

## THE DIRTY JOKES IN *WAITING FOR GODOT*

When making preparations for the staging of *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett wrote to Roger Blin, the actor/director, 'Now that we have embarked on this dirty joke together, I think we can address each other in the familiar form.'<sup>1</sup> To refer to his first play, and dramatic masterpiece, as 'this dirty joke' is surely significant, but I am unaware of any discussions either on why the phrase is apt or on the function of dirty jokes within the play as a whole. Scholars have extensively discussed Beckett's use of an extraordinarily wide range of elements of different entertainment media, drawing on conventions from silent movies, vaudeville and mime acts, *commedia dell'arte*, and formal Greek theatre.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that he should have also used the conventions and associations of bar-room jokes within the play. He uses them at least twice, in very different ways. The first time, a joke is begun verbally and Beckett uses it to produce not a laugh but a moment of intense emotion and dramatic tension, and the second time he actually incorporates a well-known joke into the action of the play, so that the joke is not told but enacted by the characters.

The verbal dirty joke is the story of the Englishman in the brothel. Estragon begins the joke soon after he 'voluptuously' pronounces the word 'calm' and notes that the English say 'cawm'. Despite Vladimir's protestations he begins, 'An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual goes to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one, or a red-haired one.'<sup>3</sup> At this point Vladimir yells, 'Stop it!' and exits.

Scholars have generally accepted the ending of the joke given by Ruby Cohn. In her version, the Englishman replies that he wants a boy. Shocked, the bawd threatens to call a policeman, whereupon the Englishman pleads, 'O no, they're too gritty.'<sup>4</sup>

There was, however, another dirty joke, with exactly the same opening, that was widely circulating in both England and France for many decades and which, I would argue, is more likely to be the one Beckett had in mind. In this version, the Englishman selects, say, the blonde and he is then shown to a door labelled 'Blondes'. He enters to be confronted by a further choice, small, medium, or large breasts. He selects again, enters the appropriate door and another choice is offered. In French (for the joke is nearer to Beckett's needs in French) the choice offered is between 'Grands Cons' and 'Petits Cons'. He chooses the door marked 'Grands Cons' and finds himself back in the street again. The whole sequence begins with Estragon voluptuously pronouncing the word 'calme', leading to the thought that the English say 'caam', to the statement 'ce sont des gens caaams'.<sup>5</sup> This surely echoes the punchline of the joke, that the Englishman 'est con'.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Roger Blin, 15 January 1951. Quoted by Ruby Cohn, 'Growing (Up?)', in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. by Enoch Brater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 13–24 (p. 15).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, John Sheedy, 'The Net', in *Casebook on 'Waiting for Godot'*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 159–66; Alfonso Sastre, 'Seven Notes on *Waiting for Godot*', in *Casebook on 'Waiting for Godot'*, pp. 101–07; Genevieve Serreau, 'Beckett's Clowns', in *Casebook on 'Waiting for Godot'*, pp. 171–75.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber, 1956), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ruby Cohn, 'Beckett's German *Godot*', in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, no. 1 (Winter 1976), pp. 41–49 (p. 42, n. 2).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1952), p. 24.

There are good reasons why this joke would have appealed to Beckett. There is first the futility of the whole exercise, where the expectations of the Englishman for the perfect sexual experience are raised, only to end in nothing but frustration. Second, he becomes the victim of a hoax, for the final door describes not an attribute of the female body, but himself.

This also strongly echoes the earlier exchange where Vladimir forces Estragon to recall 'cette histoire de larrons'. The structure of the play constantly involves such formal repetitions of themes and actions, where the 'action replay' adds a new nuance of meaning. In the earlier sequence, Vladimir asks Estragon if he remembers the story of the two thieves, and Estragon protests that he wishes neither to recall nor to hear the story. Vladimir persists despite interjections from Estragon, such as 'I'm going', until Estragon closes the exchange by saying, in the French version, 'Les gens sont des cons'. Vladimir, who represents spiritual, intellectual, and philosophical aspirations in man, tells a story, and a corny one that Estragon has heard before, about salvation after death, about the promise of heaven after life on earth. People believe the promise of heaven, and Estragon passes his verdict that they are 'cons'. Estragon, who represents the body, and its appetites and needs, torments Vladimir with the promise of carnal heaven, and the verdict is the same. In translating this sequence, Beckett rewrites 'Les gens sont des cons' as 'People are bloody ignorant apes'. To have written, in 1955, 'People are cunts' would have been too strong for the censor, so in the English version this parallel is lost. The action also involves a formal repetition. After Vladimir's story Estragon ends the exchange by rising painfully and limping to the extreme left, while after Estragon's story Vladimir exits hurriedly to relieve his sexual tension guiltily, though encouraged forcefully by the excited Estragon.

Right at the end of the play, the joke is revived in another parallel sequence, echoing the brothel joke. The boy re-enters to announce that Godot will not be coming. This exchange then takes place.

VLADIMIR (softly) Has he a beard, Mr Godot?  
 BOY Yes, sir.  
 VLADIMIR Fair or . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . or black?  
 BOY I think it's white, sir.

*Silence.*

VLADIMIR Christ have mercy on us! (p. 92)

Ruby Cohn writes, 'Thus Mr Godot is pointedly related to Gogo's smutty story about the Englishman in the brothel, juxtaposing — as so often in *Godot* — the physical, the vulgar and ethereal' (p. 42). The hesitation, I would add, is because Vladimir is aware not just of the parallel between the bawdy joke and the colour of Godot's beard, but also that it anticipates the same message, 'Les gens sont des cons'. His final exclamation for mercy (in French he utters one word, 'Misericorde') takes us back to the story of the two thieves.

The hidden dirty joke has not, to my knowledge, been discussed before.<sup>6</sup> It occurs at an important point of the play, when Beckett is playing with his audience. The sequence begins when Pozzo begins to rummage for his pipe, and Vladimir and

<sup>6</sup> Adorno has pointed out that Beckett has concealed Jewish jokes within *Endgame*. See T. W. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', in T. W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1, 241–75.

Estragon suddenly become members of the audience, watching Pozzo the comedian. Beckett teasingly puts thoughts which some of the real audience might be having into the mouths of Vladimir and Estragon.

VLADIMIR     Charming evening we're having.  
 ESTRAGON     Unforgettable.  
 VLADIMIR     And it's not over.  
 ESTRAGON     Apparently not.  
 VLADIMIR     It's only beginning.  
 ESTRAGON     It's awful. (pp. 34-35)

Having set the mood of boredom with the play, Vladimir announces he has to go to the toilet and hastens towards the wings. Estragon announces that it is 'end of the corridor, on the left'.

This colloquy immediately is reminiscent of a well-worn dirty joke about the theatre, circulating long before the appearance of *Waiting for Godot*, which gains its humour from audience/player confusion. In the joke, two men, having had a drink or two, go to the theatre, where they become thoroughly bored with the play. One of them feels a pressing need to urinate, so he tells his friend to mind his seat while he goes to find the toilet. 'I saw one down the corridor outside', says his friend. The man wanders down the corridor, trying every door, but finds no W.C. In his desperation he sees a plant pot behind one door and urinates into it. He returns to his seat and his friend says to him, 'What a pity! You missed the best part. A fellow just came on the stage and pissed into that plant pot.'

Beckett seems to follow the joke closely. When Vladimir makes his exit, Estragon calls over Pozzo and they both watch him, with Pozzo saying 'Oh I say', which in the original French was the more ambiguous 'O là là'. Vladimir then re-enters and Estragon says to him 'You missed a treat. Pity.'

The act of urination to Vladimir is an intrusive physical process which he finds annoying, and embarrassing. He becomes the victim of voyeurism, of Pozzo and Estragon witnessing in shocked delight his private act of evacuation. In the joke, we laugh at the man's embarrassment at the sudden realization that his private act was in fact the object of public entertainment. In the play, Vladimir enters, 'sombre' and agitatedly knocking into Lucky and a stool to show his displeasure, only to be told that his act of urination was the treat of an otherwise awful evening. Rather than play for the laugh, however, Beckett emphasizes his embarrassed distress.

This episode may well explain why Beckett used the term 'this dirty joke' to describe his play. Dirty jokes have victims, people at whom we laugh. The jokes are frequently voyeuristic, so that private mortification becomes public humiliation, and the tragic and disturbing becomes public disgrace. Urination, defecation, and sex are brought out into the open in order to ridicule those who perform these functions. Jokes have no pity, and sick jokes laugh at misfortune. When the blind Pozzo, screaming for pity and help, finally attracts the notice of Vladimir and Estragon, they help him to his feet, but he falls. 'We must hold him', says Vladimir, and they get him up again. Pozzo sags between them, his arms round their necks, and Vladimir asks, 'Feeling better?' (p. 84). The inappropriateness of this request, the solicitous cliché so frequently misused in everyday life, forces us to smile, despite Pozzo's tragic distress. Then, when Pozzo announces that he is blind, Estragon wonders, 'Perhaps he can see into the future.' These are sick jokes, and form part of Beckett's pessimism about humanity.

An essential element of this kind of humour is to turn tragedy into tragicomedy, misfortune into farce. The members of the audience are confused by this mixing of conventions, and they find themselves being amused by the kind of events that normally evoke compassion and sympathy. Their own failure to respond appropriately is disturbing, hence the relevance of the 'dirty joke' label Beckett hangs on his own play. We feel guilty at being amused.

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