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jokes, gender, and discursive distance on the Tamil popular stage

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Every joke calls for a public of its own.
—Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*

There has long been a certain disciplinary disinclination toward focusing serious anthropological attention on jokes. This is evidenced by the dearth of studies that treat actual joke telling in a given society, as opposed to the comparatively long history of anthropological interest in that kin behavior known as the “joking relationship” (for an overview see Apte 1985:29–66). This lack of disciplinary interest in jokes is also apparent in their complete absence from that otherwise comprehensive guide to anthropological questing, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, first published by the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1874 and last revised in 1951.¹ The history of this Victorian omission and its 20th-century disciplinary sequelae is a subject for future study.² For the present article, suffice it to note that while multiple generations of anthropologists diligently collected the “stories, sayings, and songs” they heard in the field and readily recognized these as “integral element[s] of culture” (RAI 1951:206), they left the joke to languish where it lived.

In the past two decades, however, anthropologists have joined linguists and folklorists in significantly extending the study of speech acts and their contexts under the rubric of verbal performance (Basso 1979; Baugh and Sherzer 1984; Bauman 1977; Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Ben-Amos 1982; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975; Hymes 1975). Joke texts and contexts are now recognized as worthy of anthropological attention. Indeed, several anthropologists have taken jokes seriously enough to begin to theorize about them.³ Prominent among the advanced theories is the notion that jokes are inherently disordering and disorganizing phenomena.⁴

Elliott Oring writes, for instance, that the task of the punchline, which he sees as the critical distinguishing feature of the joke as a literary genre, is to “disrupt the listener’s traditional categories and expectations” and to “transform the perspective of the listener” through “an abrupt cognitive reorganization” (1992:92, 85, 83). In the same vein Mary Douglas (1975), in something of a twist on Victor Turner’s liminal terrain, has gone so far as to suggest that a joke is an *antirite*. Whereas Turner (1977) celebrates the core of ritual as a moment of “anti-structure”

In this article, I analyze a sequence of dirty jokes embedded in a monologue performed on the south Indian Tamil popular stage. In this performance I do not find vulgarity but rather a reflection of its practiced, anxious use-in-avoidance. I analyze the two separate linguistic footings the performer uses for making moral and immoral comments and the social values that are affirmed by this split. I highlight the narrative connections established in this context between fear of the foreign and fear of the female, consider what such connections index about the remnants of Victorian sexuality in postcolonial Tamilnadu, and discuss the locally reinscriptive effects of such a gendered performance. [gender, humor, verbal performance, south India, theater, postcolonialism, vulgarity]

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that ultimately facilitates the process of societal reconsolidation, Douglas sees jokes as offering “an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general” (1975:96). She contends that jokes may be distinguished from rituals as follows:

The rite imposes order and harmony, while the joke disorganizes. . . . The message of a standard rite is that the ordained patterns of social life are inescapable. The message of a joke is that they are escapable. A joke is by nature an anti-rite. [Douglas 1975:103]

Looking closely at jokes presented in the context of a ritual event in south India, I find, in stark contrast to such theories, that far from exerting a disorganizing or transformative impact, jokes often serve to reinscribe the very conventions they blatantly taunt. At its most basic level then, this article is an argument against any suggestion that jokes are innately subversive. I look closely here at the form of a joke in performance and at the “fit” between its text and context (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1975). I discuss the norms of public gender relations in India (and specifically in Tamilnadu) and analyze both how a local comedian tells a dirty joke to a mixed audience and how he gets away with it. I propose turning instead to theories of discursive distancing, notably those of Bakhtin and Freud, because they help explain how an event can be simultaneously delicate and vulgar. My further queries concern how jokes bear the imprint of the interactive situations in which they are told and in which they are found to be funny.

I present a case in which humor, irony, and parody are agents of conformity. What of the antirite and the promise of subversive transformation? As is so often the case with humor, this is not an “either/or” but rather an “and/but” situation. Victor Turner himself suggests reflexivity as the core of both ritual and aesthetic forms, a reflexivity “wherein society becomes at once subject and direct object” (1977:vii). More recently Judith Butler develops the kindred notion that even a pointedly parodic performance may be “a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (1993:125). Both Turner’s and Butler’s theories point to a tension at the heart of performative rites and expressions between reflection and resignification. This tension arises from the fact that the reflexive social commentary embedded in (especially parodic and ironic) performance is itself constituted by, and implicated in, the society on which it comments. Successful parody “must be cut from the same cloth as that which it parodies” (Mannheim 1995).

The dirty jokes I analyze here make such relations highly apparent and play into a dominant discourse on vulgarity that serves only to marginalize further the very actors who give it voice. Nothing, unfortunately, is disrupted here. In asking why not, I rejoin all those who recognize humor’s fabulous, subversive potential (Jenkins 1994). Parody is not subversive by itself and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive and truly troubling, and why certain repetitions are easily domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony (Butler 1990:139).

In the following analysis I begin with the assumption that *form*—a term that, at least for Douglas, at once suggests structure, culture, and social life—is, in all its contextual specificity and reflexivity, critical to the ultimate social effects of jokes.

the distances appropriate to humor

In his 1935 essay, “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin suggests that “the writer of prose does not meld completely with any of [his] words, but rather accents each of them in a particular way—humorously, ironically, parodically, and so forth” (1981 [1935]:299). He then appends a clarifying note:

That is to say, the words are not his if we understand them as direct words, but they are his as things that are being transmitted ironically, exhibited and so forth, that is, as words that *are understood from the distances appropriate to humor, irony, parody, etc.* [1981 (1935):299; emphasis added]

In earlier incarnations of the present article, I borrowed the portion of Bakhtin's footnote italicized above and, in what seemed to me an appropriately Bakhtinian spirit,⁵ recast it as a title, beginning with "The Distances Appropriate to Humor. . . ." Were it not so clumsy in that position I would like to have kept it as such; the analysis that follows owes much to Bakhtin's evocative suggestion that humor, irony, and parody all involve a necessary distance and thus a particular kind of placement within textual constructions—a placement somewhat removed. I maintain the trope of distance as a means of both exploring and explaining how the jokes in a Tamil comedic performance rely on the performer's artistic deployment of words offered at a certain distance. In particular, attention to the performer's extended use of the stage aside reveals how his manipulation of discursive distance ensures the differential interpellation of men and women in the audience, and how the performed event actually reenacts the same Tamil conventions of gendered discourse that it initially appears to transgress.

The joke text I analyze here is a typical comedian's monologue from the Tamil popular stage. The monologue is typical in two important ways. One of these is the choice of subject matter, a fantasy in which modernization would visit upheavals on otherwise docile, static gender categories and securely separate spheres. The theme of modernization and its discontents has been a staple of debate throughout 20th-century India and offers an array of comic possibilities. A young male protagonist's fears about the withering of privileged male access to the Tamil public sphere drive this particular monologue. In this narrative conceit the comedian effectively connects fear of the foreign with fear of the female—a dramatic illustration of how economical humor can be.

Second, the monologue is typical of its genre. It is an introductory comedic act from a form of popular theater known as Special Drama (*special nāṭakam*). The manner in which this monologue is staged is itself a defining stylistic feature of the genre⁶ and involves an unusual deployment of that theatrical "footing" known as a stage aside. Goffman uses the term *footing* for the alignment of speaker to hearers, recognizing that changes in this alignment are "a persistent feature of natural talk" (1979:5). Changes in footing allow speakers to make shifts in tone and attitude within the course of a given utterance or string of utterances. The defining conceit of a spoken aside is that certain listeners are excluded. This basic conceit is maintained in Special Drama, while the determination of which listeners shall be excluded from the address reverses the conventions of Western and Western-influenced dramaturgy. The widely exported Elizabethan paradigm of the soliloquy, for example, has an actor uttering an aside as though the persona represented were alone—either entirely alone, or alone with the audience—as a means of communicating something *to the audience* and *apart from the other players*. In Special Drama, quite to the contrary, the comedian directs asides *to certain other players* and *away from the audience*.

Clearly, an aside is a relative phenomenon. When the norm has the actors talking to each other, as in contemporary American dramatic theater, the audience of invisible observers is treated as though it were a "fourth wall," and a marked break occurs when a performer turns and addresses a comment directly out to the audience. In the Special Drama opening act, in a format not unlike that of the American stand-up comedy, the norm (or unmarked footing) is that the performer speaks directly to the audience in such a way that the marked footing becomes the address to another actor on stage.

Here the Tamil comedian's aside consists of a literally sideways communication with a same-sex set of his coplayers (four male musicians) seated stage right, who thereby become his right-hand men in much more than the literal sense. These men become his intimates, his confidants: the stage aside allows the speaker the ruse of confiding his more intimate thoughts and feelings to their familiar ears alone, rather than to an entire village audience full of unknown persons and mixed genders. The Special Drama comedian uses a full complement of possible discursive distances—ranging from the casual close speech of intimate familiarity to the far

reaches of formal generality—to create a multigauged performance that manages to address properly a complex sociological setting and audience mix. In linguistic terms, through his aside the actor embeds an entire second “interaction arrangement” into a situational context where a different social arrangement already exists (Goffman 1979:23).

In its typicality, then, this monologue text speaks to both general theoretical and local historical issues. In a speech context for comedy where appropriateness is keyed primarily to gender relations, this text is an example of the use of embedded footings as a means of maintaining appropriate distances for different kinds of audiences. Rural India may be counted among the “many cultures [wherein] norms of modesty cause women who laugh freely and openly in public to be viewed as loose, sexually promiscuous, and lacking in self-discipline” (Apte 1985:75). Such issues of moral reputation concern everyone in the audiences for Special Drama because the women present are none other than the men’s grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters, nieces, and cousins. The dilemma facing Tamil comedians is how to tell a dirty joke on stage before a mixed audience and still save face—both their own and that of their audience. Successful strategies necessarily assume participants’ familiarity with moralizing discourses of propriety, vulgarity, and the ideology of separate spheres—all serious cornerstones of Tamil cultural identity and not normally laughing matters. Provoking mixed Tamil audiences to laugh together about such things is a complicated business.

As Keith Basso points out in his insightful study of joking imitations of “the Whiteman” in Western Apache society, joking situations that require others present to play along with jokers as the butt of their jokes rely on preexisting relations of goodwill between the two parties involved (1979:67–76). Similarly, male Special Drama comedians rely on the willingness of women in the audience to indulge their exaggerated portrayals of female sexuality as aggressively repressive, trusting the women to recognize that the jokes ultimately “affirm conceptions of what is ‘right’ and proper by dramatizing conceptions of what is ‘wrong’ and inappropriate” (Basso 1979:76). Such basic, shared cultural values and understandings between the two parties involved is preliminary to finding these jokes funny, something both men and women in the audience clearly do. To question explicitly whether and in what ways such cultural conceptions of right and wrong ultimately serve those who affirm them would entail a level of cultural critique beyond the scope of the preliminary analysis I undertake here. Nevertheless, I initiate such a project in this article: by looking at the confirmation of cultural codes in the jokes themselves as well as in their staging, I—like the Special Drama comedian—cast repeated if sideways glances at how, why, and for whom laughing matters.

special drama

Special Drama is a 20th-century theatrical form whose hybrid Anglo-Tamil name derives from the organizational practice, begun at the turn of the century, that still constitutes the core of the genre: each performer is hired specially for every performance. No company, troupe, or director is involved. The performers are independent professionals. There are no rehearsals for performances but, rather, a set repertory of roles (e.g., Hero, Heroine, Buffoon, Dance-Comic, etc.) in a set repertory of plays. This organizational structure enables each performance to be both a unique theatrical event and a stylistically familiar one. Actors from different towns across the state meet on stage, often for the first time, and perform together all night.

In Special Drama, individual performers earn their name as well as their wages according to their desirability to the local audiences who hire them. The organization of Special Drama thus depends to a remarkable extent on the rapport between performers and audience. The performances are generally regarded as entertainment and are staged within the context of temple festivals, usually Hindu but also Christian, in both villages and towns throughout central Tamilnadu during the hot season (March-July).

The genre has a rather hazy history. Sometime around the turn of the century, Special Drama developed in the interstices between the traveling Parsi troupes of the late 19th century and the large Tamil drama companies, known as “Boys Companies,” that dominated the Tamil stage in the first three decades of the 20th century (Caṅmukam 1972; IAS 1990). Actors who left such companies after being trained in their repertoires circulated on the margins of these more established genres and were available for freelance work. Whole evenings performed by these independent artistes were called Special Drama. Special Drama, rather than company dramas, proved able to weather the displacement of the theater by the silver screen, as drama was pushed off the urban stage and out onto the rural and semirural, temporarily erected platforms where it has continued to play since the late 1930s.

As a genre, Special Drama is inherently responsive to local demands. A local sponsor or group of sponsors—anybody from the village who so desires, usually for religious reasons⁷—effectively creates the artistic event, aesthetically as well as economically, by putting together a cast of performers to suit a particular audience. The ability of actors and musicians to perform together without prior rehearsal depends largely on their shared repertory of theatrical (including poetic, literary, musical, gestural, and spatial) as well as everyday social conventions. I focus here primarily on the conventions of gendered address and discursive propriety employed onstage.

Special Drama has received very little scholarly attention in India itself, apart from a few passing historical mentions and the autobiographical reminiscences of actors who eventually became famous in Tamil cinema (Baskaran 1981; Caṅmukam 1972; IAS 1990; Nārāyaṇaṁ 1981; Perumal 1981). This scholarly neglect is a symptom of a larger, dominant middle-class dismissal of Special Drama as a vulgar genre. The denunciation of popular theater by the Indian middle class, especially vehement around the turn of the century, has been well documented by scholars of north Indian popular culture (Banerjee 1990; Hansen 1992) and has contributed to a climate in which the reformulation and reinvention of the “classical” performing arts of the south often took place at the expense of more provocative traditions (Apfel-Marglin 1985; Singer 1972). Special Drama was just developing during this period when the tendency, throughout India, was for the middle classes to devalue popular traditions and reinvent high-culture forms through classicization and textualization (Erdman 1996; Hansen 1992:255). As a result, Special Drama has long inhabited the periphery of acceptable Tamil entertainment.

Within this framework of contempt the comedy scenes in Special Drama have been regarded as its most vulgar feature—primarily, I propose, because Special Drama comic scenes dare to present sexual matters before a mixed audience. These comedic scenes are most frequently described in the terms used for condemning unsanctioned sexuality wherever it occurs: *acinkam* (dirty) and *ābācam* (vulgar or lewd). Indeed, when I was conducting fieldwork in Tamilnadu it quickly became clear to me that any attempt to talk about the goings-on in Special Drama comedy scenes would be met, immediately and necessarily, in these moralizing terms. It seemed that all those with whom I spoke, whatever their class, caste, age, or region, had first to establish firmly that they were well aware that these scenes were vulgar and dirty and therefore did not warrant serious thought or attention and certainly did not deserve scholarly study. The dismissal was de rigueur, across the board, and altogether too pat. That is, it was altogether ripe for a Foucauldian questioning, first, of how such a disavowal of the public staging of matters sexual could be so well-learned, and, second, how this disavowal related to larger structures of meaning and power in contemporary constructions of Tamil identity (Foucault 1978). Overall, I view Special Dramas as entertainment sites where mass education and socialization occur—indeed where people of all ages and genders learn and laugh together about a maze of double meanings that, as I argue below, shape the construction of sex and sexuality as vulgar and unutterable through repeated, indirect utterances.

Since its earliest days Special Drama has been seen by middle-class critics, if at all, as “a great danger to the morale of the public” (Ishwar 1911). Such danger is of course intricately bound

up with its success as a theatrical entertainment and indeed with the very nature of mimesis.⁸ And when the inherent dangers supposedly attendant on theatrical identification arise in a form of theater popular among the lower, “rurban” (Ramanujan 1970) classes in Tamilnadu, perhaps they seem particularly worrisome. The mutuality of representation and reflection between audience and actors, which I argue is essential to Special Drama as a theater well-attuned to its audience, is what the middle-class critic finds disturbing:

One thing that is much to be regretted is the depravity of the stage, which is due to the undue vulgarity, that has crept in on account of the wrong understanding and desire on the part of the actors to please the groundling by descending very low, overacting their parts and talking vulgarisms at all times. It is a fact which ought not to be ignored that the public taste has in consequence deteriorated and what the public do is, not only that they do not dislike bad plays but like them most—nay adore them. It is a pity that bad plays draw crowded houses. [Ishwar 1911:19]

Here, public moral danger is clearly calibrated in a register of ranked emotions: the lowly actor and the lowly audience mutually desire and adore, while the middle-class critic condescends only to pity. Today, too, the vulgarity of Special Drama evinces a battery of mutually constructive blame: the audience claims that the actors do not know better, while the actors claim that they should indeed be chastised for not teaching the audience to want anything else. For ultimately, in order to earn a living, actors must please their audience; actors thus become both a magnet to which stigma adheres and the instruments of “undue vulgarity” in the theater.

Some 85 years later, with the spread of satellite television and the explosion of the Tamil cinema industry,⁹ discourse about the evils of undue vulgarity in popular entertainment is ubiquitous in the Tamil public sphere. No audience in Tamilnadu today, let alone a stage actor, remains untouched by the disdain in which “undue vulgarity” is held. Nevertheless, the comedy scenes of Special Drama are still its biggest crowd pleasers; the mandate of Special Drama artistes is still to please the audience and sexual humor remains incandescent. While a thousand people crowd around the stage during comedic acts, half the crowd disperses as soon as the first dramatic personage appears. Many of those remaining in the audience throughout the night sleep through the dramatic scenes and wake up only when the Buffoon comes back out and splashes water on the crowd. And while he is not accorded the highest prestige among performers, the Buffoon is often the highest paid performer on a Special Drama stage.

In short, comedy is what makes popular theater popular.¹⁰ Comedy is also the source of the vulgarity from which many, including the performers themselves, attempt to distance themselves. Given such a chorus of condemnation, how do participants—both audience and actors—rationalize their involvement in such comedic events? How do they rescue their reputations?

These are highly productive paradoxes in that they shape, in a quite literal sense, the resilient theatrics of Special Drama. Performers, like their audiences, are well-versed in the mutually defining discourses of vulgarity and propriety; I suggest that decades of sidestepping charges of “undue vulgarity” have led actors to perfect a unique performance strategy.¹¹ Looking closely at one comedian’s performance of Special Drama’s stigmatizing comedic “vulgarity,” I do not find vulgarity itself but rather a reflection of its practiced, anxious use-in-avoidance. The humorous treatment of this subject hits middle-class ideals harder and resonates much more deeply with contemporary realities of Tamil identity than its critics realize. The dismissal of vulgarity is a dominant moralizing discourse that is itself consistently folded back into these performances with comic flair. In other words, this theater triumphs through relentless incorporation,¹² as the discourses of middle-class morality condemning these local entertainments now become themselves the topic of Special Drama stagings.

context of this analysis

The humor in this monologue turns on norms of gender propriety in public behavior and speech in contemporary Tamilnadu. Briefly, the Tamil “sex/gender system,” to use the term Gayle Rubin introduced to refer to “the social organization of sexuality and the reproduction of the conventions of sex and gender” in a given society (1975:168), is structured primarily through a division of sex-segregated social spaces. These in turn naturalize a binary categorization of gender: female and male inhabit the home and the world, respectively, and from the division of labor therein arise notions of the complementarity of domestic and public spheres. Most common and scholarly articulations of “Tamil culture” (*paṇpātu; kalāccāram*) valorize a strict social division of the sexes; questions of the deleterious effects of modernization on this sex/gender system are a staple of conversation and debate in contemporary Tamilnadu generally and on the Tamil popular stage in particular. Indeed, on stage an actor’s ability to expound on the importance of codified gender roles and the duties they entail in maintaining “Tamil culture” is a necessary factor in establishing what Briggs (1988) calls “competence” in performance.

A monologue such as the following is an oral text; there are no written scripts for such performances. The comedian who creates it will in no sense retain it as his exclusive property: jokes¹³ and stories circulate freely among Special Drama performers, all of whom tailor and alter them to suit their personal styles. The repertory role of the male comedian is known (in Tamil) as the “Buffoon.” The Buffoon’s monologue introduces an entire night of drama, starting at 10:00 P.M. and ending at dawn. The standard audience for Special Drama is rural and comprises nearly the whole of a village’s population, generally anywhere between 500 and 2,000 people. Men, women, and children sit or lie on mats spread on dirt grounds—usually a village commons, temple grounds, or roadside.

The audience segregates itself according to sex and age. Young children and elderly men sit right up front, women and girls behind them to one side, and men on the opposite side from the women. In addition, groups of younger men in their late teens through early thirties stand surrounding the audience on all sides and at the back. The ring of these young male spectators forms the outer edges of the audience. In general, perhaps five times as many men as women attend Special Drama performances. Part of what my analysis reveals is the overdetermination of this lower attendance by women. I argue that discursive strategies on the stage reinscribe existing social conditions for women on the ground and ensure that coming out for a night of popular entertainment remains a much more complicated and problematic psychosocial endeavor for Tamil women than it is for Tamil men.

The following transcript seems to cry out for an ethnopsychological reading, particularly as a means of highlighting the multiple resonances that accrue, for example, to such staple substances as mother’s milk. Some element of my own attraction to such a reading does enter the analysis. My primary focus in this article, however, is on the rhetorical devices employed in the performance and what their use indexes about the context in which they are employed.

I am interested in the specific ways these devices play on broader Tamil cultural conventions for their overall effect. I concentrate particularly on the speaker’s use of framing mechanisms such as the stage aside, the use of which involves pointed shifts in tense and address, alternations between impersonal and personal verbal constructions, and rhetorical questions. My aim is to expose how such techniques enable the comedian to evade normative gender constraints on public discourse while humorously exploiting these very same constraints through the careful reframing of sexual puns and double entendres. Overall, this analysis demonstrates how key sociocultural paradigms and the moral judgments that buttress them continue to work behind even the fancy-free veneer of highly improvisatory comedic genres.

Such a perspective is again akin to that offered by Basso regarding Apache joking imitations. Basso observed that “the world of joking provides moral cover for immoral social acts,” allowing

the joker “to take moral liberties he cannot take outside it” (1979:42). This is by rights a Freudian perspective—although Basso does not discuss it as such—as it acknowledges an underlying desire to escape moral strictures. Freud himself argued that through jokes we express “the voice within us that rebels against the demands of morality” (1960[1905]:131).

Basso discusses this “world of joking” as a joking frame (adopting Goffman’s terms, as shall I) and focuses on how joking activity is “patterned” on “unjoking activity” (Basso 1979:41–42). That is, Basso sees jokes as fashioned from “serious” cloth, the “primary text” on which the “secondary text” of jokes is modeled. Basso’s analysis firmly establishes the continuity between play and nonplay, as well as providing a model for the study of how “serious things are always getting said in what appear to be unserious ways” (Basso 1979:63).

Freud writes of “the joking envelope” and uses the metaphor of “wrapping” for conveying this same point. He suggests that the formal techniques of jokes are their casing, “the protection of sequences of words and thoughts from criticism” (Freud 1960[1905]:160) and the means by which jokes transform hostile or obscene thoughts into more acceptable forms of pleasure:

The thought seeks to wrap itself in a joke . . . because this wrapping bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them. We are inclined to give the *thought* the benefit of what has pleased us in the *form* of the joke; and we are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure. [Freud 1960(1905):162]

For Freud the purpose and function of jokes is to “liberate pleasure” by “lifting inhibitions” (1960[1905]:169). In a Victorian world where the layering of skirts simultaneously poses the possibility of lifting them, the metaphor of wrapping thoughts in a particular formal garb to make them “jokes” seems quite natural. Though in this article I use primarily the metaphor of frames that is our current means for discussing presentational processes, I nevertheless find it useful to recall such Freudian metaphors precisely for the possibilities they invite to ponder notions such as “lifting” and “wrapping,” particularly as these become salient in the jokes I treat below.

terms of the analysis

I analyze the performance event as two-tiered, following the work of Bauman (1986), Goffman (1979), and Silverstein (1996), among others. I call these two tiers “narrated event” and “narrating event.” The narrated event is the event reported in the comedian’s story, in which use of the first-person singular indexes the fictional protagonist of the story. The narrated event is frequently conveyed in the past tense.

The narrating event on the other hand unfolds in the present. In the narrating event, the Buffoon is not a fictional character but the narrator himself (“I”). The narrated event (the story) is necessarily embedded in the narrating event (its telling). I analyze the interplay of these two tiers—what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1975) has called “text-context fit”—as comprising an integrated framework wherein narrated event and narrating event are linked both by given cultural predispositions and by emergent social outcomes (Bauman: 1986:6). I focus on how the narrated event and the narrating event reinforce each other,¹⁴ and on how through their interplay the Buffoon ensures that what he says will be “understood from the distances appropriate to humor, irony, parody, etc.” (Bakhtin 1981[1935]:299).

the monologue

The actor whom I saw perform this monologue was a young Buffoon named Selvam.¹⁵ The venue was the goddess temple in a village on the outskirts of the city of Madurai, and the date was April 1, 1992. The temple grounds abutted a main roadside, where buses and lorries passed

intermittently throughout the night. Every square inch of ground was otherwise occupied by audience members.

After entering the stage and introducing all the other players, the comedian introduced himself—"I, Buffoon-Comic S. K. Selvam"—and offered a formal gestural greeting to both audience and musicians (hands meeting at his chest). There followed two seconds of semi-audible joking banter with the musicians; then the Buffoon laughed, took a beat to get serious, looked out at the audience, and began speaking.

1. Buffoon:	Viṭiyum varai, naṭakam muṭiyum varai, iṭē pōl amaiti kattu	Until the dawn, until the drama ends, please remain calm and peaceful as you are now.
2.	eṅkaḷukku nallātaravu tarumpaṭi kēṭṭukonṭu, kalaippaniyai toṭaṅkukinṛom.	I request your support of our artistic service, hereby begun.
3.	Niṅkaḷ ellām vaḷkkaiyil poṭṭipōṭṭu [points at audience] munnēra vēṇṭum.	In your lives you should [points at audience] struggle to improve yourselves.
4. All-round: ¹⁶	Uñ.	Unh.
5. Buffoon:	Porāmai paṭakkūṭatu. Eṅ colkirēn enrāl, ippaṭittān vaḷkkaiyil nān porāmaippaṭṭu	You should not be jealous. Why do I say this? Because in my life I was jealous
6.	niraiya ciramappattu pōnēn!	and how I suffered because of it!
7. All-round:	Eppaṭi?	How's that?
8. Buffoon:	Eṅkaḷ viṭṭu pakkattu viṭṭukāraṅ velinaṭṭukkup pōyiruntān.	My next-door neighbor had been to a foreign country.
9. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
10. Buffoon:	Velinaṭṭukkup pōnavaṅ aṅku pōy niraiya cottu, paṅam ellām campārittu viṭṭu vantu,	He went to the foreign country, made lots of money, got lots of property,
11.	iṅkē maturaiyil vantu vacatīyaka vāṅtu koṅṭiruntān.	and came back here to Madurai where he was living comfortably.
12. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
13. Buffoon:	Iṭaip pārttavuṭaṅ enakku porāmaiya akiviṭṭatu.	As soon as I saw him I felt jealous.
14. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
15. Buffoon:	Porāmaiyaṅatum nān nērāy eṅkaḷ appaviṭam pōyviṭṭēn.	Jealous, I went straight to my father.
16. All-round:	Etukku?	What for?
17. Buffoon:	Eṅkaḷ appaviṭam pōy, "Appā! Appā! Nān velinaṭṭirku pōkirēn.	I went to my dad, "Dad! Dad! I'm going to a foreign country.
18.	Eṅakku koṅjam paṅam koṭuṅkaḷ, āppā!" appaṭi enru kēṭṭēn. "Aṭa poṭa! Iṭṭavāy payalē"//	Give me a little money, please, Dad!" I asked. "Get lost, you grinning fool!"//
19. All-round:	Uñ!	Unh!

20. Buffoon:	“Veḷinaṭṭir̥kup pōvatar̥ku paṇam vēṇṭam. Mutalil pāspōṭṭ̥ tāṇ vēṇṭum.	“It’s not money you want if you’re going to a foreign country. First, you need a passport.
21.	Pāspōṭṭ̥ eṭuppar̥kar̥ku phōṭṭō vēṇṭum tāṇā? Pōy phōṭṭō eṭuttuviṭṭu vāṭa!” appaṭi enru viṭṭār.	To get a passport you need a photo, right? So first go get your photo taken!” he said.
22.	“Cari” appaṭi enruviṭṭu nānum nēray phōṭṭō studio-vukku	“Fine,” I said, and went straight to the photo studio
23.	pattu rūpāy vāṅkikkōṇṭu// studio-vukkup pōyviṭṭēṇ.	with my ten rupees, // I went to the studio.
24. All-round, Harmonist, Mridangist:	//[inaudible comments] [laughter]	//[inaudible comments] [laughter]
25. Buffoon:	Uṅ, āmma. Phōṭṭō-studio-vukkup pōyākiviṭṭatu. Pōṇavuṭaṇ phōṭṭō-studio-vil uṭaṇēyākava eṭuttut taruvarkaḷ?	Unh, yes. I reached the photo studio. Now, does the photo studio give you your photos instantly?
26.	“Oru maṇi nēram cenru vā!” enru colli viṭṭār.	They tell you to come back in an hour!
27.	Cari, oru maṇi nēram irukkīratē, appaṭiyē cenru oru pāl cappiṭṭu viṭṭu varuvōm appaṭi enru nēray pālkaṭaikkup pōyākiviṭṭatu.	Fine, I figured I have an hour, I can go have a glass of milk. I went straight to the milk stand.
28.	Pāl kaṭaikkuppōy pāl cappiṭṭa “Oru special pāl pōṭu” enru connāl, kotikka kotikka—//	I went to the milk stand and I ordered a special milk. When I got it, it was boiling hot—//
29. All-round:	Uṅ.	Unh.
30. Buffoon:	—kaiyil cūṭu tāṅka muṭiyavillai! “Cari, koṅja nēram āraṭṭum” appaṭi enru	—so hot I couldn’t touch it! Fine, I figured I’d let it cool some
31.	pakkattil irunta table-il vaittu viṭṭu paper-ai pārttu koṅṭiruntēṇ.	and placed it on a nearby table and began reading the paper.
32.	Antappakkamāy vēkamāy oru peṅ—tan piḷḷaikkup pāl illai pōlirukkīratu	A woman came in all in a rush—it seems her child had no milk!
33.	Vēkamāy vanta peṅ paṭakkenru “Iraṇṭu pāl pōṭu ayyā” appaṭi enru mārāppai avacaramāy tūkkip pōṭṭatu	This woman quickly ordered two milks from the man, hurriedly adjusting the chest piece of her sari
34.	[throwing it over her shoulder like this] illaiyā? Nāṇ vaittirunta pālai inta mārāppu mūṭiviṭṭatu.	[throwing it over her shoulder like this] right? And the chest piece of her sari falls over the glass of milk I set down.
35.	Nāṇ pāl kuṭikka vēṇṭum. Nāṇ pāl kuṭikka vēṇṭum enrāl, anta peṅ enna ceyya vēṇṭum?	Now, I want to drink milk. If I want to drink milk, what does that woman have to do?
36. All-round:	Enna ceyya vēṇṭum?	What does she have to do?
37. Buffoon:	Enna ceyya vēṇṭum?	What does she have to do?
38. All-round:	Teriyavillai!	I don’t know!
39. Buffoon:	Unakku teriyavillaiyā?	You don’t know?

40. Buffoon:	Nān pāl kuṭikka vēṇṭumēnral antappen māṛappai tūka vēṇṭum, // ayya!	If I want to drink milk, that woman has to lift the chest piece of her sari, // man!
41. Musicians & Audience:	<i>[laughter]</i>	<i>[laughter]</i>
42. Buffoon:	Oru penṇiṭam pōy ippaṭic collalāmā?	Can one go up to a woman and say that?
43.	“Cari, namukku pāl vēṇṭam,” appaṭi enru viṭṭu, nēre//	Fine, I figured, I don’t want/need milk. I’ll directly//
44. Mridangist:	[plays a single hit: <i>ding!</i> on his drum//]	[plays a single hit: <i>ding!</i> on his drum//]
45. Buffoon:	[slow, exaggerated side-to-side gesture of acquiescence with the head]	[slow, exaggerated side-to-side gesture of acquiescence with the head]
46.	. . . photoṭṭo kaṭaikku pōy photoṭṭo vāṅki viṭṭu nēre viṭṭirṭup pōvōm” appaṭi enru viṭṭu,	. . . go to the photo studio, pick up my photo, and head straight home, I figured.
47. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
48. Buffoon:	Bus-stop-kku varukirēn. Eṅka! viṭu Fatima College pōkīra valiyil irukkīratu.	I reach the bus stop. Our house is on the route to Fatima College.
49. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
50. Buffoon:	Anta valiyiltān eṅka! viṭu irukkīratu 7-am number-il pōka vēṇṭum illaiyenral 73-il pōkavēṇṭum.	Our house is on that route so I want/need either the number 7 or the number 73 bus.
51. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
52. Buffoon:	“Cari” appaṭi enru viṭṭu “ērip pōyvituvōm” appaṭi enru viṭṭu bus-stop-kku varukirēn.	So I’m at the bus stop, and I’m thinking, fine, I’ll get on a bus.
53.	Bus-stop pūrāvum oru penṇiṭai kūṭṭam! Kalaiyil.	The crowd at the bus stop is all women! It’s morning.
54.	Office pōkīravarka! office-kkup pōkīrarka!. Vēlai vēṭṭikkup pōkīravarka! vēlai vēṭṭikkup pōkīrarka!.	Those who go to offices are going to their offices. Those who go to other jobs are going to their other jobs.
55.	Avaravarka! avaravar vēlaiyaip pārppataṅkaka bus-il ēri pōy koṇṭirukkīrarka!.	Each and every one is getting on the bus to go to her respective place of work.
56.	Kūṭṭam kūṭṭam penka! kūṭṭam kaṭṭi ēri kātai moykkīratu.	Crowd, crowd, what a crowd of women, like a swarming pack buzzing in my ears.
57.	Nānum “enna ceyvatu? Bus-ai, ettaṅai bus-aitān viṭṭuviṭṭu nirpatu?” appaṭi enru viṭṭu,	What could I do? I thought, how many buses can I simply let go by while I stand here?
58.	paṭakkunru oru bus vantatu. Atil orē penka! kūṭṭamāy iruntālum,	Suddenly a bus came. Even though there’s this huge crowd of women,
59.	“Paravāyillai. Anucarittu oru oramāy ninrukoṭvōm” appaṭi enru viṭṭu,	I figured it’ll be all right; I can adjust. I’ll just stand off to one side.
60.	oru kaiyil kampiyaip piṭittukoṇṭu, oru kaiyil photoṭṭovai piṭittukoṇṭu,	So I grab the rail in one hand and my photo in the other,

61.	oru kalai paṭikkaṭṭil mitittukkoṇṭu, toṅkikkkoṇṭē pōykoṇṭu irukkireṅ.	I have one foot on the step of the bus, and I'm hanging on.
62. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
63. Buffoon:	Oru maṇitan evvaḷavu tūram toṅkikkkoṇṭē pōkamuṭiyum?	But how far can a man go hanging on?
64. All-round:	Eti?	Onto what?
65. Buffoon:	Kampiyaittaṅ! Kampiyaip piṭittuttāṅ—vēretai piṭittu toṅka muṭiyum?	The rail of course! Grabbing the rail—what else can I grab and hang onto?
66.	“Cari” enru toṅkikoṇṭu pōykoṇṭē irukkireṅ. Kai valittuvittatu.	Fine, I figure, and I go on hanging. But my hand hurts.
67.	Pakkattil oru 60 vayatu kiḷavi ninrukoṇṭu iruntatu.	Next to me stands a 60-year-old woman.
68. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
69. Buffoon:	“Ammā! Tāyē! Nānum oru kaiyil niraia nēramāy toṅkikoṇṭu irukkireṅ!”	“Mother, oh mother! Excuse me, I'm hanging on here for such a long time by one hand!”
70.	Kai valikkutu. Koṅjam kālai tūkkikkoḷ. Nān ērikkoḷkireṅ”//appaṭi enru tāṇayya connēṅ!	My hand hurts. Please lift your leg, and let me climb on!”// that's what I said to her, man!
71. Musicians & Audience:	[laughter]	[laughter]
72. All-round:	Enna connāy?	What did you say?
73. Buffoon:	Ennavā? “Koṅjam kalait tūkkikoḷ. Nān vaṅikkuloḷ ērik koḷkireṅ”	You ask what? “Please lift your leg, and I'll climb up onto the vehicle”
74.	enre tān connēṅ. Uṭaṅē antap peṅ vērumāṭiri ninaittuk koṇṭatu.	that's what I said. But immediately that woman took it differently.
75.	“Eṅṭā! Un vayatu enna? En vayatu enna? Ennaip pārttu nī vantu . . . pōṭā!” appaṭi enru	She screamed, “What's that you say? How old are you? How old am I? How dare you look at me that way . . . ! Get lost, you!”
76.	oru aṭi aṭittu uḷḷē taḷḷi viṭṭatu.	and gave me a punch that shoved me right inside.
77. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
78. Buffoon:	Uḷḷē taḷḷi viṭṭavuṭaṅ muṭṭi nuḷaintu uḷḷē pōy viṭṭēṅ.	Shoved inside the bulging bus, I saw it was totally packed.
79. All-round:	Uñ.	Unh.
80. Buffoon:	Munnum peṅkaḷ. Pinnum peṅkaḷ. Seats pūravum peṅkaḷ.	There were women in front, women behind, and women in all the seats.
81.	Orē peṅkaḷ kūṭṭam. Nānum oru kaiyil phōṭṭōvai vaittuk koṇṭu—shirt-aiyil pai illai—	A crowd of nothing but women. I'm holding the photo in one hand—my shirt has no breast-pocket—
82.	oru kaiyil phōṭṭōvai vaittukkoṇṭu, oru kaiyil kampiyai piṭittu koṇṭu ninru koṇṭē pōykoṇṭu irukkireṅ.	I'm holding the photo in one hand, and holding onto the handrail with the other.

83.	Vaṅṅi pōy koṅṅu irukkīratu. Tiṅṅirru sudden-brake	The bus is going along fine. Suddenly, “sudden-brake”
84.	[hip thrust].	[hip thrust].
85. All-round:	Un.	Unh.
86. Buffoon:	Aṅṅukkuṅṅi cross, road-il; Sudden-brake [hip thrust] pōṅṅān illaiyā?	Some little goats were crossing the road; the driver slams [hip thrust] on the brakes, right?
87. All-round:	Un.	Unh.
88. Buffoon:	Vaṅṅi kulunkiyatu illaiyā? Munṅal peṅṅiṅṅai nīrṅīratu.	The vehicle rocks, right? A woman stands in front of me.
89. All-round:	Un.	Unh.
90. Buffoon:	16 vayatu piṅṅai. Iṅṅittu viṅṅakkōṅṅātu illaiyā?	A 16-year-old girl. One mustn’t bump HER, right?
91.	“Iṅṅipataṅṅkenṅē varukinṅarkaṅṅ!” appaṅṅi enṅru viṅṅuvārkaṅṅe!	All the women would say that I came onto the bus just to bump them!
92. All-round:	Un.	Unh.
93. Buffoon:	Appaṅṅi enṅpataṅṅkāka nīraiya balance paṅṅi intak kaiyaip	So I tried as hard as I could to keep my balance by reaching out with this hand
94.	[reaches] piṅṅittēn, allava? Intak kaiyil irunta phōṅṅō kiṅṅē viṅṅuntu viṅṅṅātu.	[reaches], right? and the photo that was in this hand slipped out of my grasp and fell.
95. All-round:	Un.	Unh.
96. Buffoon:	Kiṅṅē viṅṅunta phōṅṅō vēru eṅṅēyāvatu viṅṅuntirukkak kōṅṅatā?	Now couldn’t that photo fall anywhere else?
97. All-round:	Un.	Unh.
98. Buffoon:	Antap peṅṅ kalukkuk kiṅṅē viṅṅunta viṅṅṅātu!	It fell right beneath that girl’s legs!
99. All-round:	Appuṅṅam?	And then?
100. Buffoon:	Nān phōṅṅō eṅṅukka vēṅṅum//	If I want to get the photo//
101. All-round:	Cari//	Yes//
102. Buffoon:	Anta peṅṅiṅṅ kālai tūkkac colli!	I’d have to ask that girl to lift her leg!//
103. Audience:	[laughter]//	[laughter]//
104. All-round:	Un!	Unh!
105. Buffoon:	Appuṅṅam enṅna ceyvatu? Oru peṅṅiṅṅaiyiṅṅam pōy ippaṅṅic collalāmā,	So what could I do? Can one go up to a girl and say,
106.	“Un kālait tūkkikkol. Nān phōṅṅō eṅṅukka vēṅṅum!” enṅru?	“Lift your leg, I have to take a photo!”?
107. Musicians & Audience:	[laughter]	[laughter]
108. Buffoon:	“Inta phōṅṅō-vum vēṅṅām, vēṅṅināṅṅum vēṅṅām” appaṅṅi enṅru.	So I figured, I don’t want the photo. I don’t want the foreign country.

109.	Viṭṭu viṭṭu, viṭṭu viṭṭu. Nēram kaṇātu;	Just let it go, let it go, let it go. I figure, the time's not right;
110.	Etāvatu oru viyāpāram paṇṇi pīlaippōm....	I'll find some other way to earn my living....

analysis

In this monologue the Buffoon offers and simultaneously disclaims three utterances that, without such disclaimers, would be considered highly vulgar in a mixed gender context. Each disclaimed utterance serves as a punchline for three sequentially related jokes embedded in the story and told man-to-man. The Buffoon exploits the humorous potential of normative gender constraints on speech by making a show, literally, of abiding by them.

I now consider each joke in turn. The opening story lines establish a young male protagonist who feels jealous of a neighbor. The neighbor has returned from a foreign country with plentiful money and property. The young man determines to get some of the good life for himself. He asks his father for money to go abroad. But his father—older, wiser, and so much more practical—tells his son that first he needs a passport, for which he will need an ID photograph. This starts off the causal chain of story sequences and establishes the genre of the tale itself: a young man embarking on an identity quest, a coming-of-age tale—he is, after all, pursuing his own identity, albeit in snapshot form—and this quest is at least ostensibly sanctioned by the father. Initiated out of jealousy and desire for foreign money and the comforts it can buy, it is *desire* itself that animates the entire adventure to follow. The father's practicality and his suggestion of sensible steps actually translate into teaching his son to take his first steps on a path toward deferring desire. Each step takes our protagonist definitively deeper into quotidian realities, realities that teach him ever more about deferred desires—and dirty jokes.

The story is actually enacted in the form of a conversation between the Buffoon and the All-round drummer. This conversational effect is created and maintained by the musicians' verbal and visual responses throughout the course of the story. The All-round drummer consistently utters "Uñ" (Unh), a ubiquitous conversational response in Tamilnadu that signals listening. In general, such back-channel maintenance responses are less optional in Tamilnadu than in many other places. Their visual equivalent is the famous south Indian side-to-side shake of the head in face-to-face interactions, and, although I did not note it in the transcription, the All-round drummer did a good deal of this too. Thus throughout the Buffoon's narration the All-round drummer successfully maintains the listener half of this conversational channel, repeatedly voicing "uñ" or otherwise interjecting appropriate visual and verbal encouragements.

Once we recognize that this story is being told in the form of a conversation, we also see that the All-round drummer has taken on the role of recipient of the story. In a conversational story, one person will be the intending teller and another person or persons the intended recipient(s) of the telling (see Sacks 1974). The telling will of course be oriented toward its recipient on the level of content as well as on that of form. Having a male musician as the intended recipient of this story frees the story from the constraints imposed by a mixed audience. As a story told among men, it partakes of common street-corner society conventions that are a familiar component of the popular imagination about the public sphere in Tamilnadu, a domain where men frequent—and frequently loiter at—roadside tea stalls, *iṭṭi* shops,¹⁷ and rickshaw stands. Such male public spaces are a regular feature of both everyday practice throughout Tamilnadu and contemporary media representations of Tamil life, particularly cinematographic ones. Common knowledge and common cultural literacy code these all-male settings for all-male conversations as sites where stories can and do have overtly sexual content. The Buffoon's

conversational turn to the All-round drummer makes a sexual turn of conversation seem both expected and natural.

Looking at the conversation-like structure of the monologue, it is clear that the All-round drummer in fact supplants his listeners in the audience role by taking up fairly aggressively the role of intended recipient. The audience for whom the staging of the drama is ostensibly intended—that is, the villagers and the god for whom they are sponsoring this entertainment—are temporarily circumvented; a displacement occurs. The village audience remains seated, watching, and listening, but the Buffoon now speaks with and to the musicians. An interesting gap is opened—like a trapdoor, stage right.

That door creates the means for moving with relative ease through the otherwise insurmountable barrier that separates moral from immoral discourses and mixed-gender from single-sex audiences. It provides a means by which the only statements the Buffoon seems to utter directly to the village audience are moralizing comments. These begin in lines 3-6, when, after a performative address to the audience in line 2 (it is actually a performative within a performative: “I request your support of our artistic service, hereby begun”), the tone of a morality tale is struck: “In your lives you should struggle to improve yourselves. You should not be jealous,” and so forth. At line 7 (at the musician’s encouraging response, “eppaṭi?,” “How’s that?”), the Buffoon turns and addresses the remainder of the tale to the musician.

What occurs here is an excellent example of a change of footing. It entails a significant shift in the alignment of speaker to hearers. Shifts in footing frequently involve code switching and changes in tone and pitch, as well as literal changes in stance that include postural repositionings of the speaker’s “projected self” (Goffman 1979:4). The Buffoon employs two very distinct footings here. In one he uses a moralizing tone and unequivocally pitches his address to the audience, using a frontal postural stance. This is the footing the Buffoon generally uses to manage his own desires concerning the progress of the narrating event in the eyes of the audience. He establishes this moralizing stance, which then remains in place throughout his performance, creating a facade¹⁸ behind which he slips in order to talk to the musicians. His sideways address to the musicians is the Buffoon’s second footing, the extended stage aside. The Buffoon uses this footing for all the parts of the narrative that might be considered vulgar in a mixed-audience context.

These two footings, stances for moral and immoral comments respectively, should not be confused with the two tiers of narrated and narrating event. The speech uttered in either footing can cross into both narrated and narrating events. An example is the Buffoon’s use of the rhetorical question, “Can one go up to a woman and say that?” (line 42). The question is part of the narrated event—it advances the plot of the story—but it uses the moral footing, established for audience address, that helps the Buffoon monitor the narrating event. Shifting to a frontal footing and looking out at the audience for this question allows the Buffoon to link the two events, narrated and narrating, through a moralizing bridge. This has two face-saving corollaries: the aside footing enables the dirty jokes to remain separate from the speaker’s frontal, presentational self. And it enables the “real” audience to *overhear* rather than *hear* these jokes. By alternating the use of these two footings, the Buffoon ensures that he has neither lost his audience nor lost face before them. The moralizing facade he erects thus works for their mutual benefit. After a joke, the Buffoon momentarily turns to the audience and secures this moral front with his postpunchline line, nailing his strategy in place. “Can one say that to a woman?” is a rhetorical question to which the only acceptable answer is negative—but in fact he has just done so. The Buffoon uttered the socially unutterable, and the only social repercussion was laughter.

This strategy is put into practice with the first joke (lines 28–40). The protagonist goes to a milk stand down the street to kill some time while he waits for his photograph. He orders a glass of “special milk” (meaning undiluted milk or whole—“original”—milk). When it arrives, it is so

hot he has to put it down to let it cool. Enter Woman, a mother who has come to secure milk for her child (i.e., good woman). She orders two milks and adjusts her sari, flinging the end up over her shoulder. It falls so that it covers the protagonist's glass of milk. The Buffoon turns to the musicians and demonstrates the gesture of the woman in the story, grabbing an imaginary sari end and throwing it back over his shoulder. He then exclaims (line 35): "If I want to drink milk, what does that woman have to do?" He specifically addresses the All-round drummer: "What does she have to do?" He then provides the answer himself (line 40): "If I want to drink milk, that woman has to lift the chest piece of her sari, man!"—and the audience bursts out laughing.

This sentence is considered vulgar in its double entendre, in its suggestion that lifting¹⁹ her sari would expose the woman's breasts, from which he would drink, and in its implication that breast milk is what the hot "special milk" of the milk stall stands for. This is something a decent Tamil man would not say to a decent Tamil woman. Uttering such a phrase at all in public is clearly transgressive. To make absolutely clear that the utterance was meant for the ears of his musician friends, the Buffoon inserted the vocative "man!" at the end of the sentence to clarify the direction of the address. Thus, through the pretense of an aside, the Buffoon is able to *mention* "privately" the publicly unutterable phrase while escaping the charge of actually *using* it in public. His aside is a gesture of politeness that attempts to mask the fact of the utterance. The blatant and predictable failure of this masking attempt is its success as a joke.

The distinction between use and mention is analytically important here and warrants closer attention. The distinction turns primarily, once again, on the speaker's distance from his speech: *mention* is meta-usage, in which "one expresses an attitude to the content of an utterance" (Sperber and Wilson 1981:303) rather than simply expressing the attitude conveyed in the content of the utterance itself. Irony is attitude about attitude, a comment on the utterance *qua* utterance. "USE of an expression involves reference to what the expression refers to; MENTION of an expression involves reference to the expression itself" (Sperber and Wilson 1981:303, emphasis in the original). Affect as well as attitude can be captured in the ironic, quotative meta-usage of "mention." Here the Buffoon's gesture caricatures politeness even as it seemingly enacts it. He does not address the woman with the implied phrase, "Lift your sari so I can drink milk." Instead, he mentions the fact that he has thought about saying it, that he has reflected on the utterance itself, and that he has decided that it is too vulgar to use. The Buffoon thereby creates a very special and idiosyncratic context (the story) for the potentially vulgar phrase. The context deprives it of its vulgarity; then, just as listeners begin to accept it, he reminds them that the phrase has a vulgar meaning in the standard, generalized context after all. His hesitation, his turn away, his own fear of the utterance, and the care he takes to distance himself from it all remind the audience of the phrase's normative meaning. The audience thus laughs at the ease with which they almost accepted a public use of this phrase—a solecism from which they were saved, in so many words, by the use-mention distinction.

Line 42 marks the change in footing that definitively determines that what the Buffoon puts into play is, in Sperber and Wilson's terms, "an attitude towards the content of an utterance" (1981:303) rather than merely its content. The question "Can one go up to a woman and say X?" is a rhetorical device that reinscribes the code of propriety and public address that the joke has just transgressed. Here the Buffoon turns directly into his moralizing footing—the facade he erects for the audience—as he says it: he asks a general, open-ended question, posed to no one in particular and thus ostensibly to everyone present. The question is in marked contrast to the previous line that ended with the directive address "ayya" ("man"). He appropriately uses an impersonal, tenseless, verbal construction, "collālamā?" ("may it be said?"). Again, the question turns on social mores of decency, conditioned by and conditional to gendered linguistic usage. It avoids impropriety through a masterful splitting of mention and use, honoring

social convention through a strategic, appropriately distanced uttering of the socially unutterable.

The mridangist (drummer, line 44) registers the joke's punch with a congratulatory-sounding ring on his drum. The Buffoon has begun to move on in his narration (line 43): "Fine, I figured, I don't want/need the milk." On hearing the drum sound, he languishes a moment, drawing out the submissive, acquiescent gesture of agreement—a slow, exaggerated movement of the head from side to side—that marks his retreat from his own desire. He is momentarily cowed. His fear of inadvertently improperly addressing Woman triumphs over his desire for milk: "Fine, I don't want the milk."

Here he uses an impersonal negative verbal construction the semantic range of which includes both the English "need" and "want." One word, "veṇṭam"—don't want, don't need—can thus refer to renunciation of any stripe.²⁰ (Likewise, its positive inverse, "veṇṭum," refers to desire of any type, linked by a "need" and "want" sense of worldliness.) The notion of renunciation suggests the bliss of desirelessness and the praiseworthiness of ascetic transcendence of all things material. In addition to inspiring epics of popular Hinduism (such as those enacted in the later, dramatic portion of a Special Drama event), similar notions about renunciation form part of the daily survival strategies of millions who live below the Indian poverty line, including many in Special Drama audiences. The ability to eliminate or transcend desire is praised, expected, and often necessary. I point this out because it is very unlike life under consumer capitalism, where one is constantly exhorted to want more, crave more, and consume more. In Tamilnadu, desire is still more often a path toward danger than toward good(s). Disappointment is frequent and traditional Tamil counsel exhorts people not to entertain big—that is, expensive—dreams.

But this is precisely the road on which the young protagonist of our story has just embarked. He harbors big desires: lots of money, a fine house, and the prestige and status of working in a foreign country. Meanwhile, he is having a hard time meeting much smaller goals such as getting a glass of "special" milk. So he renounces his desire for the milk and decides instead to head home. At home perhaps he and his father may once again strategize his next steps. An image of him and his father, holed up in the safety of their own home, floats here unstated. But the world has indeed been turned inside out in this imaginary: there are no women at home, they are all on the streets! Quotidian fears about interaction with the opposite gender loom large, revealing both their humorous and nightmarish potential. In our protagonist's continuing adventures in the public sphere, Woman again enters the picture to foil the fulfillment of even his simplest desires.

The bus stop is teeming with women, and their words are buzzing in his ears (line 56). He feels outnumbered and overpowered, and his worst fears are realized when even a 60-year-old woman—old enough to be his grandmother—interprets his desires as sexual and literally punches him further into this terrifying world. This all too literal punchline of the story's second joke is a variation on the form of the first and third jokes. Here, the disclaimed and potentially offensive, vulgar statement is actually uttered in the narrated text, not just in the narrating text. The joke is in line 70 (" 'Please lift your leg and let me climb on,' that's what I said to her, man!"). Here our protagonist actually talks to the woman rather than simply imagining talking to her (and so safely talking himself out of uttering the potentially offensive line). Again, the problem is one of a double entendre. In the narrating text, the Buffoon resurrects the moralizing footing when he tries to extricate himself (line 73) with a correction—"I'll climb up on the vehicle"—ostensibly designed to cancel the offending interpretation that he intended to climb onto *the woman*. The belated correction, however, does not retroactively cancel the joke, which lies precisely in that second meaning, just as the rhetorical question "Can one say that to a woman?" only underscores the forbiddenness of the utterance. The moralizing footing does, however,

effectively distance him from the ambiguous utterance through a demonstrative but belated disclaimer—before which the double meaning effectively slips out intact.

Unlike the other two jokes in the story, this joke concretizes the threat of discursive transgression. Exemplary retribution—she yells, she punches—occurs within the world of the narrated text itself. Clearly it is a world overrun by serious, self-important women. Their actions instill fear; indeed, their actions live up to all of this young man's worst fears. This second joke, by justifying what might otherwise be seen as an unsubstantiated fear of talking to women, thus accomplishes something very important in defining the larger context in which such a story is apt. The entire story turns on such fear and the joke validates it as realistic. In his pain—his hands hurt—our protagonist makes a somewhat imprudent decision: he speaks from and of his desire, instead of stifling it. Retribution is swift. He is summarily (mis)judged (line 74: "immediately that woman took it differently!") and sentenced (line 75: "she screamed . . . (line 76) and gave me a punch") to dwell in a world where women's consensus rules (line 91: "all the women would say that I came onto the bus just to bump them!"). The assumption informing the moralizing rhetorical frame of the first and third jokes—the silent "No" that implicitly answers the rhetorical question "Can one go up to a woman and say X?"—has been upheld beyond a doubt: a man cannot make potentially vulgar utterances around women without courting both bodily injury and profound public humiliation.

In this regard the third joke revisits the strategy of the first, enlivened by the fear-effects underscored in the second. The third joke and its setup span lines 78–106, ending with the sequence: "If I want to get the photo, I'd have to ask that girl to lift her leg. So what could I do? Can one go up to a girl and say 'Lift your leg, I have to take a photo!'" At this point claps and laughter erupt from audience and musicians alike. Now the double entendre turns on a semantic overlap within the Tamil verb "eṭukka," meaning both "to pick up" (as for an object) and "to take" (as for a photograph). If he tries to suggest to the girl that he needs to pick up his fallen photograph—his own fallen identity that stares up at her from under the feet of this overwhelming pack of women—he encounters the embarrassing interpretation that what he really desires is to take a photograph between her legs. (Recall that the semantic boundary between needing versus wanting is indistinct: "I need to pick up a photo" and "I want to take a photo" are both meanings contained in this one sentence, *nāṉ phōṭṭō eṭukka vēṇṭum*, which I have thus translated as "I have to.")

The narrative framing of the joke uses much the same formula as the first joke, where an implicit proprietary concern prevents the protagonist from uttering the unutterable: "Can one go up to a girl and say, 'Lift your leg, I have to take a photo?'" Here, however, the rhetorical question precedes the punchline; both are spoken to the musicians. The aside footing and the moralizing footing come together in a single utterance and together work to heighten the overall effect of forbiddenness. The success of this strategy overtly contradicts Oring's theoretical assertion that "moralizing commentary embedded within the joke is likely to prematurely reveal information that will destroy the sense of surprise" and, even more to the point, that "any explicit didactic commentary needs to be clearly demarcated from the joke itself" (1992:87). The establishment early on in the telling of the joke text of two clearly demarcated footings for moral and immoral comments, respectively, has given way over the course of the narration to a single compound performative. This congeals the likeness of narrated and narrating event in a final utterance of both the disclaiming tag ("Can one go up to a woman and say") and the disclaimed desire ("lift your leg, I want to take a picture"). Thus the final punchline works simultaneously in a world of women's discourse (implicit in the moralizing footing) and in a world of men's discourse (embodied in the aside footing).

Such a gender-segregation of discursive worlds, extending to both men and women, has operated throughout the Buffoon's performance. A men's world of discourse is instantiated on stage in the exchanges between the Buffoon and the musicians. A complementary world of

women's discourse was implicit in both the narrated and narrating texts: in the assumption of the need for moralizing at an audience that includes women and in the fictive specter of a world dominated by women's discourse (construed as women "bashing back," yelling, and shaming men). The women's world is, to the Buffoon, the inverse of the supportive, same-sex solidarity on which he relies when telling his right-hand men the woeful tale of his wanderings in the world of women.

A large part of his misery inheres in the fact that women mortify this young man. He would rather surrender his every desire—his identity even—than risk the shame of facing women's wrath and censure. The 16-year-old before him is simply the benevolent, virginal form of the terrifying demoness who punched him. Both are Woman.²¹ When his face falls at the 16-year-old's feet, it is as though she towers right above his own speechlessness. Staring up at her from beneath her skirt, he faces the ultimate impossibility: speech in the face of everything between her legs. "Can one go up to a girl and say 'Lift your leg, I have to take a photo?'" It is unthinkable. Speechless before and beneath her, he finally abandons all desire. The closing renunciative lines of the narrative (lines 108–110) register defeat and rejection as the moral lesson of a morality tale. "So I figured, I don't want the photo. I don't want the foreign country. Just let it go, let it go, let it go; I figure, 'The time's not right. I'll find some other way to earn my living. . . .'"

The resignation in these closing lines makes a chilling link between local constraints on desire and their global implications. The protagonist, emboldened by his desire for money, fantasizes about a foreign country. He enlists in an outgoing project wherein his desire for the foreign mingles with his fear of the more immediate and localized other, Woman. His inability to override his fear of the female—exposed by his inability to negotiate communication with the sexualized specter of Woman—leads him to discontinue his pursuit of the foreign. The intimate, inner body parts that his jokes hint at exposing remain forever foreign to him in their femaleness. The narrative thus effectively links the female and the foreign as spheres equally alien to the local Tamil male subjectivity assumed throughout the narrative.

Indian nationalist discourse casts women as the repositories of Indian "tradition" who must assiduously maintain the spirit of "custom" in the domestic sphere—as bearers of both the nation's morality and its very "Indianness." In this context the public sphere evinced in this tale appears unnatural. Its reversals are disorienting and unfamiliar: gone are the expected, conventional separations of private and public realms. While the buses are bulging with women, father sits at home. The message seems to be that the foreign, modernizing influences that send men to work overseas while women take office jobs have converted the local public sphere into a foreign territory. As such the tale is a diatribe against the effects of foreign modernity and the states of desire that it breeds. It succeeds because of the preexisting meanings of gender in Tamil discourse. Thus, regardless of the apparent reversals in the tale, it reproduces several of the key sociocultural paradigms shaping discourse in contemporary Tamilnadu: first, that Tamil women and men do and should inhabit separate physical and discursive spaces (cf. Ramanujan 1991:53: "Genders are genres. The world of women is not the world of men"); and second, that desire (particularly in more modern forms that traverse this ideology of separate spheres) is more trouble than it is worth.

At the risk of being redundant, I want to reiterate that it is important not to confuse the Buffoon's playful circumlocutions and tricky escapes with subversion. Not only does the parodic representation of dominant norms here fail to displace those norms, but it may also prove a vehicle for their reconsolidation by simultaneously denaturalizing and reidealizing them (Butler 1993).

The Buffoon's performance is also a socialization process for the women and men in the Special Drama audience. I have suggested that for the audience hearing these jokes is actually overhearing them. More specifically, the fishbowl effect of watching the interaction of others

from the outside, while potentially present for all members of the audience, is strongest for women. This point deserves careful attention, if for no other reason than its long Freudian history.

Within the Buffoon's moral footing, the only footing on which he directly addresses the women in the audience at all, his utterances unequivocally mark the *exclusion* of women from actual discourse. The Buffoon's use of the generic category "woman" in his key refrain, as in the phrase "Can one go up to a woman and say X?," identifies by inference all women as its set of impossible addressees. This rhetorical refrain serves to invoke a fictive, generalized, and indeed faceless Woman (in three standard life-cycle stages: teen girl, mother, old woman)²² in place of the very real and particular women in the audience, whose predilections are here assumed rather than determined through dialogue. The facelessness of Woman, in her three bodily incarnations, provides an extreme contrast to the young man's pursuit of his own identity specifically through his face, the image of which he struggles to attain although finally it slips from his grasp. The overarching message is that women are not dialogic participants in discourse but rather its objects. In their very embodiedness they prove to be hindering objects at that.

This is precisely Freud's argument in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960[1905]), in which he posits a model of triangulated gender relations as requisite to dirty jokes. In Freud's model, dirty jokes invariably involve a minimum of three people: a man to tell the joke, a woman to be the object of the joke, and another man to take pleasure in the joke. Here the woman is both the object of the joke—the original libidinal aim of which, as Freud understands it, is the sexual exposure of the other sex—and the obstacle to male pleasure. It is a blame-the-vixen theory par excellence: women's prudishness frustrates men, forcing them into lewdness. In Freud's own words:

[Jokes] make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way. They circumvent this obstacle and in that way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible. The obstacle standing in the way is in reality nothing other than women's incapacity to tolerate undisguised sexuality. . . .

—The power which makes it difficult or impossible for women, and to a lesser degree for men as well, to enjoy undisguised obscenity is termed by us "repression." [1960(1905):120]

Victorian notions of the inherent prudishness of women have found expression in 19th- and 20th-century India in nationalist discourses of the home and the world. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, in an attempt to take the best from the West and leave the rest, Indian nationalist thought succeeded in linking women with tradition, with spiritual purity and modesty, creating for the developing nation an "inner domain of sovereignty" (1993:117) that could remain untouched and untainted by the outer, interactive world of increasingly materialist, increasingly Western, "male" concerns. The good Indian woman, like the good Victorian woman, is assumed to be incapable of "tolerating undisguised sexuality." For Freud, "civilized society" requires that smut, which he sees as the "original" verbal expression of active (read: male) sexuality, be transformed into a joke necessarily told man-to-man.²³ In the case of Special Drama, the twist on the Freudian paradigm lies in the rhetorical device that allows actual Tamil women to hear dirty jokes without falling off their assigned moral pedestal as "Indian Woman, bearer of Tradition," and also without threatening their assumed feminine incapacity to tolerate undisguised sexuality.

In the jokes told here, as in Freud's paradigm, male listeners replace female listeners as addressees. The very idea of talking to a woman stops the narrator from doing so; neither in the narrated story nor in the narrating event can a dirty joke be told to a woman. In the former, the protagonist of the story opts *not* to say the potentially obscene sentence in instances where a woman might misinterpret it; in the latter, the Buffoon opts *not* to tell these jokes directly to the mixed audience. Thus the relationship between the narrated and the narrating events is one in which the thematic content of the story both resonates with and relies upon knowledge of the very type of public enactment in which it itself is unfolding—that is, the narrated event reproduces the narrating event. Thus in both event-texts—narrated and narrating—woman's

role as obstacle is satisfied by the mere idea of her presence: women are conjured, but no female response is solicited. The gender-triangle model evacuates female subjectivity altogether, replicating a predetermined ideological role for women while replacing their agency with that of the listening man.

Onto this third party, this male substitute, is displaced not only the role of the addressee but also the burden of appreciating the original libidinal urge for exposure of the woman. Freud talks of this third party as “bribed by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido,” seduced by jokes (and indeed often by the joker himself; see Sedgwick 1985) and their “yield of pleasure” into “taking sides without any very close investigation” (1960[1905]:103).

This, arguably, is what happens for the women and men attending Special Drama events. The musicians laugh at the jokes, although it makes them complicitous. The women and men in the audience are relegated to a noninteractive, deflected audience role, one from which the addressee has been evacuated. Nevertheless they, too, laugh at the jokes they overhear. Everyone, it seems, is seduced by the jokes and no one closely investigates the social and discursive paradigms on and into which the jokes play. Of course women are more suspicious of that seduction than men: it is virtually written into their script that they should be so. Women who laugh at Special Drama comedy thereby risk distancing themselves from the prudish, morally upright, and irretrievably humorless women represented in stories such as the one analyzed here. Many families, constantly concerned with moral standards, prohibit unmarried girls from attending such entertainments. The women who do attend generally do so in accordance with the stipulations Apte notes for women’s participation in humor in many cultures: “certain social factors such as marriage, advanced age, and the greater freedom enjoyed by women in groups remove some of the constraints ordinarily imposed on them” (1985:69).

Clearly women play a problematic role in the public sphere of both narrated and narrating event-texts; their presence complicates the male public sphere whether in a fictive, narrated world, where a shy young man finds them impossible to address, or in their own home village at a temple festival, where a brazen young actor on stage finds them impossible to address. Through their laughter, women participate in affirming the rightness of the cultural codes of distanced address modeled in the jokes. The most common protest women make against such tropes—that of not attending such performances at all—is, sadly, itself all too easily folded back within the performances through jokes that naturalize prudishness as women’s morality. Thus women’s participation in events that address such cultural complexities of address—indirectly, that is, and precisely so—is inevitably itself a complicated affair.

conclusion

In Tamil, the verb *ṭṭkku* means “to lift.” All three of the jokes presented here use the imagined action of lifting as a means of trying to get at that which is hidden but desired: lifting the chest piece of the sari to get milk; lifting the old woman’s leg to climb on (the vehicle); lifting the young woman’s leg to get the photograph. In the Freudian paradigm jokes are means of circumventing obstacles to attain desired pleasures; in the process they produce pleasure through the act of “lifting inhibitions” (Freud 1960[1905]:169). Here, again through the particular manipulation of lifting, a similar sense is conveyed of the desire to circumvent an obstacle to desire. To lift is to expose an underneath, as well as to imply the existence of at least two layers.²⁴

The action of lifting, revealing, and exposing at least two layers, is encountered not only in the language of the Special Drama Buffoon’s jokes, but also in many of the concepts I have pulled in to analyze them. I have spoken here of two separate footings, each of which opens onto separate discursive spheres: in one the Buffoon is overtly moralistic, in the other covertly

immoral. A similar two-sidedness defines the whole notion of double entendre, where a hidden meaning lies beneath an ostensible one. The notion of renunciation is similarly ambivalent: the desire to be free of desire is itself a desire. "I won't be jealous"; "I don't really want/need any such goods (foreign and/or female)." All these statements, footings, and imagined actions reveal what they conceal and conceal what they reveal. I have thus attempted to analyze this scene as suffused with layers of meaning.

I have also suggested that the agendas of narrated and narrating events are strikingly similar in this performance, and that they support each other as cotexts that reinscribe the same discursive norms. Both employ young male protagonists who must negotiate between their desires to raise their status (one by going to a foreign country to earn a living, the other by going on stage and performing witty monologues to earn a living) and their trepidation at transgressing established Tamil codes of mixed-gender discourse and respectability. In sum, the two male protagonists of these two texts not only comment on each other but serve as tropes of each other. The tone of abnegation and defeat that characterizes the narrated event is precisely what enables the moralizing tone of mastery and success in the narrating event.

Unlike his pitiable fictional alter ego, the Buffoon is able to act on his desires and achieve his goals. By managing to *mention* without actually *using* transgressive utterances in a public context, the performer maintains the persona of a decent fellow—one who turns aside to utter to the company of men remarks that would be unutterable to a company of women—while collecting a tidy sum for his fine and funny performance. The audience laughs and claps. Another successful opening act has been accomplished. The real punch line of that accomplishment, however, is that nothing has been destabilized: for all the good guffaws elicited by uttering obscene puns in a context seemingly unsanctioned by dominant Tamil mores, the normative organization of gendered spheres of discourse in Tamil social life has not actually been transgressed. So much for romantic theories postulating the innate subversiveness of the joke.

Humor here operates much like art as the Russian Formalists defined it: a process of defamiliarization, a "making strange." Like the Brechtian use of alienation effects in theater (Brecht 1964[1957]), the defamiliarizing project is liberating only in the sense that it frees one to be, in Frederic Jameson's words, "*reborn to the world in its existential freshness and horror*" (1972:51, emphasis added). One becomes only free enough, that is, to see the trap in which one is caught. By deploying a technique of shifting address and qualified, distanced utterance, the performer manages to slip out of some of the constraints on discursive propriety—but he does not alter them. When he leaves the stage, a Cheshire-cat image fades much more slowly: a grinning face staring up the skirt of a 16-year-old girl. And while the story's protagonist may have exited with a whimper as the abnegated, innocent child, the Buffoon has nevertheless achieved a dramatic success. The need to hunt far afield for a new way to earn a living is not for him; he is making his living right here at home and exploiting everything he can to do it.

a final consideration

This particular buffoon's stage name—"Selvam"—appears to have the ring of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Tamil word, *selvam*, has three meanings: wealth and riches; the natural resources of a country; and—simply but perhaps most tellingly—a child. Selvam the Actor's wealth certainly lies in the natural resources of home: a discursive state of affairs ripe with possibilities for linguistic play and for a foolproof Special Drama Buffoons' strategy for evincing laughter from a platform just the right distance away. He and his alter ego function together as inseparable aspects of a male child, one pitiable and the other competent precisely because he *is* pitiable.

Noting the importance of "goodwill" on the part of those willing to be the butt of a joke for the sake of the joking relationship,²⁵ Basso writes: "A relationship in which goodwill is

abundantly present is represented as one in which it is conspicuously absent" (1979:76). A concealing ploy makes possible revealing play. In the Special Drama audience, women—mothers, sisters, wives, grandmothers, and cousins of young men—extend considerable goodwill to the much indulged Tamil figure of the pitiable boy-man. The young Tamil man, who at first himself appears to be the butt of this joking story, in fact plays his own innocence and vulnerability against a standard, generalized female figure of staunchly rigid morality. As beloved boy, he plays on and across a whole cultural set of coded indulgences.

There is a Tamil expression used to describe succinctly the Buffoon's comedic male type, namely that of the *pāvam* man. "Pāvam!" is an expression of pity and sympathy, as in "alas, poor thing!" (Cre-A 1992). The *pāvam* man enlists the audience's compassion and goodwill by seeming vulnerably human in the face of institutional rigidity.²⁶ In other words, he appeals to the nurturing mother (Ramanujan's "breast mother," see note 21) in everyone in the audience by exposing his own childlike fear of the avenging mother. His childlike innocence touches his every act. He is a son instructed by his father; he wants "original" milk; he says inappropriate things to women whose grandchild he could be. By conjuring up scary women whose goodwill he does not dare assume, he conceals the fact that he already counts on the sympathetic response of those in the audience to extend goodwill to him through their willingness to suffer his jokes, much as a parent suffers the antics of a child.

Clearly, then, the absent presence of the loving and forgiving mother is essential to understanding the machinations of this performance event. But where, at the end of the drama, does the Buffoon's enabling discursive ruse of "use" versus "mention" leave the actual women in the audience? Does the carefully crafted distinction between appellative hearing and excluded overhearing employed in the Buffoon's performance effectively save their reputations as moral characters in the dominant narrative of their lives as "Tamil Women"? Or is sitting in the audience at a raunchy popular play a place where women, too, can partially escape the ubiquitous trope of Woman as Mother as Morality, in all its existential freshness and horror? The women in the audience laugh. They have been interpellated—through an address at a set, calibrated distance—into both narrating and narrated events; their presence is an integral part of the spectacle. Here, "appropriate distances" provide a means of maintaining status quo positions, positions in which women sit awkwardly and shyly, their own hands held in front of their mouths, laughing in spite of themselves.

notes

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Working from a videotape I shot of Selvam's performance, the monologue I analyze here was first transcribed and translated with the assistance of P. Velraj, whom I thank for his willingness to work closely with me in identifying nuances of gendered subjectivity and regional specificity. Helping a foreigner understand dirty jokes is awkward work. Several female assistants proved unable to do it, for a whole host of interesting reasons, some of which may be deduced from this article and that included the truly provocative "situated fieldwork fact" that women did not understand the jokes (or claimed not to, at least

to me and at least not as men did). For all their efforts against these odds I also wish to thank G. Revathi and M. Usha of Madras and V. Shanti of Madurai.

Finally and most of all, I offer my profound thanks to the actors of the Madurai Drama Actors' Association, whose work makes my own possible. Nevertheless, I necessarily take full and sole responsibility for the article and its conclusions.

1. Six editions of *Notes and Queries* were published, at roughly generational intervals, the sixth (1951) appearing under the imprimatur of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). The omission of jokes persists through all six editions and was prefigured in an earlier, precursory questionnaire drawn up and circulated by the British Association in 1841. For a concise comparative discussion of editions, see Stocking n.d.

2. Such a study might begin with a set of basic questions concerning the omission of jokes from the list of sanctioned collectibles enumerated in *Notes and Queries*: Were jokes considered too trivial? Or perhaps too obscene? Or was it that the collection of jokes was too difficult, and embarrassing, in situations where one was the butt of many of them? Or, in keeping with Victorian evolutionary assumptions, did jokes represent a form of abstract thinking considered too sophisticated to exist among "uncivilized" peoples? The latter possibility, suggested to me by George Stocking (personal communication, June 1995), is supported by the history of *Notes and Queries* itself. The full title of the original publication reads *Notes and Queries on Anthropology, for the Use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands*. "Uncivilized lands" were populated by "primitive peoples." The tendency to espouse what Stocking terms "an evolutionary rhetoric of primitivism" in *Notes and Queries* persisted even into the fifth edition of 1929, in a discussion of "primitive mentality" (Stocking n.d.:27). The touchstone of evolutionary thought on "the savage mind" was that "primitive peoples" were capable only of concrete, not abstract, thought.

To pursue further the relation between Victorian evolutionary thought and the history of the (non-)study of jokes would require inquiry into 19th-century notions about the comic in general, as well as specifically into the notion that jokes require a capacity for abstract thought. One might well begin with the English novelist George Meredith's "An Essay on Comedy" (1877), a work that he presented to the London Institute and in which he asserts that for the comic to flourish "a society of cultivated men and women is required" as opposed to "the semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities" (Meredith 1956[1877]:3). Freud's theories on jokes (1960[1905]), only a small portion of which I discuss in the present article, likewise reiterate this assertion of a typological hierarchy among jokes that correspond to degrees of civilization (see also note 23).

3. Anthropologists have of course approached genres that resemble jokes for quite some time. See Edmund Leach's (1964) well-known article on animal categories and verbal abuse, and their taboo exposures.

4. A welcome exception to such theories is Keith Basso's *Portraits of "the Whiteman"* (1979), a study to which I turn below.

5. For Bakhtin, prose writing is a recycling act: "The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions" (1981[1935]:300).

6. Special Drama performers regularly employ differentially distanced talk on stage. Such talk creates an environment where multiple readings can fully coexist. I argue that the extended stage aside, introduced by the comedian in his opening act, establishes a paradigm for the use of stage space to which other performers will frequently return in the scenes to follow. The use of stage space relies on establishing that certain kinds of talk and certain kinds of action occur in certain spaces on stage. The Buffoon's repartee with the musicians is an important determinant of the characteristic quality of "stage right" throughout the night. In a forthcoming article (Seizer n.d.) I develop an argument for looking at the use of stage space in Special Drama as a reflection of broader Tamil sociospatial paradigms.

7. Many Special Dramas are sponsored by villagers to fulfill a religious vow made to a deity. For example, villagers may vow to offer a Special Drama to a deity if their child is saved from illness by the grace of that god. Fertility, prosperity, health, and peace are frequent causes for which vow dramas (*nertti kaṭaṇṇāṇakam*) are staged.

8. Basso discusses the danger posed by misfiring jokes: the joking frame "breaks" when, in his terms, "secondary texts are read as primary ones" (1979:43)—that is, when imitation is mistaken for life. Similar dangerously flat-footed readings of theater (readings that neglect to recognize theater as a matter of framing) recur in many cultures. Such is the basis, for example, of what Elin Diamond has called Plato's "loathing of the theater" (Diamond 1992:391). Plato's loathing stems from fear; he aims to ban certain forms of theater from his Republic "in case the harvest they reap from representation is reality" (Plato 1993:395d). Similarly, the dangers of the broken (or missing) theatrical frame are often phrased in terms of the morality (as well as the morale) of the audience.

9. Televisions entered the mass consumer market in India in the 1980s, and satellite TV in the 90s. Since the 1970s the Indian film industry has ranked as the largest in the world in terms of the sheer output of films produced per year; within India, Tamil films, along with Hindi and Telugu films, comprise the largest part of that industry (Steven P. Hughes, personal communication, June 1995).

10. Comedy scenes seem to have a similar function in contemporary theatrical genres elsewhere in India, even in genres that play to more educated audiences. In his recent study of contemporary Marathi theater, Mahadev L. Apte writes,

In Marathi theater humor is a primary drawing card for making plays economically successful irrespective of their literary quality. After all, those in the theater "business" have to earn their livelihood, and comedies

and farces have a much greater entertainment value than tragedies and serious plays, at least from the perspective of Marathi spectators. [1992:13]

The question of the respective drawing powers of comedies and tragedies has an interesting gender dimension in Special Drama because actors and audience alike generally agree that women appreciate tragedy while men like comedy. Conversely, the reigning logic of “masala films,” the mainstay of the Indian cinema industry, is that a little of everything will please everybody. Overall, I have found a marked tendency in Indian theater historiography to treat comedy and the emotions it supposedly stimulates as inherently more base than the form of and emotions generated by “serious” drama: the valor of a hero evinces piety while the fear of a Buffoon evokes pity.

11. Other scholars have documented related performance footings that use “what-sayers” (Basso 1995), “answers” (Ramanujan 1986), and “seconds” (Hansen 1992:55). While such listener-respondents are thus not uncommon, their presence does not necessarily arise from the same need to sidestep charges of vulgarity, nor are they necessarily used as a means of confirming gender segregation. I find the use of the listener-respondent for such purposes unique.

Ramanujan notes the frequent presence of an answerer who represents the audience in formally codified public genres in south India. The use of such a footing in a public and theatrical genre (a *puram* genre in Ramanujan’s model), which is nevertheless stylistically and linguistically informal and intimate (characteristic of *akam* genres in his same model), is therefore noteworthy. I suggest that this technique is particularly well-suited to what Abrahams (1976) distinguishes as “play genres” (riddles, jokes, debates, etc.) and is situated in a continuum of contextual dimensions for folklore genres, between the familiar and professional. For a useful discussion comparing Ramanujan’s and Abrahams’s models of the contextual dimensions of genres, see Hansen 1992:53.

12. Marshall Sahlins has written eloquently about incorporative strategies that enable cultural continuity in contexts of intense trade and colonial domination (Sahlins 1993).

13. Special Drama performers use both the English word *joke* and the Tamil word “*cirippu*” to refer to jokes. Both these words are combined with the auxiliary verb *aṭi* (to hit) in the causitive verbal usage *jōk aṭikka* (something like “to crack a joke”). True to its mixed British, Parsi, and Tamil theatrical origins, the contemporary vocabulary of Special Drama is liberally peppered with English loan words, including titles (*Boys Company, Buffoon, Dance-Comic, Hero, Heroine*) and terms (*joke, comedy, scene, scene-settings, and special*).

14. In my analysis of the monologue I will occasionally use the terms *narrated text* and *narrating text* when I want to emphasize the textual features of the structures of signification under consideration. This should cause no confusion, as the first terms of the pair (*narrated* and *narrating*) remain constant throughout the article.

15. The monologue is presented in English translation and in transliterated Tamil. The romanized transliteration follows the conventions of the Tamil lexicon (1982), with the exception of English loan words. Where English loan words are employed in the Tamil monologue (e.g., *special, table, paper*) I have romanized them according to the English spelling so that they are recognizable to readers. This “reader-friendly” decision on my part should not, however, be taken to imply that these loan words are recognizable as English to a Tamil audience; for many members of the audience such loan words are part of everyday Tamil speech. Loan words that have become so naturalized in Tamil should perhaps most properly be termed “nativized loan words,” but even the accuracy of this phrase would vary from speaker to speaker in complex ways. (Indeed, to begin to qualify the social stratifications indexed by the extent and type of English loan words employed in any given Tamil speech act would be to embark on a separate study altogether.)

Line numbers have been calibrated in order to facilitate cross-reference. The notational conventions used in the transcript are:

//	indicates point at which following line interrupts
(inaudible)	indicates something said but inaudible
[bump]	indicates gestural interjection
[ding!]	indicates nonverbal interjection
HER	indicates emphasis

16. “All-round” refers to the special-effects drummer. He sits furthest downstage of all the musicians, closest to the audience—a position that enables him to monitor the margins of on- and off-stage. In this position he is also well-situated as a potential mediary in interactions between performers and audience.

17. An *iṭli* is a steamed, palm-size sourdough patty made of rice and blackgram dough. *iṭlis* are a ubiquitous staple of the Tamil diet, and makeshift shops selling them are quite common on the streets of Tamil towns.

18. Freud speaks specifically of “anecdotes with a comic facade,” noting that “this facade is intended to dazzle the examining eye” though indeed we may well “try to peer behind it” (1960[1905]:126).

19. Note this first use of the verb *ṭakku* (to lift), which subsequently recurs in the two remaining jokes. The simultaneity of concealing and revealing is remarkable here. The woman enters wrapped in her sari. Immediately the possibility of *lifting* the chest piece of the sari and revealing an unmentionable object of desire establishes that indeed her dress is appreciated by the young man as a concealment, the lifting of which would simultaneously, in Freud’s terms, lift societal (both external and internalized) inhibitions and expose both her skin and his real desires.

20. Interestingly enough, renunciation plays a key role in Freud's theorizing about jokes. In keeping with his larger repression hypothesis, Freud suggests that "jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation" demanded by "the repressive activity of civilization" (1960[1905]:120). The argument could be both strengthened and complicated by recognizing the particularity of cultural meanings of renunciation. For Freud jokes that enable the pursuit of pleasure rather than its renunciation are attempts at "retrieving what was lost"—that is, they are alternate means of gaining access to infantile pleasures. Characterizing the aim of joke-work as the lifting of inhibitions on infantile pleasures also has some relevance here, as should become clearer below.

21. There are many scholarly discussions of this split between benevolent, auspicious goddesses (Sanskritic Devis) and capricious, terrifying goddesses (village *ammaṅs*) in south India. See especially Reynolds 1980 and Ramanujan 1986. Ramanujan discusses these two "aspects of the feminine" as "breast mothers" versus "tooth mothers." He explains that "the passive male's terror of the fierce castrating omnivorous female" stems from the fact that "the ambivalence of the Goddess is seen as the ambivalence of mothers—they are both loving and terrible" (1986:56). Of further relevance here is the observation that Tooth Mothers (the non-Sanskritic, village goddesses) are often figured in "rough-hewn, often faceless images" (1986:58). Clearly, there are many cross-culturally familiar tropes of male discourse regarding women here.

22. These are familiar as three of the more advanced out of a total of seven named stages of womanhood in Tamil poetry. The young woman (postpuberty) between the ages 14–19 is known as "aṅṅivai" (knowing); the married woman between the ages of 20–25 is called "parivai" ([having] extensive knowledge); the woman aged 25–31 is "terivai" (understanding); and a woman aged 32 or more is "perlam pen" (big woman). I am grateful to Daud Ali for these details (Ali 1994).

23. In Freud, we here again encounter the Victorian evolutionary worldview, now played out on a European turf between peasants in country inns and socialites in urban salons. The passage in which this logic is most succinctly articulated is worth quoting in full:

Among country people or in inns of the humbler sort it will be noticed that it is not until the entrance of the barmaid or the innkeeper's wife that smuttiness starts up. Only at higher social levels is the opposite found, and the presence of a woman brings the smut to an end. The men save up this kind of entertainment, which originally presupposed the presence of a woman who was feeling ashamed, till they are "alone together." So that gradually, in place of the woman, the onlooker, now the listener, becomes the person to whom the smut is addressed, and owing to this transformation it is already near to assuming the character of a joke. [1960(1905):118]

Freud's argument is that in "higher societies" the peasant's smut becomes the "refined obscene joke":

When we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut. In both cases the pleasure springs from the same source. We, however, could never bring ourselves to laugh at the coarse smut; we should feel ashamed or it would seem to us disgusting. We can only laugh when a joke has come to our help. [1960(1905):121]

Throughout *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud's meticulous concern with delineating the formal conditions and technical methods of jokes is based on his appreciation of jokes as providing, above all, a *civilized* means of pursuing libidinal pleasure. Freud's whole project is premised on distinctions between crude and refined societies, distinctions that ultimately rely on the establishment of separate discursive worlds, appropriate to the supposedly very different natures of the respective sexualities of men and women.

24. For the powerful language in which the concept of layered body sheaths is evoked in Tamil, see Daniel 1984.

25. Here indeed Radcliffe-Brown's seminal definition of the joking relationship applies in telling ways, as it highlights the centrality of participants' willingness not to take offense. Radcliffe-Brown writes of the joking relationship:

There is a pretence of hostility and a real friendliness. To put it in another way, the relationship is one of permitted disrespect . . . there is privileged disrespect and freedom or even license, and the only obligation is not to take offence at the disrespect so long as it is kept within certain bounds defined by custom. [1965(1940):91, 103]

I would suggest that such a joking relationship pertains here to the generalized social positions of young Tamil men and women and that performances such as this participate in defining the "bounds" of "custom." It is as though men and women function here as two separate clans, understood in Radcliffe-Brown's terms as two "distinct separated groups" (or, as is commonly remarked in Tamilnadu, two separate *jātis* [castes]), between which such a joking relationship may pertain (1965[1949]:110).

26. In that his character frequently offers up humanity in the face of institutional rigidity, the comic appeal of the *pāvam* man is not unlike the appeal of Charlie Chaplin's little tramp (I think especially of *Modern Times*) or early Woody Allen. The best theoretical plumbing of the depths of comedy as a comment on institutional rigidity is still Bergson's 1900 essay, "Le Rire" (Bergson 1956).

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