliation, completing, however imperfectly, the comic direction of the play" (433). Laughter, therefore, as I see it, derives from the incongruity generated by the fact that the comedy's location mentioned in the title is rather vague and does not correspond to the audience's expectations of the Italian cities mentioned (Verona, Milan, and Mantua). Just as Verona in the title is and is not a certain location for the comedy, the audience's expectations related to the places of the play are reversed. While some may expect connotations of civilized Italian cities, in which commerce and nobility are part of social life, other members of the audience experience laughter in the wilderness of the woods and the tragi-comic situations emerging from the interaction with greenwood outlaws. In all cases, sounds of laughter are generated by the oblique spaces of comedy.

Dialogic space in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is paralleled with dialogic gender relations. From the homosocial interaction between the two gentlemen of the title to the position of women in a fictional or real patriarchal world, the comedy has raised questions concerning the legitimacy of romantic closure as opposed to the ambiguity of male/female values. As Lori Schroeder Haselm argues, "the private talk of female characters operates not only dramaturgically as a compelling illusion of counteraction to the patriarchal-valued world of the plays but also ideologically as an occasion for exorcising female values and thereby gaining romantic closure" (123). Indeed, as I observe, the sounds of laughter may emerge from this tension between the dramatic and the ideological incompatibility between male and female stereotypes. Not only do the two romantically involved gentlemen get involved in a friendship that would subsequently shift and change mood, but also the ladies, Silvia, Julia, and her maid Lucetta, gossip together and have fun in a male-dominated world. Moreover, Launce, Speed, and Lucetta act as foils to their respective masters Proteus, Valentine, and Julia, thus implying that class relations are just as unstable as gender interactions and cross-gender disguises (such as Julia disguised as Sebastian in the forest outside Mantua). The forest is important as a setting in which social norms are suspended. In the greenwood world, social status dissolves when characters are plucked from the rigidity of their traditional social settings and transplanted into the ambiguous realm of the wood. Individuals are judged as they really are in this setting and the breakdown of traditional structures permits the flow of currents of behaviour—homosexuality, merit-based social mobility—that run counter to established norms.

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In the quest to determine what is going on in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in point of laughter schemes, a theatre-going audience reads a multitude of keys simultaneously and quickly. The keys pointing to the frames of the theatre position the audience to witness a duel between rivals and not fear for one of their lives; to see a devious plot enacted by an evil schemer and feel delight rather than repulsion; and to observe a marriage proposal based on mistaken identity and refrain from intervening. In other words, the keys evident in the theatre space and the structure of the productions ensure that the audience will understand that the actions witnessed are based on play, or on pretending. The playwright, though, embeds other keys within the play to ensure that his audience accesses the correct frame of genre and/or theme. The most important keys appear at the beginning and they establish the tone of the play and the expectations of the audience. They direct the audience to notice some things and perhaps ignore others; they highlight and they obscure. These keys appear in the title, pre-act one scenes, and the play's first lines.

1. Title as Key to Laughter

The title of a play does much towards ensuring that the audience will access the correct frames of genre and theme. There is that old adage that a tragedy's title names a character while a comedy's does not. If one removes the history plays, this adage largely proves to be true, with the tragedies including *Doctor Faustus* (by Christopher Marlowe), *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* (by Shakespeare), and the comedies including *Bartholomew Fair* (by Ben Jonson), *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (by Francis Beaumont), *The Roaring Girl* (by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker), and *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* (by Shakespeare). This guideline, though, is not fool-proof. *The Spanish Tragedy* (by Thomas Kyd), *The Changeling* (by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley), and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (by John Ford) are notable tragedies lacking proper names, while *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (by Shakespeare and Wilkins) and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (by Robert Greene) include proper names but are not categorized as tragedy. Hence, the name-title-genre relationship may be a key that could be utilized by an audience to determine genre, but it cannot work in isolation. There are often, however, other clues in the title. For example, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (by Thomas Dekker) contains language that refers to class and laughter, in addition to adhering to the above rule. *The Revenger's Tragedy* (by Thomas Middleton), although breaking the above rule, contains language that names its genre and theme.

It is this type of language that aids a theatre-going audience in not only creating expectations for the play but determining its generic categorization as well. For example, the "comical history" in Shakespeare's *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice* ensured that not only would the First Folio editors include it with

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the comedies, but that audiences would see it as one as well. It is perhaps that very phrase that makes *The Merchant of Venice* not only a problem-play but also a problematic one today, for it is difficult for modern audiences to view the play's plot as "comical" since there are many dark elements linking the Shylock plot with the problem plays. That same type of directive language is found in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline, King of Britain*, entitled as *The Tragedie of Cymbeline* in the First Folio of 1623. Although today *Cymbeline* is typically labelled as a romance or tragicomedy, the inclusion of the word "tragedy" in this title would have influenced an audience's expectations greatly.

What do the keys found in the title *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* suggest? First, the title follows the idea outlined above. Given, however, that *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is one of Shakespeare's earliest—if not *the* earliest—plays, it cannot be assumed that a theatre-going audience would rely so heavily upon this key to determine genre. Yet, the language does direct the audience to the play's central characters and, more importantly, its primary theme. Silvia and Julia may be strong characters, with Julia especially given scenes that promote audience identification, and Lance and his dog Crab may steal laughter from audiences in many productions; however, the title suggests that this is a story of camaraderie—of brotherhood—that will centre on the conventions of being a "gentleman." Before an audience member has even entered the theatre, he or she can expect that the conflict will rest with these two men and that questions of what it means to be a gentleman—in other words, the very frame of "gentleman"—will be raised.

While *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* does not have an Induction—in performance—or a To the Reader—in print, other plays do, and this material's primary purpose often is to introduce keys that target intended frames that produce laughter. It is a play's opening lines that provide the most reliable keys for an audience. A close look at the opening of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, can prove this assertion. When an early modern theatre audience first encountered Theseus and Hippolyta at the start of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it must have been quite a moment. These unsuspecting theatre-goers saw and heard the legendary characters from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* brought to life on the stage. Based on this extraordinary start, what were their expectations for the remainder of the play? Did they expect grand spectacles of battle and conquest? This assumption could easily be true, for early on Theseus reminds Hippolyta—and the audience—that he wooed her with his sword (1.1.16-17).[3] Even without this reminder, Theseus's association with violence would have been known, for as Jonathan Bate states in *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Theseus, "as

[3] "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (1.1.16-17). All references to Shakespeare's plays are keyed to *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (1997); references to act, scenes, and lines will be given parenthetically in the text.

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any half-way educated person in the Renaissance could tell you, was a notorious rapist" (136). Given the connotations of these characters, how does a playwright, and Shakespeare in particular, elicit laughter?

A close reading of the initial interaction between Theseus and Hippolyta reveals two keys that encourage early modern audiences to access the frame of the comic and the production of the sounds of laughter. The first key appears in the very first line of the play, when Theseus states that their "nuptial hour" is quickly approaching (1.1.1). Comedy's association with weddings has long been noted. The association speaks to the way comedy as a genre has been framed. Shakespeare's comedy especially has been defined by nuptials, with Lisa Hopkins marking its most outstanding feature as "its pervading obsession with marriage" (36). By the time *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed, this obsession—or what I will call a key—had been well established, with four previous Shakespearean comedies centred on marriage or the expectation of marriage. This key is accessed early, and frequently, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with the word "nuptial" appearing no less than five times (1.1.1; 1.1.125; 3.2.12; 5.1.55; 5.1.75); "wedding" appears twice (1.2.4; 2.1.139), "wed" appears three times (1.1.18; 1.1.64), and "wedded" once (2.1.72). Other terms signalling a wedding also appear, such as "solemnities" (1.1.11), "pomp" (1.1.15), "triumph" (1.1.19), and "revelling" (1.1.19), all of which connote the public celebration of marriage.

It is the term "revelling" that leads to the second key in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—language or vocabulary that directly connotes laughter. While four variations of the word "laughter" (5.1.70) appear in the play, terms like "revel" (2.1.18; 2.1.141; 5.1.36; 5.1.353), "mirth" (1.1.13; 2.1.56; 5.1.28; 5.1.35; 5.1.57), and variations of "merry" (1.1.12; 1.2.14; 2.1.43; 5.1.58; 5.1.69) appear much more often. In fact, in the opening exchange between Theseus and Hippolyta, Theseus uses no fewer than seven words that connote laughter. Hence, while the halfway educated person of the Renaissance may, for a moment, understand the presence of Theseus and Hippolyta as a key indicating that this play will centre on violence and conquest, the same person would use the key of nuptials and the key of laughter-related vocabulary to access the frame of the comic instead. When Theseus states that he will wed Hippolyta "in another key" (1.1.18)—not one of sword or of injuries—but "with pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" (1.1.19), the audience has been told directly which frame they should employ in enjoying this play. In other words, they should be ready to produce sounds of laughter.

The opening lines of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* work similarly to those of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in that the characters and their language act as keys to direct the audience to produce sounds of laughter. The play opens with Valentine in the midst of bidding his good friend Proteus adieu. He is leaving for Milan, believing that one must leave home and see the world in order to become a man.

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Valentine has chosen to stay in Verona, for he is in love with Julia. Valentine and Proteus are the "two gentlemen of Verona" and their language indicates a deep affection for one another. Valentine addresses his friend as "my loving Proteus" (1.1.1) and "sweet Proteus" (1.1.56), while Proteus addresses his friend with "sweet Valentine" (1.1.11). When speaking to Valentine, he also names himself as "thy Proteus" (1.1.12). This language, alongside the fact that the play begins with solely these two characters, shapes the audience's expectations. This play will not be a romantic love story, even if romantic love appears later. This story centres on the love between these two men, a bond that can be described as a homosocial brotherhood.[4] Moreover, the comedy is like a duet since, in most scenes, no more than two characters are in dialogue.

Yet, the language of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* also indicates that love is of some importance to these men, for the word in varying forms appears no less than twenty times in these first lines (1.1.1-69). Love is also connected with laughter when Speed jokingly describes Valentine in love: "You were wont, when you laughed, to crow like a cock" (2.1.26-27). This comic image of the romantic lover crowing like a cock instead of producing laughter is ironic and subverts the audience's expectations of the Petrarchan lover's attitude. Both "wit[s]" (1.1.2; 1.1.34; 1.1.35; 1.1.44; 1.1.47; 1.1.69) and "fool" (1.1.38; 1.1.41) or "folly" (1.1.34; 1.1.35; 1.1.48) appear no less than four times in the play. Other important elements of language are the repetition of "youth" (1.1.2; 1.1.8) or "young" (1.1.22; 1.1.47) and "mirth" (1.1.30). Even divorced from the context of these terms, the words become keys that highlight the play's themes. This is a story that raises questions about the place of love in a gentleman's life. Is it possible to be in love and maintain one's wit? How does one in the midst of growing into manhood balance friendship, love, mirth, and wit? Which of these is most important and why? By the time Valentine warns Proteus that "by love the young and tender wit / Is turned to folly" (1.1.47-48), the audience already understands that this tension will be the main conflict of the play. Therefore, the expectation of laughter is there, inherent in the language that the characters use, and the audiences become aware of these important clues.

Moreover, when Proteus juxtaposes "honour" and "love" in his short soliloquy at the end of the opening lines (1.1.63), it is clear that this is the conflict that he himself will face. Based on the keys evident in the beginning of the play—the title, the sole focus on two characters, and the opening lines' language—the story will not be a love triangle then, even though it later appears to be one, in which two men vie for the love of the same woman. Instead, the play is about each man's struggle to create an honourable self, even in the face of love. These keys are

[4] See J. L. Simmons's "Coming out in Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*" for a critique that claims that Proteus and Valentine's relationship is not only homosocial but homoerotic as well.

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embedded in the play in order to direct the audience's attention towards these tensional issues and away from others. The contradictions and tensions raised by these issues elicit the sounds of laughter in the audiences, who are confronted with unfulfilled expectations—such as that of viewing a play involving a love triangle—and unresolved conflicts.

2. Playing with Words: What's in a Name?

The Spanish Tragedy's Revenge, *Doctor Faustus*'s Wrath, Envy, et al., *The Malcontent*'s Malevole, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*'s Luce, *The Revenger's Tragedy*'s Vindice, and *Twelfth Night's* Malvolio: these are merely representative of the multitude of early modern characters whose names acted as keys. Some of these examples are of allegorical figures, such as Revenge and the Seven Deadly Sins in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Doctor Faustus*, respectively. Most, however, are meant to be clues as to how these characters should be framed. Malevole's and Malvolio's names identify them as discontents; Luce as good and wise; and Vindice as a vindicator. Ben Jonson famously utilizes this technique in his moralistic allegory, the comedy *Volpone*. The Italian translations of the characters' names reveal much about their personalities, motives, and abilities. These names are the first keys instructing the audience in how to frame these characters. Some of the names indicate how a character will behave in a given situation. While these are not the only keys Ben Jonson provides, they are the first indicators of how his characters should be framed—as hero or villain, as schemer or vindicator, as innocent or discontent.

Many of the names of the characters in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* serve a similar purpose as those in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*: they act as keys to framing the characters in their entirety. "The two gentlemen," Valentine and Proteus, are the most notable examples of this technique. As Valentine's Day has been associated with romantic love since at least the days of Chaucer, and St. Valentine with courtly love, Valentine's name inherently carries connotations of love. When Valentine mocks Proteus's love for Julia in the opening lines, his very name stands in contradiction to his words. His name allows the audience to predict not only that he too will fall in love but that his love for Silvia is truer than Proteus's. Valentine's name encourages the audience to believe him when he says, "I have loved her ever since I saw her, and still I see her beautiful" (2.1.59-60). In contrast, the audience doubts Proteus when he tells Julia, "Here is my hand for my true constancy" (2.2.8), for the one thing the audience knows about Proteus is that he is a shape-shifter. Proteus, the god of the sea, appears in Book VIII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and features in Homer's *Odyssey*. He is known for his mutability, because of his association with the changing sea; the word "protean" now conveys that variability. Shakespeare's Proteus does not escape that connotation. In his first lines, Valentine suggests that Proteus lives in "shapeless idleness" (1.1.8). He himself echoes his

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shape-shifting nature when he states that he has been "metamorphosed" by Julia (1.1.66). The term "metamorphosed" hearkens back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the theme of transformation. Hence, an audience reads the key of Proteus's name as one that indicates that his character is one whose form and interests are easily shifted. He confirms the changing nature of his mind when he says that he has conflicting thoughts about being summoned by his father: "My heart accords thereto, / And yet a thousand times it answers 'No'" (1.3.90-91).

Conventionally, Valentine is read as faithful, whereas Proteus is understood to be inconstant; in terms of their love for Silvia (or in Proteus's case both Silvia and Julia) that notion bears out. Proteus's name, however, does more than construct him as unreliable. It instead introduces the very nature of metamorphosis into the play. The language of transformation sounds throughout the comedy. Valentine states that his "life is altered now" (2.4.121), and Speed declares him "metamorphosed with a mistress" (2.1.26-27). Thus, this language does not describe Proteus solely. Rather, this language key—reinforced by Proteus's name—asserts the transformative power of love. It also suggests, moreover, that Proteus and Valentine are not polar opposites but rather versions of the same self. It is perhaps no coincidence then that the other key term appearing throughout the play is the "self." In describing Proteus, Valentine states, "I knew him as myself" (2.4.55). Valentine's language does not merely claim that he knows Proteus well but that he knows him "as" himself, that they are the same. Similarly, in Proteus's soliloquy declaring his love for Silvia, he states,

> Julia I lose, and Valentine I lose.
> If I keep them, I needs must lose myself
> If I lose them, thus find I by their loss
> For Valentine, myself, for Julia, Silvia. (2.6.19-22)

Here, Proteus struggles to distinguish himself from Valentine. From the above lines, it is clear that Proteus has yet to have had a self that is separate from Valentine.

This interpretation aligns with that of Marjorie Garber, who identifies the major theme of the play as "losing oneself to find oneself" (*Shakespeare after All* 47). Proteus must lose Valentine in order to find Proteus. This paradox can only be true if they are read as not polar opposites but as versions of each other. As Garber argues, Proteus and Valentine taken together demonstrate the typical young man: "ardent *and* changeable; selfish *and* optimistic; needlessly, carelessly cruel *and* hoping, always, to be forgiven" (46). While their allegorical names at first suggest that they stand in contrast to one another, the other language keys, "metamorphosis" and "self," direct an audience to see them as two sides of the same coin. This understanding again ensures that the audience does not read the play as that of a love

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triangle, wondering who is most worthy to win the girl; rather, these keys comprised of names and repeated terms access a different frame: the construction of self.

Various productions of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* elicited peals of laughter from the audiences, according to their directors' stratagems. In the 2004 production at Theatre Jacksonville in the USA, directed by George Judy, the reviewer Tanya Perez-Brennan concludes that "[t]he show is definitely a ton of laughs with a solid cast, dog and all" (Perez-Brennan). Concerning the 2010 production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* directed by Dean Garbourie for the Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada, as the reviewer Laura Estill documents, the production was not set in Renaissance Italy but in a contemporary vaudeville show setting, in which Julia and Silvia were actresses by trade (Estill 105). As Estill describes one of the scenes in this vaudeville show, "Sylvia's melodramatic inclinations led her to cry an impressively long wail before storming off stage … drawing huge laughs from the audience" (Estill 105). As Estill concludes about this production, "Garbourie played any angle he could to increase the humour in this play" (106), so the vaudeville-inspired direction and the melodrama accents elicited laughter from the audience. The reviewer of the 1998 outdoor production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Kingsmen Shakespeare Festival in Thousand Oaks, California, directed by Michael J. Arndt, documents the "boisterous crowd-response" to the comic moments, highlighting the fact that "you rarely hear as many laughs at a conventional production of *Gentlemen*" (Brandes 27). Drawing on the reviews of only three productions of Shakespeare's comedy, it is possible to conclude that the more unconventional the setting and staging is, the more enjoyable the production becomes. Rather than focusing on Renaissance Italian settings, contemporary directors use strategic keys that bring the production into the present; this makes the comic moments even more impressive for contemporary audiences, and this approach is productive of sounds of laughter.

3. Conclusion

Centred on the laughter elicited in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* via title, text, and character composition, this essay has considered how moments of laughter are constructed in the play. I have shown how laughter is framed in various scenes—granting permission for an audience to laugh—and how that laughter reflects, reinforces, and alternately challenges societal frames of gender, ethnicity, status, and appropriateness of laughter. I have explored the keys represented by the playwright that access frames which, in turn, elicit laughter from the audience. In answering the question "What is going on there?" I have shown that comedic moments in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* prompt laughter by referencing culturally-held frames, while certain jokes are frames in and of themselves. Playing with words or ideas—especially playing with negative stereotypes—is an incontrovertible way of eliciting

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laughter in this comedy. For example, the inconsistencies of the play and the vaguely homosocial relationship of the two "gentlemen" of the title frame the sounds of laughter in a way that settles many of the play's inadequacies. This idea confirms the humanness of laughter, even when one of the characters in the play is Launce's dog, Crab, who cannot understand the keys of laughter represented during the dramatic interaction.

The clash between the audience's expectations and the results of the comedy's events is another form of experiencing or eliciting laughter. For example, in the attempted rape scene at the end of the play, the incongruity between the tragic expectations of the attempted rape in the woods—which fails lamentably—and the comic ending may prompt laughter because of the unexpected tragi-comic results. Similarly, the reversed expectations of the audience in relation to the Italian locations in the play (Verona, Milan, and Mantua) create comic situations that are provocative of sounds of laughter. While not much of the action happens in the Verona of the title, some of it occurs in Milan and Mantua, but these idealized locations are vague representations of Italian cities. The stark contrast of these Italian cities with the wilderness of the woods—in which the attempted rape fails lamentably—is bound to elicit laughter among the audiences because of the conflict between cultural expectations and dramatic action. Conflicts and tensions between male and female stereotypical images are also triggers of laughter, such as in the case of the romantic lovers (Proteus, Valentine, Silvia, and Julia) and their interactions with their servants, Launce, Speed, and Lucetta.

The theatre-going audiences interpret several keys to the theatrical frames simultaneously, being aware of the fact that this is play-acting and the theatre highlights moments of meta-theatricality. Moreover, each individual production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* emphasizes certain specific keys to elicit laughter from the audiences and this aspect changes the framing of laughter significantly. Although the language employed in framing the title does not directly suggest the play's genre (as a comedy), the title suggests camaraderie and questions enclosing the issue of what it is to be a "gentleman." This encourages early modern audiences to access the frame of the comic and they are ready to laugh at the incongruity generated by high romantic expectations and dramatic action. The opening lines in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* act as keys to direct the audience towards the comic frame. The language shapes the audience's expectations of a duet-like piece, with characters in dialogue and keys that highlight the play's themes. The play's language provides clues for producing the sounds of laughter, just as the male characters' names (Proteus and Valentine) act as keys to framing laughter and stand in contrast to their actions. Laughter in this comedy is, thus, a form of signalling multiple constructions of the self.

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