

## WHEN HUSBANDS DIE: JOKE-TELLING IN AN ITALIAN LADIES' CLUB IN CHICAGO

Gloria Nardini

### Abstract

This is a paper about women and language. In it women tell jokes, both individually and collaboratively, which are performances of verbal art. It is also a paper about ethnicity and gender, for in their joke telling, these women meld both discourses in seamless fashion. My analysis of a 2 minute 40 second transcript of "talk as play," (Coates 151) explicates the powerful identity they fashion for themselves. Both this identity and the fun they have with each other are dependent, of course, upon understanding the context of their club, the Collandia Ladies' Club.

**Keywords:** verbal art, joke telling, women and language, gender and ethnicity, Italian culture, Bella figura

### 1. Background of the study

The Collandia Ladies' Club<sup>1</sup> was founded in Chicago in the 1950's as an auxiliary to the Men's Club, which was started in the 30's by immigrants from Lucca.<sup>2</sup> Women are entitled to membership by virtue of having husbands in the Men's Club. Their purpose has always been, in the words of many of them, "to help the men." The Ladies' Club tends to have more American-born members than does the Men's Club. Many of its Italian-born women are more recent immigrants; that is, they came to Chicago after World War II. The conditions they encountered, while challenging, were not the *miseria* attributed to the illiterate waves of the early 1900's. Generally, these *lucchesi*<sup>3</sup> arrived equipped with literacy, job skills, and contacts already in place.

The purpose of the Collandia is recreational, its heart quite simple. Lifetime friendships are formed and fostered here where, on a day-to-day basis, members come to play cards, to place *bocce*, and to speak Italian. Everyone knows about everyone else's troubles and pleasures. People get married, raise children, and grow old together. In some ways the Collandia represents the *caffè* and the *piazza* of the *paese* left behind.

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<sup>1</sup> The name is a pseudonym as are all the women's names except for mine.

<sup>2</sup> Lucca is a province located in Tuscany in North-Central Italy where the dialect spoken is very close to standard Italian.

<sup>3</sup> The adjective for people from Lucca, both men and women, is *lucchesi*.

Here I engaged in long-term participant observation (2 ½ years from 1991-94), following Dell Hymes's ethnography of communication, in order to reach an emic interpretation of its culture. As a part of the Collandia Club, I became recording secretary, fashion show chair, member of many other committees, etc. All the while I took field notes, held interviews, taped meetings and other speech events, and examined artifacts such as the club newsletter.

As time went on, I came to realize the importance of being not just bilingual, but also bicultural - that is, I came to understand the extent to which language and culture are inextricably bound at the Collandia Club. Despite thirty to forty years of living in Chicago, a familiarity with English, and the incorporation of American holidays, the underlying mores of the Collandia are Italian. Contrary to many other clubs, the culture of this one remains largely unchanged from its origins.

How can those origins be described?

My research shows that the most important phenomenon in this group is the Italian cultural construction known as *fare bella figura*, literally "to make a beautiful figure." The phrase is figuratively even more important. It means: To engage in appropriate visual display, to look good, to show off, to put on the dog - in short, to perform. Its opposite is *fare brutta figura*, literally, "to make an ugly figure," which means to engage in behavior lacking in appropriate style, flair, or *sprezzatura*. This last term, coined in 1528 by Baldessare Castiglione in *The Book of the Courtier*, purports to be the key to explain "gentlemanly" behavior. Castiglione urges his courtier to

...steer away from affectation at all costs, as if it were a rough and dangerous reef, and (to use perhaps a novel word for it) to practise in all things a certain sprezzatura which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless....So we can truthfully say that true art is what does not seem to be art; and the most important thing is to conceal it, because if it is revealed this discredits a man completely and ruins his reputation. (67)

All behavior and language of the Collandia Club, I came to realize, depend upon the contexts within which a *brutta figura* performance is avoided and a *bella figura* performance is expected, encouraged, and constituted.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Sociologist Erving Goffman says that we all "present ourselves" according to the roles we play; all humans are "performers." I agree. In this theatre of life, Italians perform in a heightened way because of the cultural necessity of always making "*bella*" and avoiding "*brutta*" *figura*. This construct, I maintain, extends to every area of Italian and Italian-American life, including how speakers use language for purposes of *figura*. It may also mean that within a bilingual, bicultural community the concept of *bella figura* is transferred into speech in English, too.

Such seems to be the case in this transcript of Italian women joking. Here, as perceived by both Bergson and Freud, joking is an attack on control. Mary Douglas creates a formula for identifying jokes:

A joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted

pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first... The joke is an image of the relaxation of conscious control in favor of the subconscious. (364)

In my transcript of 160 seconds, during which much laughter occurs in the background, a full 60 seconds of laughter in response to specific jokes occurs all by itself. This means that laughter takes up more than one third of the tape. Clearly, my "ladies" thought their jokes hilarious although the reader of this paper may not find these jokes rip-roaringly funny. To explain this disparity, Douglas says, "the joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but... can be identified in the total social situation" (363). Popular parlance translates this explanation as, "I guess you had to be there." Both show the importance of understanding context in the interpretation of language.

In the jokes told by Jeanne and by Laura, the transcript affords us a view of individual performance, which Richard Bauman calls

...a mode of spoken verbal communication [that] consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence...From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence. Additionally, it is marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity. (11)

In both cases, empirical evidence - the silence of the other women, the rapid pace of the recitation, the framing words - shows the "special intensity" with which the audience regards the joke tellers. Their "display of communicative competence" comes from their understanding of *brutta figura*. For both Laura's and Jeanne's jokes turn upon what wives say and do as they publicly mock a husband's attempt to control them.

In this instance, "context" and joking depend not just upon the Italian concept of *fare bella figura*, however, but also upon gender. These women engage in what Jennifer Coates calls a peculiarly female phenomenon, the "construction of a collaborative floor," (151) in which

individual voices merge and blend in a joint performance. Laughter occurs frequently not just because people say funny or shocking things, but because we take huge pleasure in the talk we create and in our skill at "melding together." (151)

In other words, there exists a specific form of women's solidarity, which becomes women's joke telling and vice versa. What is interesting to note is how the two kinds of performances - individual and collaborative - work together to claim a kind of satisfying and powerful identity for these Collandia Club "ladies."

### 3. The specifics of the performance

To use Hymesean terms, in this communicative situation, otherwise known as "a meeting of officers preparing for the general meeting," a communicative event takes place: The ladies joke about the oppressive atmosphere of the Men's Club which does not allow wives

to become actual shareholders. If their husbands die, the husband's share in the Collandia Club gets passed on to a male - to a son or to a son-in-law - not to the widow. The ladies disagree about the disposition of money to widows. Some quote the Men's Club president, who said that only if they prove "financial need," can they collect their husband's \$2000 share and still remain members of the Ladies' Club.<sup>4</sup> For this is the dilemma: Women are entitled to membership in the Ladies' Club only if they have husbands who are members of the Men's Club. A "courtesy" is extended to widows to allow them to continue membership, but the ramifications of this "courtesy" are unclear.

Within this event occur discrete communicative acts: Specifically, two individual performances of jokes that flaunt *bella figura*. Ultimately, these jokes and the women's commentary on them meld into a communally performed narrative of joke telling that becomes more outrageous with each succeeding line. The language all plays upon the word "need," in a parody of the edict about refunding the \$2000 to widows.

To analyze the communicative event requires that attention be paid to its salient components, says Saville-Troike (137-150), who also maintains that

The criterion for descriptive adequacy...is that enough information should be provided to enable someone from outside the community under investigation to fully understand the event, and to participate appropriately in it. (119)<sup>5</sup>

As I explicate my transcript, I shall use Saville-Troike's terminology.

The "genre" is comedy. Women are trading stories about what they will do when their husbands die. The "topic" involves celebrations - cruises in particular - and gambling, two real life pastimes of the Collandia Ladies. The "purpose" of the dialogue is fun after the business of preparing for the next general meeting. The "setting" is the banquet room of the clubhouse where meetings are usually held.

The "participants" are seven white Italian-American women in their 40's, 50's, and 60's. The "message form" is almost wholly colloquial English with an occasional code switching to Italian. The "message content" about what women need builds up to a crescendo of rhythmic exchange that ends with the funniest joke of all.

Saville-Troike's notion of discourse having "rules for interaction" plays itself out in this transcript, for these ladies can joke about anything they want. In fact, they joke about not having any rules. The Mae West-like tone of line 2, what Bauman calls a "special paralinguistic feature" (19), signals that a carnival of sorts is starting. That it has ended occurs with the self-definition of the "feminist group" comment (lines 35-37) made by the "appropriate leader."<sup>6</sup> It functions as a kind of coda, keying the end of the joke telling. The final comment (line 38), in fact, is in Italian and represents a topic shift.

#### 4. The discourse analysis

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<sup>4</sup> It would be rare in this community for a real financial need of \$ 2000 to exist, for most families are financially successful.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz refers to writing up this work as "thick description."

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, I am the "Gloria" who both starts and ends these performances.

Transcript - 2 minutes, 40 seconds<sup>7</sup>

(1) Gloria: Have any widows taken their money back?

*5 seconds of silence*

*Topic Shift*

(2) Gloria: [a la Mae West]  
Welll, when I'm a widow,  
I'm takin' my money back...

(3) Rhoda: That's all.

(4) Gloria: and I'm gonna go on a cruise.

*General laughter for 5 seconds*

(5) Rhoda: That's what you need, right?  
That's your need!  
[rising tone and emphasis on "you need," "your need"]

*Unintelligible comments and general laughter*

(6) Mira: You're gonna be so awful lon-e-ly!  
Shame on you, Gloria, for thinkin' about that.  
[in mock chastisement]

(7) Nina: Gloria, maybe you should bring me with you for,  
you know [pause]  
if you need someone

(8) Mira: for companion, for companionship.

*Overlapping unintelligible comments*

(9) Laura: Yeah, it's like the lady and her husband died

(10) Ivette: You know what my husband say all the time.

You know, Tony say,  
if I die today you can be sure my wife tomorrow  
she's in Las Vegas  
gambling

*Brief general laughter*

(11) because he doesn't like gambling  
and I love it!  
Say you can be sure she gonna be in Las Vegas

(12) Mira: and gambling and thinking about Tony

(13) Ivette: and somebody else is gonna take care of me.  
[in unison with above line]

(14) Nina: You know, now you can be close.

(15) Mira: Oh, yeah, that's right, you don't have to go that far.

*Unintelligible comments*

(16) Jeanne: A friend of mine had a home on a lake  
and in back of the home was a hill  
and she always wanted him  
to cut that hill down  
but that was years ago  
and it was a home  
and he had-he had inherited it  
and he would never cut the hill down

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<sup>7</sup> Dialogue is written on different lines to represent the breaths speakers take when speaking. Numbering generally follows the turn-taking of different speakers. Conventional end punctuation and capitalization have been abandoned in order to indicate better how the spoken lines continue during conversation. When lines start more to the right than would be expected, they start at the point where the speaker overlapped the woman before her. Within brackets are paralinguistic cues. Other explanatory commentary is in boldface.

*During above, background noises*

*From now on, everyone is silent*

(17) Jeanne: and that's what she says,  
you s.o.b. when you die,  
I don't know who I'm gonna call first  
the undertaker or the excavator.

*15 seconds of general laughter*

(18) Jeanne: He did die first, though

*5 seconds of laughter*

(19) Jeanne: and she sold the house.

*5 seconds of laughter*

(20) Mira: That's bad - she

(21) Laura: she didn't wanna make  
two phone calls!

*10 seconds general laughter - someone says, "Oh, Laura!"*

(22) Laura: There was a lady and her husband died  
and she said he always wanted  
to go on a cruise  
so she brought him with her -  
[pause for effect - punch line is coming]  
in a box!

*5 seconds general laughter - someone repeats, "In a box!"*

*From now on, there is soft laughter throughout*

(23) Laura: This is a true story!

(24) Rhoda: I don't believe you!

(25) Laura: She laughed all the way to the bank.

(26) Nina: Was he embalmed?

(27) Laura: A box, everything in this little box.  
He said he always wanted to go on a cruise.

(28) Nina: Was he cremated?

(29) Laura: No.

(30) Nina: You mean the whole box?

(31) Laura: The whole box!

*5 seconds of laughter*

(32) Mira: Oh my god, oh no!

(33) Nina: Laura, you know what?  
She said, if you neeed anything?

*Unintelligible comments amid 10 seconds of laughter*

(34) Mira: O, dio!

(35) Gloria: This is a feminist group.

*General chorus of "Oh, yeah"*

(36) Gloria: I hope you realize that  
that that's what this amounts to.

*General "Yeah" and "Oh, yeah"*

(37) Gloria: Well, I'm the appropriate leader.

*Laughter stops*

*Topic shift*

(38) Ivette: Quella sedia non é toccata...

Gloria's line 2 has been prefaced by 5 seconds of silence. Now her tone - a long, drawn-out "welll" and lowering of the voice to a sexy pitch followed by a deliberate pause - clearly indicates that something new is happening. She shifts the topic from the discussion of who is entitled to get \$2000 back. At first Rhoda, in line 3, doesn't catch on to the joke, for her response - "That's all" - is a literal affirmation of wifely entitlement to a husband's money.

But as soon as the burlesque becomes apparent - namely in line 4 with the outrageous suggestion of a "cruise" for a bereaved widow - the women laugh for a full 5 seconds and she responds in kind.

Her repetition of "need" in lines 5 harkens back to the discussion about Carlo, the Men's Club president, who had said, "In cases of need, we give it back." Only Rhoda's repetition of "need," prefaced first by "you" and then by "your," lampoons the idea of really needing \$2000. In both lines she gives unusual emphasis to these words, both prolonging them and raising her tone, clearly entering in to the spirit of play begun by Gloria. She also effectively changes what "need" refers to; now it becomes a vacation for "you," and a luxurious one at that!

Mira chimes in with mock chastisement for such a suggestion. There is laughter in her voice in lines 6 as she pretends shock. Nina gives her approval to the cruise idea, again playing on the word "need." By adding the "need" for "someone," she augments the joke. Her use of "you know" with a pause afterwards - implying that they all do really know - highlights her repetition of the word-play on "need" that Rhoda had started.

By line 8, this chorus of women has used the word "need" three times, communally changing it from "cruise" to "companionship," the synonym supplied by Mira. All have entered into the spirit of joking begun by Gloria, what Coates calls the "collaborative floor."

Laura attempts a change of pace in line 9 with a formal joke introduced by "It's like the lady and her husband died." Bauman would call this an attempt at an individual performance "keyed" by the "special formula" (21) that signals joke telling: "It's like the lady..." But she is interrupted by Ivonne's real-life story in lines 10-13. By choosing her husband as topic, Ivonne picks up on the theme of "companionship" but she turns it into a negative, showing how it circumscribes her freedom. As soon as her husband dies, she will be free from his disapproval of gambling for he doesn't "love it." The threefold repetition of "say," which always means "Tony say," implies that Tony is controlling their pleasures. But as soon as "somebody else is gonna take care of me" - in heaven, the angels? - she can do what she wants.

Mira reiterates Ivonne's delight in "gambling," clearly relishing her part in the story. She adds "and thinking about Tony," in a sort of mock-grief that matches her mock-chastisement of Gloria earlier. By line 15 this is definitely a group of women who, having entered into the spirit of the joke, become a chorus of solidarity.

Now, in a departure from the women's personal stories, the first of the two long formal jokes is told. Like Ivonne's account, it takes the form of a story. In lines 16-17 Jeanne signals exposition by her past tense verbs: "Had a home, was a hill, wanted him, was years ago, was a home, had inherited." This narrative is seemingly unlinked to any of the previous discourse. The first 8 lines had played on a communally constructed "need." Ivonne's story had also linked to her "need" for gambling, unshared by Tony. In fact, the women do not give the joke their undivided attention, as indicated by the background noises throughout. Suddenly, when Jeanne shifts into present tense in line 17, there is silence:

And that's what she says  
you s.o.b., when you die, I don't know who I'm gonna call first - the undertaker or the excavator

What makes them suddenly pay attention and then laugh for 15 seconds, the longest sustained laughter so far? Is it because the women recognize the structure of a formal joke as different from the playful bantering that has gone before? Douglas says, "...a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time" (366). Even though Jeanne has veered far from the real life of the previous jokingly told stories - Gloria's cruise, Ivonne's Las Vegas - in lines 16-17, she has returned to the same "social pattern." That is, women's "needs" are constantly eclipsed by their husbands' desires. The symbolism of the hill as both physical and metaphorical obstacle, initially unclear to the ladies, has now entered into their communal theme of "need." The choice between "undertaker" or "excavator" replicates the celebratory tone of the earlier tales.

We could say that what has occurred so far has been a "collaborative floor" performance (a la Coates) started by Gloria's burlesque-like tone, picked up on by the other women's play on "need," and continued by Ivonne's story. Next comes Jeanne's joke, a clear example of an individual performance (a la Bauman). An empirical analysis of the context cues shows its "emergent quality." First, there is the abrupt topic shift; next, the sudden silence of the women as Jeanne approaches her punch line. In it she uses language "marked by extra regularities" (Bauman 19), notably the quasi-rhyme of "undertaker/excavator." Laura's line 21, which provides a sort of punch line, keys the end of Jeanne's joke. The "Oh, Laura!" remark effectively shifts attention away from Jeanne, ending her performance.

From now on, in lines 18 to the end, we see the communal building-up of the joke(s) almost like a vaudevillian act. First of all, the laughter comes in more frequent spurts: 5 seconds after line 18, 5 more seconds after line 19, 10 seconds after line 21, 5 seconds after line 22, 5 seconds after line 31, 10 seconds after line 33. These are guffaws largely unpunctuated by commentary; there is also a general current of giggling from line 22 - "in a box!" - throughout the rest of the tape.

Jeanne contributes to the vaudevillian act by moving her story from the realm of formal joke about someone no one knows to (possible) real life when she says, "He did die first, though" in line 18 and "she sold the house." Both are instances of incongruity that cause laughter. Mira admits the ruefulness of this sale when she starts, "That's bad." The implication is that she will continue with a comment such as, "After all she went through to get him to cut down the hill, you'd think she would have finally cut it down." These are examples of more "collaborative floor." But Laura's comment - "She didn't wanna make two phone calls" - triggers the second joke-telling performance that becomes the most important display of verbal art on the tape.

Laura had tried to tell her joke earlier in line 9 but the ladies weren't ready for it then. Now they are. She has prepared them by reminding them of the theme of "need" - the black humor of the wife's not wanting to make two phone calls implies that her "need" is to deal expeditiously with both hill and dead man by wishing them on to someone else. Laura proceeds:

There was a lady and her husband died  
and she said he always wanted to go on a cruise  
so she brought him with her (pause)  
in a box!

Laura uses many of the techniques that signal individual performance. She pauses for

effect in line 22, asserts that “that is a true story” in line 23, and re-creates reported speech. In particular, she repeats “box” or “in a box” or “the whole box” 4 times, causing Nina to repeat it, too, in line 30. Even Nina’s “Was he embalmed?” of line 26 and “Was he cremated?” of line 28 signal a repetition of “the whole box.” This technique is important for it adds to the rhythm of the exchange. By building on Nina’s interruptive pattern in lines 26 and 28, Laura’s repetitions create a performance everyone acknowledges with laughter. In fact, Deborah Tannen calls repetition the “central linguistic meaning-making strategy” (97) of poetics.

To cap off the joke, Nina returns to the theme of “need” in line 53. Clearly mocking, she implies that the woman, always faithful to her husband, even asks the corpse if he “needs anything.” Thus, she interacts most directly with Laura in the building of this vaudevillian routine. But Rhoda has assisted too, earlier in line 42, by asserting “I don’t believe you,” which allows Laura the irony of “She laughed all the way to the bank,” a familiar phrase of comeuppance.

Mira’s role seems to underline the increasing outrageousness of the jokes. First she says, “Shame on you,” then “thinking about Tony.” Both are ironic but still grounded in the realism of real husbands everyone knows. Even after the undertaker joke, she starts, “That’s bad,” a comment grounded in real-life disappointment. But after “the whole box” of line 50, she just collapses with “Oh, my God” and then the code-switched “*O, Dio.*” The boundaries trespassed by Laura for all of them have now become too broad to fully encompass.

In terms of Douglas’ formula for identifying jokes, the ladies have moved from the “disparate elements” of two future real-life possibilities - Gloria’s husband’s death and Tony’s death - to jokes about dying. One, which creates an actual deathbed scene, is followed by another, which portrays a wife merrily escorting her dead husband’s casket on a cruise. In a sort of contrast rhetoric, the women’s outrageous joking exposes their serious sense of constant and oppressive subjugation to the “needs” of their husbands. In their jokes, the “accepted pattern” following death - namely, grief - is “challenged by the appearance of another pattern” - namely, celebration - -as they collaboratively and metaphorically thumb their noses at all men’s needs. So much, they are saying, for *brutta figura!*

By imitating the male voices, the women have subsumed them. They have traveled a long way from their earlier conversation about a widow’s entitlement to a \$2000 share. Gloria cements the talk-as-play collaborative floor by her assertion, “This is a feminist group,” in line 35, to which all the women eagerly assent. When she says, “I’m the appropriate leader,” the joke is clearly over. A shift to Italian signifies this topic shift.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mary H. Ber has made me aware of my role in this transcript. As an American feminist with a hyper-awareness of patriarchal domination, could it be that my participation precipitates stronger awareness on the part of the Collandia ladies? It is also possible that when I force them into awareness by my professional naming of them as a “feminist group” and me as the “appropriate leader” that they choose not to continue joking in this vein? A topic shift does occur right after my comment. This is the dilemma of representation in ethnography.

## 5. Conclusions

Understanding context is the most important element in deciphering the meaning of language as it occurs in discourse. Hymes asks, “What does the speaker need to know to communicate appropriately in this setting?” My example here shows that these speakers need to understand the complexities of *figura*. They know they would create *brutta figura* if they were to make their jokes in mixed company. They also know that “doing” *brutta figura* in language creates a sort of freedom for them. Much of their performance is uniquely female - collaborative rather than competitive - and it presents a kind of resistance to the dominant male ethic. Douglas says, “...jokes...do not affirm the dominant values, but denigrate and devalue. Essentially a joke is an anti-rite” (369).

In a world in which societal male oppression is replicated in the activities of the Collandia Club, where a woman cannot become the owner of her husband’s share but must watch ownership pass to a son or a son-in-law, a sense of celebration at the death of a husband could never be publicly expressed. In the interplay between their individual performances and their collaborative floor performance - in their layers of performance, as it were<sup>9</sup> - these ladies jointly construct a relaxing of the code of *bella figura*.

Victor Turner calls performance “a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of” (22). It is a momentary relief from the pressures of everyday life. I am not implying, of course, that these women do not love their husband. Rather, their boldness, created in layers of performances of verbal art, enables them to reinvent their gender identity.

“[T]he joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but...in the total social situation,” says Mary Douglas. By celebrating *brutta figura* in their joking, the women resist the dominant ethnic discourse of *bella figura*. In so doing, they create a text of resistance to the dominant gender discourse where women’s “needs” are determined by patriarchal men. This is the “total social situation.” In fact, because a joke implies that anything is possible (Douglas), the women ultimately triumph in a reversal wherein a “dead” husband is “maximally contained, silenced, and celebrated.”<sup>10</sup>

But it is only by moving gracefully between the discourse of ethnicity and that of gender that these clubwomen fashion for themselves a more powerful identity. For if they were not women, if they were not Italian, they would not “tell” and “get” their jokes in the same way. In fact, their negotiation of ethnicity and gender, almost contrapuntal, depends upon both for its collaborative understanding and effect. It is almost a tour de force performance of *bella figura*.

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Marcia Farr for suggesting the notion of “layers of performance.”

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Richard Bauman for these words about my paper.

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