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Comedy

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The perennial problem with comic drama is that critics have proved reluctant to take it seriously. While tragedy has long held an established place at the forefront of academic study, comedy has singularly failed to acquire this high intellectual status. The main difficulty for comedy in this context has been its perceived role as providing mere entertainment to its consumers. Tragedy is conventionally associated with portraying some of the most significant experiences of our lives, and it explores how we might cope with these. It sets out, as Simon Malpas noted in Chapter 18, to evoke responses of fear, horror, sympathy and pity from the reader or audience. In contrast to the solemnity of this task, comedy appears designed simply to amuse us and take us out of ourselves for a brief period. But although comic drama has remained the poor relation to tragedy among critics and students of literature at least over the last 2,000 years, it has never lost its popularity on the stage. During eras in which tragedy has moved out of fashion with audiences, comedy has continued to fill theatres and keep playwrights and actors in work. Furthermore, apart from its staying power as a discrete theatrical genre, comedy has also found its way into all other distinct theatrical modes including tragedy. Shakespeare's most serious works of tragic drama such as *King Lear* (1605) and *Macbeth* (1606) include considerable comic elements: Hamlet himself proves to be an adept comedian when the occasion requires. An understanding of the function and technique of dramatic comedy is therefore vital to our study of English Literature.

The roots of comedy's academic image problem can be traced back to classical writings on this topic. W. K. Wimsatt usefully sums up Plato's negative thoughts on comedy as expressed across various books of the *Republic* (c.360

BCE): 'the actions performed in comedy are a frivolous and giddy experience, demoralising to the spirit of serious citizenship' (7). Aristotle's discussion of comedy in Chapter V of his *Poetics* (c.335 BCE), is similarly perfunctory and dismissive, but it does at least provide a bedrock for future critical attempts to classify this dramatic form:

> Comedy is . . . a representation of people who are rather inferior – not, however, with respect to every kind of vice, but the laughable is only a part of what is ugly. For the laughable is a sort of error and ugliness that is not painful and destructive, just as, evidently, a laughable mask is something ugly and distorted without pain. (94)

Aristotle establishes comedy here in direct opposition to tragedy. The characters in comedies, he claims, are drawn from lower sections of society than those in tragedies and are involved with ridiculous rather than sublime elements of life. In addition, comedy is categorised – in contrast with tragedy – by the lack of authentic violence and suffering experienced by its characters. Although Aristotle devotes relatively little space to comedy in his *Poetics* (leading some critics to suspect the loss of a volume of *Poetics* dedicated to comedy) he does manage to classify the key features by which we continue to recognise this enduring dramatic form.

These key features certainly typify the golden age of English stage comedy during the early modern period, roughly between 1500–1700. The period is also marked by the variety of different types of comic productions that appeared at this time. We can classify these varieties of comedy into four broad generic types: farce, satiric comedy, comedy of manners and romantic comedy. The first of these categories, farce, forms the central element of what is generally recognised as the earliest English stage comedy, *Roister Doister*, written by Nicholas Udall in about 1553. This comic mode typically includes much physical interplay between characters and the often knockabout action that ensues almost always takes place between stereotypical character types. In *Roister Doister*, for example, the title character courts a widow, Christian Custance, who is already betrothed to an absent merchant, Gawin Goodlucke. At the end of the play, the widow and her maids beat off the unwelcome advances of Roister, and order and happiness are restored when Custance and Goodlucke are reconciled. While the slapstick elements of farce comedy are usually designed to provoke uproarious laughter from audiences, this unbridled amusement is often licensed by a moral element in the play which is usually included in a prologue or epilogue. In *Roister Doister*'s Prologue, for example, comedy is promoted as a life-enhancing force rather than a potentially destructive one: 'For Mirth prolongeth life and causeth health, / Mirth recreates our spirits and voideth pensiveness, / Mirth increaseth amity, not

hindering our wealth' (Udall 93). This desire by dramatists to justify farce comedy by emphasising the positive role it might perform in society was a common feature of the form that lasted until the twentieth century.

One form of comedy had a more enduring association with moral purpose: satire. The satiric comedy of the early modern period has its roots in the classical drama of writers such as Aristophanes. Like Aristophanes, later satirical dramatists attempted to challenge political and philosophical orthodoxies (or challenge unorthodox thought depending on the political persuasion of the playwright), and they achieved this aim by making the individuals and issues that they satirised appear ridiculous. Ben Jonson is probably the most renowned satiric dramatist of the seventeenth century, and his plays, including *Volpone* (1605–6), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), provide excellent examples of this mode of comedy. The first of these works, *Volpone*, satirises the avarice of modern city society via a cast of unscrupulous characters. In the plot, a nobleman (Volpone) pretends that he is dying while several greedy members of middle-class society (including a lawyer, miser and merchant) pay court to him in the hope of gaining an inheritance. By making all of his seemingly respectable characters appear either corrupt or ludicrous (or often both), Jonson intended that his audience scrutinise themselves for similar faults. In making the play's action into a virtual mirror of their own daily lives the audience might then successfully guard against the contagious vice that they had witnessed on stage.

The comedy of manners also features satire as its driving force. But rather than focusing on broader political or philosophical matters, this form of comedy instead targets the domestic world, attacking in particular the pretensions of polite society. Like farce, the comedy of manners dates back to classical times, and early examples of this genre can be found in the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence in the second century BCE. Their work, often featuring star-crossed lovers thwarted by a cast of stock character types, was recycled by Shakespeare (among other dramatists) in the early modern era. In *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600), Shakespeare offers a neat twist on the Roman plots from which he has borrowed by tricking Beatrice and Benedict into admitting their love for each other. The parallel love plot in this play, between Claudio and Hero, has a different focus, being primarily concerned with the issue of infidelity outside marriage. The defamatory charge of sexual unfaithfulness brought against Hero before her wedding by the jealous Don Pedro allows Shakespeare to question attitudes to this perennially contentious issue. In the process, conventional beliefs regarding gender and sexual hierarchy are interrogated and are placed in a new and revealing light. The opportunity for audiences to transfer this new light from the world of the play to their own experience of life affords the comedy of manners (like broader satiric comedy) a potential interrelationship with society.

The last of these key categories of early modern comedy drama, romantic comedy, includes several features which overlap with the other types of comedy discussed above. But romantic comedy has proved perhaps the most popular and enduring of all forms of drama, remaining today a staple element of the film industry in its modern guise as 'romcom'. Like these latter-day romantic comedies, the basic plot of their seventeenth-century counterparts might best be summed up in the following simple formula: 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl and then marries her'. Shakespeare's repertoire of comedies includes several which might be classified as romantic, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596) and *As You Like It* (1599). But his most accomplished work in this area is generally regarded to be *Twelfth Night* (1601). This play provides a number of features which might be considered typical of the form. Its unfamiliar geographical setting, Illyria, for example, allows the play's action to take place outside the 'real' world of everyday concerns. Northrop Frye has identified examples of the use of this extraordinary space across a number of Shakespeare's romantic comedies: you will, for example, recognise this dramatic shift of location in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s transition between the aristocratic world of the court and the forest world ruled over by fairy characters**.** In this location, which Frye has termed the 'green world', unconventional forms of behaviour are licensed and consequently much comic potential is released. For Frye this festive 'green world' provides a key aspect of what he argues is the archetypal function of comic drama. In these terms, the significance of the move from the 'normal world' to the 'green world' is connected with 'the victory of summer over winter' (Frye 183): cold winter is here defeated in a festive summer environment in which all things become possible. Whether or not we follow Frye in recognising this underlying mythic function of comedy, the movement into Illyria in *Twelfth Night* allows scope for fundamental shifts in the existing attitudes and patterns of behaviour of the play's characters. In the process, the move into the 'green world' permits characters to see themselves and others in often unexpected and transforming ways.

In *Twelfth Night* this shift in perspective is extended by the cross-dressing of one of the central characters. Viola, who is shipwrecked along with her brother Sebastian in the opening section of the play, decides to adopt male dress so that she might act as Duke Orsino's page. In this guise, Viola (now acting under the assumed name of Cesario) acts as a go-between for the Duke and the woman, Olivia, whom he wishes ardently to marry. While the Duke and Olivia independently discuss the nature of love with the cross-dressed Viola/Cesario, they both become emotionally attracted to her/him. The resulting comedy works on a number of different levels, all of which are accessible for the audience via their privileged knowledge of the gender

deception taking place here. In his early encounter with Viola/Cesario, for example, the Duke remarks upon her/his feminine qualities without realising the truth behind these suspicions:

> Diana's lip
> Is not more smooth and rubious: thy small pipe
> Is as the Maiden's organ. Shrill and sound,
> And all is semblative of a woman's part.
> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* I, iv, 31–4

On one level, the dramatic irony occurring here is too obvious to require further comment. But we do need to recognise the ways in which the masculine register in which the Duke addresses an individual he assumes is another man intensifies the scene's comedy. In particular, the writer's freedom here to introduce potentially bawdy material in dialogue between male and female characters imbues these scenes with comedy underscored by sexual frisson. The comedic potential of *Twelfth Night* to question assumptions about sexual identity is discussed in much greater detail by Suzanne Trill in Chapter 21.

Aside from this primary comic plot of love and mistaken identity, *Twelfth Night* also includes a separate block of comic characters grouped around Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's drunken relative. In contrast with the largely high comedy of wit and wordplay that takes place in scenes involving the Duke, Viola and Olivia, the episodes with Sir Toby typically act out a low comedy which is fuelled by drunkenness and misrule. The Russian formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin has identified this sort of festive behaviour as representing the spirit of Carnival. This concept draws upon our knowledge of those feast days in the Christian calendar in which eating, drinking and often sexual freedoms were permitted to take place, including Twelfth Night itself when Shakespeare's play was first performed. For Bakhtin, these periods of temporary liberation for the proletarian people marked 'the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalised and completed' (*Rabelais and his World* 10). In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare distils this anarchic spirit and relocates it to a domestic and seemingly bourgeois setting, thus offering a slightly different twist on Frye's notion of the 'green world'. But while the harnessing of Carnival in this way might appear to divorce it completely from its original functions (leaving behind only the excuse for drunken horseplay) the political implications of this stage business become evident as the play progresses. The festive revelling of Sir Toby and his confederates (Maria the maid, the cowardly fop Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Feste the fool) bring them into direct conflict with Malvolio, Olivia's steward. This conflict on its localised level offers a comedy of class:

the social climber Malvolio's attempt to dictate behavioural rules to Sir Toby is greeted with the withering rejoinder 'Art any more than a steward?' (II, iii, 106–7).

But the clash between these characters is equally concerned with the larger conflict between puritans and those with more traditional or mainstream religious and social attitudes. These ideological battle lines emerged from the increasing power of 'puritan' beliefs at this time: among these beliefs was a desire to prohibit theatrical performance. These tensions are exposed in the lines that immediately follow those quoted above: 'Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?' (II, iii, 114–15). This remark would resonate with those traditional members of a seventeenth-century audience who had themselves been subjected to prejudice by fundamental religious factions opposed to putatively frivolous pastimes. The new historicist and cultural materialist literary critics of the 1980s and 1990s sought to reconstruct original political and social contexts in which drama of this type was performed. These critical movements attempted to expose the contemporary power relations underpinning play texts which had been obscured by the passage of time.

The roles played by Malvolio in representing both petit bourgeois upstart and puritan killjoy offer excellent examples of elements in *Twelfth Night* that have lost much of their original resonance. These aspects of the play are fully elaborated in two key scenes which expose differing aspects of Shakespeare's comic technique. In the first, Sir Toby and his friends gull Malvolio into believing that a letter that they have forged was actually written by Olivia. This letter, which Malvolio discovers while walking in the garden, includes an apparent declaration of Olivia's love for him, along with a number of her individual requests: these include her desire to see him dressed in yellow stockings with crossed garters while wearing a perpetual smile. Furthermore, the letter includes a direct appeal to Malvolio's social ambitions in its request that he 'be not afraid of greatness': 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrown upon 'em' (II, v, 144–6). The immediate comic potential of this gulling of the ambitious Malvolio is extended by setting this scene in a public space from which the audience might witness the reactions (and hear the whispered interjections) of the eavesdropping Sir Toby. Audiences used to the dramatic convention of eavesdropping scenes in comic plays were quite prepared to suspend their disbelief regarding the improbability of stage action of this kind. In addition to the comic action that takes place within this self-contained scene, Olivia's apparent requests regarding Malvolio's future dress and demeanour set up the pleasurable expectation of a further comic set piece. This duly occurs in a later scene in which the unenlightened Malvolio presents himself to Olivia

suitably smiling and cross-gartered. Olivia who has no knowledge of the trick reacts with incomprehension and assumes that Malvolio has been affected by 'midsummer madness':

OLIVIA Wilt thou go to bed, Malvolio?
MALVOLIO To bed? Ay, sweetheart, I'll come to thee.
OLIVIA God comfort thee! Why dost thou smile so, and kiss thy hand so oft?

(III, iv, 30–3)

The opportunity for visual and verbal comedy that emerges in this scene is designed to provoke uproarious rather than thoughtful laughter and as such it draws heavily on the tradition of farce comedy discussed above.

Farce is also much in evidence in the other key scene in which Sir Toby's group take revenge on Malvolio. In this episode, the suspicion of Malvolio's madness (initially established in the cross-gartered scene) is fully exploited by his adversaries who use this as a pretext to imprison him in a darkened cellar. Trapped here with no means of escape, Malvolio is mocked by Feste the fool who uses verbal trickery to elicit a confession of lunacy from the imprisoned man:

FESTE Master Malvolio?
MALVOLIO Ay, good fool.
FESTE Alas, sir, how fell you besides your five wits?
MALVOLIO Fool, there was never man so notoriously abused: I am as well in my wits, fool, as thou art.
FESTE But as well? Then you are mad indeed, if you be no better in your wits than a fool.

(IV, ii, 87–93)

While this sort of inhumane treatment may have been less disconcerting to an early modern audience, today's playgoers often find this abuse of 'mad' Malvolio unpalatable. Indeed, actors in several recent stagings of the play have recognised these shifting attitudes towards the insane in the nature of their performance. This is an example of changing social behaviour altering the ways in which comic material is performed by players and received by audiences across different eras. What we might now regard here as an uncomfortably black comic episode in the play would, in the seventeenth century, have probably been viewed as a straightforwardly farcical episode. Malvolio's desperate claims for his sanity and pleas for his release evidently affect us now in quite different ways from those in which they struck our play-going forebears.

While we might broadly categorise *Twelfth Night* as a romantic comedy

it also clearly draws upon a wide variety of comic modes (including farce, satire, comedy of manners) to achieve its ends. In addition, the many different comic techniques used in this play (including cross-dressing, mistaken identity, wordplay, stock characters, 'green world' locations and eavesdropping) suggest the variegated nature of a drama that is broadly classified as comedy. All of the comic forms, modes, locations and techniques evident in *Twelfth Night* remained staple features of the genre during subsequent eras. Through the Restoration comedy of manners in the later seventeenth century, the eighteenth-century comedies of Richard Brinsley Sheridan and the early Victorian works of Dion Boucicault, stage comedy relied upon the familiar and the recognisable for its success. Only in the 1890s with the emergence of Oscar Wilde's comedies including *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) can we recognise the arrival of something distinctively different in this field. In making this claim for the freshness of Wilde's work we need to recognise that all of these plays appear, at least on the surface, to follow forms of conventional stage comedy. They include characters drawn from the polite society of the day; they include plots of mistaken identity and moments of high farce; they are largely predicated on the difficulties involved in love and marriage; and they end up with an apparently happy resolution of their often complex stage business. But Wilde manages to make these hackneyed elements of comedy new by refusing to obey a number of the 'rules' that had previously governed their use on stage. In doing this he arguably reinvented this genre for the modern era.

A brief examination of what is perhaps Wilde's most successful comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, suggests the ways in which he achieved this feat. One key way is through his use of characterisation. While Wilde's cast includes several of those characters whom Frye observes provide the stock types of comedy, in *Importance* these individuals fail to conform to their predestined roles. The hero and heroine figures, for example, whom Frye suggests are typically played down and made to appear 'rather neutral and unformed in character' in comedy (173), are in Wilde's play fully engaged in the comic action. Similarly, for Frye the traditional 'blocking characters' of comedy who try to thwart the lover's union are frequently lacking in 'self-knowledge' and consequently tend not to gain the audience's sympathy. In the case of Wilde's Lady Bracknell (a seemingly stereotypical blocking character in her desire to prevent the marriage of Jack and Gwendolen), her wit and verbal dexterity ensure that she sidesteps the traditional villain status the audience anticipate from this role. We can recognise this facility in Lady Bracknell during the following exchange in which she tests Jack's suitability as a husband for her niece:

LADY BRACKNELL Are your parents living?
JACK I have lost both my parents.
LADY BRACKNELL Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose *both* looks like carelessness. Who was your father? He was evidently a man of some wealth. Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?
(Wilde 1709)

Rather than finding comedy in the misguided nature of this blocking character's behaviour, we instead admire the inventive and intelligent wit evident in her dialogue. It is perhaps this question of audience sympathy that sets Wilde's comedies apart from many of their predecessors. The democratic involvement of all of the play's characters in its sparklingly witty dialogue ensures that traditional groupings of empathetic and antipathetic comic characters are deliberately resisted here.

More significant, however, than this freedom of characterisation is the play's unwillingness to conform to a recognisable moral code. Instead of the conservative status quo of morality being restored in the last act, the flippancy which has marked the cast's attitude to prevailing social mores throughout the play is simply reinforced in its ending:

JACK Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?
GWENDOLEN I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.
(1740)

This exchange is typical of the play's refusal to take anything seriously, including marriage. Just when the audience feel that they are about to witness the lovers retreat into seriousness or sentimentality, the heroine neatly sidesteps this anticipated change in register. While we have grown familiar in more recent years with sardonic and self-aware stage comedy, its Victorian audience recognised in drama of this kind a departure from what had gone before. The shock of the new that plays such as *Importance* delivered in the 1890s was registered by Wilde's contemporary playwright George Bernard Shaw. His feelings that the play was 'really heartless' and 'essentially hateful' offer a revealing perspective on the play's contemporary impact (Shaw 286, 287).

While it would be misleading to overstate the revolutionary effects of Wilde's comic drama, it did mark a shift towards a new freedom in this field that emerged in the twentieth century. This lack of restraint is recognisable,

for example, in the work of modern dramatists who have arguably pushed the limits of this genre: this group might include Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and Caryl Churchill. But while comedy and tragedy often appear inextricably intertwined in these stage manifestations, modern comic drama of this type still largely relies on many of those forms discussed above. As Alexander Leggatt argues in relation to one aspect of stage comedy, 'Through the changing properties, tastes and social conditions of different periods, the comedy of the disruptive body carries on, changing its language but not its essential statement' (14). Roger Savage's note in Chapter 16 of the 'time-honoured comedic pattern of a movement from darkness to light, from conflict to resolution' conveys eloquently the nature of this 'essential statement'. This is also manifestly true of comic drama at large, which appears set to retain its prominent place in stage history irrespective of its continuing lack of academic regard.

NEXT STEPS

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New York: Atheneum, 1966.
Leggatt, Alexander. *English Stage Comedy 1490–1990*. London: Routledge, 1998.
Stott, Andrew. *Comedy*: *The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2005.