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If You Have to Explain It, Is It Still Funny?

Beth Luey

Is editing humor different from editing political correspondence, personal letters, journals, and the materials that most documentary editors deal with? Transcription surely is the same, but what about annotation? When I asked three editors to present papers on the subject, they were reluctant to do so because they didn’t think they did anything differently than editors whose subjects are less funny. But it seemed to me that there would be differences. Humor is often topical and very much tied to its time: any script of The Daily Show resurrected fifty years from now would require a lot of explanation. Does the annotation need to provide more context than is needed for other kinds of documents? And if you do supply context, how do you keep it from bogging down the humor? We have all had the experience of hearing someone explain why a joke is funny, and that spells the end of any humor the joke might have had. The panelists—Ellen R. Cohn, editor of the Benjamin Franklin Papers; Robert Hirst, general editor of the Mark Twain Papers; and Steven Gragert, director of the Will Rogers Memorial Museums—answered these questions, as well as some that I hadn’t thought to ask.

I first wondered about this topic when browsing through Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology.1 It includes a story by Leo Rosten from The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N, written and set in 1930s New York.2 Mr. Kaplan is a student in a night class for immigrants learning English. His confidence far outstrips his language skills. In this story, “Mr. Kaplan and Shakespeare,” his teacher, the long-suffering Mr. Parkhill, has given up the usual practical speaking lesson for an adventure

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in understanding Shakespeare. He writes on the board

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time

and so forth.

At this point in the anthology, the editors insert a seemingly obvious note identifying the play, act, and scene. But is this such an obvious thing to do? I imagine that, in the undergraduate classes for which this anthology is in part intended, few students could supply that information. So at first blush it makes sense to identify the play. But what happens in the story is that Mr. Kaplan begins: “Ve mus’ tink abot Julius Scissor an’ how he felt!” and goes on at great length to explicate the passage in the context of Julius Scissor. Unfortunately, the passage is from *Macbeth*, as Mr. Parkhill tells him after a bit. Undaunted, Mr. Kaplan goes on. So the note is unnecessary, since the text itself supplies the information, and this premature identification limits the possible readings. For readers who don’t know the source, the humor comes from the language and from Mr. Kaplan’s imaginative interpretation—until the truth is revealed and they are no longer sure they should be laughing at Mr. Kaplan. (Even Mr. Parkhill, with a grudging respect for “the fertility of Mr. Kaplan’s imagination and the power of his oratory…could not easily return to the world of reality.”) For the reader who knows the passage is from *Macbeth*, the humor is more along the lines of *Fawlty Towers*: a cringing, nervous feeling that comes from knowing that someone is making an ass of himself. In this case, the joke is not spoiled by too much information, but it is limited. This, I suspect, is the sort of problem that most of us would anticipate in annotating humor: the fear of telegraphing the punch line.

In the same story, though, a joke is totally missed because there is no note. The first student to speak after Mr. Parkhill reads the passage aloud is Miss Carevello:

“Da poem isa gooda,” she said slowly. “Itsa have beautiful words. Itsa lak Dante, Italian poet—”

“Ha!” cried Mr. Kaplan scornfully. “Shaksbeer you metchink mit Tante? Shaksbeer? Mein Gott! . . . to me is no comparin a high-cless man like Shaksbeer mit a Tante, dat’s all.”

Now, if you are of my generation and grew up among people with accents, you got the joke. Miss Carevello pronounces Dante as an Italian would,
with a short e at the end rather than a long a. And Mr. Kaplan hears it as a
Yiddish speaker would, as “tante,” or aunt, possibly with a slightly negative
implication. Certainly Shakespeare is not to be compared to one's Aunt
Sadie. But, again, most of today’s undergraduates have grown up without
hearing an Italian or Yiddish accent. Without a note, that joke is
lost forever.

This, it turns out, is a bigger problem than I thought. As Bob Hirst
noted in his paper on Mark Twain, the editors have come precariously close
on several occasions to missing a joke altogether, leading them to believe
that they probably have missed a few more. The more subtle the humor, the
more likely it is that a century or so down the road we won’t realize that
the author was being funny. (Perhaps some contemporaries didn’t either.)
One example Bob Hirst used was a group of apparently random letters
and symbols that turned out to be a rebus. And Ellen Cohn noted that
Benjamin Franklin was very fond of hoaxes, many of which he kept going
for years and which remained undetected. His editors have tracked them
down and provided annotation to explain what they were about, but they
suffer from lingering fears that there are more out there, either undetected
altogether or detected but not attributed to Franklin.

Of course, the fact that the editors came close to missing a joke
means that readers most certainly would miss it. In these cases, annotation
is essential. Crafting a note that alerts readers to the joke, explains it, but
doesn’t spoil it is a skill that requires extraordinary dexterity on the part of
an editor.

Contrary to my expectations, the vintage of the humor doesn’t
necessarily affect the need to annotate. As Ellen Cohn pointed out,
eighteenth-century joke books don’t seem very funny to us, but one of
Poor Richard’s aphorisms can still bring down the house, in part because
of Franklin’s careful choice of words. We might assume that Will Rogers,
the most recent figure discussed, would be the most accessible, yet he was
subjected to the heaviest annotation. Psychologists are probably better
equipped than editors to explain which sorts of humor are timeless and why.

As the session title suggests, editors do have to worry about
overexplaining. Readers of documentary editions, whether humorous or
not, are annoyed by unnecessary notes. In another excerpt from the Norton
Anthology, this one a story by S. J. Perelman, the editors interrupt the
narrative to define “sweatshop,” to note that “The night before Christmas”
is “the first line of the popular poem by Clement Moore,” and to explain


that “Beethoven’s Fifth” is “a symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven.” As Steve Gragert details in his article in this issue, Will Rogers’s first editor was heavily criticized for running jokes into the ground with heavy annotation.

Is editing humor different? In many ways, no. But the editor walks a fine line between spoiling the joke and missing it, a line that others do not have to navigate. And there is real danger in not getting the joke, as Woody Allen explains in his own version of the story of Abraham and Isaac:

And so he took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham’s hand and said, “How could thou doest such a thing? . . . I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it.”

And Abraham fell to his knees, “See, I never know when you’re kidding.”

And the Lord thundered, “No sense of humor. I can’t believe it.”

4 “The Scrolls,” in Chametzky et al., 320-23.
These apparently random letters and symbols from the Mark Twain Papers turned out to be a rebus. The top entry translates, “A little more than kin but less than kind”; middle, “A little darkey in bed with nothing over him”; and the next is “You undertake to overthrow my undertakings.” According to Bob Hirst, “Take a drink?” needs no explanation. From Notebook 7, Mark Twain Papers, the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.