
THE COMIC POWER OF OCCASIONALISMS IN CREATING LASTING HUMOR

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the comic power of occasionalisms in English literary comedy, focusing on their role as context-bound lexical innovations that generate humor through linguistic deviation. Drawing on examples from early modern drama to contemporary comic fantasy, the study analyzes how occasionalisms function as stylistic devices that exploit incongruity, analogy, and semantic distortion. Through close reading of works by Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, and Terry Pratchett, the paper demonstrates that occasionalisms contribute to comedy not only by producing immediate laughter but also by articulating social critique, character psychology, and genre parody. The analysis shows that while some occasionalisms remain confined to their original dramatic context, others achieve lasting cultural or linguistic resonance. Ultimately, the study argues that occasionalisms are a central mechanism through which English comedy transforms linguistic creativity into a durable humorous effect.

KEYWORDS: occasionalisms, comic language, English literary comedy, word-formation, linguistic creativity, dramatic discourse, humor studies.

INTRODUCTION

In English literary drama, and particularly within the comedy genre, artistic language devices play a crucial role in producing a natural and enduring comic effect. Among these devices, occasionalisms occupy a distinctive position, as they enable writers to generate humor through linguistic novelty, surprise, and contextual specificity. Comic dramatists and prose writers frequently coin such forms as deliberate, moment-bound lexical innovations that disrupt established norms of language use. In comedy, this deviation is not accidental but functional: it provokes laughter by foregrounding incongruity, verbal wit, and the audience's pleasure in recognizing creative departures from expectation. As Terry (2021) aptly observes, "Occasionalisms function as stylistic devices whose primary aim is not lexical permanence but immediate expressive or humorous impact". This immediacy is especially vital in dramatic comedy, where comic success depends on the audience's rapid perception of verbal irony and linguistic play.

From the perspective of English word-formation, occasionalisms in comedy are often grounded in analogy, playful morphological manipulation, and unexpected semantic combinations. As demonstrated by Mattiello (2017), English occasionalisms frequently arise through analogical processes that reshape familiar lexical patterns into novel forms (pp. 4-5; 36-38). In comic drama, such analogical creativity becomes a powerful mechanism: spectators recognize the underlying linguistic model while simultaneously appreciating its humorous distortion. On stage, these

formations gain additional force through timing, repetition, and character-specific speech habits, which reinforce their comic resonance and embed them within dramatic interaction rather than isolated wordplay.

Moreover, the comic value of occasionalisms in English comedy drama extends beyond their immediate theatrical moment. While many such formations remain tied to a particular scene or character, others achieve lasting humorous impact because they condense broader comic perspectives, such as social hypocrisy, pretension, or imaginative excess, into a single striking word or phrase. As Mattiello (2017, 6-7; 171-191) notes, occasionalisms foreground speaker creativity and expressiveness, qualities that closely align with the conventions of comedic drama. When combined with performance, characterization, and audience reception, these lexical innovations contribute not only to momentary laughter but also to a durable comic identity within the English literary tradition.

Having established how occasionalisms operate as powerful comic devices in English literary comedy, the following section examines how individual playwrights and novelists employ such formations in specific dramatic and narrative contexts to generate satire, expose hypocrisy, parody excess, and create humor that resonates beyond its original setting.

Main Part. One of the most celebrated examples of comic occasionalism in English comedy drama appears in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In Act I, Algernon explains to Jack his invention of an imaginary invalid named Bunbury, declaring: "I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose." (Wilde, 1895, Act 1, page 13). Through this utterance, Wilde coins the occasionalism "Bunbury" and its derivatives (Bunburyist, Bunburying), which denote the practice of fabricating excuses or double lives to escape social obligations. The humor arises not only from the absurdity of the fictional patient, but from the linguistic legitimization of moral hypocrisy. By transforming deceit into a named and almost respectable practice, Algernon's speech reframes irresponsibility as a witty lifestyle choice. The occasionalism thus functions as a comic strategy that exposes Victorian double standards: lying is no longer condemned but playfully systematized. The lasting success of "Bunbury" is evident in its later adoption into English usage to describe secret or double lives, demonstrating how a theatrical joke can evolve into a culturally resonant term.

A different, though equally influential, example of comic lexical innovation can be found in Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*. During a chaotic cricket match, an irritated spectator shouts insults at a clumsy player, including the term "butter-fingers". "Ah, ah! – stupid – Now, butter-fingers – Muff – Humbug!" (Dickens, 1837, Chapter 7, page 97). Dickens employs this freshly coined compound to mock physical ineptitude, suggesting hands so greasy that they cannot hold the ball. At the time, the expression was not established in literary English, and its humor derives from vivid physical imagery and immediacy. Unlike Wilde's morally charged occasionalism, butter-fingers operates at the level of bodily comedy and spontaneous ridicule. Its success lies in its transparency: the audience instantly grasps the metaphor and laughs at its aptness. The phrase's later integration into everyday English illustrates how comic occasionalisms, even when born from a moment of narrative agitation, can achieve permanence through their expressive clarity.

Earlier dramatic comedy offers a more aggressive and satirical use of occasionalism in Ben Jonson and Thomas Dekker’s *The Poetaster*. In the play’s satirical climax, the pretentious poet Crispinus is forced to ingest a purgative that makes him “vomit” an absurd list of overblown, pseudo-learned words such as retrograde, reciprocal, incubus... glibbery, lubrical, defunct, spurious... chilblain, clumsie, turgidous, ventosity, oblatrant, furibund, fatuate, strenuous (Jonson & Dekker, 1913, Act V, Stage III, pages 151-161). These exaggerated formations parody the affected diction of writers who prioritize ornate vocabulary over meaning. Here, occasionalisms are deployed en masse, overwhelming the audience with their sheer excess. Jonson’s comedy does not invite admiration of linguistic creativity but rather mocks its misuse. By staging language itself as a kind of illness lodged in Crispinus’s stomach, the play turns artificial eloquence into a physical grotesque. The comic force lies in exposure: what sounds “learned” collapses into nonsense when stripped of substance. Occasionalisms thus become instruments of satire, attacking cultural fashions of pretentiousness and false intellectual authority.

In modern comic fantasy, Terry Pratchett’s *The colour of magic* demonstrates a subtler and more ironic use of occasionalism through the invention of “octarine,” described as the eighth color – the color of magic itself. Initially presented in grand, metaphysical terms as “the undisputed pigment of the imagination,” octarine embodies the elevated rhetoric of fantasy world-building. However, this solemnity is immediately undercut when the character Rincewind dismisses it as looking merely “a sort of greenish-purple”. “It was octarine, the colour of magic. It was alive and glowing and vibrant and it was the undisputed pigment of the imagination... But Rincewind always thought it looked a sort of greenish-purple” (Pratchett, 1983). The humor emerges from this anticlimax: an exalted, supposedly ineffable concept is reduced to a mundane, almost bored description. Pratchett’s occasionalism operates by colliding epic fantasy language with everyday perception, thereby parodying the genre’s tendency toward overwrought symbolism. Unlike Wilde or Jonson, Pratchett does not mock social hypocrisy or literary pretension directly; instead, he destabilizes grand narratives through deflation. The invented word remains comic precisely because it promises transcendence but delivers ordinariness.

Table 1. Occasionalisms in English Comedy.

Author & Work	Occasionalism	Context of Use	Comic Function	Lasting Effect
Oscar Wilde – <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	<i>Bunbury</i> , <i>Bunburyist</i> , <i>Bunburying</i>	Algernon invents an imaginary invalid to escape social duties	Satirizes moral hypocrisy by legitimizing deception through witty naming	Entered English usage to denote double or secret lives
Charles Dickens – <i>The Pickwick Papers</i>	<i>butter-fingers</i>	A spectator mocks a clumsy cricket player	Creates immediate physical comedy through vivid metaphor	Became a stable colloquial expression in English

<p>Ben Jonson & Thomas Dekker – <i>The Poetaster</i></p>	<p>Excessive pseudo-learned words (<i>glibbery, lubrical, turgidous, etc.</i>)</p>	<p>Crispinus “vomits” artificial words in a satirical punishment</p>	<p>Mocks pretentious, meaningless literary style</p>	<p>Reinforces satire of false intellectualism rather than lexical permanence</p>
<p>Terry Pratchett – <i>The Colour of Magic</i></p>	<p><i>octarine</i></p>	<p>Described as the magical eighth color</p>	<p>Undercuts grand fantasy rhetoric through anticlimax</p>	<p>Popularized as a comic fantasy neologism</p>

These examples demonstrate that occasionalisms in English comedy serve multiple comic functions: they can legitimize hypocrisy (Bunbury), intensify ridicule through vivid imagery (butter-fingers), expose pretension via excess (The Poetaster), or puncture grandiosity through anticlimax (octarine). Across periods and genres, such formations show how linguistic invention becomes a durable vehicle for humor, allowing comedy not only to entertain but also to critique social behavior, literary fashion, and even imagination itself.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that occasionalisms occupy a central position in the creation of comic effect in English literary comedy, functioning not merely as decorative linguistic elements but as purposeful artistic devices. Across different historical periods and genres, comic writers employ context-bound lexical innovations to disrupt linguistic norms, provoke surprise, and invite audiences into an active process of interpretation. As the analysis has shown, occasionalisms operate at the intersection of language, character, and performance, allowing humor to emerge simultaneously from verbal ingenuity and dramatic situation.

The analysis of works by Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, and Terry Pratchett highlights the versatility of occasionalisms as comic tools. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s invention of Bunbury and its derivatives transforms moral hypocrisy into a playful, almost institutionalized practice, exposing social double standards through witty lexicalization. Dickens’s butter-fingers illustrates how spontaneous metaphorical coinage can generate immediate physical comedy while later achieving stability in everyday English. In *The Poetaster*, Jonson and Dekker exploit excessive, pseudo-learned word formations to satirize literary pretension, using linguistic overload itself as an object of ridicule. By contrast, Pratchett’s octarine demonstrates how an occasionalism can parody the grand metaphysics of fantasy by deflating it through ordinary perception, creating humor via anticlimax.

To conclude, these examples confirm that the comic power of occasionalisms lies not primarily in their lexical permanence but in their functional precision. Some remain confined to their original dramatic context, serving as momentary sparks of humor, while others transcend their texts and enter broader linguistic or cultural circulation. In both cases, their effectiveness depends on the audience’s recognition of linguistic deviation and its comic motivation. Occasionalisms thus contribute to lasting humor by condensing social critique, character psychology, and genre parody into compact and memorable verbal forms.

Future studies could focus more closely on the relationship between occasionalisms and character construction in English comedy, examining how lexical innovation helps shape comic identities such as the hypocrite, the pretender, or the fool. Such research would deepen understanding of how language creativity supports characterization and dramatic conflict within comedic discourse.

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