## Introduction

Can a movie be considered an effective movie until it has a spoof? Many would argue yes and others would still argue no. A recent trend of movies would seem to say that unless a movie is famous enough for a spoof it is not entirely famous at all. Many productions of spoof movies have been created over the past few years, showcasing each original movie. Horror films of all kinds were combined to create the hysterical collection of *Scary Movies*, *Dawn of the Dead* became *Shaun of the Dead*, and the many stereotypical "epic" movies were poked fun at in *Epic Movie*. This type of movie seems to be a reoccurring theme in popular culture, but why exactly is that? Audiences flock to movies as a source of entertainment with fairytale stories, happy endings, daring action, witty lines, and the list goes on and on. However, the same way people view these other genres for their entertainment, they go to their counterpart spoofs as a way to find a release from the framework that creates the movies. Spoofs are ways for directors and actors to get out of the movie paradigm. Though these "paradoxical" movies may be looked down upon for their oppositional nature, audiences still appreciate them for their benefit of humor and how they challenge an audience with their wit.

Laughter is something that people should include in their daily lives, whether through listening to comedians, watching a comedy show on television, or simply being with friends who make them laugh. Humor is a very important part of a person's life; required for daily living and something that many cannot do without. With humor being such an important part of our society's culture, people are constantly affected by it. Television and film are prime places to look for this effect. With shows such as *The Office*, *Family Guy*, or *House of Pain*, and movies like *Bruce Almighty*, *Music and Lyrics*, or *Mr. Deeds*, many people have a hard time staying away from humorous influences. People like to have their funny bone touched. If this need for

humor is so important to the general population then is it not also important to understand the persuasive abilities that humor can possess? Research has shown that the regulation of emotions is an important aspect of the human mind and is something that should be stimulated frequently to offer the body a chance to gain strength and immunities. "Indeed, the up-regulation of amusement may be particularly important to well-being, as correlations have been documented between increased humor and psychological resilience, immune functioning, and cardiovascular health" (Giuliani 714). Amusement is important and helps bodies recuperate. Something this helpful to health and function concerns everyone and warrants a closer understanding. If so many people are looking to humor and comedy for entertainment, would it not suggest that rhetoricians should do their part and look into comedy as a way to reach their audience? I would argue that if humor is as effective as it seems, then it should be important to rhetoricians as well.

The "spoofy" artifact in question is the famous Mel Brooks' parody of the legendary character Robin Hood in the movie *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. Through this artifact, we can see Brook use his mastery of humor and wit to push an agenda of controversial topics into an unsuspecting audience. This may seem to be a topic that would not interest scholars of the academic world, those who center their studies on speeches and famous dialogue, however overlooking this contentious form of media and entertainment puts scholars at a great disadvantage in our present-day society. Humor makes up a large part of our interactions, media, and communication in general. As stated, in a study on the effectiveness of humor, "It is common for most people to experience humor as often able to elevate them above the grip of negative emotions," which follows along the same reasons that people claim they see movies or any medium that makes them laugh (Strick 574). "Recently, an interesting line of research emerged that studies the relation between cognitive distraction and the experience of negative

feelings…. There is strong empirical support for the idea that negative stimuli evoke affect-congruent cognitions, even after the stimulus is no longer present" (Strick 574-75). Not only is this important to the average person who watches television, but scholars need to understand this as well in order to know how to help people and what would constitute a healthy lifestyle. Humor is not something that people include as a "part of their daily breakfast," but maybe it should be. Overlooking this would be detrimental to the understanding of cultural communication for rhetoricians.

Because humor is important to our healthy lives, we pay attention to it and are more likely to believe things that are presented to us in funny ways. There is something to be said about humor and its motivating powers. As the saying alludes to, in every instance of humor there is some truth, whether positive or negative. Humor is not simply a way for producers, directors, or actors to create an interesting play of events. Humor is important because it allows audiences to look beyond the words and into the deeper meaning behind them. This brings us to the purpose for this analysis. Following Kenneth Burke's idea of the comic frame, I will look at the movie *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, and analyze its humor for effectiveness in furthering the racial, gender, and religious agendas of Mel Brooks. This determination will come from closely looking at Brooks' rhetoric in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* through the lens of Burke's comic frame. I choose this artifact because it is one of Brooks' movies that has been looked at the least of all. Rhetorical critics look to his other, arguably more popular movies, for the critical analysis. I was interested in this movie and wanted to see how it lined up with Burke's comic frame. Initially, to understand what Mel Brooks is dealing with when looking at how he will approach his own story of Robin Hood, we will look into what historical authorities say make up the legend of Robin Hood.

**The History of the Legend**

"Once upon a time, there lived in Sherwood Forest a wronged nobleman whose lands, home, and woman had been stolen and who turned into an outlaw….With King Richard the Lionheart busy on the Crusades, the kingdom fell into the hands of his evil brother John and his dastardly henchman, the Sheriff of Nottingham" (Polidoro 22). This is the story line that is clearly understood as the description of the legendary Robin Hood. When looking into the "real-life" story of Robin Hood, however, we find that there are many different accounts of people with characteristics of a Robin Hood-like figure. There is still debate over whether such a man ever existed, or if the legendary figure was comprised of the characteristics from many different outlaws during the olden times of Europe. This means that almost every historical authority has a different story to tell when it comes to the ancient telling of Robin Hood. For a well-rounded knowledge of Robin Hood, one must consider the many different perspectives on the elusive man and his twisted past.

One of the most frequent figures to discuss the legend of Robin Hood is Stephen Knight. According to Robert Alan Segal on Knight, there are reportedly four different types of Robin Hoods found in legends. These include: "'Bold Robin Hood,' 'Robert, Earl of Huntingdon,' 'Robin Hood Esquire,' and 'Robin Hood of Hollywood'" (Segal 336). According to Segal, "The earliest Robin Hood, found in late medieval ballads and still more in 'plays, village rituals, passing references, (legal, historical, moral), and even proverbs,' is not the one with which most contemporary readers will be familiar" (366). Knight refers to Robin Hood as a yeomen, "…a free man who is not a bound serf" (Segal 366). However, there are major differences that separate this Robin Hood from the contemporary version present-day audiences know. "He has no female companion: his is a man's world. He has no nobility. He is not a Saxon confronting

Normans. He does not live in the time of Prince or King Richard. He serves no one king but whichever is on the throne. He has not taken to hiding in the forest but is naturally a part of it…. He is a trickster" (Segal 366). As Debbie Wilcox states in her article on Robin Hood, "When examining the history of Robin Hood, it is almost impossible to separate fact from fiction….still the ghost of Robin Hood has not been laid to rest" (212). Robin was a thief in some way, whether stealing from the rich or any passerby. "One can accept what researchers have unearthed, that Robin stole from travelers riding the Great North Road near Barnsdale in Yorkshire, and that he raided with his outlaw band thirty miles away in Sherwood Forest" (Wilcox 212).

A harder area to find agreement on is the problem with dates; when exactly did this Robin Hood exist? According to Wilcox, "Robin's minor rule of the English 'badlands' reputedly occurred around 1261" (212). "The tale begins with records which show that a Robin Hood did exist, in Wakefield, Yorkshire, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" (Wilcox 212). According to Polidoro, "The oldest written references [of Robin Hood] are very short. The earliest known one can be found in a long poem written in 1377 by William Langland, titled *Piers Plowman*" (22). This theory of time placement is more or less supported by other historians and reporters, "…one of the few things we know with reasonable certainty, namely that the earliest versions of the Robin Hood stories that have come down to us belong to the late Middle Ages (more precisely the fifteenth century), that is some time after he lived (if he lived) and some time after he began to be a figure of folklore" (Tulloch 191). Though many of these depictions of Robin Hood seem clouded by the mystery behind his actual existence, the ideals of a man named Robin Hood give much to legend and have created a pathway for a notorious character that became the cornerstone of the Middle Ages' rhetoric.

The history of the silver-screen Robin Hood is of equal importance to this analysis. With actors such as Douglas Fairbanks, Errol Flynn, Kevin Costner, Cary Elwes, and the soon-to-be Robin Hood, Russell Crowe, this character has developed many dimensions through various actors. "The long dive to freedom from the castle tower into the moat; a forest ambush; a rescued beauty; a villain's quivering nostrils; the archery contest; the sword fight; a well-filled pair of green tights: from hero to hokum, the Robin Hood tradition has so much for the cinema to relish and recreate" (Knight 35). The lack of definite answers to the story of Robin Hood has caused problems for the silver screen as well, "Because the Robin Hood myth has been available for cinematic adaptation for a hundred years, it is hardly surprising that no definitive articulation of the myth can be identified" (Leitch 22). Some Robin Hood stories shy away from the robbing from the rich and giving to the poor, others show Robin Hood and his merry men as marauding bands out to kill all in their path, and still others romanticize the story and place, the whole in a world of beauty and color geared towards emotions and warmth. "Since Robin Hood offers a challenge to institutional authority likely to be at once more compelling and more empathetic to modern than to medieval audiences, and capable of reaching a much larger audience, he can fairly be called a modern hero in medieval clothing" (Leitch 24). With this wide variety of stories to follow, it comes as no surprise that it eventually turned into a parody.

**How Mel Brooks Found His Humor**

Mel Brooks was born in New York City as Melvin Kaminsky in 1927 (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). "His earliest work was in television, notably as a gag writer for Sid Caesar's 'Your Show of Shows' (1950-54)….Turning to film, he wrote and directed *The Producers* (1968), s comic masterpiece of uproarious bad taste" (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). First was *Blazing Saddles* in 1974, a Western movie spoof, *Young Frankenstein*

in 1975, a Brooks' version of horror films, and *High Anxiety* in 1977, a spoof on Alfred Hitchcock's movies (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). Brooks' later movies included *To Be or Not to Be* in 1983, "Life Stinks" in 1991, and, the subject of our analysis, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* in 1993 (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). Brooks stated in an interview with Vicky Hallett, "When I work on something, I love it to pieces or I wouldn't do it. I don't think I've ever taken a job for money" (1).

"'If you stand on a soapbox and trade rhetoric with a dictator you never win,' says Brooks, 75" to Nancy Shute in a U.S. New and World Report article (71). Brooks explains that the only way to combat negative ideas is with humor. It is through this humor that we see what Brooks values the most, equality in all areas of life. Brooks has been largely involved with his religion, Judaism, and has shown this commitment through the work he does with film and movies. "Brooks, who is Jewish, saw the results of Hitler's handiwork firsthand, while serving in the Army in Europe in World War II. 'I didn't see the camps, but I saw the streams of refugees. They were starving. It was horrible'" (Shute 71). Brooks took on the task of combating hatred with his own special style; "Brooks attacked that horror with the only weapon he had—his wit" (Shute 71). Physical violence was not Brooks' way. "'The angrier he is, the funnier he is….' 'He will say things you can't believe, but you realize it's the absolute truth'" (Shute 71). It is because of this humorous turn on a terrible subject that Brooks has become a wildly popular celebrity and proponent of fighting against injustices through humor. "Their [Brooks and Reiner] wry satire of pop culture influenced a generation of comedians while it helped make Jewish humor American humor" (Karpel 19).

According to Shute, "When making Blazing Saddles, he [Brooks] relied on one cowriter, black comedian Richard Pryor, to let him know when using the 'N' word was too hurtful. And

Brooks closely read his gay colleagues on the Broadway Producers to make sure the limp-wristed jokes inflicted laughter, not pain" (Shute 71). Nothing was sacred to Brooks, but he knew that not everything would be considered funny if he did not carefully consider his audiences. Brooks was not worried about being socially acceptable or politically correct, but in keeping the laughter away from the realm of pain. "Brooks uses comedy to expose life's horrors and expunge pain" said Shute, and that was exactly what Brooks did (71). In this case, humor was not meant for anything other than education about society's ills in a hilarious manner. This kind of artifact requires a specific kind of criticism, one that deals specifically with parody and humor.

**Kenneth Burke's Comic Frame**

The common theme throughout this description of Kenneth Burke's comic frame is the idea of parody. The key to understanding the comic frame begins with understanding parody: "For a working definition, I suggest that parody is 'an imitation that distorts a target text, author, or genre'" (Trivigno 30). Parody drives the analysis by the comic frame of *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. Parody takes something that is commonly known, or structured, and turns it on its head for a different effect. "Parodic inversion, broadly speaking, upsets or overturns the target text by distorting the original in a way that reverses the stylistic effect or semantic intention. Parodic amplification hones in on one aspect of the target text and amplifies it to absurdity, often exposing its artificiality as a literary trope" (Trivigno 30). Plato addresses the idea of parody in his rhetoric, using the parody for rhetorical emphasis and addition. "Parody expresses a kind of criticism, and while this criticism could be tongue in cheek, it might also have a serious purpose. Hence, it would be a mistake to insist that no parody has serious intentions" (Trivigno 31). This is the unifying theme throughout this discussion of the comic frame; parody may seem at first to

be funny and humorous, but its purpose is of the utmost seriousness. For the purposes of this analysis, parody is useful as a positive influence on its audiences, however still contains serious tones; and thus, the comic frame is also useful as a positive influence on its audiences.

Kenneth Burke was a famous theorist and rhetorician who lived from 1897 to 1993. Burke worked closely with the ideas of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Fredrick Nietzsche basing much of his philosophy on these three historical figures. Being self-taught, Burke changed the world of rhetoric and the way rhetoric analyzes artifacts. Two books Burke wrote, *Attitudes Toward History* and *On Symbols and Society*, contain information on a criticism referred to as the comic frame.

Burke lays out the basis of the comic frame for the public in *Attitudes Toward History*. "Comedy must develop logical forensic causality to its highest point, calling not upon astronomical marvels to help shape the plot, but completing the process of internal organization whereby each event is deduced 'syllogistically' from the premises of the informing situation" (Burke 42). How comedy is framed and presented to its audience, especially in the case of a parody, allows it to take its being from societal ideas, turning norms on themselves creating comedy. Burke says multiple times that comedy is important, "Comedy is essentially *humane*, leading in periods of comparative stability to the comedy of manners, the dramatization of quirks and foibles" (42). Although satire and parody are not the same things, they are similar enough for Burke to draw a distinct connection between the two. Burke, therefore, discusses the effect of the satire on an audience: "Satire is as confusing as the plaint. For the satirist attacks *in others* the weaknesses and temptations that are really *within himself*" (49). People discuss satire many times and claim to use, but it also is misused. Burke explains it as follows in his work:

> A and B have a private vice in common (both are cleptomaniacs, homosexuals, sadists, social climbers, or the like, in varying degrees of latency or patency). At the same time,

> on some platform of the public arena they are opponents (they belong to clashing forensic factions). A is a satirist. In excoriating B for his political views, A draws upon the imagery of the secret vice shared by both. A thereby *gratifies* and *punishes* the vice within himself (49).

Two people who have some characteristic in common can become a satire if their overall beliefs or tendencies are radically different. The satire is drawn when the rhetor points out the secret characteristic that the two share. Altogether, both people have radically different views but find common ground over one secret subject, calling into question their radically different views. Satire works much in the same way parody does, turning the rhetoric around to make a point. Because satire is close to parody, what Brooks attempts in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, it is important to detail the difference between comedy and satire. Like parody, satire allows the rhetor to emphasize material that may otherwise be overlooked.

Kenneth Burke shows that comedy is important to audiences because it has a strong existence in rhetoric and thus can be of help to rhetors; "…the comic frame will appear the most serviceable for the handling of human relationships. It avoids the dangers of euphemism that go with the most heroic frames of epic and tragedy" (106). The comic frame is more direct because it uses words that describe a concept completely rather than shifting around the issue. It can be explicit while maintaining an acceptable standard because it is laced with comedy. Comedy allows for words to lose their offensive nature because it lacks an attacking tone and eases its way into the audience's mind. The comic frame does this by "…showing us how an act can 'dialectically' contain both transcendental and material ingredients" (Burke 166-67). Comedians form parodies with this recipe in mind, the looking beyond the immediate information. Instead of focusing on the bad things within the world, "The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has tricked or cheated,

since he can readily put such discouragement in his 'assets' column, under the head of 'experience'" (Burke 171).

"In sum, the comic frame should enable people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would 'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and nonrational" (Burke 171). This is the act of turning the judgment inward, into what the rhetor is embodying and forming a parody. "The comic frame is charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. It keeps us alive to the ways in which people 'cash in on' their moral assets, and even use moralistic euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes—but it can recognize as much without feeling its disclosure to be the last word on human motivation" (Burke 107). Burke states that, "… in lowering human dignity so greatly, it lowers us all," bringing rhetor and audience down to the same level (166). To properly form a parody, and make it effective, the audience must be brought to the same level as the rhetorician. When the rhetorician brings the audience down to his level to see his agenda, the audience can see where the rhetoric is coming from and why they should agree, or disagree, with the agenda. "By astutely gauging situation and personal resources, it promotes the realistic sense of one's limitations, hence has a proper ingredient of '*Entsagen,*' [renounce] yet the acceptance is not passive" (Burke 107). The comic frame offers a "realistic" perspective; it is more true to life than other forms of criticism.

The second of Burke's books is *On Symbols and Society*. "A comic frame of motives, as here conceived, would not only avoid the sentimental denial of materialistic factors in human acts. It avoids the cynical brutality that comes when such sensitivity is outraged, as it must be outraged by the acts of others or by the needs that practical exigencies place upon us" (Burke

264). The comic frame, especially in the form of a parody, not only allows but also forces the audience to look beyond the world they live in and into a world they can only imagine, all with the help of humor. It showcases the comedian and his agenda. The comedian can easily show the audience their position through humor, and that makes it much easier for the audience to be a part of the agenda and understand what it means for them. A quotation from *Attitudes Toward History* bore repeating in *On Symbols and Society*: "… the comic frame should enable people to *be observers of themselves*, *while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would 'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the nonrational" (264). Comedy allows people to look beyond themselves and their own beliefs because they can become observers of what they believe. Since the comedian must convince his audience of his agenda and beliefs, he must change the rules to something the audience can work with. While a comedian may try to convince an audience, they are also changing the rules by which the humor operates. This need to change the rules lends itself to forming a parody. Comedians must win over their audience by changing things around to the audience's point of view, easily done through parodies where the comedian can switch things around and imitate things from society. "Thus, we 'win' by subtly changing the rules of the game—and by a mere trick of bookkeeping, like the accountants for big utility corporations, we make 'assets' out of 'liabilities'" (Burke 264).

Ultimately, the comic frame switches the view from where the comedy is coming. By making a parody of how people act, talk, look, or what they believe, comedians reach their conclusions without threatening the audience or putting their humor in a negative light. A passage from *Attitudes Toward History* and *On Symbols and Society* describes that, "… in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he

has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his 'assets' column, under the head of 'experience'" (Burke 264). Again, this also bears repeating because it explains how people can, through parodies, move beyond feelings and beliefs and look into the deeper issues without instigating negative thoughts. Parody allows people to look beyond their prejudices and problems into what issue the comedy is trying to tackle at a deeper level. The comedian can deal with topics that are more controversial without causing a controversy because it brings people above the issue with humor used to present it. The comic frame is just that, a frame that changes the way an audience sees something through comedy.

Richard Keller Simon explains his opinion on Burke's comic frame and goes into depth on what that means for its use and the audience. In Simon's book, *The Labyrinth of the Comic*, Burke's notion of the comic frame is connected to philosophers, like Freud, as well as the practicality of the comic frame. Simon first makes reference to Freud by referring to his studies in humor saying, "These are major critical texts in the history of comedy and comic theory. All contain complex arguments about comedy and the comic, and many are simultaneously comic and about the comic—they mock seriousness at the same time that they take mockery very seriously" (2). As Simon says, we can mock seriousness while we take that mockery very seriously. This is what comedians do when they create parodies, further serious topics by mocking its seriousness. Humor is not used simply as a way for making people laugh because serious topics can be tackled within a humorous frame. This also brings us to the idea that the comic can be the one featured in the work. As in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, Brooks showcases himself while writing about others' problems as well. The idea that, "The philosopher of the comic lives as a comedian in the world, all the while explaining the meanings of the comic for the man in the world," speaks directly into Brooks and his place in the parody (Simon 5). Simon

makes some other comments on the subject of Freud and how jokes can form an elegant synthesis and "play" with the issue at hand. "Freud's study of the comic as a form of psychodynamic play is itself a playful book, a series of manifest Jewish jokes that hide Freud's contribution to the subject. This is his own latent Jewish joke, an elegant synthesis of philosophical concepts of play with psychological concepts of sexuality and the unconscious. Freud plays with play" (Simon 5).

Simon claims that comedy could be the salvation for civilization as long as it is not allowed to die. Simon refers back to Kenneth Burke's *Attitudes Toward History* using that to illustrate the importance of comedy in our society. "…Kenneth was arguing in *Attitudes Toward History* that civilization would finally be destroyed unless it could adopt a comic attitude: a mode of acceptance, accommodation, and celebration. 'Mankind's only hope,' he wrote, 'is a cult of comedy'" (Simons 14). Along this line of the comic frame, parody encourages equality because it brings the most unfortunate aspects of every person out in the open, dispelling their weight by making it public. The comic frame can not only convince an audience of the attitudes of the comedian, but it can also save a civilization through a parody. However, based on the comic frame, we, as the audience, are supposed understand what the comedian is trying to say; we are meant to understand the parody and not simply discount it. "We are not meant to see *through* this irony but we are meant to understand the irony for what it is…" (Simon 85). The parody we experience is a representation of something deeper, such as the saying that in every bit of humor and joke is some seriousness and truth. This enables the comic frame to be effective in its humor and offer something for comedians to use to enhance their humorous rhetoric.

Caitlin Wills Toker is another author who explains Kenneth Burke's comic frame as well. Toker states in her article "The Comic Frame and the Public Moral Argument," that "Kenneth Burke's comic frame is another particularly suitable model for rhetors wishing to 'alter, not to supplant, the social order'" (55). When rhetoricians point out mistakes in themselves and others, they unknowingly or knowingly if they understand Burke, point out the injustices of the system. This process forms the common comedy known as a parody. As Toker says: "Comic strategies are tools through which individuals can 'point out the failings in the present system.' By unmasking vices, the comic rhetor exposes unjust practices" (55). This is what Burke talks about in *Attitudes Toward History* and is also what Brooks tries to accomplish in his movies. "At the same time, the clown invites 'the audience to assume an attitude of ethical moderation' by making these practices more just. In this sense, the rhetor can 'subtly change…the rules of the game- and…make 'assets' out of liabilities'" (Toker 55). Toker uses the comic frame as a way to reach an audience of average people, about environmental and health risk, because it is easy to understand from the audiences' standpoint. But environmental and health risks are not the only places that the comic frame can be used.

Burke's comic frame has been used to analyze media before, specifically in an article titled "A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism," by Don Waisanen. This article claims that as funny as these two political comedians, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, are, "…*they are rhetorical critics*, who creatively guide audiences toward democratic possibilities. That is, they both critique and innovate upon the suasive phenomena of contemporary public life, to activate new insights about acts of human communication," (Waisanen 120). These two comedians use parody as a way to point out the injustices they perceived in the political and popular culture realms. "Kenneth Burke's

organizing principles of 'perspective by incongruity' and 'the comic frame' can illuminate how Stewart and Colbert's symbolic actions function to (re)fashion political frames of reference" (Waisanen 121). The comic frame as a parody changes the way the audience sees something that they have looked at many times before. This allows the rhetorician inside the mind of the audience as a persuader and gives them the opportunity to sway the audience to their way of thinking. The only way for this to work properly is for the rhetor to also offer an opposite thought to replace the one they made fun of. "Both Stewart and Colbert draw attention to and debunk social absurdities and contradictions, while often providing incipient alternatives to myopic orientations" (Waisanen 121). When all is done, the audience has the opportunity to view the criticisms through a different, "parodic" light. "At the same time, perspective by incongruity can remoralize, jarring people into new perceptions about their constructions of reality. The comic frame further provides what Burke calls 'maximum consciousness,' or a point from which human beings can perceive social inconsistencies" (Waisanen 121). People are shocked by what they hear comedians say, and are promptly thrust into a new way of thinking that causes them to see things in a new way. Just as Waisanen was able to show how Colbert and Stewart use the comic frame, so does Mel Brooks use the comic frame to form the parody in his work.

**A Screenplay of Humor**

*Robin Hood: Men in Tights* is the artifact for this analysis. This movie's diverse humor and parody are obviously a product of the funny-man himself, Mel Brooks. The cast for this movie includes Cary Elwes, as Robin Hood; Richard Lewis, as Prince John; Roger Ress, as the Sheriff of Rottingham; Amy Yasbeck, as Maid Marion; Mark Blankfield, as Blinkin; Dave Chappelle, as Ahchoo; Megan Cavanagh, as Broomhilde; Patrick Stewart, as King Richard; Dom

DeLuise, as Don Giovanni; Dick Van Patten, as the Abbot; and of course Mel Brooks, as the Rabbi Tuckman. Most of these actors were well-know comedians of the 1980's and 90's, making the movie even more funny and the comic frame even more appropriate. Mel Brooks attacks many problems within his movie *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, most notably those of race, gender, and religion. Each one of these subjects he approaches with expert caution, as well as with a large amount of humor. Because of the volatile nature of each of these problems, Brooks had to use special care with his advance. The movie is a near close representation of the previous film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, released in 1991 with Kevin Costner as the lead role of Robin Hood, except in the fact that everything is twisted away from the seriousness in the 1991 version to the hilarity of Brooks' 1993 parody.

The movie starts in the Holy Land of Jerusalem where Robin Hood is locked up for his Christian part in the crusades. In this prison, as ridiculous things are happening around them, Robin meets Ahsneeze, a Muslim being held in the prison for jaywalking. They break out of the prison and Robin escapes back to England. When he reaches England, Robin is united with Ahsneeze's exchange student son, Ahchoo, and the two go in search of Robin's family. When they arrive at Locksley Hall, they discover that because of back-taxes, the castle has been repossessed and taken away; they also discover that Robin's whole family has died. However, Robin does find his loyal blind servant Blinkin, who has a memento meant for Robin from his father. Then the three go off to figure out what went wrong with England while Robin was away at the crusades with King Richard. They meet people along the way, including Little John, the Sherriff of Rottingham, and Will Scarlet. They soon reach the castle and instigate a duel with the Sheriff of Rottingham. Robin then meets Maid Marion and she becomes instantly enamored with Robin, even though her lady-in-waiting Broomhilde and her Everlast chastity belt hold her

back. After this skirmish with the king and sheriff, Robin retreats into Sherwood Forest to train up villagers who will eventually fight off the prince and his henchmen.

As Robin Hood and his merry men are training, and meeting other infamous characters like Rabbi Tuckman, the Sheriff of Rottingham makes plans to have Robin arrested and killed at the archery contest set to take place the next day. Maid Marion overhears their plot and rushes off to warn Robin and his men. The next day, against Maid Marion's warning, Robin enters the contest as an old man and wins the tournament. When he wins, he is found out and arrested. To save his life, Maid Marion relents and says she will marry the sheriff if he will only let Robin live. Maid Marion and the sheriff begin the wedding ceremony, with Robin ready to be hanged should she change her mind, when Robin's merry men and the trained villagers come to his rescue. Fights break out as Robin escapes, but not soon enough as the sheriff whisks away Maid Marion to take advantage of her in the highest tower. Robin comes to rescue her and as he and the Sheriff are dueling, the memento Robin's father gave him breaks and reveals a key that fits perfectly in Maid Marion's Everlast chastity belt. Robin manages to defeat the sheriff and claims Maid Marion as his bride. They go to Rabbi Tuckman to be "married in a hurry" when King Richard appears, back from the crusades. King Richard knights Robin Hood and then gives his consent for him to marry Maid Marion, ending the saga of Robin Hood and his merry men.

**What is In a Spoof?**

When it comes to race, it is clear to see its manifestation. We find Brooks personification of race in the Dave Chappelle character Ahchoo. Because race is still an issue, even during the time of the 90's when this was filmed, Brooks saw the need to embody the issues of race within one man through the use of the comic fame. Because the comic frame would allow Brooks to

delve into this topic without looking inappropriate, it was a route that seemed best for racial jokes. Throughout the whole movie, Ahchoo is a small but steady voice of reason and the driving force behind so many of the antics performed by the merry men and their fearless leader Robin Hood. This is different then what racial stereotypes would suggest. African Americans are, by stereotype only, supposed to be unable to accomplish or make progress with anything; therefore, they are not given the lead positions in groups or organizations. However, to parody this idea, each time Ahchoo is given a role of importance, though his colleagues and enemies mock him, he accomplishes his tasks better than his light-skinned counterparts do. From the very beginning, Ahchoo is ostracized by his color, to parody the stereotypical idea held about African Americans and never in an overtly negative way. When we first see Ahchoo, soldiers are beating him up and he was left alone to fight them himself. Robin Hood rescues the young man and from that moment on, they help each other on the road to end the unjust tyranny of Prince John. From then on Ahchoo is successful with every task he ventures to take on, not always with the support of his friends and colleagues.

This first scene with Ahchoo is also where Brooks first uses the comic frame. Ahchoo is the struggling minority, in regards to race in this movie, and Brooks battles against racism with him. Because Brooks makes negative comments that go against what the audience has been told is appropriate, the audience laughs at the uncomfortable comments. This parody shows the plight of Ahchoo through laughter and exposes the ridiculousness of the racism through the ridiculousness of the parody. The audience is also challenged to understand why they laugh at what is said. The act of making fun of someone because of his race is inconsistent with what people believe to be acceptable; and by laughing at the parody formed around derogatory comments and actions, the audience acknowledges these inconsistencies. As the movie

progresses Ahchoo receives more and more support from his surrounding friends and by the end, we can witness his rise to "power" when he is given the role as the new Sheriff of Rottingham. Even when Ahchoo is given this prestigious role, he is still mocked as the village people say, "A black Sheriff?" But, Ahchoo takes it all in stride and brushes it off saying, "And why not? It worked in Blazing Saddles," an allusion to a previous Brooks movie where an African American was named Sheriff. As Brooks uses the comic frame to push his agenda against racism, the audience debunks the problem through laughter. As the parody is formed, the meaning is shown in its true light, as Brooks would see it, just as silly as the humor used to describe it. As the audience laughs, they realize they are laughing because it is inappropriate and not something they would want to encourage. This idea is the main point of Brooks' rhetoric and his purpose for employing the comic frame.

Gender is shown in this movie through the parodies of the characters Maid Marion and Broomhilde. Each of these women embodies a different part of women as a whole and serves the purpose of showing the outrageous nature of an oppressed woman. Many of the sexual stereotypes found in the world today, and when this movie was filmed, came to life in these two women giving the audience parody after parody for the subversion of women. Maid Marion is the beautiful, sophisticated, and a somewhat helpless woman who finds herself in the middle of trouble in every incident as the story progresses on. On the other hand, with Broomhilde, we see another stereotypical woman, one with spiteful, brusque features, and a controlling attitude; a woman perfect for the charge of keeping Maid Marion out of trouble. Between these two, we see a majority of stereotypes debunked by the comic frame, as Burke would say, through their antics. Maid Marion wears an Everlast chastity belt throughout the movie to signify her vow to

virginity, even though it is obvious she resents it by the comments she makes and the way she acts around her love, Robin Hood.

Here, Brooks uses the comic frame to form a parody of the stereotypes of women and their inability to refuse men. Maid Marion is portrayed as a very beautiful woman, and many men want her sexually. Since women are not mentally strong enough to refuse them, she needs a chastity belt and lady-in-waiting to make sure she does not stray away from her vow of virginity until after she is married. As Broomhilde says, to stop Marion and Robin Hood from breaking her vow, "Before you do it, you must go trough it, or else I blew it!" Women are aware of the stereotypes placed upon them by men and even other women, these stereotypes only come as a shock because they seem so wrong through Brooks' rhetoric and parodies in the movie. As they laugh at the parodies formed by the absurd actions and comments made and performed by the women, and their male counterparts, Brooks tears down gender stereotypes. Audiences see the typical woman in their mind, and then compare that to the women they see on the screen noting that they are very different. The comic frame takes a commonly held idea, such as the belief that women are equal to men, and turn it on its self, the women in the movie, for a dramatic effect and to expose the unfavorable nature of the negative stereotype. As they laugh, the audience realizes that it is not just the dialogue that is ridiculous, the ideas upholding the dialogue is ridiculous.

Religion is tackled directly with the comic frame through the director and comedian Mel Brooks. As Rabbi Tuckman, Brooks makes a very strong point about his Jewish nature. Brooks shows that there is humor in the Jewish religion, not just the numerous tales of strife and spoiled times, and can do this without offending people because he uses the comic frame and reveals things to the audience in a much less threatening manner. In Rabbi Tuckman's debut scene, he

rides up talking to his horse with language and words that resemble the usual perceptions of Jewish rabbis. Robin Hood and his merry men then confront and accuse him of trespassing on their land. Brooks turns on the charm of his character and channels everything hilarious about Jews into Rabbi Tuckman; complete with curls attached to the edge of his hat and not connected to his head, poking fun at the tendrils that seem to come standard with the Rabbi outfit as a standard issued uniform. With the sacramental wine and his job as the dreaded mohel, the man who performs the "latest fad" known as circumcisions, the audience can see the funny side of religion. Religion can be a touchy subject, not just for the audience but also for Brooks himself, being a part of the minority group as well as a persecuted group; Brooks earns his right for religious humor. However, Brooks aim is to dispel any inappropriateness that can exist with Jewish humor and turn it around into simply appropriate humor. The importance was to rid the negative stereotype that comes with humor and use the comic frame to change it around to something that they audience can find funny rather than hurtful.

Brooks makes himself the object of humor, making his character the agent for the negative perceptions about Jews. He points out the problems with society by making fun of himself, as the comic frame would suggest and require for proper humor, as far as the comic frame is concerned; this goes against much of what the audience would believe. One does not make fun of other cultures because that would not be "politically correct" or socially appropriate; but Brooks challenges this by doing it anyways through the safety of the comic frame. By going against the norms of society in the gentle manner of the comic frame, Brooks points out what is wrong with society and makes the audience second-guess what they believe about Jews. Through humor and the comic frame, Brooks can gently and easily convince his audience that following negative societal perceptions is as ridiculous as Robin Hood putting Blinkin, his blind

manservant, in the lookout tower to watch for danger; it just does not make sense and therefore is funny.

**Conclusion**

Humor is a curious thing. As pointed out by Burke, and other authors, humor and comedy can be used to put down negative societal perceptions. This may seem backward at first, like the rhetorician is actually encouraging the negative perceptions by making fun of it, but as Burke said, "… in lowering human dignity so greatly, it lowers us all" (Burke 166). While the audience laughs at what is being said they are laughing because they see major incongruities through the dialogue. What should be said, and what is being said are two different things with comedy. By making the "man" the object of ridicule, as an actor, the audience is able to see just how silly these negative societal perceptions are. Injustices are thus debunked and proved wrong. Mel Brooks saw an injustice in the world in the areas of race, gender, and religion. As he noted, people were being ostracized for these things, which to him seemed just ridiculous. We see Brooks challenge the idea of racism through the character Ahchoo. An African America seems out of place in this predominantly white European setting, but that is only the beginning of the inconsistencies. As Ahchoo is made fun of and kidded for his roles, the audience realizes that they are laughing because they know it is wrong and should not be encouraged. With gender, we find Maid Marion and Broomhilde, both female characters who inhabit the negative stereotypes of women. As they perform their silly antics, the audience laughs, thinking about their perceptions of women. By making fun of them, Brooks draws the audience away from the negative and into the positive. Finally, with religion Brooks himself takes the role of Rabbi Tuckman and changes this idea of religious negativity. As they laugh at the silly stereotypes established in the Rabbi, they realize that what they are laughing at is not as important as the

person they are laughing at. The audience realizes that the negativity being shown towards Jews is silly and not important enough to be given real acknowledgement. Overall, the ridiculousness in race, gender, and religion that people use to degrade it are pointed out and revealed through the safety of the comic frame. Brooks channels this ridiculousness into his rhetoric for the audience to see how ridiculous these things really are. Through the laughter and snickering, the audience thinks about why they are laughing and, in effect, push these negative societal perceptions away and replace them with: laughter.

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