

The Mechanics of Role Inversion

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In Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart and Stephen Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, we find slaves exchanging places with masters, courtesans with well-bred matrons. In Molière's *The Miser*, we find a misanthrope who can think of nothing but money. There is nothing that suggests these should be related at all. Theories of humor can be divided into three main categories, two of which may apply to these plays. Incongruity theory sees humor as a response to the incongruous or unexpected. Role inversion is the application of incongruity to human relationships. It creates humor through the mixing-up of hierarchies that the audience expects to find one way and finds another. Henri Bergson's idea of mechanism found in *The Miser*, on the other hand, is closer to superiority theory, which surmises that we find things funny if we are made to feel superior to them. Bergson's idea is that we find something funny when something living, which we expect to be flexible and adaptable like ourselves, becomes something rigid and unchanging, something contemptible. One would not expect comedy based on one theory to overlap with comedy based on the other. Yet in *The Miser* and *Forum*, switching roles leads to mechanism and mechanism leads to switching roles—they form a unified type of comedic action. But while Molière teaches us morality by giving his character an inherent mechanism, *Forum* remains steadfastly amoral with mechanism that is rooted in an inherent flexibility.

There are two primary forms of mechanism in *The Miser*. The first is shown through the character of Harpagon. His mind is fixed in one particular path, always contemplating money and never able to consider for long anything else. He is constantly making monetary calculations, or at least keeping their results in mind, since he is able to casually state without a moment's pause the exact amount of interest a certain sum brings in at a particular rate: "twenty pistoles bring in eighteen livres, six sous, and eight deniers a year, even at only eight

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per cent interest” (Moliere, 185). His actions too, not just his thoughts, possess a mechanical character: he must check his money box at regular intervals, like some kind of robotic guard (Moliere 189, 194, etc.). This is Bergson’s “mechan[ism] encrusted on the living,” (Bergson, 84) the unnatural periodicity of which produces humor.

It also produces role inversions. Harpagon’s mechanistic fixation takes a severe toll on his sense of identity, blocking out almost completely all considerations of reality besides his quantity of money. Indeed, after the loss of his money box he loses his identity entirely at times, believing himself to be the culprit and not the victim—an example is when he grabs his own arm and yells “give me back my money, villain!” (Moliere, 218). Even before that, Harpagon reverts to youth and tries to take the role of his son in marrying Mariane. He is free to be his son’s rival without shame because in his warped view Cléante is an extravagant disgrace. More directly still, his mechanism compels him to maintain a ridiculous appearance of poverty when his situation is quite the opposite—for example, “I must see my money box. . . . I have no money” (Moliere, 228). In all of these cases, Harpagon’s mechanism leads inexorably to a role inversion.

The second form of mechanism in *The Miser* is in the structure of the dialogue itself. All its instances are based on the technique of mirroring: a character speaks, and another responds in similar language. The most basic form is exemplified by Élise and Harpagon when they first discuss her marriage. Élise rejects the marriage, and Harpagon responds with the exact same words but with names switched and a crucial ‘not’ removed: “‘That shall not be, father.’ ‘That *shall* be, daughter’ ” (Moliere, 187). This evokes the impression of mechanism even more than Harpagon’s character itself. The dialogue is completely lifeless, as if Harpagon’s part had been taken over by a machine that simply took in words and spat them back out with trivial modifications. Even Élise’s responses are somewhat automatic, e.g. “No!” “Yes!” “No, I tell you” (Moliere, 187), simply becoming more emphatic. This suggests that this form of mechanism also leads to a change of roles. Mirroring by its very definition implies duplication, one character replicating traits of another. Mirroring applies Harpagon’s mechanistic role onto

the other characters, thereby throwing his own mechanism into even sharper relief.

Much the same process occurs in *Forum*, but in reverse. In a number of places throughout the work, characters switch roles intentionally. This invariably leads to mechanism. Usually it is due to the characters' rather poor acting, which makes them sound more like parrots or Harpagon's machine than normal people. A good example is when Hysterium must pretend Pseudolus is Lycus in front of Miles: "Trust me, Lycus! I go, Lycus. Farewell, Lycus! [then, added in the movie:] He is Lycus" (Gelbart et al., 77). The mechanism furthermore does not have to be simple repetition: for example, when Pseudolus greets the soldiers as Lycus, instead of being brave and confident as we expect from his conversation earlier with the real Lycus, he makes the same terrified mistake: "Who seeks the mouse of Larkus Heekus?" (Gelbart et al., 75). Both of these come about due to the characters' inability to adapt to their new roles, one of the telltale signs of Bergson's mechanism.

Mechanism can also arise from role inversions that are not the result of an intentional disguising. Probably the most obvious example is that of Senex and Domina. Here, the inversion of the stereotypical hierarchy with the father as the head of the household reduces Senex almost to the level of an automaton. In the presence of Domina, he is unable to speak more than a few words of his own volition: he can say "yes, dear" or "yes, beloved" many times (Gelbart et al., 27, 127-8), but when he is to give his final instructions to his slaves his mouth opens but Domina speaks (Gelbart et al., 27). This is also yet another instance of parrotting: interrupted after saying as much as "and furthermore—" he can do nothing more than mutter again the line Domina interrupts him with (Gelbart et al., 27)! The role inversion takes away Senex's power, and unable to adapt he becomes mechanical.

These examples make it clear how closely related mechanism and role inversions truly are. The presence of one necessitates the presence of the other, meaning that (at least in these works) they are effectively a single type of comedic action. However, there is an extremely important difference in the application of this action to both works. In *The*

Miser, the mechanism (or role inversion—I use ‘mechanism’ to indicate the unified action) is *directed*. All of the instances of mechanism in the play are focused around Harpagon’s character. Either the mechanism is literally his own, or it illuminates his own through mirroring. The reason for this is that Molière has written a *moral* play. The entire work is centered around a single ‘anti-virtue’—Harpagon’s miserliness—and the mechanism drives in again and again the terrible consequences of it. Molière uses mechanism in its most basic form: a way to ridicule a particular character for his inability to adapt.

The situation is very different in *Forum*. In this work, there is no single target of the mechanism. There is no one character whose own mechanical nature is responsible for the motion of the entire plot. Instead of a directed mechanism, there is a general mechanism distributed among many characters. This is because *Forum* was written to be totally *amoral*—one of the authors wrote, “there should be no political or satirical edge to any of the songs, since the show was to be strictly a domestic farce and not a commentary” (Gelbart et al., 156). Where do the instances of mechanism, or the role inversions that give them rise, come from? They come from Pseudolus. Most of the mechanism in the work is (as discussed above) a product of characters switching roles to disguise themselves, and Pseudolus is the sole architect of almost all those inversions. This is crucial, because it means that the mechanism of the piece is mostly a byproduct of an inherent *flexibility*. While Harpagon has an intrinsic mechanical nature, which leads us to ridicule him, Pseudolus has a clever, scheming nature, which leads us to admire him. The amazing rate at which he invents impromptu plots whenever the situation changes balances whatever mechanism may result from their shoddy execution. The distributed nature of the mechanism means that any one character does not possess more than we might naturally expect when attempting similar harebrained schemes. Unlike in *The Miser*, we are not left with a dislike of any one character, but instead merely with a general bemusement about the intricate plot.

We must also consider that Pseudolus’ plots are not quite the only source of mechanism in the work. One could argue that while Pseudolus has no inherent mechanism like Harpagon, there are others that do. The

primary suspects are Erronius and Miles, for the first runs constantly, repetitively, and without regard to his environment (i.e. crashing into things), while the second (even more ominously) has a fixation on himself similar to Harpagon's fixation on money. There are two factors that make these sources of mechanism less important than Pseudolus and keep the work amoral. First, both Erronius and Miles are minor characters, especially when compared with Harpagon. While they form integral parts of the plot, *Forum* is not about them—*The Miser* is entirely about Harpagon. This shifts their mechanism away from being central to the morality of the piece and closer to being just comedic filler designed to get a laugh. The second factor is the presence of a *cognitio*. At the end of *Forum*, there is a reconciliation among the characters. Erronius loses a good part of his mechanism—he no longer needs to wander—and Miles ceases to be a blocking, feared character. In *The Miser*, there is no reconciliation: Harpagon remains a detestable miser to the end, emphasizing Molière's moral point. But in *Forum*, whatever intrinsic mechanism there is becomes minimized and accepted, balancing what came before and keeping the work amoral.

Together, *The Miser* and *Forum* illustrate how role inversions and mechanism are really just two different ways of looking at a single type of comedy. But they also show that by varying how it is applied, comedy can yield a play that is deeply moral or a play that is completely amoral. Knowing this could be very useful to someone trying to write a comedy. First off, we know that role inversions and mechanism are applicable whether one is writing morally, immorally (since this is just morally with a different opinion), or amorally. But we also get a bonus in that role inversions and mechanism occur extremely commonly. If we ever use one of them, we can get more laughs almost for free by taking advantage of our discovery that there is a natural role inversion corresponding to a mechanism and a natural mechanism corresponding to a role inversion. With not very much trouble, we can double how funny our writing is by utilizing that happy incidence. ●

Works Cited

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