

# JACKIE GLEASON'S THEOLOGY

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## INTRODUCTION

On the surface of it, the fifties TV series, the Honeymooners, starring Jackie Gleason, doesn't evoke associations with theological speculation or dogmatic pronouncements. The episodes are apparently popular and ever-lasting ephemera left over from the defunct Dumont Television Network and the "Golden Age of Television." They are popular culture performances with immense appeal.

When Jackie Gleason, the creative force and star performer of the series, died in June, 1987, the commentators strained to explain the appeal of the series as well as the hold Gleason himself has on the American imagination. Newscasters visited the Kramden's apartment on 328 Chauncy Street in Brooklyn, and stood there, embarrassed, with nothing substantial to say. The Brooklyn Transit Authority named a bus station after Ralph Kramden. On that occasion, the Transit Commissioner said, "Although Ralph Kramden was loud-mouthed and a blowhard, he did work hard and earned a decent living." These accomplishments somehow don't fully explain the appeal. Accounting for the fascination somehow remains elusive to Jackie Gleason's public.

### 1. **Comic Weight.**

The problem with Jackie Gleason and his comic creations seems to be that he provokes two irreconcilable feelings in us at once. On the one hand, he impresses us as someone big, someone who is weighty. And the word "weighty" is not used here in the sense of overweight or fat which

Jackie Gleason incidentally was, but in the sense that Aristotle uses the word "weighty" (spoudoiaia , from the *Poetics*), meaning a character with bigness of purpose, of closeness to the gods. Or perhaps it is in the sense of the phrase in which Gleason's press agents described him, "The Great One."

On the other hand, and paradoxically, Jackie Gleason impresses his admirers and detractors alike as someone who is light, an oaf, a clown, a loud mouth, a blowhard, a buffoon, a loser, a decadent, a flop, a failure, a spendthrift, a joker, a dud. He never won an Emmy.

It's the eternal problem of the great comic. While at once a delineator of the human condition, the comic is not considered serious. The comic is rarely held to be "weighty." It's a condition the comic lives with, the way many accountants live with eyestrain and all gardeners with dirty fingernails.

The popular audience, however, knows by some sort of instinct that Jackie Gleason is "weighty" not just in the corporeal, but in the Aristotelian sense of the word as well. The first sense is, of course, self evident; the second is known in a deep-down, but not so evident, way. What is it that makes a comic performer weighty? Food for the body? But what for the soul? There is some evidence to suggest that horseplay becomes weighty when it has some connection with, or some dependence on, theology.

*“HE IS LIGHT, AN OAF, A CLOWN, A LOUD MOUTH, A BLOWHARD, A BUFFOON, A LOSER, A DECADENT, A FLOP, A FAILURE, A SPENDTHRIFT, A JOKER, A DUD. HE NEVER WON AN EMMY.”*

The objective here is to argue for the "weightiness" of Jackie Gleason's comic creations and to demonstrate their essential religious dimension, particularly of the Honeymooners. Reference to certain themes and emphases of Catholic theology will provide a method for achieving this objective. Some of these themes include the nature of humility as a virtue, the role of the fool in holiness and marriage, the battle of the sexes as the test for character, the separation of God and His creation, the importance of the five senses for perceiving what is real, and the necessity of delight and festival for meaningful life. Reference to two Catholic writers will provide historical and traditional perspective on Jackie Gleason's comic creations. On another level, the purpose is to demonstrate that all comedy is bound to theology of some sort or other--of which Jackie Gleason's case is of just one particular theology and of one particularly glorious manifestation.

## 2. Coarse Jokes and an Uncanny God.

It may seem an abrupt assertion that good humor depends on theology. But consider the perception of C.S. Lewis that the whole of theology can be deduced from two facts: "(a) that men make coarse jokes, and (b) that they feel the dead to be uncanny."1 That perception, the obverse of my comment above about the dependence of comedy on theology, needs to be expanded on, and we'll get to that later. The question for now is, can we do it the other way around and deduce comedy from Theology? And not merely divine comedy, but "coarse comedy?" I think we can.

Readers of People magazine and Hollywood biographies know that Jackie Gleason was attached to the Catholic Church. The Church sometimes had difficulty attaching herself to Jackie primarily because of divorce. But Jackie remained committed nevertheless. He was friends with Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, arranged Church funerals for errant acquaintances, and was said to try on occasion to reach the Pope by telephone when he was drinking. Jackie had, by all accounts, a traditional Irish Catholic upbringing--although exceptionally tragic in other respects.

Theology, the queen of the sciences, tries to tackle the big questions; it is a system of speculation and belief about the large questions of life--and those vital questions are at once raucous, subtle, coarse, and delicate. Theology always deals with the most difficult, and sometimes the most esoteric, subjects because they end up being the most practical subjects. A simple decision such as whether to go down one street or the other involves questions so staggeringly complex that most people simplify the process by rationalizing that the decision is merely self-evident. In actual fact, the decision to go one way or the other is based on a byzantine system of beliefs and assumptions absorbed from training and culture which often remain unconscious to the person doing the acting.

*“ODD CHARACTERS RISE INEXPLICABLY FROM THE SEWER DRESSED IN BLACK TIE AND THEN STAGGER OFF STAGE LEFT.”*

These complexes of beliefs, these complicated and usually transparent assumptions, that permit one to make the decision to cross the street is the subject of theology. The system of beliefs that allows anyone to make the decision to cross the street is that person's theology--whether any theology was ever read by that person or not. One doesn't have to read theology at all to acquire it. One acquires it from one's parents; one acquires it from one's schooling; and one acquires it from the David Letterman Show and the Honeymooners. Fundamentalists have theology; atheists have it; Hindus have it; mainline congregants have it. All different; but all theology. There's no escaping it. Theology is as ubiquitous as action. Action is always based on insufficient information and is therefore, as a practical matter, dependent on faith.

An artistic creation such as comedy jumps in to illustrate or dramatize both the problem and the possible action. In this sense, artistic creations are less dogmatic and more suggestive, more illustrative, but they still deal with the systematic body of weighty questions that theology grapples with.

### **3. The Windows of the Soul.**

But let's return to the discussion of coarse jokes. And let's consider a class of Jackie Gleason jokes. There are pies thrown into the face; acrobatic flips that don't flip; widened eyeballs at surprise or shock; fainting dead away in a convulsive, downward spiraling action; odd characters who rise inexplicably from the sewer dressed in black tie and who then stagger off stage left; fists shaken to promise propulsion to the moon; elaborate and ritualistic bodily flourishes to prepare one for the act of writing a letter; double takes so involved that they take up a good ten percent of air time; the rotation of the stomach after an elixir is imbibed from the hollow of a walking stick; and a dance directing attention to stage right indicating a segue from introduction to first skit.

The common denominator here besides the slapstick is the masterful use of bodily gesture: of physical grace, a gift. Many other comics use it, but probably no one does it with the intensity and deftness of Jackie Gleason. As the cant of the profession puts it, these are examples of visual jokes as opposed to verbal jokes. And as suggested, this is specialized visual humor having to do with the motions of the body or the placement of the body in time and space. Gleason of course was an expert mime, and made one movie, *Gigot*, completely in that genre.

Now it may seem precipitous to say that Jackie's use of gesture is rooted in his theology. But I don't think it is. What I'd like to do from this point on is to take several aspects of Jackie Gleason's comedic creations and show how they illustrate characteristic themes addressed by Catholic theology. In order to assist that venture, two writers will be recruited into the discussion.

One is G. K. Chesterton, a popular Catholic theologian and apologist of the first half of the twentieth century who also wrote essays, mystery stories, novels, poetry, nonsense verse, newspaper articles, and literary criticism. Chesterton will serve as the theological sounding board for Jackie Gleason's comic creations. Frankly, the main reason I choose Chesterton for this task is that his expression of Catholic theology so easily illustrates the foundation of Jackie Gleason's comic creations. Chesterton is not the most systematic of theologians. But he is coarse, he is funny, he is Catholic, he is a good thinker, he was popular, and he was fat. Perhaps he is even "weighty."

The other writer is Geoffrey Chaucer, English poet of the 14th century who wrote the *Canterbury Tales* and invented a useable English language. Chaucer was no theologian, but a comic story teller who reworked tried-and-true tales. He was funny, coarse, and Catholic. His comic

creations have amazing parallels to Jackie Gleason's, and his distance in time and his disparity in perceived stature will provide a perspective on Jackie's work based on affirmed critical standards. Chaucer also was incidentally fat--if all the representations are even close to accurate. Chesterton wrote an entire book on Chaucer.

*“HUMOR IS DEPENDENT ON THE FACT THAT THE BODY IN SPACE AND TIME IS MEANINGFUL AND IMPORTANT.”*

Getting back to gesture as one of the prominent characteristics of Jackie Gleason's comedy, it can be said that reliance on gesture to communicate may be humorous, and it can be said that such humor is dependent on the fact that the body in space and time is meaningful and important. This is not a universally accepted assumption. One form of humor is wit, and wit is based on the head, the head standing or sitting still: the intellect. Wit is quick because wit doesn't have a body, a corpus, to drag along. In commenting on the comedy of George Bernard Shaw, whom he considers a Calvinist, Chesterton says,

“This is the essential Puritan idea, that God can only be praised by direct contemplation of Him. You must praise God only with your brain; it is wicked to praise Him with your passions or instinct of beauty. Therefore it is wicked to worship by singing or dancing or drinking sacramental wines or building beautiful churches or saying prayers when you are half asleep. We must not worship by dancing, drinking, building, or singing; we can only worship by thinking. Our heads can praise God, but never our hands and feet”.<sup>2</sup>

Again he says, referring to St. Francis of Assisi's use of gesture to convey the attitude that St. Francis was vitally interested in every person he met:

“ . . . this was really and truly the only attitude that will appeal to that part of man to which he wished to appeal. It cannot be done by giving gold or even bread; for it is a proverb that any reveller may fling largesse in mere scorn. It cannot even be done by giving time and attention; for any number of philanthropists and benevolent bureaucrats do such work with a scorn far more cold and horrible in their hearts. No plans or proposals or efficient rearrangements will give back to a broken man his self-respect and the sense of speaking with an equal. One gesture will do it. With that gesture Francis of Assisi moved among men; and it was soon found to have something in it of magic and to act, in a double sense, like a charm. “<sup>3</sup>

All of this, from the gestures of St. Francis to Jackie's ritual charm of drinking coffee at the end of his variety show ("Umm, that's good coffee."), has its foundation in an old theological question: whether the actualities of the world are apprehended via the bodily senses or via the intellect or both in some combination. One thinks of the entire theology of St. Thomas Aquinas with its insistence on the five senses as the windows for the soul. And one thinks too of the

recent movie, *Babette's Feast*, with its gesture and gift from out of nowhere: the sensuous French dinner as the charm needed to rejuvenate two old sisters and their earnest but sterile religious society.

#### **4. An Antidote to American Calvinism.**

In this respect, Jackie Gleason provided the feast as well as the festival that American culture needed. America is primarily a Puritanical culture. And Jackie's comic creations dispensed something of a needed antidote to American Calvinism. Like a good festival day, the comic creations of Jackie Gleason, gave Americans a break from their own seriousness. "One cannot be serious for three hundred years," says Chesterton. "You must be 'at ease in Zion' unless you are only paying it a flying visit." Jackie's comic vision allows us to be at ease.

(If Jackie Gleason is an antidote to American Calvinism, so are many other brilliant comics--many of them Jewish. I feel especially obliged to mention a few of these Great Ones, at this point at the least, within parentheses. One only has to remember the barbs of Groucho Marx designed to deflate bland gentile platitudes. Or the bone-crushing insults of Don Rickles designed to get us all in touch with the realities of the street. [We have to laugh whether we want to or not.] Or the cagey representation of God made by George Burnes, a wry God who smokes cigars and is a veteran of vaudeville. His God is the Lord of Israel, Praised be He: a fascinating stumbling block for gentiles.)

*“ONE THINKS TOO OF THE RECENT MOVIE, BABETTE'S FEAST, WITH ITS GESTURE AND GIFT FROM OUT OF NOWHERE: THE SENSUOUS FRENCH DINNER AS THE CHARM NEEDED TO REJUVENATE TWO OLD SISTERS AND THEIR EARNEST BUT STERILE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY.”*

I'm also not saying that there aren't "mainstream," middle-America comics who are fabulously funny. There is, for example, Garrison Keilor who is more than a funny man, but whose vision is brilliantly comic as well as Calvinist. And he never tires of reminding his audience about the latter fact. No, the only thing I'm saying here is that all these creators are comic and that their comedy is based on a theology of one kind or another, and that Jackie Gleason's was Catholic and, among some other things, was an antidote for American Calvinism.

## 5. An Extravagance of Humility.

Another theological theme presented by Jackie Gleason's comic creations is nothing less than that of pride, the foremost trespass catalogued in the seven deadly sins. The obverse of pride is humility, the pinnacle of all the virtues. The theological questions regarding this virtue might be listed as follows: why is humility a virtue; what constitutes humility, how do we know it when we see it; what is its relation to reality, and what makes its sinful counterpart, pride, so deadly? The virtue of humility is arguably one of the most important single themes of Jackie Gleason's comic creations. And yet, ironically, his depiction of that virtue may have the appearance of its opposite. Jackie's virtue of humility is perceived by many in his American audience as nothing but sin: big sin, outrageous and obvious sin, weighty sin.

The question of what constitutes humility is a perplexing one. It is viewed by all Judeo-Christian traditions of theology as the root foundation of the proper approach to life. Humility is an essential response to God, the world, and humanity. This is because of the tendency the ego has to believe it is the center of the universe--an absurd notion. Submission to something greater than oneself--a god, nature, a family, a tribe, a certain baby, an ideal, a nation--tends to make a person more tolerable, interesting, and productive. Narcissism is utter pestilence.

While there has been no debate in western civilization over the immediate necessity of humility and the constant curse of pride, there is a good bit of disagreement over what constitutes its substance and style. Reserve and modesty might best characterize the Calvinist approach to humility.

*“RALPH KRAMDEN FINDS A SUITCASE FILLED WITH CASH, AND THIS SUPPLIES HIM AND HIS FRIEND, NORTON, WITH BIG CIGARS, NATTY CLOTHES, AND FLASHY CARS.”*

The tone of that Calvinist reserve and modesty is remarkably well-expressed in Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography. Moderation in all things is what keeps the ego in line. Flamboyance will cause all sorts of difficulties because flamboyance makes one stand out, and therefore makes one vulnerable. Bragging, vanity, a gaudy lifestyle, and excessive expectations are a danger because all of these put one in danger of being taken down a notch. If one lives modestly, one reduces the risk of failure. This belief resembles the classical idea of tragedy: that the hero should not overstep the bounds circumscribed for him by the gods.

In the Calvinist model, pride is, for all practical purposes, associated with a style of vanity and gaudiness. In this respect, The Great One is the paragon of prideful sin. He is vain, loud, impetuous, grandiose, and excessive. His schemes are flamboyant and they fail. Having a fear of flying, The Great One arranges for a train to take him from coast to coast or from New York to

Miami, a rolling party with Dixieland band, bunting, friends, hangers-on, showgirls, good food and drink, card games. Ralph Kramden finds a suitcase filled with cash, and this supplies him and his friend, Norton, with big cigars, natty clothes, and flashy cars. Alice instantly gets new furniture and a telephone.

## “JACKIE GLEASON'S CHARACTERS BELIEVE THAT WHEN THE GIFT COMES, YOU SHOULD ACCEPT IT.”

Of course, the money and the accoutrements almost instantly disappear. The American psyche thinks this is just. Ralph didn't deserve all these things. Perhaps he might have kept some of his money if he had been more circumspect, more modest, about it. When he has to return the money, Alice rebukes him for his excess. Ralph responds, "Alice, for one day, I lived like a millionaire. How many other people can say that?"

Jackie Gleason's characters believe that when the gift comes, you should accept it. You should accept it because you deserve it--as do your friends with whom you share the gift. And you owe it to your benefactor to take the gift. Not to do so is an act of arrogance and pride. "God giveth and God taketh way," seems to be a favorite phrase of the American Calvinist. But Jackie seems to believe that "God giveth, God taketh away, and God giveth back again." Accepting a gift is as generous as giving a gift; it takes an act of magnanimity properly to accept a gift. Certainly accepting a gift requires an act of humility because it presupposes a power greater than the person receiving the gift. Humility is related to generosity. Pride stops transactions, communion, and interactivity and is related to stinginess and meanness of spirit. Ralph Kramden had many vices, but stinginess and pride were not among them.

Geoffrey Chaucer has portrayed a character with exactly the opposite characteristics of The Great One. This character, the widow in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales*, leads a life that the American psyche would consider humble.

Sooty her hall, her kitchen melancholy,  
And there she ate full many a slender meal;  
There was no sauce piquante to spice her veal,  
No dainty morsel ever passed her throat,  
According to her cloth she cut her coat.  
Repletion never left her in disquiet  
And all her physic was a temperate diet,  
Hard work for exercise and heart's content.  
And rich man's gout did nothing to prevent  
Her dancing, . . . .4

This description of the widow could have jumped right up from the pages of Benjamin Franklin as an example of humility. The passage suggests that humility is equated with temperance. Hard work and slender meals keep the ego in proper measure. The result of excesses, "the rich man's gout," is not what prevents the widow from dancing. It is something else that prevents it. Perhaps it is her theology. Actually, Ralph and Alice's apartment on Chauncy Street is just as minimalist as the widow's farmhouse. But one doesn't get the sense that the Kramden apartment is austere. On the contrary, the image of it that is stamped on the imagination is one of extravagance.

## **6. The Battle of the Sexes.**

But let's take yet another tack on this humility question--one that is perhaps more empirical. Jackie Gleason's comic creations are always noisy; people are always talking. This garrulousness is a common complaint of Jackie Gleason's detractors. He is, by their accounts, a loud mouth and a blowhard.

There is abundant evidence for such a criticism. There is even a Gleason character based on garrulousness: Loud-mouthed Charlie Bratton. Charlie is the man who comes into the diner where Milquetoast (Art Carney) is trying to enjoy a quiet cup of tea. Charlie enters with the 50's equivalent of flashy polyester. He slaps Milquetoast on the back and begins a "hardi-har" banter that defines the classic bore. Alice could never describe Ralph as the strong, silent type; for in fact he is the weak, loud type. And there is also Joe the bartender, and from him too we get a stream of talk.

In many quarters, silence has been promoted as a good thing. Silence does have its golden benefits, but the virtue of humility is not necessarily one of them. Chesterton says

“ . . . that a man who talks like a torrent for hours on end is a humble man. . . . The proud man will scarcely ever lay down the law. The proud man will scarcely ever talk too much. He will lie in wait and drop in the epigram where it is exactly needed. He will feast upon speechless superiority, while the modest and unconscious man goes on like Niagara explaining the principles of socialism or the humours of his eldest son. The humble man will be always talkative; for his is interest in his subject and knows that it is best shown in talk. But the proud man will generally be silent; for he is not interested in his subject but in himself. And he knows that he looks best when he is not talking.”<sup>5</sup>

Talkativeness especially manifests itself as argument in the Honeymooners. Neither Alice nor Ralph retreat from verbal disagreement when it is called for. In this respect, Ralph and Alice are perceived to have something of a bad marriage. Argument is paralleled with trouble. Relationships, so the conventional wisdom goes, are destroyed by discord. All the couples in the situation comedies of the fifties are much more agreeable than Alice and Ralph in their relationships. One can't imagine Ward Cleaver going into a rage over a burnt steak. Even the

title, *Father Knows Best*, is an absurdity if applied to Ralph Kramden. Father knows best, or husband knows best is the opposite vision of the *Honeymooners*. The idea of it is anathema to Ralph and Alice.

Argument, as found in the *Honeymooners*, reveals something important about theology, and it reveals something important about marriage too. This is not to argue in anyway that the *Honeymooners* is a feminist tract. The male/female roles are as stereotyped in the *Honeymooners* as in *Father Knows Best*. Feminism is an important step in cultural evolution about which the *Honeymooners* says almost nothing. Yet the series does reveal something about the difficult business of two human beings in a relationship.

It is a dominant American theme that marriage should be happy. It is believed that marriage should have unity and compatibility as its foundation. In a very real way, this is all nonsense. Chesterton says,

“Marriage is not a mere chain upon love as the anarchists say; nor is it a mere crown upon love as the sentimentalists say. Marriage is a fact, an actual human relation like that of motherhood which has certain habits and loyalties, except in a few monstrous cases where it is turned to torture by special insanity and sin. A marriage is neither an ecstasy nor a slavery; it is a commonwealth; it is a separate working and fighting thing like a nation. . . . The family is a fact even when it is not an agreeable fact, and a man is part of his wife even when he wishes he wasn't. The twain are one flesh--yes, even when they are not one spirit. Man is duplex. Man is a quadruped.”<sup>6</sup>

If marriage is a commonwealth, it is not an easy and sentimental unity. The political slogan "Law and Order," is alien to both democracy and marriage. Perhaps there is a good bit of law in each, but democracies and marriages should be utterly devoid of order. Order is best left to totalitarian states and ant colonies. In its better moments such as when it mints money, the United States of America uses the paradoxical slogan, "E pluribus unum," and that paradox can accurately be applied to the marital as well as the political sphere.

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REVEALS SOMETHING IMPORTANT ABOUT THEOLOGY,  
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Western theology has always emphasized separateness over unity. In most of the world's religions, the highest good is a mystical unification of all things. Christian theology, on the other hand, considers God and God's creation as two separate things. Our duty is not to merge with God, the creation, or with other people. The Book of Common Prayer likens marriage to "the

mystical union of Christ and His Church," but one gets the impression from the tradition that mystical may actually mean disorderly. Only in separateness and division can there be commonwealth. Chesterton says,

“Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces, because they are living pieces. . . . Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls. But according to orthodox Christianity this separation between God and man is sacred, because it is eternal. That a man may love God it is necessary that there should be not only be a God to be loved, but a man to love him. . . . the Son of God came not with peace but with a sundering sword. . . . Sham love ends in compromise and common philosophy; but real love has always ended in bloodshed.”<sup>7</sup>

In a similar passage, Chesterton says,

[Charles Dickens] “knew very well the essential truth, that the true optimist can only continue an optimist so long as he is discontented. For the full value of this life can only be got by fighting; the violent take it by storm. And if we have accepted everything, we have missed something: war. This life of ours is a very enjoyable fight, but a very miserable truce.”<sup>8</sup>

There is hardly a passage that could better describe the Honeymooners. Alice and Ralph don't make a miserable truce, but rather preside over a fighting commonwealth. And they are the king and the queen of that commonwealth. "I am the boss, Alice, I am the boss," says Ralph pointing ridiculously at himself. The audience gets the sense that Ralph isn't having much fun being the boss. Being king in a commonwealth isn't what its cracked up to be.

The battle of the sexes has to do with what is real in life. How one handles one's role in the battle of the sexes is the true test of that person's beliefs and character. That's why the battle of the sexes is such an eternal theme in literature, art, and life. One can have all sorts of attitudes about world peace, the nuclear arms race, the distribution of wealth, and the brotherhood of mankind. But throw that person into an intimate relation with one other person, give the two of them fairly limited resources, an outside world of perilous dangers, and perhaps a baby or two--and what you have is one large drama that tells you more about human nature and the character of those two particular people than any other philosophy under the sun.

## **7. Alice's Fool.**

What will a person do when embroiled in the battle of the sexes? What is the most humane and holy thing to do? If you have any degree of humanity whatsoever, the first thing you will do is fight, and the second thing you will do is make a fool of yourself. Fighting is the bread and butter of marriage. Ralph and Alice do that splendidly. Fighting is the foundation of communion, of interactivity. Making a fool of yourself takes you to an even higher plane of

spirituality. Ralph and Alice do that splendidly too.

Making a fool of yourself means, of course, humbling yourself. Making a fool of yourself means that you are becoming funny, that you are becoming comic. How do you go about making a fool of yourself? "The way to be a fool is to try to be practical about unpractical things," says Chesterton. Don Quixote is a fool and he takes a very practical approach to charging windmills. Ralph Kramden takes a very practical approach to the American Dream. His scheme for starting a pizza factory would work if the American Dream were really attainable. But it isn't. Yet Ralph acts eternally as if it were. And so he is a flop and a fool.

The disparity between the ideal and its implementation is where fools are made, and where comedy is made. This takes us back to C. S. Lewis' comment about coarse jokes, the uncanny dead, and relation of each to theology. He says further,

"The coarse joke proclaims that we have here an animal which finds its own animality either objectionable or funny. Unless there had been a quarrel between the spirit and the organism I do not see how this could be: it is the very mark of the two not being "at home" together. But it is very difficult to imagine such a state of affairs as original--to suppose a creature which from the very first was half shocked and half tickled to death at the mere fact of being the creature it is. I do not perceive that dogs see anything funny about being dogs; I suspect that angels see nothing funny about being angels. . . . But once accept the Christian doctrine that man was originally a unity and that the present division is unnatural, and all the phenomena fall into place. It would be fantastic to suggest that the doctrine was devised to explain our enjoyment of a chapter in Rabelais, a good ghost story, or the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe. It does so none the less."<sup>9</sup>

The fool acts as if the ideal were actual when he or she knows full well that it is not. Again, the fool acts anyway. Ralph Kramden kept up his illusion that he could attain the American Dream; indeed he kept up his illusion that there even was an American Dream. The Dream was Ralph's holy grail, his eternal and unattainable quest. But he was always acting; he was always attempting something. His actions were always tinged with greatness even in failure. Meanwhile he held down a job at the bus company to keep the commonwealth going.

The disparity between Ralph's actions and his ideals is what makes him a fool and what makes him funny. Alice is a fool by virtue of standing by someone whom she knows full well is a fool. And this foolishness is what makes for a great, a weighty marriage. Chesterton says,

"There is an apostolic injunction to suffer fools gladly. We always lay the stress on the word suffer, and interpret the passage as one urging resignation. It might be better, perhaps, to lay the stress upon the word gladly, and make our familiarity with fools a delight, and almost a dissipation. . . . The great fool is he in who we cannot tell which is the conscious and which the unconscious humour; we laugh with him and laugh at him at the same time. An obvious instance is that of ordinary and happy marriage. A man and a woman cannot live together without having

against each other a kind of everlasting joke. Each has discovered the other is a fool, but a great fool. This largeness, this grossness and gorgeousness of folly is the thing which we all find about those with whom we are in intimate contact; and it is the one enduring basis of affection, and even of respect."<sup>10</sup>

## **8. The Kernel of Delight.**

At the end of Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale," the storyteller admonishes his listeners to separate the "grain from the chaff," apparently asking the band of wayfarers to identify the moral of the story. That may be a fruitful question to ask of the Honeymooners as well: what is the grain and what is the chaff? In all the uproarious subterfuge of the dramas, where is the meaning of Jackie Gleason's great comic creation?

A look at the "Nun's Priest's Tale" may be instructive in the task of answering this question. That six-hundred-year-old telling of the tale contains many of the dynamics and much of the theology of the Honeymooners. To remind the reader of the gist of Chaucer's tale, the story is about a hen, Pertilote, and a rooster, Chanticleer. The rooster has a dream that he is captured by a "beast." Fearing his destiny and fate as foretold by the dream, he refuses to leave his perch. He is rebuked by his wife, Pertilote, for being unmanly. She discounts his "fate" and ascribes his dream to improper diet--a condition to be remedied by a purgative and a laxative. At this and the rising sun, Chanticleer clucks down from the roost to peck a kernel of corn. Having considerable vanity about his magnificent voice, he crows a robust cock-a-doodle-do for the entertainment of all the hens. At this point of vulnerability, he is snatched by a fox at the neck. Being carried off, a fulfillment of his "fate," he flatters the fox into speaking. As the fox opens his mouth, Chanticleer escapes his predator's grasp.

It's here that we are asked to separate the kernel from the chaff. Our first impulse of interpretation is to respond that the problem with the rooster is his vanity. It's vanity that gets him in trouble. It is only because of the lucky stroke that the fox too has vanity that Chanticleer gets spared.

In this interpretation, we would be mistaking the grain for the chaff. Vanity is a minor sin. Many think it related to pride; but it is quite unrelated. While vanity is definitely a minor sin, vanity indeed has some elements of virtue as well. Vanity is intensely social. Chanticleer does not crow because he dislikes the hens, but because he likes them and wants to please them. Even if they are cynical about it, he is confident that they will be entertained by his crowing. It might be said that Chanticleer is a fool over his crowing.

Who in fact but a fool would get out of bed when he has had such a clear and convincing vision of his "fate," and this fate is "real." What is instructive here is the series of tales told just before by the monk. The monk goes in for what is real. His characters are recognizably human with tragic stories. They all have a fate and they are all struck down by its sober logic. The monk's

Julius Caesar is a biped sans feathers. He is serious, he is historical, and he is real. Fate represents the structure of reality. And one has a level head if one submits to that structure. But it is a head, level or no, that is dull. Or, at least, when it is incorporated into a story, it is tedious. Another character and another teller, courteous and noble, has enough of this veracity, saying to the Monk:

"Ho, my good sir, no more!" exclaimed the Knight.  
"What you have said so far no doubt is right,  
And more than right, but still a little grief  
Will do for most of us, in my belief."11

What may be getting confounded here, in one sense, is classical aesthetics. Aristotle outlined the requirements of tragedy and epic in terms that made "seriousness" a prerequisite of the hero. The Monk's tales appear to be affirming Aristotle's formula. The "Nun's Priest's Tale", and its successor, the Honeymooners, seem to be confusing it. The formula, it seems, is classical, and that is not Catholic which is weighty rather than serious. The Host of the pilgrimage, the Landlord of the Tabard, says,

. . . "This Monk, he talks too loud;  
All about 'Fortune covered with a cloud'  
--I don't know what--and as for 'Tragedy',  
You heard just now, what has to be must be.  
It does no good to grumble and complain,  
What's done is done. Moreover, it's a pain,  
As you have said, to hear about disaster;  
Let's hear no more of it. God bless you master,  
It's an offence, you're boring us, that's why!  
Such talk as that's not worth a butterfly,  
Gives no enjoyment, doesn't help the game."12

Now we may be sifting out the chaff. There may be two classes of facts in this life. Each is real. But one class is boring and the other is interesting. The "fate" of the monk is boring even though it is real. In fact, the monk is boring--just as the Host, complains. Chanticleer and Pertilote, Ralph and Alice are interesting. Chanticleer's crow is interesting. The monk's "fate," Ralph's job at the bus company, won't get you out of bed in the morning, but Chanticleer's crow will. The monk's tale bores you. The "Nun's Priest's Tale," the Honeymooners, interests you.

Death is a fact of life, but it is a boring fact. Eating worms is a fact of life for a rooster, but that too is a boring fact. What has interest is crowing and impressing hens. And that's what Chanticleer does. It is an irrational act, it goes against many serious facts, and it gets Chanticleer into predictable trouble. But it is not boring and it is vital. "Comedy is more difficult than death," said Cary Grant at a particularly inspired moment. And so too is marriage.

The rooster's crow is like an artistic creation, a comic creation. It is like a good Chaucer tale; it is like the Honeymooners. The tale teller circumvents many facts and sifts out much real chaff so that he or she can create interest, delight, and enjoyment. And that's what gives us life. If we stop to think about it, our life may be just such a tale.

We live our life with just such disregard for reason, consistency, and predestination. We throw reason to the wind for the sake of interest. "Delight and solace fill me to the marrow/ And I defy all visions and all dreams!"<sup>13</sup> says the rooster. "For one day, I really lived like a millionaire." says Ralph.

Chanticleer says to Pertilote,

Of one thing God has sent me plenteous grace,  
For when I see the beauty of your face,  
That scarlet loveliness about your eyes,  
All thought of terror and confusion dies.  
For it's as certain as the Creed, I know,  
Mulier est hominis confusio  
(A Latin tag dear Madam, meaning this:  
"Woman is man's delight and all his bliss.")<sup>14</sup>

The bird mistranslates the Latin. What it literally means is, "Woman is man's confusion." Right! And, "Man is woman's confusion" if you would ask Alice or Trixie. The kernel in this is that both translations are at once correct. One's intimate partner is delight and bliss because one's partner brings about confusion. For without confusion there is no action, there is no attractiveness, and there is no life.

Certainly there is a hubbub of confusion in Chaucer's tales and on any Jackie Gleason set. And if Chesterton is right, there is a good bit of confusion in theology as well.

Men talk of philosophy and theology as if they were something specialistic and arid and academic. But philosophy and theology are not only the only democratic things, they are democratic to the point of being vulgar, to the point, I was going to say, of being rowdy. They alone admit all matters; they alone lie open to all attacks. . . . There is no detail, from buttons to kangaroos, that does not enter into the gay confusion of philosophy. There is no fact of life, from the death of a donkey to the General Post Office, which has not its place to dance and sing in, in the glorious carnival of theology.<sup>15</sup>

It is said that the ancient Greek drama had its roots in religious rites, that the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides were a refinement of classical religious ritual. It is said too that the modern stage emerged from the Church ritual of the middle ages, the time of the flowering of Geoffrey Chaucer's tales. In all Jackie Gleason's skits and playlets, one is always struck by the presence

there of a great religious dimension. Jackie may be disguising this as light stuff and may, in fact, be confounding the grain with the chaff. But with a little sifting, we discover the kernel.

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FOOTNOTES

1C. S. Lewis, "The Grand Miracle," *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York, 1947), p. 132.

2G. K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (New York, 1909), p. 43.

3G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (Garden City, NY, 1924), pp. 97-98.

4Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," *The Canterbury Tales translated into modern English* by Nevill Coghill (Baltimore, 1952), pp. 230-231.

5G. K. Chesterton, *A Handful of Authors: Essays on Books and Writers* (New York, 1953), p. 152.

6Chesterton, *Shaw*, pp. 121-122.

7G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Westport, 1908), pp. 245-246.

8G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: Last of the Great Men* (New York, 1942), p. 204.

9Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 132-133.

10Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, pp. 196-187.

11Chaucer, p. 229.

12Chaucer, p. 229.

13Chaucer, p. 239.

14Chaucer, p. 239.

15G. K. Chesterton, *G. F. Watts* (London, 1975), p. 74-75.