Meet Mr Fish:

Writing of the 1590’s, author and traveller Fynes Moryson describes how “when some of our cast [off] players came out of England into Germany, and played at Frankfurt in the time of the Mart, having neither a complete number of actors, nor any good apparel, nor any ornament of the stage, yet the German’s, not understanding a word they said, both men and women, flocked to see their gesture and action.” Furthermore, at Leipzig, Moryson suggests “many young virgins fell in love with some of the players, and followed them from city to city till the magistrates were forced to forbid them to play anymore.”¹ Exploiting such popularity, the touring troupes would come to include a clown sufficiently versed in the local language to serve as the bridge between the stage and an otherwise less than fully comprehending audience. This character flourished in Germany throughout the seventeenth century. Demanded in Tragedy as well as Comedy, it dominated the continental theatrical scene finding its way into adaptations of Shakespearean and other texts—including the intrigued The Comedy of Joseph, the Jew of Venice. Indeed, in 1658, after seeing a production of Romeo and Juliet, the Archbishop of Prague made a note of his enjoyment of the play. Surprisingly, if not untypically, he says nothing of the lovers but praises the clown, known as Pickleherring, “who was very good and funny.”² This character springs directly from the English stage of the 1580’s, epitomised in the figure and practice of the famed clown Richard, or Dick, Tarlton, and his dominant, disruptive, and presiding presence. Autolycus, in The Winter’s Tale, is perhaps the closest model in Shakespeare, with his talking to the audience, trading in song, topical references and scurrilous mischief. However, as soon as we limit this particular clown character to a given text we delimit and neuter its power and effect on an audience. To imagine an early modern play experienced (or brokered) in this manner is to glimpse the vitality of the clown in the sixteenth century theatre, and the more participatory nature of the theatrical event before it assumed the norms pervasive now, yet all but unimaginable then.

² Ibid., p 21.
Rather than seeking to traduce otherwise wonderful plays by foisting an alien concept and a new character on them, the following proposes that there are contexts where clowning, deeply rooted in Elizabethan stage practice even before Tarlton, might be usefully employed to recover the joys, accessibility, and linguistic nuances of Early modern theatre in performance. Pickleherring offers a model of disruption folded into a narrative, his choric function naturally growing out of the clown’s liminal and privileged relationship with the audience. Might the choric function and improvisatory aplomb of the Pickleherring clown be appropriated, somewhat as Shakespeare was to do, towards rather than against the purpose of playing? Surviving texts
exhibit the durability of Elizabethan stage practice to extra-diegetic elements, indeed the clown was central to both the theatre’s popular appeal and the performance’s vitality. In attempting to recuperate that theatre’s laughter in our own century how might we acknowledge, harness, and crucially adapt, the enduring comic forms of its own time? This paper aims to offer specific instances where audience comprehension faces an obstacle that disrupts or detracts from the play’s inherent qualities, suggest strategies drawn from clown practice for interventions, and begin a discussion on the possibilities and parameters of creating an organic (dare I say “funny”?) dramaturgical device for performance. The result in performance might perhaps be envisioned as equivalent to the “pop-ups” found in digital media.

Pickleherring: the word itself emerges as a term for clown or buffoon from indistinct origins in German or Dutch as well as in English. The name is found belonging to a German immigrant brewing beer in Southwark in the 1530’s. By the end of that century it was the chosen moniker of a touring actor, and a century later indexed a generic and popular European figure and tradition. Art historians have noted how, in fifteenth century Flemish representations, the fool is sometimes pictured with a herring placed over his cap to mark his folly.³ (This brings the image of Lew Zealand from The Muppet Show to mind, (pictured) although he is usually holding or throwing his fish.) Most of us, if we know the word at all, associate it (beyond the food) with Sir Toby in Twelfth Night and his characteristic belching—itself an invaluable piece of clown schtick for upstaging others. Toby exclaims against the fish for his indigestion, “A plague on these pickle-herring,” (Twelfth Night, 1.5.120-1)⁴ at the precise moment he also first sees Feste clearly hinting at an association of the word with fooling, clowning, and the play’s “corrupter of words” (3.1.36). Shakespeare’s indebtedness to, and developing use of clown forms could fill a whole conference. Suffice to say that Pickleherring indexes the Tarlton (and later Will Kemp) tradition, full of physical and musical virtuosity, tumbling, jigs, word play, and interaction with the audience. Kemp’s successor, Robert Armin, was well-versed in these forms but pioneered the fashion for witty “artificial fools” associated with Feste and Touchstone in Comedy, and Lear’s Fool in Tragedy. Our Pickleherring would combine elements of both traditions, linking a sophistication of purpose with playful direct address and improvisatory (or pseudo-improvisatory) forms, reinvigorating the texts in performance to recuperate the laughter languishing within them. Shakespeare has already mined the clown’s perspective on the heroics

³ Ibid., p.17.
⁴ All quotations from Shakespeare are from The Riverside Shakespeare, Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
of their masters, I am proposing to bring out their semantic and helpful aspects. Our Pickleherring wants the audience to relish and appreciate the language, and thereby the larger event, as much as he does. To have, as it were, our fish, and eat it too.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the magnificence of the pair’s transgressive love is intimated in their opening entrance and exchange, their physical passion indexed in their passionate arguing (no pun intended) about the size of that professed love. Preceded by Philo’s terse commentary that describes Anthony as in thrall to a “gipsy’s lust,” the pair enter and we are invited to perceive “the triple pillar of the world transform’d, into a strumpet’s fool” (1.1.13). Shakespeare carefully contrived this opening for maximum effect, Cleopatra’s train bustling in replete with both ladies and eunuchs “fanning her.” This extravagance, apparent before either have opened their mouth, continues when they speak informing the topic and the manner of their address:

Cleopatra. If it be love indeed, tell me how much?
Antony. There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd.
Cleopatra. I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved.
Antony. Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth. (l.14-17)

Combative from the outset, Cleopatra demands quantification of his love, and Anthony scorns the possibility of measuring it with the first of three powerful plosive “b’s “beggary.” Not to be outdone she retorts with two (b’s) of her own, the first as obscure as the second is straightforward: beloved isn’t going to interrupt the implied flow and build of these four lines but the other operative word “bourn” has fallen into disuse. Such is our current cultural reality that a contemporary auditor might be forgiven for thinking first of Jason, of identity, supremacy, ultimatum, or even legacy. In Scotland the word is apparently still used as a synonym for fireplace. The intended archaic meaning is that of a “bound,” boundary or limit: “I'll set a limit how far to be beloved” facilitates and justifies Anthony’s epic response in a way that fireplace clearly doesn’t. At the same time, the fuller archaic meanings bolster the associations of the emphatic word choice: a destination or goal, and a realm or domain, neither fit quite right but do enough to suggest distance. As a Shakespeare practitioner, I have always lived by the principle that if the actor knows what they’re saying then the audience will get the sense if not the full
meaning, and this is a case in point: properly or suitably acted the sense will be clear, and indeed, far greater challenges await any actor playing Cleopatra. But, the issue remains that a keyword in establishing the relationship, and in building the metrical intensity of the exchange, is problematic unless addressed. A monosyllable shouldn't be allowed to diffuse, distract or deflect from the overall effect of lubricious excess around and between Shakespeare’s lovers, established with such economy by the writer.

In another example from tragedy, Desdemona’s willow song has her take on the voice of a maidservant called Barbary, who’s name as Peter Stallybrass says is “a curious transposing of Iago’s slur to Brabantio “you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse: you'll have your nephews neigh to you” (Othello 1.1.111-2). Barbary here then is both the symbol for bestial male sexuality and a maid betrayed in love - “poor Barbary” indeed! As Stallybrass continues: “a single signifier slides between male and female, animal and human, betrayer and betrayed, and at the same time between opposed notions of the barbarian as oppressor and as victim.” These resonances give a specificity to the song which is otherwise still potent in performance, but less so because not integrated thematically. The word “barbarism” is still in common usage but how can its associations and its earlier use by Iago be evoked or resonate? (Presumably, the vocal repetition of Barbary was enough for some or many to appreciate the connection at the play’s initial performances.) To suggest a gloss here, a brash comic intrusion into the calm before the blistering storm, would indeed be counterproductive, but the nuances still lie just beneath the surface asking to be actualised.

Might a possible solution be found earlier in the play when, as we’ve seen, Iago and Roderigo are on stage bellowing to Brabantio and the word is first sounded? In the atmosphere of ribald clowning at play in this scene a few seconds of targeted (excuse the pun) horse-play here might pay dividends later. The question that naturally emerges is one of tone, and when it might be desirable to unleash such comic forms. It should be stated that the tone, nature and extent of the clown/actor’s performance needs to be germane to the play and the production’s larger goals. Some might still balk at the idea of a few extra beats between Roderigo, Iago and the audience, but it must be conceded that such an exchange would be a natural extension of the comic forms already employed in the scene: the scandalous humor of the dialogue and situation, Iago’s Vice-like direct address making the audience accessory to his malice, and the skilled relish with which he manipulates and fleeces the gull Roderigo. To draw attention to the

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word here, to activate its potential, in a context where the sense of virility and invasion are foremost, arguably serves both scene and play even as it might be said to disrupt. “Barbary” serves only as a qualifier here, and, as such, is unlikely to impede audience understanding or the scene’s progress. Indeed, as with the Cleopatra example, the actor’s choice in attending to the word in their action and delivery may be enough to activate it in the audience’s mind and thereby have it resonate later. However, the scene’s existing structure and relationships, the triangle between Iago, Roderigo, and audience facilitates easy comic interaction between them. As such, might the scene be a model for proactive interventions more broadly, and where the linguistic terrain is tougher? Given the problem and the historical facts, how might the sensitive employment of clown forms, particularly asides and direct address, actually tap in to or actualise something about the original experience of performance? The clown’s vitality, I propose, and the connection between representation and reception they facilitated, is central to early modern performance. The clown, particularly Tarlton, was a popular celebrity his presence and practice both the spark that animated performance and that drew people to it. Skillfully done, might not comedy itself serve as a particularly appropriate, popular and accessible means to recuperate laughter? In proposing what might seem such radical interventions (What would Hamlet say?), I repeat my assertion that Elizabethan theatre was constituted on precisely such forms, and was just such a robust, participatory, and transactional milieu. If there was no distance between modern English and that of the Elizabethans we would not need creative solutions in performancally generating the comic gloss material remains, but let us concede that sharing it—coming out from a fourth wall that’s only been put there retrospectively—is perfectly Elizabethan.

Romeo and Juliet famously employs comic forms throughout that ultimately further the dramatic intensity achieved. Indeed, as Stephen Greenblatt has elucidated, the supposedly abominable “mingling of kings and clowns” scorned by Sir Philip Sidney as liable to “make people groan, turns out to anticipate precisely what Shakespeare would do brilliantly throughout his career.” Shakespeare’s comic inheritance is also our own, like in the theatre he witnessed his own use of clowning transcended and destabilized genre, particularly until the turn of the seventeenth century and its incorporation and apotheosis in Hamlet. In closing, I want to reach back to one of the earliest extant plays in English, Ralph Roister Doister (c1552), a comedy that illustrates the medium’s extra-diegetic durability baked into the form at its outset.

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Simultaneously, I suggest the clown’s application and reach extend beyond simply comedy and might still now. Given only a 90 minute slot for an Off-Broadway production of *Hamlet* some years ago, I had to take an axe to the text. Part of my solution was to cut and redistribute much of the exposition: whenever the trumpet sounded the players would enter loudly tumbling their way centre stage only to immediately have their enthusiasm arrested as Claudius told them they were entering prematurely. In the act of sending them off-stage the requisite exposition was provided for the audience by an increasingly frustrated usurping uncle, explaining the scene the troupe had displaced and rendered obsolete by their entrance. This intervention, tied into my larger reading of the play, was seemingly effective and popular in performance, it encouraged my continued practical exploration, my subsequent return to academia, and my ongoing research. Audience’s apparently like being spoken to directly as much now as then.

The eponymous comic hero of Nicholas Udall’s *Ralph Roister Doister* is quickly established as a both a braggart and an inept wooer, given to fall helplessly love-sick at a glance from a woman. This we learn through a sixty six line monologue that begins the opening scene, (and that the stage directions suggest may actually have been sung) by the play’s conniving Mathewe Merygreeke—arguably the play’s great innovation. Udall famously combines stock elements of classical comedy with those from the English medieval theatre, and peoples the play with English social types to all but birth a new tradition. Merygreeke, clearly descended from the Vice figure of the morality plays, drives the play’s comic action (his continued duping of Ralph) from his privileged proto-stage-clown position, at once within and beyond the play’s mimetic bourn. (Couldn’t resist that.) His opening speech rattles along with all the relish we would expect from an Iago or a Richard III, but, of course, is full of glorious if long defunct English words and usages: Ralph is described as “facing” and craking” in his blustering, (1.1.35) and his entrance heralded as “sadly comming [sic] / And in love for twentie pounds, by his glommyng” (l.65-6). Such archaic language is as much of the play’s charm and fascination as it’s situations, chivalric silliness, and vibrant characters. Given that the relationship with the audience is already established for us, might we interrogate it, as needed, with the same comic forms that animate the scene? Might brokered the language in this way, taking a beat to explicate the obscure terms in pseudo-improvised asides and interactions, activate their rich associations and power? Might deliberately having a laugh at the problems (drawing attention to a word’s obscurity) not be the means of conquering them, and in the spirit of comedy? If so what are the criteria or guidelines to do this effectively in different contexts and productions? Merygreeke, in exalting being “me[r]ny” remembers the proverbial advice, pertinent here, that
men “be together both mery and wise” (l.6.). Even before Merygreeke’s opening speech, the play’s Prologue spends half of its length celebrating the place of mirth and the rest promising that such mirth awaits. The language makes no bones about its audience coming hither to laugh, indeed its terms might serve to guide and encourage our endeavor in attempting to recreate precisely that enjoyment and recuperate its laughter. With the caveat established “Avoiding such mirth wherein is abuse,” (l.5) the Prologue reminds us that:

..Mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health.
Mirth recreates our spirites and voydeth pensiveness,
Mirth increases amitie, not hindering our wealth. (l.8-10)

I suggest that laughter, invaluable and restorative in comedy as it is in life, remains the best medicine for the difficulties inherent in staging the early modern, and that old comic forms still resonate across the years. At risk of inducing hysteria, having audiences flock to the theatre, and even losing their hearts in extreme circumstances, might we court laughter with laughter and revivify comedy in the process?

Works Cited