

“HEY—STUMBLE? STAY HUMBLE!” MORE STORY SPOONERISMS

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One of my favorite varieties of spoonerism is the narrative form, in which a setup is followed by a punned punch line.

Lengthier examples qualify as shaggy-dog stories, though my own preferred style is shorter and, er, less shaggy. Such tales can sometimes be contrived, but at their best, they provide considerable fun and amusement.

In my all-spoonerism book, *Cruel and Unusual Puns*, I retold several classics of the genre. The most recent compilation of my own “story spoonerisms” appeared in the February 2009 issue of *Word Ways*. So it’s time for a new set.

Not all the punch lines here are spoonerisms, strictly defined; a couple are word reversals. Online searches in most cases produced no matching results, confirming their presumed originality, though occasionally I discovered that someone else had recognized the same transposition pun. (“Pete to the bunch!”)

- Being antireligious, Karl Marx publicly opposed Christmas. Secretly, however, he regretted not being free to participate in joyous holiday festivities. So now we know the origin of the popular song, “I Saw Commie Missing Santa Claus.”

Each New Year’s Eve, street musicians in New Orleans celebrate with a unique ritual. Shortly before midnight, they briefly stop playing and toast each other in a hip and jazzy Southern patois. This ceremony is known as the bopping of the drawl.

- On a fine day in 1682, a courier was dispatched from Paris to Versailles with an important message for Louis XIV. While awaiting a reply, the courier overheard music and conversation emanating from a nearby room. Peeking through the door, he was astonished by the finery and splendor. “*Sacre bleu!*” he exclaimed. “Zees eez a major beeg lace ball!”

Those of a sufficient age and with long memories may recall Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist who provoked a nationwide controversy in the 1950s when he charged that comic books were corrupting America’s innocent children. Among his more interesting ideas was the theory that Batman and Robin had a secret homosexual relationship. Wertham’s views have since been discredited and ridiculed. But maybe he wasn’t so far off regarding the Dynamic Duo. After all, the biblical verse tells us: “Prepare ye the lay of the ward.”

- Last year, an off-Broadway play starring Richard Dreyfuss dramatized a historical incident involving a Vatican official and Abraham Heschel, a Jewish theologian. But the playwright was apparently unaware of an interesting sidelight: The rabbi's wife had devised a potent potable eagerly anticipated by visitors. This beloved beverage was known far and wide as the Heschel tea of the spouse.
- When the telegraph was introduced to China, most people were unfamiliar with the newfangled technology. Merchants from other countries quickly learned that only certain locals possessed the skills to transmit and receive their messages. Thus the frequently heard expression, "I need to see a Han about a Morse."
- Doctors routinely prescribe painkillers for patients with serious illnesses. But some physicians fear that such drugs may become addictive or even create unintended euphoric experiences. In such circumstances, nurses and orderlies have been known to whisper uneasily, "The ill's have highs."

The prostitute was shocked by her shy and nervous first-time customer. He was so tongue-tied that she was initially baffled about how to deal with the situation. But she boosted her spirits by silently repeating the affirmation, "Speak for your john, self!"

In London during the Swinging Sixties, hip and fashionable types were often tempted to give money to the adorable urchins who begged outside their favorite coffee bars. But these sybarites had expensive clothing and drug habits to support, limiting their discretionary outlays. One day, a stern preacher decided to deliver a fire-breathing sermon denouncing their dissolute behavior. The theme? "You cannot serve both mod and gamin."

When I was in the Navy in the early 1970s, stationed in the Philippines, the head of the Catholic church was Jaime Cardinal Sin. That's right: Cardinal Sin! The coincidental name provoked much good-natured chuckling among both Filipinos and foreigners. But less well known was what ensued whenever a teenage boy confessed to getting his girlfriend pregnant. The hapless adolescent was obligated to begin with the words, "Forgive me, Sin, for I have fathered."

According to recent news reports, producer Peter Jackson's megabudget two-part film version of *The Hobbit* has encountered numerous obstacles, including union problems and actor defections. It's perhaps not surprising that at one point he exclaimed in frustration: "These are the times that—*sigh!*—men's trolls??"