

# Wordplay as Courtly Pastime and Social Practice: Shakespeare, Jonson and Lewis Carroll

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Communicative utterances which involve wordplay violate the Gricean maxims and evidently privilege the metalingual and phatic functions of language over the conative, emotive and referential ones. The prominence of wordplay in literary works like Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (set at a prototypical Renaissance court) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* (which clearly mirror Victorian drawing-room interaction), however, suggests that wordplay might have a social function which is not quite covered by Jakobson's categories.

I therefore propose to analyse and compare these texts as to the functions of wordplay: *Much Ado About Nothing* testifies to the use of wordplay as a courtly practice, as outlined theoretically in Castiglione's *Courtier*, in which *facezie* belong to the conversational skills an ideal courtier should possess. The functions of wordplay obviously lie in a display of wit, in showing a mastery of language and in the creation of an atmosphere of humour and playfulness, which might include some gentle teasing of the interlocutor. Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* may provide an illustration of the playful element inherent in courtly interaction in general, and wordplay in particular.

In Carroll's *Alice* books, the habit of the wonderland creatures of toying with language constitutes a major challenge to the heroine, and to the reader. In mastering this challenge, Alice displays and develops her social skills. As can be seen by the example of wordplay, Victorian drawing-room culture seems to imitate Renaissance courtliness, with children admitted as 'courtiers'. In these 'courtly' communities, metalingual awareness as displayed by a mastery of words and of wordplay allows initiates to keep their ground in a community whose internal rules are terrifyingly complex.