

The Philosopher Farts and Clowns: Humor and Wisdom in Javanese Puppet Theatre

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As I read the literature that has inspired the staging of this symposium, I realize that I may be entering the scene on a slightly different cue. In the “Western” tradition, scholarship has played out an “ambivalent attitude” towards theatre, and performance in general. On the one hand, there is a rift between text and performance, which has been traced all the way back to Plato’s condemnation of theatre as a form of self-dissimulation and self-delusion.¹ On the other, there have been attempts to bring thought and theatricality together—as for example in Nietzsche and Derrida—where theatricality is not just another form of expression but through which the notion of truth as self-presence is constantly disturbed and dis-located.

In studying philosophical texts in Java, however, one realizes that the writing cannot be separated from its performance. Consider for example the 19th century didactic poem, *Serat Wedhatama*, which is written in verse (as opposed to the prose of the treatise of Western philosophical tradition) not only to be read aloud but sung; or the shadow puppet performances (*wayang*), where the puppeteer (*dhalang*) is always weaving an oral text that enriches/deviates from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics from which *wayang* plots are often taken. In fact, performance is so pervasive that for the Javanese it is never merely an artistic expression on stage but a way of life. In a society where hierarchy and status are given great importance, life on the everyday is a constant enactment of roles—from how garments of the appropriate *batik* (traditional print) patterns are worn, to using gestures of deference, as well as choosing a level of language proper to the social status of the speaker vis-à-vis the other. And even within the Javanese vernacular itself, one finds profuse theatricality.

While this is not the place to delve into the theatrical character of the Javanese language, it is the backdrop that makes humour possible and what allows the latter to play an important role in the lives of the Javanese. While it is not unique to their language, one sees how Javanese words and script are inherently ambiguous, that even didactic texts which are expected to be unequivocal in its moral prescriptions have proven notoriously difficult to

¹ Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham Press University, 2004), 8.

reduce to one interpretation.² Another aspect of the language is its rich, mimetic character, where we see how the onomatopoeic brings out the power of words beyond the symbolic.³ The popular Javanese phrase, “*kena ing sabda*” (to be hit/struck by speech) proves how words have the power to transform, uncover what things or people are like, or plague us with a curse.⁴

Resisting humour’s seductive power

This non-logical potency of the word lies at the very heart of *wayang*. In the *Murwakala* (“Birth of Kala”) story, which is performed at a *ruwatan* (an exorcism for ill-fated children), we are told how *wayang* saves the young from the blood-thirsty ogre Batara Kala. *Struck* by the beauty of the *dhalang*’s words, Kala finds himself bursting into peals of uncontrollable laughter and gives up his weapon in exchange for the *dhalang*’s promise to keep the show going.⁵ The *Murwakala* therefore narrates not only the myth of human ill-fortune as the condition of being devoured by Time (personified by Kala), but also the origin of *wayang*, and how, through the seductive power of speech, it causes a forgetfulness that suspends time/Time, or puts it momentarily off track.

Performed in the context of a *ruwatan*, the *Murwakala* performance is not just a re-telling, but a re-activation of *wayang*’s originary power. But even on occasions when a regular *wayang* is performed (not an exorcism but a thanksgiving/prayer to the gods), the Javanese are said to be mindful of its seduction, and are wont to protect themselves from its effects. Like when people in the audience let out a “stylized hoot,” immediately after the boisterous laughter caused by the *dhalang*’s joke. Such stylization, according to Ward Keeler “puts a stop to the humor’s effects (and) the spectator regains self-control.”⁶ Also, many people say they prefer watching from the “puppet side,” where one sees the *dhalang*

² See Martin Hatch, *Lagu, Laras, Layang: Rethinking Melody in Javanese Music* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) for a study of the *Wedhatama*, where he shows how the Javanese script, which is “written in continuous sequence,” results to a loosening of the semantic.

³ I have found also in *Wedhatama* how the poet, in describing the feeling (*rasa*) of one’s union with the Great Spirit (*Suksma*), does not explain it abstractly but uses the onomatopoeic word, *tumlawung*. While it literally means the echo heard from afar, it also re-enacts (physically) the way *rasa* occurs: an opening, outward movement that breaks free from all barriers.

⁴ Jan Mrazek, “Whence Come the Stories,” unpublished paper.

⁵ Jan Mrazek, *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre: Contemplations on the Art of Javanese Wayang Kulit*. (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005), 354.

⁶ Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 218.

manipulating the puppets, instead of the “shadow side,” so as “not to be deceived” and be completely enthralled by his skill.⁷

Plato, it seems, had not considered that it is possible for a spectator to subject himself to dissimulation and delusion without necessarily abdicating his freedom and awareness. Had he known about *wayang*, he would have seen an audience that was “free to move about, free to pass to the other side of the ‘screen,’ to experience the ‘reality’ of theatre as relativity and as surface,” making the dichotomy between “appearance” and “reality” reductive.⁸ And if the Javanese feel the need to protect themselves from *wayang*’s seductive powers, their resistance is not an outright rejection but a desire to control, a kind of “power-management,” which presupposes that power is good, if maintained at a harmless level. This is why Kala is defeated, not because he is “taken out” permanently but because he must submit to the superiority of whoever can read the writings on his body.

The Yoke of Javanism

While the relation between Javanese text and performance is undeniable, scholars still find themselves defending *wayang* from the tendency to reduce it to Western categories. A.L. Becker has shown how *wayang* stories defy Aristotle’s plot constraints,⁹ while Hendrik Kleinsemeide has criticized “the hegemony of language” in scholarship, which denies other modes of representation such as the imagistic, musical, and corporal.¹⁰ This echoes with Jan Mrázek’s effort to move away from mystical interpretations, to provide a wholistic picture of *wayang*, showing how performance is about not merely the stories, but also the music, the *dhalang*’s gestures, the night air, and the gathering.¹¹

In my own study of *punakawan* (clown) humor in *wayang*, however, it seems that the Javanese themselves have the tendency to dichotomize, and give precedence to the symbolic. This relates to the profusion of philosophical interpretations in their culture. One hears the

⁷ Ibid., 219.

⁸ Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 6.

⁹ See A.L. Becker, “Text Building, Epistemology, and Aesthetics in Javanese Shadow Theater,” in *Beyond Translation: Essays Toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995).

¹⁰ See Hendrik Kleinsmiede, “Watching Wayang with Spinoza: Mentalism and (Written) Language in Nonnative Scholarship on Wayang as Evidence of Paradigmatic Constraint,” in *Puppet Theater in Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Jan Mrázek. (University of Michigan: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 2002).

¹¹ See Mrázek, *Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre*.

Javanese always saying, “*itu ada filsafatnya*” (“this contains its own philosophy”), referring for example to the way a dancer walks with bended knees to the stage, or how a small dagger (*kris*) is kept under the pillow to determine its suitability to its owner. But this, according to a *dhalang*, all boils down to one meta-idea: that in their search for perfection, the Javanese reduce everything to the formula, *manunggaling kawula gusti*, literally, the absolute union of servant and lord, of man and God.

The theme of *manunggaling kawula gusti* can be seen in its many wonderful variations, which although at the beginning looks exciting and exotic, does eventually tend to sound like a broken record. And as some scholars have shown, something actually did break, under the yoke of a highly functioning cultural monster that made everything fit into a harmonious order. The emphasis on status and hierarchy, and refinement (*halus*) is constantly performed through an elaborate display of Javanese etiquette in form, language, movement, and space. One would only need to look at the Pandhawa hero, Arjuna, who in his great capacity for concentration, his slow and minute movements, slender and girlish physique, and deep, low voice, could beat up the squeaky and frenetic demon Cakil with only a slight lift of his arm.¹² But it was precisely these cultural values, according to John Pemberton, that allowed former Indonesian President Suharto to create an uncanny “appearance of order” and “political stillness,” amidst the tumultuous events of the peasant movements and politicized killings that accompanied the establishment of his New Order government in 1966.¹³ Political indifference could not have been possible without reaffirming values such as “the mutual adjustment of interdependent wills, the self-restraint of emotional expression, and the careful regulation of outward behaviour,”¹⁴ all of which were expressions of the refinement that the Javanese loved.

My concern here, however, is not to begin analysing this cultural hegemony called Javanism and its political consequences but simply to make sense of an interesting contradiction: that in my interactions with the Javanese, I have seen on the one hand, how they love to laugh, and yet, find in their discourse a seriousness that leaves out much of the obscene, the absurd, and the corporal.

¹² Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1965), 13, 45.

¹³ John Pemberton, *On the Subject of “Java”* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 4.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 196), 29.

Losing their (punakawan) humor

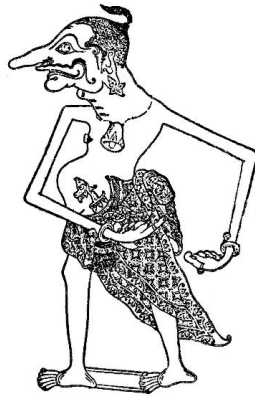
To see the contradiction, one must first know that the *punakawans*, as they appear on stage, are really funny creatures. Servants/advisors to the noble, refined *Pandhawas*, they enter the scene after midnight, which in *wayang* is a time of total chaos. This scene is called *gara-gara*, which the *dhalang* describes as a time when the earth is shaking and volcanoes are spewing out fire. But *gara-gara* has also come to mean the clown scene, when, in the midst of this turmoil, the funny-looking *punakawans* appear, seemingly oblivious to what is going on.

When Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong enter the stage, they start fooling around, throwing nasty jokes and giving each other a few slaps on the head. Eventually, their father, Semar, appears, always in search of his sons, who at that point all seem to have momentarily gone. Unlike their masters who mostly have refined, slim bodies, the *punakawans* each have their own physical (and mental) deformities. Gareng, Semar's eldest son, is a "deformed dwarf, with crooked, disjointed arms, and has yaw sores on his feet," which is probably why he walks with a limp. Petruk has a "scrawny build, huge, predatory mouth, and long, inquisitive nose." Petruk seems to be very good at getting the better of Gareng, and the crowd loves him for his practical jokes and slapstick. Bagong "has a bald head, a hernia, a bulging fat belly and behind, and virtually no nose." And he is known for "his immensely deep slow voice and impenetrable stupidity, usually taking the form of persistent misunderstanding of what his master or his fellow *punakawan* have to say."¹⁵

¹⁵ Anderson, *Mythology and Tolerance*, 43-44.



Gareng



Petruk



Bagong

But while the *punakawans* have equally captured the hearts of their audience, Semar is the clown that the Javanese love the most. And this might be because, despite his humble, coarse features, he does in fact have great status, which is important in Javanese culture. Here is a *dhalang*'s description of Semar just before he appears on stage:

As nature's turmoil subsides, a bright shaft of light pierces the sky in the east, and just as swiftly as it appeared it vanishes. In its place we see one of God's funnier creatures. Plump as a pumpkin quietly he sits like a mound of earth. He is called Clown Semar. . . . One can hardly call him a man for his breasts are long, but one can't call him a woman for he is, in fact, a man. Though extremely ugly, he is in reality the ancient god Ismaja, protector of Java, descended to earth. He acts as servant to the Prince Ardjuna. But in truth he could rule the world if he so desired, and the highest Gods could not prevent it.¹⁶



Kjahi Turah Semar

¹⁶ James R. Brandon, ed. *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 120.

In her dissertation, Sumastuti Sumukti criticizes foreign scholars who see Semar merely as a trickster. She finds their analysis “superficial and fragmentary,” and even contrary to Javanese perception. Thus, in presenting Semar, “as understood by Javanese,” Sumukti insists that we focus on the power of his wisdom, which includes “the quality of unselfishness and the conviction of the necessity of justice.” Similar to Siddharta and Christ, Semar rejects the life of a god-king and transforms himself into a servant. This, according to Sumukti, is the way that Semar tries to restore social and natural order, by exhibiting a life of humility to demonstrate “that even those who are humble should be respected.”¹⁷

In unravelling the immense power concealed in his humble stature, Semar has become a source of an overwhelming (and on-going) production of mystical interpretations. Sumukti, for example, shows how Semar is “embedded in several types of units of Five,” five being a sacred, Javanese number, which refers, among other things, to the aspects of personhood. Sri Mulyono, on the other hand, gives an exhaustive account of Semar’s origins, proving not only how etymologically, the quality of obscurity (*samar*), and consequently the capacity for disguise (*menyamar*), or how the shape of the spherical (*semat*), are all sculpted into his name; but also how genealogically, Semar is (as *Sang Hyang Maya*) Batara Guru, the highest god, and sometimes even greater, where he (as *Sang Hyang Tunggal*) is said to have given birth to the latter.¹⁸

Despite the semantic playfulness, these explanations depict Semar not as the down-to-earth clown on stage, but in all seriousness, an enigma, a profound vagueness which does not come from confusion or chaos, but from being able to accommodate all contradictions. He is spherical in shape because he is complete, which according to Mulyono is the reason why anyone who is assisted by Semar is ensured victory and success. And because of this great power, Mulyono claims that Semar is not just god’s creature (as in the *dhalang* description) but god himself.

Some say that this Javanese obsession to mysticize, to essentialize everything into a spiritual meaning, was in fact part of constructing “Java” as a “cultural spectacle,” and how this cult of *adiluhung* (the beautiful sublime) and “*halus*-ination” (this hallucinating emphasis on refinement [*halus*]) in Javanese culture were all part of a concerted effort between the conservative *priyayi* (Javanese nobility/ intellectual class) and “sympathetic Dutch

¹⁷ Sumastuti Sumukti, *An Analysis of Semar through selected Javanese shadow play stories* (University of Hawaii, 1990), 1.

¹⁸ Sri Mulyono, *Apa dan Siapa Semar* (Jakarta: CV Haji Masagung, 1989), 29-30.

Javanologists” to codify and spiritualize Javanese culture.¹⁹ Some claim that the Javanese subscribed to it as a reaction/resistance to the colonialism that deprived them of political power. To assert the cultural superiority of the Javanese vis-à-vis their Western colonizers, the Javanese soul needed to be exoticized, presented as what can never be fully comprehended/exhausted.

The legacy of such scholarship on Java clearly persists today. When Mulyono speaks of Semar’s supernatural powers, he is actually quoting Dutch Javanologists, C. Poensen and L. Seurrier, or even Theodore Pigeaud when he talks about “*semat*.” But scholars are not the only ones talking like this. When I was in Java a couple of months ago, I asked a few people (the common folk) what they thought about the *punakawans*. Proudly, they explained that the clowns are representations of the stages of one’s spiritual journey. Bagong, born out of the shadow of Semar, being the dumbest and therefore the opposite of his wise father, is supposedly a reminder of the ugliness that co-exist with the goodness in the human soul. Petruk is said to have a gaping hole on his side, which signifies a stage of emptiness that drives one to search for god. And finally, in the end, Gareng, whose deformed feet are a sign not of physical defect but of long hours sitting in meditation. These were wonderful, insightful explanations, but somehow I was not convinced that these were the clowns they grew up with or laughed at when they were a child.

Remembering Keeler, I am wondering whether the Javanese (scholars and non-scholars alike) love to mysticize because they were indoctrinated by Dutch/Priyayi scholarship, or because they *choose* to protect themselves from *wayang*’s seductive power. When Keeler asked people why they do this, they said it was so they would not forget. One must remember (*kudu éling*), which meant being mindful of God. And this required self-awareness or self-control, an “emotional invulnerability,” a capacity to remain “calm, untroubled, unmoved,” in the midst of great adversities.²⁰

People believe that through meditation and ascetic practice, this self-control could be attained. And here, we find the Javanese resistance to *wayang* becoming absolute: that this eight-hour performance, which goes on from night til dawn, is popularly regarded as one of the best exercises in the ascetic practice of staying awake. Ironically, the *dhalang*, whose seductive power the Javanese are trying to resist, becomes the epitome of self-control, in his

¹⁹ See Pemberton, *On the Subject of “Java”* and Nancy K. Florida, “Reading the Unread in Traditional Javanese Literature,” in *Indonesia*, 44 (October 1987): 1-15.

²⁰ Keeler, *Shadow Plays*, 219-220.

ability to give an all-night performance without interruptions (toilet or otherwise) and with only occasional smokes and sips of tea. Aside from the stories that entertain, the *dhalang* is the spectacle that people come to watch.

The Philosopher Farts

Sometimes, I wonder if the desire to quickly elevate the mundane, insane, corporal, and obscene to that beautiful spiritual, mystical realm has led the Javanese not so much to remember as to forget. Or maybe I underestimate their wisdom, that perhaps the Javanese believe that humour, which “turns to froth” whenever we speak about it,²¹ must be distinguished from discourse. But scholars like Keeler, against Sumakti’s objections, have provided us insightful ways to understand why the Javanese, despite themselves, hold on to *punakawan* humor: that in a society where the values of power and hierarchy bear heavily on people, the *punakawans*, because of their lack of status, offer a sense of freedom, a momentary relief from such concerns, that none of the other wayang figures can. Against “the normative stress of Javanese culture on self-control and discipline,” the clowns are not concerned about status and propriety in behaviour and language. And because of this,

They contrast with their high-status masters in the directness of their speech, in their practical concern with food and money, in their willingness to use any means, no matter how unheroic, to defeat their opponents, and in their complete lack of fortitude, self-restraint, or resistance to their own emotions.”²²

It is interesting that while Sumakti claims that Semar is the exemplar of selflessness, she forgets that on stage, he is actually always asking for donations. When Arjuna gives Petruk a hundred thousand rupiah for singing a song about ants, Semar, who is not about to be outdone, tries to give his own performance, hoping to get a hundred thousand fifty.²³ In fact, Semar, who we are told abdicated his divine status, was actually transformed to his ugly, human form as the result of his own greed. In the *Manikmaya* story, we learn that Semar had swallowed a mountain to prove to his brother Togog that he was the rightful heir to their father’s throne. But even in Mulyono’s analysis, one forgets that Semar, in this thicket of

²¹ Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1997) 34.

²² Keeler, *Shadow Plays*, 208-209.

²³ *Makutharama*, performed by Ki Purbo Asmara (Jakarta, Indonesia: Lontar Productions, 2013).

mystical descriptions, is in fact the clown who in his wisdom fails in so many ways (even his own sons make fun of him) and have no control of anything, especially when he farts.

One could here begin comparing Semar to Socrates, who in the *Symposium* is depicted as the philosopher in full control of his body and mental faculties. He is, as we know, despite being “a cave of all evil passions,” one who has proudly become “master over them all,” which according to Nietzsche could have only been achieved by making a stronger tyrant out of reason.²⁴ And I can imagine an interesting analysis, pitting the serious, rational philosopher against the wise clown. But for now I am more concerned that this paper has itself lost its grip on *punakawan* humour. In talking about *wayang*, it always shrinks “from a smorgasbord of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes to a single sense,” which is the reason why, as Kleinsmeide argues, “*wayang*... does not travel well.”²⁵

So in a desperate attempt to defy this reduction from context to text, I will try to show flashes of *punakawan* humor, which hopefully can tickle. What follows is a part of the clown scene performed by the *dhalang* Ki Tristuti Rachmadi Suryasaputra at the Art Institute in Solo in the mid 90’s. It is after 1am, and the *dhalang* is sensing that his audience is falling asleep. It is time to heighten the action and the humour, so Sugriwa, the king of monkeys, comes in, shouting at his army (and audience) that no one is allowed to sleep. A thief is on the loose, and everyone should stay vigilant. He is angry that someone in the audience is laughing (“who is laughing?”) and responds ever more firmly that if one is not strong enough, they must at least do it alternately –one sleeps, while one is awake. But people are dozing off not because of tiredness but because the demon Indrajit had cast a sleeping spell on king Rama’s entire kingdom. And so even Sugriwa, as he screams at everyone to wake up, his words, in mid-sentence, grow faint and begin to sound garbled, and we realize that he, too, is dozing off. At that brief moment, he awakens, and realizes what’s happening, but only to see that it’s a lost cause. He feels himself slipping back into deep slumber: “*Miripatku yo bliyut*” (My eyes are also closing). “And it’s because I never perform.” At that moment, the audience bursts out laughing. They know that it’s no longer Sugriwa talking but the *dhalang* himself—Ki Tristuti who for many years had been banned by Suharto to perform, is himself struggling to keep awake as he tries to deliver an eight-hour long show.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Twilight of the Idols,” in *The Works of Nietzsche*, trans. Thomas Common (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), 113.

²⁵ Kleinsemeide, “Wayang with Spinoza,” 40.

The thief enters the stage, and seeing Sugriwa, asks, “Why are *you* asleep? How will you know if a thief comes?” Sugriwa, definitely not in one of his most lucid moments, responds, “Well, how many times have I told you that if you are going to work, don’t be with women.” The demon laughs and realizes Sugriwa is talking from his sleep. He walks past Sugriwa, into the palace, and is startled to see the great monkey warrior Hanuman staring at him. “Oh damn, Hanuman is still awake. How can that be? Oh, but he’s so quiet. Is he awake or asleep?” He inspects Hanuman more closely and realizes that he is asleep but had propped his eyes open with matchsticks.

Deep in the forest, Semar and his sons are accompanying their master who is deep in meditation. Semar had just woken up, and Gareng points out sharply that he was asleep for two hours. Semar tries to defend himself: “*Aku wong tuwa ora kuwat* (I’m an old man, I’m not strong enough). And later you might need to take me to the hospital.” Petruk laughs, and says that their father is asking for donations again. Semar ignores him and instructs his sons to stay awake and watch the *pendapa* (the pavilion), and soon after, announces that he will go rest. Bagong makes fun of Semar: “Look at this old man, he cannot even stay awake. And he drools.” He goes closer to Semar and hears a sound coming out of his father’s lips: “*Poh. Poh.*” Bagong turns to Petruk, “Truk, what is ‘poh?’” Petruk laughs, “This person really does not understand anything. Old people, when they are asleep, are like that. Because they no longer have teeth. So when they breathe, and air comes out of their mouth, and passes through the lips, it sounds like ‘poh.’” Bagong is curious more than ever, and examines Semar more closely, but as soon as he approaches, Semar lets out a huge fart into Bagong’s face. Bagong is in momentary shock: “*Tak tilik, kebos!*” (“I check him out, he blows!”) Semar awakens momentarily, again to defend himself: “It’s *masuk angin.*”²⁶ Bagong retorts, “*Ora masuk angin, ngebrak!*” (That’s not *masuk angin*. *Ngebrak!*)

Here, I bring you a short intermission because my translation is beginning to fail. And we might have to add, to Kleinsmeide, that the reason why wayang does not travel well is because there’s so much humour in the language, and unfortunately, some of these Javanese words do not lend themselves easily to translation. And the problem with humour is that when one starts explaining, it just starts withering away.

²⁶ *Masuk angin* is basically the belief that wind has entered one’s stomach. The Javanese think it’s a kind of flu, and when Semar says he has *masuk angin*, he is again saying he is sick, asking for compassion for an old man.

Bagong is interesting because of what seems to be his impenetrable stupidity. They say he always misunderstands, and hears by mistake. But it might be because he's actually close to the physicality of words, that words make sense to him not because of its signification. That's too abstract for him. For him words are essentially onomatopoeic. That's why he is curious about "poh." That's why he keeps saying words like *kebos* or *ngebrak*. And if you carefully hear the word, you will understand why the Javanese call a sudden explosion *kebos*, or the sound of "ripping action," of "splitting wood," or "slapping sound" *ngebrak*. *Ngebrak*, it is the sound of fart tearing out.

Back to the story. Gareng scolds Bagong, and tells him to let the old man sleep, preaching that they should respect their elder and be responsible for watching over him. So they decide to play games to keep themselves awake. But eventually, one by one, they doze off, ironically, starting with Gareng. Petruk tries to wake Gareng up, who gets angry, saying "*Sopo turu, ora isa!*" ("Who's sleeping, [not me] no way!") But then again falls asleep. Petruk is fed up, he pulls Gareng's *sarong* (traditional garment), and throws them away. Gareng wakes up, angry, looking for his pants. And off stage, you hear him screaming, "*Kena semut! Wedus!*" ("I'm being attacked by ants! Fuck!"). Bagong tells Petruk to have pity on him, and Petruk is asking why he should when Gareng is always sleeping. And then he goes on explaining that when people help each other, it's not just saying it but actually doing it. Petruk turns around, asking, "Right, 'Gong?" But Bagong is already asleep, and wakes up momentarily to explain that if he doesn't sleep, he will get high blood pressure. Now we think that Petruk is amazing, how he manages to stay awake, as all refined Javanese do. But later we realize that Petruk can't sleep because he is troubled. He tries different positions, lying beside Gareng, on Gareng, and finally talks to himself: "Thoughts, go to sleep, thoughts, and don't wander in many directions. The school fees for my children—you just think about that tomorrow. If you don't have the money, you just go in debt. Heart, heart, do not beat so fast. The heart is the place for feelings. If you don't have the money, just let go. Whatever. It is the fate of someone who doesn't have. I am poor and there is no point thinking about it."

Suddenly, Sugriwa appears, saying that the thief is getting away. It is dark, and he tries to wake up the clowns, feeling around for them. Gareng is lying on his back, and his (puppet) stick is pointing upwards. Sugriwa feels it and says, "*Saru*" ("Obscene"). Gareng gets angry, "Leave me alone, I can do what I like!" Finally, Sugriwa manages to wake and

convince Petruk to help search for the thief. Petruk is leading the way, and Sugriwa stops him, feeling uneasy. “Petruk, go behind me. I’m the king, how come you are in front?” Sugriwa criticizes the *dhalang* for confusing the proper positioning. But Petruk argues back: “We are chasing a thief, it is not a matter of being king, but a matter of being brave.” If I were to go behind you, we would just lose time. The thief went there (Petruk points to the left), now if I had to go behind you, I would have to walk there (pointing to the right), and that doesn’t make much sense. Sugriwa is convinced, and Petruk is assuring the king that it’s okay, that one doesn’t have to follow the proper etiquette, at least not in this case. Sugriwa agrees then that Petruk lead the way, just as long as he promises that he does not fart in his face.

Scholars say that the *punakawans* are “perfect representatives of marginality” in criticizing and rejecting social distinctions. But Keeler argues that while the clowns may be “non-structural,” it does not mean they are anti-structural.

They do not affirm pan-human or pan-social values in conflict with heroic ideals and strictures. They simply present a contrast with them, an alternative rendering that does not put the normatively dominant one into question.²⁷

While Keeler is onto something here, one cannot underestimate how the *punakawans* are challenging the values of power and hierarchy. Not only in showing how stupid and stuck-up these noble heroes are, but also in divulging our own pretenses. (Everyone’s talking about how one needs to stay awake, how one must have self-control, but no one can actually do it. No one. Not the great Hanuman, nor the kings nor the *dhalang*, and definitely not even the wise Semar). But Keeler does make me think about how the *punakawans* are not trying to establish a new world order. While they are constantly testing the limits of the current order, and always come across, beyond what is tolerated/ tolerable, as gross, rude, obscene, and stupid, they do continue to affirm Javanese values, such as the respect for one’s elders, the charity of helping each other (*gotong royong*), and even social propriety encoded in Javanese etiquette (*tata-krama*). But it also makes me think how differently marginality signifies here. One always thinks of the margins as an alternative discourse, a combative position, which could erupt (at least we hope for it) into a serious social revolution. But with the

²⁷ Keeler, *Shadow Plays*, 210.

punakawans, one gets the impression that for every moment they strike, they also retreat. They poke, criticize, turn things upside down, get a good laugh, and run away with it.

The *punakawans* are known to appear on stage just after *gara-gara*, a world in turmoil. I had always thought that the turmoil was the great drama of a world in distress, in chaos, where things are not working the way they should be. But now I'm wondering if the Javanese also saw a certain kind of turmoil in laughter, that great Dionysian force that Nietzsche loved so much.