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# Introduction

## A TRANSGRESSIVE VERNACULAR ART

AMONG THE ROYAL TREASURES IN ROSENBERG CASTLE in Copenhagen is a carefully preserved seventeenth-century armchair that once belonged to Christian IV. A hidden mechanism in the arms would pin the king's guests in the seat, where they would be soaked with water from a container on the back. When they were released, a small trumpet tooted the news to all who cared to hear, thus proving that fart jokes have an ancient and royal lineage. Centuries later, the FartDroid app has been downloaded more than 2 million times, despite a “low maturity” content rating (Neat-O-Fun 2012). iFart, the equivalent app for the iPhone, reportedly earned its inventor thousands of dollars in 2008 (Hanlon 2008). The underground economy in immature practical joking is apparently alive and well.

To folklorists interested in humor, practical jokes deserve study because they are a truly vernacular, unofficial, or “folk” arena for creative play. At any given moment, the chances are good that somebody near you is involved in a practical joke, plotting another, or regaling friends with stories of tricks that they have played, been taken in by, or heard of. The ready availability of digital cameras and websites like YouTube makes it easy for practical jokers to record their efforts and post them for the enjoyment and commentary of wide audiences. In turn, stories and recordings inspire others to attempt their own trickery.

There are very few professional practical jokers, but a substantial popular culture industry celebrates and supports this pastime. Besides android apps, there are books, film, radio, reality television, and websites all devoted to practical jokes, and all replete with puns, verbal jokes, and cartoon illustrations that bathe the topic in a jocular light (AmazingFX.net and Regan 2008; Jillette and Teller 1989; Van Rensselaer 1941). In the earliest days of television, Alan Funt's *Candid Camera* established a formula for playing elaborate tricks on unsuspecting people and broadcasting the results for the amusement of a mass audience, a formula that continues to be used to great success in shows from *Punk'd* in the United States to *Grand Classics* in Great Britain to *Verstehen Sie Spass* in Germany (Funt and Reed 1994). Around the United States, radio stations similarly entertain their listeners

with recordings of tricks played on individuals by telephone (Douglas 1996; Richardson 1998). Although these instances have high visibility, they have not supplanted the unofficial, noncommercial folk practice of playing practical jokes—rather, they draw energy from it.

### A POOR REPUTATION

Humor scholars, dedicated to understanding jokes of every kind, have paid scant attention to the practical joke, perhaps because it is considered too unsophisticated for serious attention. Even among people who appreciate jokes and other comic genres, practical jokes and pranks are often disparaged. As the compiler of one early joke book put it, “If the pun is the lowest form of wit, the practical joke may be described even more assuredly as the lowest form of humour” (Jerold 1912, 91). The practical joke “gives no intellectual satisfaction” according to humor scholar Avner Ziv: “For years a variegated industry has supplied players of practical jokes with an apparatus for secret attacks devoid of humorous talent: flowers that spurt water up a person’s nose as he bends over to smell them; cigarette boxes from which frogs jump out; jars of mustard whose lids conceal snakes; fake mice designed to look as real as possible, to be placed in such sensitive spots as kitchen drawers; and many more . . . An attraction to this sort of humor is without a doubt connected to the innocence and lack of sophistication characteristic of childhood” (1984, 124, 113). Like Ziv, many sophisticated persons disparage the practical joke as puerile and devoid of skill or talent. The genre is easy to dismiss when considered in the abstract, which usually means with reference to a paradigmatic example like the infamous whoopee cushion or its electronic version, the iFart app. Compared to literary and theatrical genres of humor, folk humor seems simple and unoriginal, and practical jokes rank even lower than verbal jokes from oral tradition because the latter at least approximate a literary form (Marsh 2012, 291–292; Oring 2011).

As a folklorist, I believe that creativity and artistry exist throughout society in humble everyday settings as much as they do in the semisacred arenas that post-Renaissance Western culture has created for art and literature. Perhaps it is this ideological belief in the importance of vernacular art that has led folklorists to pay closer attention to the practical joke than other humor scholars have done. The first attempt to catalog the practical joke and related genres was made by folklorist Richard Tallman (1974). Other folklorists have focused on the repertoire and personal style of outstanding practical jokers (Bauman 2004; Leary 1982; Sawin 2004, 135–155) or on

case studies of practical joking in specific contexts (DeNatale 1990; Harlow 1997; Santino 1986; Schmidt 2013).

“A great prank is like art,” according to the compiler of a popular book of college pranks, and I agree (Steinberg 1992, ix). However, to appreciate the skill and artistry of the practical joke it is necessary to look at the particulars—particular practical jokes as they are played by particular people at particular times and in particular places. This approach has been used effectively by folklorists with respect to verbal jokes (Leary 1984a, 1), and I will follow it in this book. By studying specific practical jokes, their creators, and their reception by specific audiences, the genre that is so easily disparaged in the abstract is revealed to be a lively expressive play tradition that includes both sophistication and intellectual satisfaction. It is a vernacular art form subject to critical evaluation by both practitioners and audiences, operating under the guidance of local aesthetic and ethical canons. Some practical jokes are better than others, but the best of them demand significant skill and talent, not only to think up but also to execute.

### CRUELTY

A more serious objection to practical jokes in general is that they are aggressive and cruel. George Eliot (1883, 101) remarked of practical jokes that “no sympathetic nature can enjoy them,” which implies that even for uninvolved observers to countenance a practical joke is evidence of a moral failing. More often, it is the character and motives of practical jokers that are impugned. “I think practical jokes are for the birds,” opined Ann Landers. “In my opinion, something is fundamentally wrong with people who enjoy embarrassing or humiliating others and then expect the victim to be ‘a good sport’ and laugh it off” (Landers 1988). Humor scholar Martin Grotjahn agreed. “The practical joke represents a primitive form of the funny,” he wrote, “which often is so cruel and so thinly disguised in its hostility that the sensitive or esthetically minded person can hardly enjoy it” (1957, 40). The fact that practical jokes commonly occur as part of initiation or hazing rituals only intensifies this objection, since the very term *hazing* has come to carry a pejorative connotation (Mechling 2009).

Any play activity that designates one of its major protagonists as a *victim* must contain a heavy dose of aggression, at the very least. A practical joke is always at someone’s expense, at least for a brief time. However, whether that aggression amounts to hostility or cruelty is another question. Practical jokes are intended to cause people discomfort but not necessarily distress, embarrassment but not necessarily humiliation, chagrin but not

necessarily mortification. Some jokes do cause distress or humiliation, but these are not necessary results. Whether or not the effects of a practical joke go too far to be considered amusing is a judgment made by the audience each time a joke is enacted or retold. Cruelty is a subjective concept, defined variously according to the mores of the day and the social setting. Similarly, hostility refers to the motives of the joker, and motives are always unknowable. Nevertheless, joke audiences and recipients draw conclusions about jokers' intentions, and their determinations have significant and lasting consequences in the social setting.

The cruelty issue can only be decided on a case-by-case basis, and the goal of this study is to elucidate how those decisions are negotiated. Further, the problem of cruelty and hostility in practical jokes mirrors similar problems in all jokes and other humorous genres. The problem is more pointed in practical jokes because they are enacted rather than told or, as Grotjahn (1957, 40) said in his dispraise of the genre, they have less symbolization to disguise their latent hostility. Nevertheless, even an apparently cruel joke is still framed as a joke, and this framing always complicates questions of intentionality and appropriateness. It turns out that questions and arguments about morality are central in the evaluation and effectiveness of jokes of all kinds.

Naturally, I have personal reactions to the jokes recounted in the following pages. Some I find very funny, while others I personally find hard to approve. Still others are merely dull. If some of these subjective feelings leak out in my presentation and analysis, it is neither intentional nor relevant. It is not the job of the humor scholar to be an arbiter of humorousness, to set herself up as an Everywoman whose finely tuned sense of humor can unerringly distinguish the funny from the unfunny or the appropriate from the inappropriate. The scholar's role, instead, is to identify and describe how these determinations are made in specific settings, which is to say, to find out how jokes behave in the wild.

### SOURCES AND SCOPE

The major sources for this study are forty-two interviews with jokers and joke targets that I conducted in Bloomington, Indiana, between 1986 and 1988 and in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2005. I also draw on published sources, including memoirs, obituaries, biographies, advice columns, newspaper feature stories, and ethnographic case studies. Folklore archives throughout North America yielded another trove of practical joke narratives and recipes, both traditional and original. YouTube videos posted by

practical jokers are another useful source, especially for showing the setup, unfolding, and evaluation of jokes. Finally, I have also drawn on some personal experiences. I am not much of a practical joker myself, but since I have been the target of one or two good fabrications, I have got my revenge by including a couple of these experiences here (see “The Ethnographer Hoaxed” in chapter 11).

It is not always possible for ethnographers to observe practical jokes directly as they happen because most cases are deeply embedded in specific social settings to which only insiders are privy. Instead, most case studies of this genre have relied upon the prank narratives that form part of the micro-culture of specific small groups. Whether collected in interviews, posted on the Web, or published in books and newspapers, these narratives can substitute for “being there” because they typically include both descriptions of the actual fabrications and detailed accounts of the joke’s repercussions and the social and individual characteristics that motivated them. Joke narratives also include the narrator’s evaluation of the events, which speaks to both the effectiveness and success of jokes.

Most of the cases presented in the following pages are from the United States or New Zealand. Most of the people I interviewed directly are white and middle class or lower middle class, but the material I draw on from folklore archives also encompasses white working-class individuals. Within this admittedly only mildly heterogeneous corpus, however, it turns out that there is considerable variety in how practical jokes work. Within this aesthetic variety it is difficult to draw broad comparisons based on national culture or class, and it is not my brief to do so. Folklorists have described how the performance style of verbal jokes is influenced by both individual personality and local jocular aesthetics (Bronner 1984; Leary 1984b). I will argue that the same thing applies to practical jokes, not only in terms of repertoire and performance but also regarding how jokes are received and how their humorous qualities are determined. While social class plays a role in forming local joking aesthetics, individual characteristics, regional and occupational settings, and the joking history of the local group are also involved.

## OUTLINE

In this book I will examine the creativity, humorousness, and social significance of vernacular practical joking. Chapters 1 and 2 define and catalog the various playful activities encompassed by the terms *prank* and *practical joke*. I will compare practical jokes to other kinds of jokes and suggest a

broad definition: practical jokes, broadly conceived, are forms of unilateral play. Within this broad definition are practical jokes more narrowly conceived—especially put-ons, fool’s errands, and booby traps—which, drawing on the work of Erving Goffman and Richard Tallman, I define as scripted play activities in which one protagonist is unwittingly contained in the play frame. Chapter 3 is a detailed analysis of the way a single fool’s errand manipulates access to information about what is going on. I draw upon Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) model of the personal experience narrative to analyze the relationships between the narrated event and several different narratives about it, from the point of view of the jokers, onlookers, and joke target. Chapter 4 explores the relationship between practical jokes and truth and includes an analysis of related folklore genres, the belief legend and the tall tale, that similarly concern themselves with epistemological questions.

Chapters 5 and 6 introduce the question of morality both in jokes generally and in practical jokes particularly. In chapter 5, I explore how jokers use playful fabrications to censure minor wrongdoing as well as how questions of (im)morality arise in the evaluation of their jokes. Chapter 6 argues that morality is a central question in the reception of all jokes, and builds on the humor support and the benign violation models to present a reception theory of humor that incorporates morality, local aesthetics, and play. Chapter 7 focuses on the variety of techniques that the targets of practical jokes can draw upon to show both support for and ambivalence toward their jocular mistreatment.

In chapters 8–10 I investigate the effect that practical jokes have on their social settings. Practical jokes are about relationships; they are deeply socially embedded, arising from, reflecting, and influencing specific relations. While humor support aids solidarity, the withholding of support—the situation for which I have adopted Michael Billig’s felicitous term *unlaughter*—tends to heighten group boundaries. Chapter 8 considers how humor support builds solidarity and illustrates the power of the existing relationship to activate the play frame and transform the meanings of behaviors that would otherwise appear cruel or hostile. Chapter 9 is devoted to weddings and initiations, two sites in which ritual practical joking is commonly found today. The incongruous status of those undergoing a rite of passage both motivates and serves as justification for practical jokes, but despite their ritual play / playful ritual framing, targets do not always support these jokes. Initiation jokes are especially vulnerable to unlaughter, and the final case in this chapter considers the relationship between initiation jokes and workplace harassment.

Chapter 10 considers public pranks, specifically media April Fools' Day spoofs and the public practical jokes of university students in England and New Zealand. The targets of public pranks are anonymous but not random; they are selected based on their membership in salient out-groups to play stereotyped roles in public display events that dramatize anxieties held by in-group members about their own social status. Even in public, practical jokes are about relationships. Finally, in chapter 11 I introduce some individual practical jokers, highlighting their different jocular aesthetics and illustrating the roles that practical joking plays in their lives and relationships.