



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 2, Episode 3

Presumed Dead: Birds of a Feather Fool Together

Hosts: Jacob Laitinen and Petra Shearer

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Episode Resources

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Episode Transcript

Jacob [00:00:14] Hello, everyone, and welcome to tonight's episode of *Writ in the Margins: Birds of a Feather Fool Together*. We are your hosts, Jacob Laitinen.

Petra [00:00:22] And Petra Shearer. And today we will be discussing the play, *El Muerto Disimulado* or *Presumed Dead*, written by Angela de Azevedo.

Jacob [00:00:30] The play was written sometime in the 17th century during the Spanish early modern period.

Petra [00:00:35] Otherwise known as the golden age of theater, which spanned the 16th and 17th centuries. Notably, this play is written in Spanish but set in Lisbon, Portugal.

Jacob [00:00:43] Little is known about the playwright de Azevedo, other than the fact that she is from Portugal and wrote at least three plays in her lifetime.

Petra [00:00:50] And even less is known about the play itself, especially to English speaking audiences as the translation we have been working with came out only in 2018.

Jacob [00:00:58] With this lack of readily available information, we felt it necessary to give our listeners a little insight into the plot of *Presumed Dead*.

Petra [00:01:05] Featuring lovers, duels, cross-dressing, puns, and attempted murders. The plot of this play is as complex and intricate as a modern day soap opera.

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Jacob [00:01:14] At the start of this play, Jacinta believes that her love, Clarindo, has been killed while he was off at war. Much to her father's anger and disapproval, Jacinta refuses to marry anyone else in order to remain loyal to Clarindo, to whom she promised herself before his departure.

Petra [00:01:29] However, Clarindo is not actually dead. Instead, he was wounded by his best friend, Don Alvaro, who also in love with Jacinta, stabbed him in the back.

Jacob [00:01:38] Clarindo is "presumed dead" (get it?) And uses his newly acquired status as dead by cross-dressing as a woman in order to keep hidden while he finds his assailant.

Petra [00:01:49] This isn't just a plot of revenge. No, far from it. Clarindo wants to be sure his beloved Jacinta has remained loyal to him. At the same time, Don Alvaro, Clarindo's best friend and his attempted murderer, is trying to woo Jacinta to for himself like the backstabber he is.

Jacob [00:02:04] And this is just the A plot. We don't have time to get into the B, C or D plots to this play, but know that it does have a happy ending with marriages, forgiveness, and a final word from the play's clown character and the subject of this episode, Papagayo.

Petra [00:02:18] Now, Papagayo, whose name translates to "parrot," is the servant of Clarindo's sister Lisarda, one of the main characters of our play. Lisarda is introduced partway through Act One and arrives with Papagayo in tow to the town of Lisbon to find information about her brother Clarindo's death.

Jacob [00:02:34] Papagayo turns up in six of the 12 scenes in this play, and as his name suggests, he loves to talk. In fact, Papagayo speaks 521 lines or almost 14% of the dialogue. He himself is quoted as saying, "No one likes a quiet parrot. Everyone prefers talking ones."

Petra [00:02:53] He is what is known as a gracioso, or clown, within Spanish golden age dramas. He is funny, witty and tends to talk his way out of conflicts rather than fight, which is different from the other male characters in the play who resort to sword fighting to solve their issues.

Jacob [00:03:06] Now what is a gracioso you might ask? If you're like me, you are unfamiliar with the term. Let us give you a definition and history of the gracioso.

Petra [00:03:14] According to scholar Edwin B Place, a gracioso is a confidential servant who provides comic relief one by making witty, humorously nonsensical, calculatedly stupid or whimsically extravagant speeches, all of which are frequently ribald and which often have nothing to do with the plot two by parading his master's love affair three by manifestations of hunger or gluttony, four by sometimes speaking a jargon or dialect, and five by showing cowardice. In addition, the gracioso also gives advice to his master, sometimes to the extent of providing considerable plot motivation. Oof, that was a mouthful.

Jacob [00:03:52] But where does such a character come from? Well, fools are as old as theater itself, first seen in the court of ancient Greece, known as gelotopoi, which means he who provokes laughter. These may not be fools or graciosos as we know them today, but the influence has a clear lineage. From ancient Greece to early modern England, the role of Court Jester or Fool has played an integral part in the machinations at court, acting as a sort of

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informal adviser for their potent potentates. Under a veil of humor, the Jesters would criticize the happenings at court from an assumed point of inferiority, giving them the ability to point out flaws within the decisions of their rulers without threatening the ego of the King or Queen.

Petra [00:04:35] Aristotle even wrote about fooling in his work *Ethics*. According to him, the gracioso was a type of fool who jokes in moderation and is graciously witty or amusing, hence gracioso. Compared to other types of fools who are either too boring and rude or not funny because they get cheap laughs, the gracioso is a truly witty man who is courteous, well-bred and temperate. Since Aristotle, fools have been given different names throughout the centuries. By the early 16th century, gracioso or jester referred to the identity of the man himself, not just a mask or persona worn by multiple men.

Jacob [00:05:09] One of the more immediate influences on the role of gracioso comes from the Italian Arlecchino, a common character in *commedia dell'arte*. Though both differ in some very interesting ways. And now it's time for everyone's favorite section, Real Talk. So, Petra, we've been talking about graciosos and Arlecchinos. What do you think are some of the similarities? What are some of the more obvious comparisons that we can make?

Petra [00:05:33] Yeah, yeah. I think obviously both of them are functionally the same as they were kind of, you know, the court jester in their time providing entertainment to their masters and everybody else at court. And I think they also have very similar motivations in their appetites. As we mentioned before, graciosos kind of are keen to being hungry and gluttonous and an Arlecchino is also known for his motivations being food, sex or money. So I think they kind of share those similarities in that way.

Jacob [00:06:02] I feel like those are universal drives (not to be gross). I think that there are some interesting differences, though, between these two, the execution of how they did their humor. An Arlecchino often felt more physical humor. I mean, they would use wordplay, but a lot of what they did was the sort of physical *commedia* style of humor, which was very big and over-the-top, and they used masks, which was not something that you would get from a gracioso. So I feel like graciosos also had a very specific outfit, but they wouldn't have the mask itself.

Petra [00:06:36] The other difference we've thought about before is talking about music and Arlecchinos versus graciosos. Whereas graciosos in our research and in this play, especially with Papagayo, don't really seem to play a lot of music or be involved with singing or anything. But we see that with Arlecchinos and also with Shakespeare's fools. That's like one of their major things is that they're always singing songs or playing music with a tabor or something like that.

Jacob [00:07:03] An interesting comparison that comes up. Having mentioned Shakespeare's fools, is that Arlecchinos share a very close similarity to Shakespeare's early fools that relied more on, you know, not maybe not slapstick humor, but more physical comedy. Yeah, more physical comedy, more kind of absurdist jokes and misunderstandings. Whereas graciosos share a lot more with the later fools of Shakespeare that were very cerebral in their in their approach to how they made humor. The wise fool as it were.

Petra [00:07:37] Yeah, yeah. That makes me think of Lance from *Two Gents in Shakespeare's* early career versus maybe characters like Feste from *Twelfth Night* or Touchstone from *As You Like It*, who seem to be those more intellectual type of witty fools versus Lance is just very physical with his dog onstage, so that kind of has a lot of humor from him. So that's that's a very interesting point.

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Jacob [00:08:00] Did you get a chance to see the performance that they did down at the wharf?

Petra [00:08:04] I did, yeah.

Jacob [00:08:05] Yeah. The MFA company here did a production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and they did the thing where the the dog was a leash with a with a collar.

Petra [00:08:16] Yeah.

Jacob [00:08:16] And I just think that that's such a cool way to do that.

Petra [00:08:18] It was great because it didn't take away from the actor. Especially when you bring an animal on stage, the audience tend to just kind of focus in on the animal and pay attention to the actor at all. Because like, yeah, there's an animal on stage. But that way we could really see the actor and Lance as the full character coming through with his joking with his humor, which was really nice to see so.

Jacob [00:08:38] Yeah.

Petra [00:08:40] And we just want to make a general note about these characters when we're discussing the similarities and differences with Arlecchinos, Shakespeare's fools, and graciosos, we're kind of making broad generalizations just so everybody can kind of get a sense of where these fools land on this humor spectrum. But there are definitely nuances to each fool within their plays and within their specific character types that the playwrights write for them.

Jacob [00:09:05] Oh, absolutely. Each each fool is their own. And we have a very limited scope for graciosos because Spanish Golden Age theater has only recently become more into the into the mainstream with English speakers.

Petra [00:09:19] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jacob [00:09:20] So it has some of the, some of the research that we've done. It wasn't able to get too much further than Papagayo, which is not to say we didn't do our research, but it is, it is a burgeoning field even though it's been around for 400 years. So at least for English speakers, I'm sure it has been much more well known in Spanish, but I can't read Spanish unfortunately.

Petra [00:09:49] Now that we know more context for graciosos and fools across Europe, let's bring it back to the Spanish Golden Age. In 1620, playwright Lope de Vega claimed to have introduced the term gracioso in a play he had written 25 years earlier. However, some scholars have found evidence that the term was introduced earlier in Spanish dramas, specifically a comedy written by Torres Naharro before 1524. Either way, scholar Edwin J. Webber argues that the gracioso was actually a character prototype for Spanish comedies long before the term referred to a specific character. And now let us take a look at an example of a gracioso in action with a scene from Act One of our play, *Presumed Dead*. Jacob will be reading for Papagayo, the gracioso, and I will be reading for Lisarda, his mistress. Lisarda, dressed as a man, enters the scene, as does Papagayo.

Jacob [00:10:47] You're in Lisbon now, and this is the Palace Plaza.

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Petra [00:10:50] Truly a striking plaza!

Jacob [00:10:52] Everything in Lisbon is striking for, as the old adage affirms, those who haven't seen Lisboa haven't seen anything good. Those who haven't been in Lisbon stood truly haven't seen anything good.

Petra [00:11:05] Due to the cruelty of the fates I'm seeing Lisbon quite well, to my great suffering. My brother's death, the news of which then killed my father, compel me to tread the streets of this city.

Jacob [00:11:15] You might just as well have said that you're doing it out of curiosity, because I can't figure out how that led you to trade our town of Lamego for the Royal Court.

Petra [00:11:25] I'm trying to discover the identity of Clarindo's murdering tormentor. Till now, no other news of his death has arrived except for the report from here saying that he was killed in the Savoyard Armada. They say they don't know the name of that traitor, that vile, lying man who, in taking my brother's life, also took the life of my father.

Jacob [00:11:45] You are taking on a huge task. Frankly, you're wasting your time trying to solve the case. Looking for someone you don't even know. My lady, how will you find them? Do you think you can search for a man without his name or address? Is that the way to do it? This is going to turn out like it did to a guy who entered a monastery asking for one of the monks, but added that he'd forgotten the man's name. He said, Father, if I'm not mistaken, all I remember is that his name began with Friar. Well, that's useful information foo, they replied. No doubt that will help you find the person you're looking for. As if there was only one friar in the monastery. I'll say the same to you, my lady. How without a single clue, good or bad, do you plan to find a man who has taken the life of another? As if there were only one killer in the world. That would be a good trick. Based on what you just heard. Let's break down how Papagayo upholds his gracioso-ness. In this scene, Papagayo begins with a bit of superfluous language about the city and makes a pun on Lisboa and boa, establishing himself for the audience as the funny guy who is going to talk a lot. We also heard one of many of Papagayo's long speeches that the gracioso characters are known for. This speech is witty, funny and maybe a bit extravagant with the story about the friar, but it isn't nonsensical or unnecessary. It is actually helpful for his mistress Lisarda to hear. He is doing part of his job as a gracioso by giving his mistress helpful advice.

Petra [00:13:22] From this example, Papagayo seems to be more closely related to a Shakespearean fool than a traditional gracioso. Touchstone and Feste, for example, frequently outwit their masters and those around them. They also provide their masters with criticism when needed. Papagayo does the same thing when he not only provides counsel to Lisarda, but also a realistic critique of her logic. Granted, that advice may seem to be give up. You haven't thought this through. But really, how can they find the murderer if they don't even know his name?

Jacob [00:13:50] Another interesting aspect of the scene, which we haven't touched on yet, is the fact that Papagayo has been to Lisbon prior to the events of the show. This brings up an interesting fact that we see in many other shows from this time. Fools, Jesters and graciosos seem to fall under the category of able to travel. Fools may travel with their masters, but would also have the ability to go see the world depending on their status. They are neither too poor to leave the homeland nor duty bound to stay at court unless diplomatic missions demand otherwise. We see this in Feste's independent travels in 12th Night, Touchstone's accompanying Rosalind and Celia into the woods, as well as King Lear's Fool joining Lear as he traverses the wilds.

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Petra [00:14:30] Within this scene, there's a sense of dramatic irony for those that know the play in that Papagayo actually is wrong about their seemingly pointless travels. They run into the person they seek, Don Alvaro, almost immediately after. Lisarda is looking for Don Alvaro, Clarindo's friend, not knowing yet that he is the murderer all along. The next scene will read is a cut from Act Two of the play, which takes place outside of an inn. Jacob will again be reading for Papagayo and I will be reading for Clarindo. Listen for Papagayo's cowardice and humor in his speech. Papagayo enters carrying suitcases as if he were fleeing from Clarindo who is following him.

Jacob [00:15:12] Shadow, ghost or illusion. Don't pursue me. My soul is too scrawny for such grief. Why is the coward the guy who always finds himself having such encounters? It seems like fear tends to produce things like this. Jesus. What holy protector against the dead will we find? If you're Clarindo's ghost as your presence here attests, and you're coming to ask that masses be said for your soul, leave me alone, and I promise you I'll find a priest tomorrow. And he'll proceed to say at least half a dozen masses for you.

Petra [00:15:42] You'll do it as a good Christian, Papagayo which will allow me to leave my purgatory, for this place is one.

Jacob [00:15:48] Purgatory? That's not so bad. You might as well have said hell.

Petra [00:15:52] But of all my suffering, do you know what torments me the most?

Jacob [00:15:55] What?

Petra [00:15:56] Being forgotten, my friend, by all my friends and relations who don't remember to pray for me.

Jacob [00:16:02] It's an old, evil truth that when a man is dead and buried six feet under, others will forget him.

Petra [00:16:08] Surely they haven't considered me dead with any degree of certainty.

Jacob [00:16:11] Why not? Everybody also knows what I believe. For there's news all over that you were killed in the Armada.

Petra [00:16:17] And is the name of the murderer known?

Jacob [00:16:19] No. Though the investigation of the case is moving forward.

Petra [00:16:23] And what has become of my father?

Jacob [00:16:24] Well, his wrath led him to flee this life.

Petra [00:16:28] He died?

Jacob [00:16:29] The old gentleman died suddenly. Haven't you by chance run into him out there in the great beyond?

Petra [00:16:35] And my sister?

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Jacob [00:16:36] Your sister became a monk.

Petra [00:16:38] A monk?

Jacob [00:16:39] I mean, a nun. Cause the stuff monks and nuns is all the same to me, since they all wear habits and live in monasteries. For anyone who might be reading at home, we have cut the sides within the scene for time, but know that we are sad about it.

Petra [00:16:58] Really sad because they're so funny. But anyway, once again, Papagayo starts off the scene with a long speech that is characteristic of graciosos. He also has to test his wit in lying to Clarindo about what his sister Lisarda is up to by claiming she became a monk. Which is an excellent callback to the first scene we looked at, where he tells his little story about the futility of finding a monk in a monastery. Like the first scene, his dialogue is not unnecessary or nonsensical. He really does think he's seeing a ghost, so that would probably be a natural reaction. This conversation with Clarindo does further the plot as it gives Clarindo necessary information before going public with the disguise.

Jacob [00:17:38] This is a great example of a gracioso's cowardice. He speaks about how he is so scared his soul is too weak to handle this encounter and even invokes Jesus to help him. He can't wait for the moment he is able to escape. Especially given the Christian audience and characters, that is a very real and unsettling thing for him.

Petra [00:17:56] Based on these two scenes and the play overall, it seems that Papagayo does not engage with some of the other characteristics of graciosos like hunger, gluttony, or speaking in jargon or dialect. He mostly relies on his funny, over-the-top, lengthy speeches, which makes sense given his parrot name.

Jacob [00:18:13] There is also a lot of humor from his cowardice, which shows up multiple times in the play when he avoids conflicts at all costs. This also speaks to his name and birdlike qualities. Flight over flight. Just like a bird, Papagayo flies away from danger rather than engaging with it, unlike most of the other characters in the play.

Petra [00:18:32] All right, everyone, as we near the end of our time here today, we will be looking at the final few lines of *Presumed Dead*. Within these lines, we see an oddity in that our foolish friend gets the last line of the play, a rarity within this time period. I will be reading for Clarindo and Jacob will be reading for Papagayo once again. And now *Presumed Dead* has its happy ending.

Jacob [00:18:58] Such an affair didn't really happen. But since strange things do occur, I suppose that this one did to. And there you have it, folks. That's the end of the play. As stated before, it is rare for a fool to get the last word of a play with Feste from *12th Night* and the Dromios from *Comedy of Errors* as two of the few examples from Shakespeare's Canon. According to Karl Marx, last words are for fools who haven't said enough. Well, I don't think that this applies to our talkative parrot friend. It brings up the question, why don't we see that more in many of these plays? The main character or the surviving character with the highest status gets the epilogue, acting as a sort of chorus for the audience and their need for closure. So what gives this lower status stooge the right? Well, in the case of Feste, Dromio, and Papagayo they are all integral to the plot and its continued march to closure.

Petra [00:19:52] I also want to note that right before these lines Papagayo asks which one of the female servants wants to date him, our first look at the more consumptive side of gracioso character. Hipolita agrees. And it's that

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simple. It's definitely playing off of one of the traits of *graciosos*, which is parodying his master's love affair. While all of the other characters, especially his mistress Lisarda, had extremely complex love stories, which took a whole play to get through, Papagayo's love story takes about three lines to accomplish. There was no disguising, deceit, or complex feelings. This could be a commentary on how the others, specifically the upper classes, have so many unnecessary pressures and complications to love and relationships which do not plague lower class characters or the *gracioso*.

Jacob [00:20:46] So what's the bigger picture here? By applying this understanding of clowns, fools and *graciosos* to *Presumed Dead*, audiences can recognize that plays are always in conversation with each other. Starting in ancient Greece and especially in the Renaissance era, theater across Europe was influenced by each other.

Petra [00:21:03] Theater of the continent, such as Greek, Italian and Spanish drama gave English playwrights inspiration and vice versa. Certain ideas and characterizations are embedded deep in the history of our humanity, and they manifest themselves through the multiple adaptations and variations of plays we see in the Renaissance and throughout time.

Jacob [00:21:21] Through their widespread influence, the ideas found in these plays have staying power that affects audiences today. Audiences then feel a familiarization and comfort when they recognize common ideas and themes. The caution in studying stock characters like clowns is that we must acknowledge the necessity of the evolution of these characters.

Petra [00:21:40] They cannot remain one note or limited by their stereotypes, else we lose the humanity and inner life of these characters. Theater makers can respect the historical significance of these clowns while not allowing them to fall flat in their objectives and actions. And now, as one of our resident fools, would you like to have the last word, Jacob?

Jacob [00:21:59] Well, certainly. Thank you all so much for listening to this episode. Don't forget to check out the other episodes about our play, *Presumed Dead*, and all the other episodes from our classmates in this season of *Writ in the Margins*. I'm Jacob Laitinen.

Petra [00:22:12] And I'm Petra Shearer.

Jacob [00:22:13] And this has been *Writ in the Margins: Birds of a Feather Fool Together*. Thank you.

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