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Theory and Practice in English Studies. 2014, vol. 7, iss. 2, pp. [83]-96

ISSN 1805-0859

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/134363>

Access Date: 01. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

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SHIFT OF PERSPECTIVE IN JACOBAN COMEDIES

Alexandra Stachurová

SHIFT of perspective is a term which appears in the works on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama quite often. Unfortunately, this principle is mostly being mentioned with little or no critical attention being paid to it and, so far, there seems to be no study offering an in-depth analysis of the subject. But what actually is the perspective? How can it be shifted? And how does a shift of perspective work in a play?

This essay aims to answer these questions through detailed analyses of two comedies by Thomas Middleton, *The Old Law, or A New Way to Please You* and *The Roaring Girl*. Subsequently I propose my own terminology for understanding different categories in the shift of perspective, using the theory of film gags by Václav Havel and Vít Hrubín (film gags work on the same principle as a shift of perspective) with the help of the method of defamiliarisation by Viktor Shklovsky.

Shift of perspective could be described in several ways. It is a special type of a twist in a narrative. It is a method of putting a twist into a narrative. It is a technique of influencing the perception of what is going on in the play (or on the stage) for the audience or the readers.

As Havel and Hrubín agree, at the beginning of a gag, there has to be some starting point, some given situation. Havel (1999, 591-3) makes use of the theory of defamiliarisation by Viktor Shklovsky. A gag consists of two phases. The first phase exposes a situation. It is passive, it "awaits" the defamiliarisation, and becomes its object. The second phase defamiliarises the first phase. It is active, and it twists, denies, and negates the seeming situation. The first phase is seen in a different light then.

Hrubín (1970, 7) says practically the same thing. According to his theory, a gag is a dynamic and distinct structure, which begins with a basic idea. The idea is exposed, then used in a

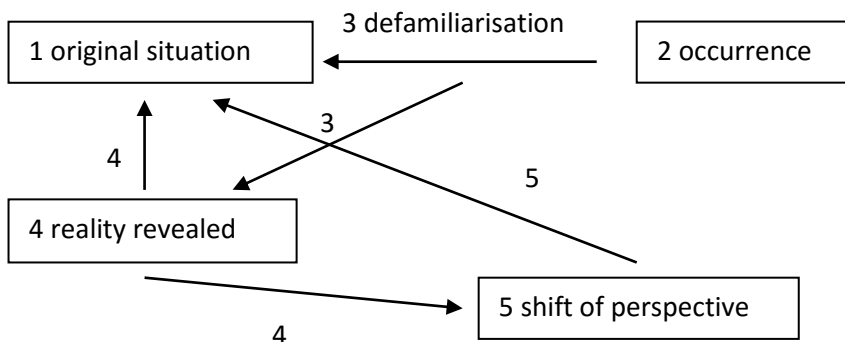
certain way. The treatment of the idea is twisted unexpectedly, but the conclusion is logical, although absolutely surprising.

A shift of perspective works in the same way. It can be divided into two phases. There is a basic original situation (the first phase) which is exposed and used, and seemingly true. Then some occurrence happens (the second phase), and defamiliarises (influences, or twists) the original situation, thus the reality is revealed. The original situation is twisted, denied, and negated, and the reality is described in a new, unusual way. The result of this process is the shift of the perspective on the original situation (Havel 1999, 592).

Why is the perspective shifted? When the first phase (that is the original situation) is introduced and gradually developed, the perception of it becomes conventionalised and automatised. The readers/audience become accustomed to it, and take it as a fact. By using defamiliarisation, the original situation is questioned, and thereafter extracted from its automatised perception. The reality is not incorrect, there is only an incorrect context (that is what the original situation seems to be). By defamiliarising, a particular phenomenon is extracted from the incorrect context, and the perspective on the automatised situation is shifted. The automatism is broken, the reality is revealed, and the perspective is shifted (Havel 1999, 593–6).

The original situation thus serves as an established concept (what it seems to be) which is defamiliarised by a description of the reality as it really is (something happens that shifts the perspective on the original situation). It can be also understood as one generally familiar automatism (the original situation) defamiliarised by an incursion of another generally familiar automatism (what shifts the perspective is certainly well known, but not in the context of the original situation). The convention changes—one generally familiar convention switches suddenly and unexpectedly into another one. One logic is made nonsensical by another. For this to work properly, the two automatisms/conventions/logics have to differ in their “contents”. The linkage between the two automatisms/conventions/logics is always logical, and it functions the same way mechanically in every type of a shift. Therefore, it might be claimed that a shift of perspective results from an unexpected view on the familiar (Havel 1999, 597–8).

To summarise, a shift of perspective arises when an original situation is defamiliarised by an occurrence. At the beginning, the original situation is conventionalised and automatised, and it serves as an established concept, and a generally familiar convention, even though its context is incorrect. By defamiliarising it, the reality is revealed, and the incorrect context is replaced by the correct one. The perspective on the original situation is thus shifted. It is necessary that the shift has an obvious cause in the original situation—it clarifies the original situation retrospectively. The process can be represented by this diagram:



As for drama, and specifically comedies, a shift of perspective can be divided into five categories:

- outside shift;
- character shift;
- carnivalesque shift;
- clown shift;
- theatrical shift.

1. Outside Shift

An outside shift works with a main plot and subplots. Usually, the main plot is serious to tragic. Subplots tend to be comical although they often have some serious/tragic issues. The main plot serves as the conventionalised original situation, subplots as the occurrence. Subplots also ease the seriousness of the

main plot, and emphasise it at the same time. The serious issues in subplots are emphasised as well.

In *The Old Law*, the main plot follows the struggle of a young man, Cleanthes, to save his father's life, after a new law comes into force. Every man older than eighty years and every woman older than sixty years are to be executed. One of its subplots deals with a clown who wants to get rid of his wife, and marry a young girl. The clown bribes a clerk who changes his wife's date of birth in the register, so that she can be executed at once. The scenes with the clown are hilarious, and the jokes shift the perspective from the horror of a husband's cruelty and unconcern into an entertaining watching of his behaviour. But the jokes stress the cruelty at the same time: "where sorrow and joy meet together, one will help away with another the better. Besides, there will be charges saved too; the same rosemary that serves for the funeral will serve for the wedding" (Middleton et al., *Old Law*, 2007, 4.1.31-5). The Clown is very well aware that he does a bad thing. But he does not care. He is obsessed with marrying a young girl, and he does everything to fulfil his needs.

The Clown subplot shifts the perspective on the main plot. The theme of executing old people is so serious that some relief is needed. Also the fact that the young of the Epire society accept the law gladly is terrifying. The main plot dealing with Cleanthes' struggle is emotionally demanding. The subplot shows that even such a tragedy can produce laughter and funny situations. It relieves the heavy atmosphere of the main plot, and entertains the audience. On the other hand, the subplot—though humorous—contains some serious issues. The humour of the subplot clashes against the terrifying behaviour of the characters, and makes the audience reflect on what takes place on stage.

2. Character Shift

A character shift works with individual characters. It can be divided into three subcategories. These are:

- character conscious shift;
- character unconscious shift;
- character unconscious 'word play' shift.

The behaviour of characters serves as the conventionalised original situation, and the revealed reality is who the characters really are.

A character conscious shift emerges when a character pretends to be someone/something they are not (the occurrence). By this pretention, they defamiliarise the behaviour of the other characters.

In *The Old Law*, it is in case of the Duke when the shift of perspective is revealed at the end. The Duke pretends that he issues a law according to which every man older than eighty and every woman older than sixty are to be executed, and that the old people are actually being executed. He explains his aim as follows: “[W]e have now seen | The flowers and weeds that grew about our court” (Middleton et al., *Old Law*, 2007, 5.1.612–3). In fact—no law comes into force and no one is executed. The Duke pretends so to find out who (of his young courtiers) is virtuous. He knows he “seem[s] a tyrant” (Middleton et al., *Old Law*, 2007, 5.1.617), but his play is necessary to unmask the true characters of his subjects. Owing to the play, the perspective of the Duke’s character is shifted, and it can be seen that he is a very wise man who wants to govern righteously with the right people by his side. The Duke’s play also shifts the perspective on every single character in the play because it ignites all the events. Therefore, the Duke becomes the mover of the action, although he is not a very prominent character.

A character unconscious shift originates from a comment of a character. A character utters an (often) ironic comment (the occurrence) which explains what is going on in reality, and usually makes fun of it.

In *The Old Law*, a female character, Eugenia, wants to get rid of her old husband. To achieve it, she uses her cousin and pretends that she mourns for her soon-to-be-executed spouse:

EUG. O, for a woman that could love, and live
 With an old man, mine is a jewel, cousin;
 So quietly he lies by one, so still!
 ...
 One that will not disturb me in my sleep
 For a whole month together, less it be
 With those diseases age is subject to,

As aches, coughs, and pains, and these, heaven
knows,
Against his will too: – he's the quietest man,
Especially in bed.

(Middleton et al., *Old Law*, 2007, 2.2.157–9, 162–7)

Eugenia tries to persuade her cousin that she loves her husband and that she will miss him after he is gone. When she describes her husband's virtues, she mentions his quietness in bed. Even though she endeavours to sound sincere, she – probably unintentionally – sounds very ironic. The irony of her speech is apparently unintentional – otherwise she risks revealing her plan. When Eugenia and her marriage to Lisander are introduced in the play for the first time, the facts of the marriage are not shown in every aspect. Only this speech reveals the nature of the marriage – the fact that Eugenia's husband is old and incapable of consummating the marriage. Although it could be objected that Eugenia got married to acquire her husband's possessions, there is still the tragedy of a young woman married to an old man who cannot consummate her needs. Eugenia thus shifts the perspective on the state of her marriage and unconsciously explains what is hidden before the audience, and even maybe before the other characters – that the marriage is unsatisfactory. Eugenia's ironic remarks shift the perspective on her marriage and – subtly, perhaps – make the readers/audience have second thoughts on her character and the motives behind her intentions.

A character unconscious “word play” shift is created when a word, collocation, or name with several meanings is used. A character uses a word or collocation which is ambiguous, or there is a character with an ambiguous name (the occurrence).

The main heroine of *The Roaring Girl* is called Moll. A moll is one of many terms meaning a prostitute. Her real name is Mary, and she is called so several times. It is interesting that she is called Mary only by the people who show respect for her:

MOLL. Let me see a good shag-ruff.

OPEN. Mistress Mary, that shalt thou, i' faith, and the best in
the shop.

(Middleton et al., *Roaring Girl*, 2007, 2.1.229–31)

By the others—who despise her, and consider her to be a whore, and a thief—she is called Moll. The sense of the word moll meaning a prostitute is even highlighted by Sir Alexander:

SIR AL. Methinks her very name should fright thee from
her,

And never trouble me.

SEB. Why, is the name of Moll so fatal, sir?

SIR AL. Many one, sir, where suspect is entered;

For, seek all London from one end to t'other,

Many whores of that name than of any ten other.

(Middleton et al., *Roaring Girl*, 2007, 2.2.157–62)

Considering the realities of the Jacobean society, the name Moll might describe her suitably. Moll is certainly not the ideal of a Jacobean woman. She is independent, she dresses like a man, she smokes, she fences, and she is friends with men. She does not satisfy the notion that a proper woman should behave in a traditional way, so she is regarded as a whore, and called a whorish name. But, from the contemporary point of view, an objection can be raised that Moll is a victim of prejudice. She is being herself, she does not succumb to the pressure of the society. Moll is an ideal to herself. By calling her Moll, the despising characters shift the perspective on themselves, and prove that they are narrow-minded, and that their own perception of the world is perverted. Actually, they are the morally corrupt characters. They also emphasise Moll's (in a way) innocent personality, virtuousness, and individuality.

3. Carnavalesque Shift

A carnivalesque shift works with individual characters. It can be divided into three subcategories. These are:

- carnivalesque “different reality” shift;
- carnivalesque “kings become fools” shift;
- carnivalesque “fools become kings” shift.

A carnivalesque “different reality” shift results from an inappropriate behaviour of characters. One or more characters perceive reality somehow distortedly, which serves as the conventionalised original situation. Their inappropriate behaviour

(the occurrence) then proves that reality differs fundamentally from what they or the other characters consider it to be.

In *The Old Law*, the “different reality” shift case is Lisander. Lisander is an old man who is married to a young woman. When his execution comes near, his wife is chased by courtiers. Lisander’s jealousy makes him rebel, and that is why he refuses to surrender, get old, and die. He declares to “have a spirit yet” (Middleton et al., *Old Law*, 2007, 3.2.59), and so he starts dancing, fencing and drinking again. He colours his hair as well. Lisander’s behaviour shifts the perspective on his character. The more he tries to act as a youth, the more he proves that he is an old man. The actions of the old man who endeavours to behave as a youth are very comical, largely when he knocks out his much younger rivals, but they also underline his real age and the fact that people cannot become younger. Lisander realises this and accepts his fate.

A carnivalesque “kings become fools” shift is caused by an abstract transformation of characters’ position. A character starts at an abstractly high position—they are successful, rich, and so on. This position serves as the conventionalised original situation. The course of the plot (the occurrence) changes everything dramatically, and thus defamiliarises the position of the character whose real position is revealed as exactly opposite.

At the beginning of *The Old Law*, Simonides seems to obtain everything he wants. His father is executed, he gains his wealth, status, and office, he seduces Eugenia, and he takes revenge on the hated Cleanthes. But in the end, he loses everything—his father is alive, and so he is deprived of his office, status, as well as wealth. He also loses Eugenia, whose husband is alive, too. Moreover, he has to watch Cleanthes rise. Simonides becomes a “fool”.

A carnivalesque “fools become kings” shift works as the opposite of the “kings become fools” shift. This time a character starts at an abstractly low position—they are underestimated, poor, and so on (the conventionalised original situation). The course of the plot serves as the occurrence, it also changes everything dramatically, and the character’s real position is also revealed as exactly opposite.

In *The Old Law*, Cleanthes and his wife Hippolita protest – as the only ones – against the new law because they find it cruel and unjust. They even violate the law and hide Cleanthes' father to save his life. When they are betrayed, they do not hesitate to claim responsibility. Their conscience saves them in the end because nobody is actually executed – it is only a trial performed for the Duke to see who is worthy to stay at the court. Cleanthes and Hippolita become “kings” – they gain power, but, above all, Cleanthes' father is alive.

4. Clown Shift

A clown shift is based on one comical character. There is some sort of serious situation going on (the conventionalised original situation). A comical character then enters the scene, acts like a simpleton or a villain (the occurrence), undermines as well as emphasises the serious situation, and entertains with his simplicity or cleverness at the same time. The clown shift is the most typical for any type of narrative. Traditionally, a clown is the only one who can tell the truth, because s/he tells it jokingly (Havel 1999, 600).

In *The Old Law*, the clown – in the true sense of the word – is Simonides. He begins as the main villain of the play, but he is such a simpleton that his actions are more hilarious than fearful. Simonides is cold-blooded and ambitious, but he is not intelligent enough. Moreover, he is sincere and foolish, and unaware of doing anything wrong, and so he represents a very atypical villain. Simonides' absolutely sincere, but inappropriate speeches and comically ending actions attribute the role of the clown to him. Simonides' comicality shifts the perspective on his character, and shows that he is not so much a proper villain as a clown. This proposition is supported by Simonides' clumsiness. When Cleanthes and Hippolita are betrayed, Simonides hurts himself with his own sword:

SIM. I would you'd seized upon him a minute sooner, it had saved me a cut finger: I wonder how I came by it, for I never put my hand forth, I'm sure; I think my own sword did cut it, if truth were known; may be the wire in the handle: I have lived these five and twenty years

and never knew what colour my blood was before. I never durst eat oysters, nor cut peck-loaves.

EUG. You've shown your spirits, gentlemen; but you have cut your finger.

SIM. Ay, the wedding-finger too, a pox on it!

1 COUR. You'll prove a bawdy bachelor, Sim, to have a cut upon your finger, before you are married.

SIM. I'll never draw sword again, to have such a jest put upon me.

(Middleton et al., *Old Law*, 2007, 4.2.261–75)

This long conversation about a cut finger is not very suitable for a determined villain. Simonides complains about his wound, and proves that he is not very good at working with weapons. More likely, weapons are dangerous for the awkward villain who is able to come to harm on his own. Simonides acts like a clown whose simplicity and clumsiness contrast with his indicated role of a villain. He shifts the perspective unconsciously with his sincere speeches and stupidity, and equally he serves as a clown who is simple enough to undermine the seriousness of the scenes as well as his own character, and so he entertains with his own villainous disability.

5. Theatrical Shift

A theatrical shift is determined predominantly for an audience watching a performance. A line by a character (the occurrence) describes what is happening on the stage (the conventionalised original situation) – not in the play, but during the performance of the actors. It defamiliarises the illusion of the performed play, and thus reveals the reality – a surprising and entertaining intersection of the play and the actual performance.

Concerning a performance of a play on a stage, the occurrence can also be, for example, a gesture or any other device applied by the director and/or the actors, which does not have to emerge primarily from the dramatic text, but can be used to shift the perspective on a particular thing the director/actor wants to emphasise.

Theatrical shift takes place in *The Roaring Girl*, in the scene where Moll and Mary, dressed as men, visit Sebastian in his father's chamber. Sebastian and Mary kiss, and Moll remarks:

“How strange this shows, one man to kiss another!” (Middleton et al., *Roaring Girl*, 2007, 4.1.45) She thus shifts the perspective for the audience because in the play, Sebastian is a man, and Mary is a woman. But, Mary is disguised as a man which is pointed out by Moll. So, although it seems that there are two men, it is a man and a woman. However, in the Jacobean theatre, all the roles were played by men (Henderson 2011, 329). Which means that there, in fact, were two men kissing on the stage. That is why, by her remark, Moll shifts the perspective on the kissing couple, and accentuates that there are really two men kissing. This hilarious moment might have caused a great amusement in the audience after everyone realised that Moll’s remark had been true.

Technically speaking, Moll’s remark about the kissing men is the occurrence, the conventionalised original situation is the two actually male actors performing a kiss on the stage, to which the audience might or might not have paid attention. By the remark, the performance is defamiliarised, the illusion of the performance is broken, and the actual action on the stage is suddenly revealed to the audience. The perspective on the performance is thus shifted.

Shift of Perspective and Readers/Audience

Readers and/or an audience constitute an essential part of a shift of perspective. Without readers/audience, the use of a shift in a narrative would be needless. A shift is created by an intellect, an intellectual activity, it makes an appeal to intelligence (Hrubín 1970, 10).

A shift of perspective arises right in the mind of a reader/viewer by a defamiliarisation of something conventionalised. An original situation is conventionalised and automatised, so that readers/audience become accustomed to it, and thereafter take it as a fact (Havel 1999, 593).

Then the conventionalised original situation is defamiliarised, the convention is broken, and reality is revealed. The reader/viewer who is accustomed to the original situation suddenly sees through the incorrect context of the original situation, and, by their intellectual activity, comes to realise that the original situation is a mere illusion, and that the reality differs

fundamentally. The perspective of the reader/viewer on the original situation is thus shifted.

Conclusion

As stated above, a shift of perspective is a technique of influencing the perception of what is going on in the play (or on the stage) for the audience and/or readers. Although it arises from a dramatic text, or an action on the stage, its most significant part is the mind of the spectator/reader. Albeit the action goes on in the text/on the stage, it is the mind of the spectator/reader that adopts a certain perspective, and – by means of the action – performs its shift.

The shift always works on the same principle. There is some conventionalised original situation which is defamiliarised by some occurrence. Through the defamiliarisation, the real state of the original situation is revealed. The audience/readers, who accept the original situation as a fact, a convention, at the beginning, suddenly see the true state of things, and their perspective on the original situation is shifted. There are five categories of the shift: the outside shift (dealing with plots and subplots), the character shift (having three subcategories, and pursuing characters with regard to their pretention, comments, or names), the carnivalesque shift (also having three subcategories, and concerning characters behaving inappropriately, and changing their abstract position), the clown shift (relating to comical characters), and the theatrical shift (referring to the intersection of a play and its performance).

The shift of perspective – whether it be the outside, character, carnivalesque, clown, or theatrical – is always related to characters. The behaviour of characters serves as a starting point of an action as well as its complication. It is also the characters whose real selves are revealed, and who are the objects of the perspective. Characters comment, pretend, intrigue, behave inappropriately, clown around, and change, whether consciously or not. They also hint that they are mere illusions, that there are real people who only perform. The essence of a shift of perspective is the realisation of a spectator or reader that nothing is what it seems.

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the shift of perspective in English comedies of the Jacobean age – a dramatic technique of influencing the perception of what is going on in a play/on the stage by the readers/audience. This device is illustrated by comedies by one of the most notable playwrights of the time, Thomas Middleton (1580-1627). Employing the film gag theories by Václav Havel and Vít Hrubín, and the theory of defamiliarisation by Viktor Shklovsky, the article argues that the perspective is shifted by defamiliarising (that is, extracting a particular phenomenon from its incorrect, automatised context). Subsequently, the author offers an original classification of the individual types of shifts in Jacobean comedies (outside shift, character shift, carnivalesque shift, clown shift, and theatrical shift) as well as their subtypes, making use of the examples of Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* and *The Old Law*.

AUTHOR

Alexandra Stachurová is a Ph.D. candidate at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. She holds master's degrees in English Language and Literature and Classical Archaeology, both earned at Masaryk University. Her scholarly interests include Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline drama, particularly comedies and revenge tragedies. Her Ph.D. project focuses on the shift of perspective in Jacobean comedies. She has presented papers at conferences in London, Nicosia, Brno, and others. Alexandra teaches literary courses at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University. Outside of academics, she works as a proof-reader and translator.