

## Literary and Stage Humour in *Three*

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze the Italian stage humour of Luigi Lunari from *Tre sull'altalena* (*Three on a Swing*) as staged at the National Theatre of Iasi, Romania against the background of other humorous writings, in prose and verse in which three protagonists are involved (Jerome K. Jerome's *Three in a Boat*, *Three on a Bummel*; Andy Croft, W.N. Herbert and Paul Summers's *Three Men on the Metro*) in order to distinguish its characteristic features.

**Keywords:** humour analysis, contemporary Italian dramaturgy, Translation Studies

### Introduction

Contemporary Italian playwright, screenwriter for radio and television (*Carlo Goldoni: Venezia, Gran Teatro del Mondo*, 2007; *Tra due donne*, 2001; *L'ultima mazurka*, 1986), essayist insufficiently dealt with based on a simple internet search, Luigi Lunari (1934-2019) is best known for his play *Tre sull'altalena* (*Three on a Swing*), one of the most performed plays in the world. He dies where he was born, in Milan, and his existence has been centered around the theater since 1960; then, at the Piccolo theater in the (Italian) capital of fashion, he was entrusted with the archives, *Ufficio Studi*. There he created the nucleus of what has become today one of the most extensive international theater archives. He remained in this place for 20 years turning into a prominent figure of the city and, along with Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler, became the most incisive playwright of his generation. He translated from Brecht, Shakespeare, Molière, Chekhov, showing au(c)torial skills, above those of translation. A man of culture and theater, a polyglot, he managed to recreate in Italian the language of dramaturgy masterpieces and their theatricality.<sup>1</sup> He knew Strehler's vices, virtues and narcissisms, as shown in *Il Maestro e gli altri* (*La Vita Felice*), a bibliographic, ironic, brave and affectionate libretto written in 1991, some time after he had left the Piccolo theater and all its controversies.

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<sup>1</sup> From a Translation Studies viewpoint, we can argue that a translation reads like the original and that the effect in the source text is preserved in the target text. The issue of the translation of the dramatic text is broader, as the text type is read differently, being incomplete when compared to the prose text, because it only shows its perfection through stage representation. Therefore, the translator must take into account this function, a complex system as shown by theatrical semiotics that does not separate the text from its staging, relying on the dialectical relationship between them, cf. Susan Bassnett, "Translating Dramatic Texts", *Translation Studies*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 124.

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He went down in history with *Tre sull'altalena* (*Three on a Swing*), a fantastic play translated into more than 18 languages; the most important stage adaptation in Italy was at Carcano, Milan, with the Giuseppe Pambieri and Lia Tanzi duet, and at the other theaters, including the Piccolo, where he worked, the play was ignored or not treated with due importance. Instead, on the great stages of the world, there were hundreds of performances of his work played to fully booked theatres, especially by minor companies that appreciated his humour, considered commercial by those who did not rally to the specific Lombard matrix.<sup>2</sup>

### Three in Literature

There were also three in a boat (to say nothing of the dog), but also on a bummel in Jerome K. Jerome's fiction (1899, 1900), a prominent representative of the New Humour of the end of the 19th century (1890), along with Barry Pain and Israel Zangwill. Often defined as a mania or disease that attacked susceptible readers who did not allow themselves time for reflection, this type of humour was originally tackled by Jerome K. Jerome who knew how to make the best of the ambivalent status of comic fiction of this period. His weekly journal, *To-day*, responded to press attacks, notably through provocative suggestions which he and his contributors wrote in the Dickensian tradition, emphasizing the innovative way in which the common language was used as a vehicle rather than simply the object of clever humour. By inviting his readers to consider themselves loyal members of a club, the author developed a close relationship with them, arguing that the snobbery of critics makes literature ridiculous and not the intrinsic quality of modern fiction. His writings from that time bear witness to the serious questions he asked himself about a writer's relationship to his published work, while conflicting feelings about his own writing haunted him in that *fin de siècle*. In *Three in a Boat*, Jerome K. Jerome humourously exposed organizational incompetence and ineptitude, and critics did not take well to this exuberant anti-intellectual literary circle humour by a non-college-educated author aimed at a new consumerist literate reading public, deeming it ridiculous and vulgar. Also called Jeromania (humour given by puns, the tavern, police station, pawnshop), it was ridiculed in the press of the time and labeled as low and ephemeral (along with Oscar Wilde and his plays which, it seems, did not portray sufficiently honest characters), compared to the fine, superior humour of Dickens or Thackeray.<sup>3</sup>

Jerome K. Jerome's novels have also attracted interest in the field of Translation Studies due to their humorous allusions, a cultural and pragmatic

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<sup>2</sup> Stefania Vitulli, "Morto Luigi Lunari, fece grande il "Piccolo" ricreando i classici per l'amico-nemico Strehler", *il Giornale.it*, 17 aug, 2019, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/spettacoli/morto-luigi-lunari-fece-grande-piccolo-ricreando-i-classici-1740806.html>. Retrieved on Feb. 3, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> de la L. Oulton, Carolyn W. "“Making Literature Ridiculous”: Jerome K. Jerome and the New Humour." *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 48 (2017): 273-284. [muse.jhu.edu/article/707298](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/707298). Retrieved on Feb. 17, 2023.

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challenge in the source text that must be solved in the target one with the preservation of the effect of the original, without distortions and disappointing the reader who needs fulfillment of his horizon of expectation. Following a diachronic axis of the novels *Three in a Boat* and *Three on a Bummel* in the period 1957-2009, it was concluded that, through strategies of adaptation and pragmatic equivalence, the effect of the original was preserved; moreover, the translators' decisions varied due to cultural differences that can be reduced in the context of globalization trends, and unsuccessful attempts at literal translation have created confusion.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in the field of applied Translation Studies, the author's humour was analyzed from the perspective of the negative superiority of linguistic, pragmatic and social incongruity; through samples of irony, joke, dark humour, pun, anecdote, satire and caricature, comic suspense and surprise in translation were also demonstrated through equivalence at the communicative, situational level, that of expression, syntax and linguistic signs.<sup>5</sup>

Poets Andy Croft, W.N. Herbert and Paul Summers visited the metro stations from Moscow drawing on Jerome K. Jerome's classic novels for their poems in *Three Men on the Metro* (Five Leaves Poetry, 2009). Continuing the tradition of poetry and tourism (Lord Byron, Seamus Heaney), the subway (in London via Ezra Pound), Croft, Herbert and Summers are overwhelmed by the art here and its cohabitation with the post-communist era. In a comic stance, the three resemble the exhaustion (probably caused by Stendhal syndrome) of the retreating Napoleonic army. Dirty and tired, they contemplate harakiri, pun of the bold, fearless Russian word. The three wander, the unifying poetic sequence consisting of the multifaceted subway, praised with amazing verbal dexterity and fine allusions. The Miltonian pandemonium may have inspired the architectural exoticism (mix of round pilasters with Doric overlays and golden elements), the three poets invoking the conflict between order and disorder, clarity and cultural chaos, through a wide range of associations and styles. The reader is presented with the facts in a fascinating manner, with useful footnotes that help him realize the importance of the subway as a witness to social change after 1989 and the previous idealistic, Brechtian utopian vision of the owner-builders. Closer to dystopia, today's subway is that of the rich who trip over the hungry and street people, get lost among commuters; the poems have parodic, sometimes surreal inflections, and the cultural and historical references allow for more than just a sterile, introverted x-ray and lyrical solipsism of the place. A collective adventure of three companions marked by metrical precision (given also by Andy Croft's knowledge of

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<sup>4</sup> Irina Puşnei, "Aspects of Translating Allusion. The Case of "Three Men in a Boat" and "Three Men on the Bummel""", *Buletinul Ştiinţific al Universităţii de Stat „Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu din Cahul. Ştiinţe Umanistice*. Nr. 2 (6), 2017, p. 177-186.

<sup>5</sup> Irina Puşnei Sîrbu, "Equivalence in Humour Superiority and Incongruity Translation: A Case of *Three Men in a Boat* and *Three Men on the Bummel*", *Linguistics and Literature Studies* 4(3): 221-231, 2016, pp. 221-231.

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the Russian language), inventiveness of verb and verse in English and Scottish (in Bill Herbert) and quiet contemplation (in Paul Summers).<sup>6</sup>

### Three on the Stage

Three male graces, men of our times. An inverted trinity, as we learn from the final confession made to the maid who embodies the Virgin Mary. In an ill-famed house where hell becomes the other in the good Sartrean existentialist tradition, three travelers through this world make a hasty stop: a businessman comes with chocolates and roses to a lady in what he thinks is a hotel, a secret service reserve colonel has a meeting with a gentleman at the headquarters, and a writer enters the scene to pick up the corrected manuscript of his detective novel from a small, newly established publishing house. The humour is that of the absurd of the situation, of the unfulfilled expectations that put a sad grimace on the spectator's face.

Three elevators bring the main characters to a creaking location, where voices are heard, smoke comes out, a poetic atmosphere of the fall of the house of Usher is at work. They all think they have got the address wrong, they send each other to check it, everybody is right and all are wrong. They come to the conclusion that the meeting place is a horseshoe-shaped one that stands at the intersection of three streets. Humour here lies in the irony, there is misfortune knocking at the door. Moreover, each can only use the elevator that brought him here, Sesame opens for him and remains closed to others. Harry Potter's Room of Requirement is reduced to a cupboard door that houses a bar fridge, the businessman quenches his thirst with beer, the colonel with orange juice, and the writer with hot chocolate after being caught in a torrential downpour, in an attempt to break free from the replica of a moth house from George Calinescu's novel in Romanian literature. Everyone gets what they want or finds what they need, the world is fulfilled as Schopenhaurian will and representation, according to the writer. He also quotes from Vico, all of them recount true or fictional events. The army man provides a pot where he will soak his feet in baking soda, a cure for a condition acquired while working on the African continent (a counterpoint to the Orwellian Burmese days).

The maid enters the stage coming down the stairs, the three help her clean, they find out that she has a son by a carpenter father; walled up, crucified, he works in Israel, he sent her a beautiful leather jacket that she wouldn't have been able to afford from her work; music by Rammstein blares on stage, the song rocks (a far cry from *Jesus Christ Superstar*) and the biker outfit replaces the surface technician, the politically correct euphemism of (post)modern times. First, the three search her bag, they poke each other: is she or is she not the real Virgin? Every word spoken by the woman is meaningful and brings them closer to the elucidation of the mystery, the

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<sup>6</sup> N.S. Thompson, "Andy Croft, W.N. Herbert, Paul Summers, *Three Men on the Metro* (Five Leaves Poetry) £7.99", *PN Review* 197, Volume 37 Number 3, January - February 2011, p. 88.

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confession of their sins frees their soul, they show their true self, they have wronged themselves and others mercilessly: the businessman is a ruthless exploiter, the man from the secret services resembles a pantagruelic ogre, and the writer is actually a fraud who wanted to defraud the publishing house, and he acquired all his erudition from a prisoner, a cellmate. She forgives them, the laying on of hands, a sign of the Son, an attribute of priests, today desacralized by alternative therapies, has its effect and frees the souls of those who found their names in the Book of the Dead that comes as a Singaporean phonebook. The humour of situation and language is given by the Machiavellian end that excuses the means, by deceptive appearances and the surfacing of the essence of the characters.

The three are informed by the third apparition (a chronological one following the first two, that of a maid and of a motorcyclist, respectively), in nun's clothes, that everything was just an exercise, a purgatory of what was to come, a rehearsal for them to remember so as to change for the better and inherit the kingdom of heaven. An opportunity to get to know contemporary Italian dramaturgy, the play *Three (on a Swing)*<sup>7</sup> incites us to follow its stagings in the theaters of the world<sup>8</sup>.

### Conclusions

Unlike the classic humour of Jerome K. Jerome, considered even vulgar by the critics of the time, a treasure for Translation Studies and the art tourism in verse given by the Moscow subway to Croft, Herbert and Summers, in Lunari we can speak of an absurd humour, in a Breckettian or Ionesian stance; its erratic character opposes the classical one, Moliere's in dramaturgy, according to the Bergsonian opposition in the theory of laughter. The latter is also circumscribed to the novels of Jerome K. Jerome or the aforementioned poets.

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<sup>7</sup> See "the stage adaptation by Teodor Corban, Constantin Puşcaşu and Ionuţ Cornilă from *Three on a Swing* by Luigi Lunari", <https://www.teatrulnationaliasi.ro/stagiunea/trei--221.html>. Retrieved on Feb. 6, 2023, translation ours.

<sup>8</sup> We hereby refer to *Tre sull'altalena* – Commedia di Luigi Lunari, regia Sebastiano Boschiero, Stremen Teatro, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaEu-rJL3s>. Retrieved on Feb. 6, 2023.

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