Comedy Through The Ages

Part I

Lecture 1: The Scope and Range of Comedy
Lecture 2: Some Critical Approaches to Comedy
Lecture 3: Greek Comedy—Historical and Literary Contexts
Lecture 4: Aristophanes's *The Frogs*—The Comedy of Acting
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Lecture 10: Shakespearean Comedy II—*The Taming of the Shrew*
Lecture 11: Classical French Comedy—Molière and his Worlds
Lecture 12: Molière's *Tartuffe*

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Comedy through the Ages

Scope:

This course is about the history and scope of comedy in Western literature. Its goals are to survey the genre from its origins in Greek and Roman theater through medieval, Renaissance, and modern literary forms. Comedy lies in the unexpected: in reversals of experience, inversions of social hierarchies, the undermining of meaning, and shifts in public and private life. What is funny often resides in such inversions, whether they are large-scale upendings of political and cultural life (as in Aristophanes, Chaucer, Rabelais, Beckett) or more finely nuanced twists of words that give us pun and parody (as in Shakespeare, Sheridan, Wilde, Coward, Loos). This course highlights the comedic as a literary genre and as a way with language and a habit of life.

This course also explores a set of key terms central to the forms of comedy and their social history, including such general terms as pun, parody, satire, and performance and such historical and generic categories as Old Comedy and New Comedy, fabliaux, and wit. The course also addresses a set of larger social issues that frame the development of comedy: for example, the relationships of class and power (especially in the portrayal of masters and servants), the relationships of age (especially in the portrayal of parents and children), and the relationships of gender (in the portrayal of men and women). Characters in comedy are always pretending to be people they are not. The stories of these impersonations constitute the main plots of the comic works we will examine.

We will also try to understand the comic tradition through a set of theoretical or critical frameworks. Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin explored the history of laughter; we will use his concepts of the grotesque and the carnivalesque to understand medieval and Renaissance comedy (as well as more modern cases). Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, developed a theory of jokes that is central to many of the twentieth-century works we will explore. Finally, Susan Sonntag, the cultural commentator, has advocated for the importance of "camp" (the theatrical, self-parodic display of personal wit) in modern literature and society. This course locates comic plays from Sheridan's *The Rivals*, through Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, to Coward's *Blithe Spirit* in this context.

Although the primary focus of the course is the history of comedy as a theatrical form, we will spend some time with narrative poems and works of prose fiction to explore their role in shaping social notions of the comic. We will also look at these kinds of works to see just how "theatrical" they are. Finally, the course suggests some ways of understanding contemporary comic forms (film, television, and stand-up) in the larger history of the comic tradition. In the end, the course hopes to provoke us to consider a central literary form with impacts that are social and cultural, personal and public, poignant and uproarious.
Lecture One

The Scope and Range of Comedy

Scope: This opening lecture introduces the central themes and approaches of the course. It seeks to outline some of the central problems to the historical study of comedy, as well as to define some of the key terms of our inquiry. The lecture then moves to a set of historical and critical grids for approaching classical comedy. This course embodies Aristophanes to Seinfeld, the salon to the saloon, and will include the likes of Francois Rabelais no less than Oscar Wilde.

Outline

I. What is comedy?

A. Comedy is a literary genre that has, for centuries, been distinguished by several defining features of plot, language, character, and setting.
   1. Plot: Byron wrote: “All tragedies are finished by a death/All comedies are ended by a marriage.” We will examine the plot-driven nature of comedy and the place of archetypal criticism.
   2. Language: Comedy is often distinguished by the colloquial, the low, the vulgar, or the verbally playful; pun and wordplay have major roles in comedy.
   3. Character: The figures of comedy are often everyday, rather than elevated, types; they may mock the “elevated” and undermine archetypes of emotional or psychological condition.
   4. Setting: Comedy is often set in places of remove; the country vs. the city, the forest vs. the court. But many comic forms are, in fact, city and courtly.

B. Etymology of the word comedy.
   1. The Latin *comedia* comes from Greek words meaning “revel” or “merrymaking,” keyed to village song or dance. Central to the etymology of comedy is the idea of the village.
   2. Early uses of the word in English are in the medieval period: Chaucer’s *Trostus and Criseyde; Chronicle of Troy*. Dante’s notion (in Italian) of the Divine Comedy is keyed to the salvific or, at the very least, resolution-driven quality of the plot.
   3. The classical forms of the dramatic genre: comedy versus tragedy.
   4. Medieval notions of comedy versus tragedy are not dramatic but are literary and thematic; they are keyed to content and to effect on audience or readership.

II. Central problems and themes of the course.

A. Each of the sections above can be seen as a thematic node for the course. Central to each is a relationship of inversion, of undermining of expectations, or of transformation.

B. We may also see the key thematic structure of the course as drawn from the legacy of two kinds of comedy established in the ancient Greek world: Old Comedy and New Comedy.

III. Old Comedy versus New Comedy.

A. Old Comedy is the form associated with Aristophanes (c. 450–388 B.C.).
   1. It uses the language of farce and carnival.
   2. It undertakes social commentary, often keyed to a satiric or reformist spirit.
   3. The audience is the community and the public; themes and settings are often political or social institutions and their foibles.
   4. Scenes of dressing and disguise are keyed to travesty or burlesque.
   5. The form often hinges on elaborate parodies of preexisting texts or public and literary figures.

B. New Comedy is the form associated with Menander (fl. 320–292 B.C.).
   1. It employs the language of social ritual.
   2. It uses a marriage plot; a young man and woman overcome obstacles to their successful marriage.
   3. It often hinges on scenes of disguise and recognition.
   4. Servants and rogues are central figures.
   5. The subject is the nature of family life and private desire, not so much public or social reform.

C. New Comedy forms the legacy of Roman theater and much Western literary comic theater (e.g., Shakespeare, Sheridan, Wilde, and so on).

D. Old and New Comedy often define the “other” as the butt of comic insult or appearance.
   1. Slaves, Persians, non-Greeks (and, later, non-Romans), as well as individuals from different dialect regions (true of both Greek and Roman theater) function as characters against whom the society measures itself.
   2. The legacy of comic otherness is the legacy of ethnic humor and of the self-theatralizing of marginal groups in later Western culture (e.g., the history of Jews as stage stereotypes from medieval drama to the present).
   3. In many ways, the ethnic or social other becomes the figure for theatricality itself. Consider, for example, Plautus’s *Pseudolus*, the slave who is the great trickster; indeed, his very name connotes the pseudo, the fake, the illusory, the theatrical.
E. But it is important to see the ways in which Old and New Comic elements blend throughout history.
   1. Old and New Comedy might be seen as convenient axes along which comedy develops as a genre.
   2. Old Comedy seems to have its legacy (or its similarities) in vaudeville, farce, and physical burlesque; New Comedy seems to have its legacy in the more “literary” or scripted forms of comic understanding.
   3. Think of the Marx Brothers, for example, as Old Comedy figures trapped in a New Comedy world.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
   1. What are the differences between Old Comedy and New Comedy?
   2. How can you apply the distinctions between Old and New Comedy to more modern forms of comic performance (e.g., the Marx Brothers, popular comedy teams, stand-up, situation comedy)?

Lecture Two

Some Critical Approaches to Comedy

Scope: This lecture introduces three theoretical and critical approaches to comedy. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the literary historian Mikhail Bakhtin, and the social critic Susan Sontag have, each in their own ways, explored the nature of laughter and the cultural place of humor. Each provides us with insight into why we think things are funny; each suggests ways of understanding the psychological, the social, and the cultural impact of humor. Their work will come into play directly throughout this course, but it may also give us ways of understanding our own notions of the humorous in everyday life.

Outline

I. We consider three major theoretical and critical approaches to comedy.
   A. Twentieth-century writers have long sought to understand the nature of comedy—and, in turn, the nature of humor itself—through a variety of social, psychological, and cultural perspectives.
   B. As a framework for this course, we will bear in mind three highly influential writers who have worked in each area.
      1. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) sought to understand the comic by analyzing the psychology of laughter.
      2. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) sought to understand the comic by analyzing the social function of carnivalesque: of public displays, of grotesque letting go, of parodies and rituals, of masquerades, and mock performances.
      3. Susan Sontag (b. 1933) has sought to understand the comic by exploring what has come to be called “camp”: a performance aesthetic in twentieth-century culture that hinges on theatrical parody and playful excess.
   C. Each of these three writers has a direct impact on specific texts we explore in the course.
      1. We will look at Freud on the modern conditions of the comic, especially in our reading of Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.
      2. We will read Bakhtin on Rabelais and Chaucer, but more generally on relationships of language, humor, and the body from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century.
      3. Finally, we examine Sontag on modern performance forms, but also on a tradition of wit and display from Sheridan and Wilde through Noel Coward to the present.
II. Freud and the theory of the joke.

A. Freud is largely concerned with the psychology of laughter and the nature of jokes as linguistic phenomena.

B. He associates jokes with dreams, because both represent estranged forms of experience that may shed light on the deeper or repressed features of human consciousness.

C. Freud develops, however, a notion of the comic from his work on jokes.

D. He states: "The comic arises in the first instance as an unintended discovery derived from human social relations. It is found in people—in their movements, forms, actions and traits of character..."

E. He identifies certain forms of humor that make individuals appear comic. These include:
   1. Caricature
   2. Parody
   3. Travesty.

F. Many of the selections we will look at work in these ways, but they also work according to another of Freud’s notions: "where someone has seized dignity and authority by a deception and these have been taken from him in reality."

III. Bakhtin and the idea of the carnivalesque.

A. The Russian literary critic and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin is perhaps best known today for his work on the novel and for his study of Rabelais, which we will use in the course.

B. Bakhtin develops a notion of the carnivalesque and the grotesque.

C. Carnivalesque refers to the phenomenon of social exaggeration and parody at work in public ritualized feast days or celebrations.

D. Grotesque refers to the phenomenon of physical deformity and exaggeration, often accompanying carnivalesque, but central, too, to what Bakhtin sees as the rise of European modernity.

E. Central to these notions of laughter and comedy are ideas about the body, its physical form, its social representation, and its rituals.

F. Bakhtin also argued that the history of laughter is social history. What place does laughter have in society, and how is canonical literature keyed to enjoyment and education? Thus, Bakhtin argues that the periodization of literary history can be written as a history of laughter; that is, classical, medieval, Renaissance, and modern are all definable, he argues, by their attitudes toward laughter.
   1. Classical: Laughter is the defining characteristic of human behavior; it is keyed to social ritual, individual identity, and public life. It is therapeutic, too, in the health of the individual body.
   2. Medieval: Laughter is not sanctioned by official culture (i.e., the Church); rather, it becomes the purview of folk or popular celebration. Such celebrations are condoned, in a limited way, by the official culture only on such occasions as the feast of fools or carnival (i.e., days during the year when unbridled festivity, public mockery, playful excess, and dress-up were permitted).

3. Renaissance: Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning; it helps us understand the world itself. Laughter is possible in canonical literature (i.e., high culture), because it enables the public to view the world anew and, in the process, find one’s place in creation.

4. Modern: After the Renaissance (what Bakhtin is really talking about here is the French “classical” period of the seventeenth century), laughter loses its public sense of universality and becomes, instead, an occasion for individuals. Laughter is a momentary release, a private response, or a form of amusement (often centered on socially low figures). It is no longer a controlling idiom for social life.

IV. Sontag and the notion of camp.

A. The contemporary critic Susan Sontag has synthesized from a variety of sources a definition of camp as a central feature of twentieth-century public life.

B. Camp may be thought of as the self-conscious theatricalization of parody.

C. It has been seen as a discourse of gay culture since the 1920s (the word seems to originate in the 1920s), and it often centers on the public display of parody and self-parody, the tension between high and low culture in contemporary life.

D. Sontag writes: “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.”

E. Camp is important for us when we look at the comedy of artifice, including the comic theater of Sheridan’s The Rivals, Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, and Coward’s Blithe Spirit.

F. What Sontag calls the “flamboyance” of camp characterizes a strain of comic theater and performance well up to our own time.
Lecture Three

Greek Comedy: Historical and Literary Contexts

Scope: This lecture traces the historical and literary contexts of Greek comedy. It locates that tradition’s origins in public performance and social ritual. The lecture also surveys some of the major texts, authors, and performance traditions. Finally, it looks forward to the specific example of classical Greek comedy we will explore in the next lecture, Aristophanes’s The Frogs.

Outline

I. The origins of Greek comedy.

A. Comedy developed in Greece out of the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine (Bacchus in Latin).
   1. Revels and processions were central to his worship.
   2. The animal choruses in early Greek comedies suggest that the older rituals had a sense of animal masquerade.
   3. There was song, costume, and phallic display (ritualized and symbolic).

B. Eventually, these revels and rituals came to be codified.
   1. Texts were actually composed for the ritual performance.
   2. Individual actors or speakers emerged from the choral group.
   3. Soon, a second actor was added, and plotted scripts were created.

C. The first official production of comedy (plays as we understand them) was in Athens in 486 B.C.
   1. Although we know the names of the early writers, we have no texts from that event.
   2. We can reconstruct the major themes and issues of these early comic performances.

D. These attributes included:
   1. A mythological plot, often with a travesty or burlesque of heroes or gods, such as Dionysus, Odysseus, and so on
   2. Fantastic, imaginative journeys
   3. Satire and attack on contemporary political events and figures.

II. Aristophanes (c. 445–388 B.C.) is the earliest comic writer from whom we have complete surviving plays (eleven are extant).

A. His plays range widely in topics and themes.
   1. There are plays about the pretenses of philosophy, the limitations of knowledge, and the aspirations of the intellectual. Such plays include, most famously, The Clouds, a satire and parody of Socrates and his philosophical world.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. How can the works of Freud, Bakhtin, and/or Sontag help you understand what is funny in everyday life?
2. How is contemporary comedy, especially on television, influenced by notions of Freudian psychology, of the grotesque as Bakhtin considers it, and of camp as Sontag defines it?
2. There are plays about the abuses of political power, the foolishness of rule, and the waste of war. These include, for example, *Acharnians*, *Peace*, and most famously, *Lysistrata*, which imagines the women of Athens withholding sex until their menfolk stop making war.

3. There are plays about the pretenses of literature, about just what the function of poetry and drama really is, and in turn, about the social function of the playwright. These include the famous *Frogs*, which we will look at in detail in the next lecture.

B. His plays are excellent examples of the traditions of Old Comedy.
1. They often have burlesque or mocking figures of the gods and heroes. Hercules in *The Frogs* is an excellent example.
2. They alternate individual character speeches and dialogues with choral interludes.
3. They are full of fantasy. Wild journeys (e.g., the journey to Hades in *The Frogs*), crazy creatures (the animal choruses of *The Birds* and *The Frogs*), and imaginative creations (e.g., bringing back the dead playwrights at the end of *The Frogs*) make these plays dazzling displays of the theatrical imagination.
4. They are full of obscenity, some of it untranslatable, but much of it as obvious and funny now as it was 2,500 years ago. What other playwright, in what other language, could come up with a single verb that means “to have a large white radish shoved up your buttock”? The verb, by the way, is “raphanido.”
5. They encompass dialects and nonsense. The decay of language is a central theme of the comic tradition, and no one shows language at its silliest—be it regional dialects, the jargon of the overeducated, or the mumbo jumbo of the religious and political elite—better than Aristophanes.

III. The social and professional organization of Greek comedy.

A. Greek comedy, like tragedy, was supervised by organizers of dramatic festivals.
1. The dramatist was often his own producer.
2. Actors were paid by the state. Comic poets were paid.
3. Plays were judged and prizes awarded. Aristophanes’s *Frogs* won first prize in 405 B.C.

B. The physical nature of the Greek theater.
1. Plays were performed in open air and in daylight.
2. There were very few stage props and settings (N.B.: the wheeled cart of Charon in *The Frogs* is unusual). Often, the stage had only one door.
3. Aristophanes often exploits these limitations for self-conscious comic effect; that is, he uses the conventions of the stage against themselves.

4. Reading the plays of Aristophanes can help us understand the historical conventions of Greek comedy, but the plays can also help us understand how a Greek dramatist could criticize those conventions for additional comic effect.

C. Men and women.
1. All the actors were male, regardless of the parts they played. There is some evidence that women occasionally would appear on stage as non-speaking dancers or figures of spectacle.
2. Almost everyone in the audience was probably male.

D. Language and gesture.
1. Actors wore large masks; sometimes, actors playing a male role would wear an exaggerated phallus.
2. Because of the limitations of masking, emotion and response had to be conveyed verbally and descriptively, rather than through the face or with gestures.

E. Texts and transmission.
1. All the texts of the Greek plays are late; they survive for us only in medieval manuscripts. No ancient Greek copies of Greek texts survive for us. The earliest manuscript of *The Frogs*, for example, is from the tenth century A.D.
2. Nonetheless, we know a great deal about Greek comic traditions from contemporary witnesses, from Roman commentary, and from the parodies and satires in the plays themselves.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. What elements of the Greek comic can you find in modern comedy as you have experienced it?
2. It is very difficult for us to reproduce exactly the historical environment of Greek comic performance; many modern productions are “modernized.” How would you put on a Greek play, and what modern resonances would you find with mask, costume, gesture, and ritual?
Lecture Four
Aristophanes's *The Frogs*: The Comedy of Acting

Scope: Aristophanes's *The Frogs* is one of the major surviving plays of Greece's greatest comic dramatist. We can approach this complex and wildly funny play in many ways: as a political satire, as a lewd burlesque, and as a commentary on the traditions of tragic drama in Athens. For this course, we will concentrate on the ways in which *The Frogs* exemplifies our key themes: the problem of acting itself; the relationship among actors, gods, and politicians; and the comic devices of impersonation, dress-up, pun and wordplay, and parody. *The Frogs* also exemplifies many of the features of Greek Old Comedy, and its major structure (especially the "buddy act" of Dionysus and his servant Xanthias) will be seen to resonate with many of the later and more modern comic works we will explore.

Outline

I. Aristophanes's *Frogs* is the first major literary work we will explore. We begin with a text that exemplifies the key themes, idioms, passages, and motifs of the course.

A. *The Frogs* is a play about acting itself.

B. Its central premise lies in a conception of the god as actor—and, in turn, of the actor as god.

C. Dionysus enters in costume as Hercules; he comically struggles with the problem of impersonation throughout.

II. Main lines of plot.

A. Dionysus and his servant Xanthias enter; Dionysus is dressed, imperfectly, as Hercules, wearing the skin of the lion.

B. They come to Hercules's house because they want to find the way to Hades (Hercules had gone to Hades to steal Cerberus, which was one of his twelve labors).

1. Dionysus wants to go to Hades to see the shades of the dead dramatists, especially Euripides (who had died, along with Sophocles, in 405 B.C., just before the composition of *The Frogs*).

2. Dionysus is the titular god of the theater in ancient Greece. He wants to go to Hades and bring back Euripides.

C. In the play, the way to Hades is presented as a stage set. Thus, the play contains a self-conscious reflection on how the stage creates the world. The play seems to ask, "Is hell really only a stage set?" Or more to the point, "Is being on stage the equivalent of being in hell?"

D. After a series of directions and encounters, Dionysus and Xanthias reach Charon, who will ferry Dionysus across (Charon will not ferry slaves).

E. Dionysus is ferried across to the sounds of a chorus of frogs.

1. As in many of Aristophanes's plays, the title is taken from the chorus scene.

2. The frogs offer mimetic or onomatopoeic lines and are dressed in ways that provoke the audience to question the nature of the function of the chorus—and their own function in the theater.

F. Dionysus meets up with Xanthias on the other side, but they are not welcome in Hades.

1. The doorkeeper thinks Dionysus really is Hercules, who was a dog thief. The joke here is that Hercules brought back Cerberus from Hades.

2. But Xanthias says to Dionysus, "you wear the gear and spirit of Herakles. Act according." This is an important statement about performance and dress, which are key themes of the play.

G. Dionysus and Xanthias then change clothes and, after a comic bit of travesty, they resume their regular appearances. This scene of cross-dressing comments on the theme of theatrical impersonation raised by the play. Are we who we are because of how we dress or, having dressed in a certain way, are we expected to act accordingly?

H. This scene in hell raises some important thematic issues generally.

1. The population of Hades is presented as watching a performance; is watching a play like being in hell, now? Is the theater a kind of underworld?

2. There are many politicians in Hades; are politicians just actors? If the shoe fits, the play says explicitly, wear it; that is, the ruler is expected to live up to the trappings of rule.

I. After an interlude on current political events in Athens, Xanthias has a conversation with one of Pluto's (i.e., Hades's) slaves. Their discussion raises the issue of how one can act properly as a slave. Is being a slave, in other words, simply playing a part?

J. Euripides and Aeschylus (who had died about fifty years before) get into an argument about who is the better dramatic poet.

1. Here, they raise the question of what the social function of dramatic poetry really is. They are really debating the nature of literature.

2. Euripides says, "I staged the life of everyday."

3. Aeschylus argues that drama should incite the audience to virtue and, thus, makes a claim not for the representative but for the moral responsibilities of literature.
Lecture Five

Roman Comedy: Themes, Traditions, Contexts

Scope: Roman comedy developed, to a large degree, from Greek literary models. By the second century B.C., several comic playwrights had developed a highly wrought version of comic theater emerging out of public festivals and moving toward autonomous, paid-for performance by professional actors and staff (the greg, or company of actors). This version of comic theater was largely based on the Greek playwright Menander's style of New Comedy. Plautus (254–184 B.C.) is, with Terence, perhaps the best known of the Roman comic writers of the second century. About twenty plays survive, many of them based on Greek models. This lecture reviews the central features of Roman comedy (especially that of Plautus) that bear on the materials of the course and on later comic traditions and inheritances.

Outline

I. Roman comedy is the theater of impersonation.
   A. Characters are constantly dressing up, dressing down, feigning, preening, doubling, and so on.
      1. Masquerade, impersonation, confusion of identity—all are deployed not just for local comic effect, but for the larger thematic purpose of developing the idea that the theater is itself the site of identity formation.
      2. Furthermore, these activities argue that public life is itself a series of masquerades and performances.
   B. This central plot device (the ruse and disguise) becomes the means by which comic theater comments on itself.
      1. This device also is part of what we can call the violation of dramatic illusion, or self-conscious reference to the theatricality of the performance.
      2. This feature of Plautine comedy is familiar to us from later comic traditions. Characters call attention to the fact that this is a play, often through direct audience address.
   C. In Plautus's plays Pseudolus and Miles Gloriosus, scenes of disguise and impersonation are themselves scenes of acting.
   D. Roman comedy (i.e., in the New Comic tradition) is plot driven; in Plautus, in particular, plot is the driving force of the comedy. There is little plot to speak of in Aristophanes. In The Frogs, for example, we see a pretense, a set-up, a situation, but no plot as such.

Readings:


Questions to Consider:

1. What is funny about this play? Do you respond to the humor in a modern way?
2. How do Dionysus and Xanthias come off as a team? How does Aristophanes seem to anticipate traditions of "buddy" comedy?
3. What is the purpose of all the dressing (and even cross-dressing) in this play, and how does it add to the comic, as well as the social, effect?
II. These Roman plays are about the arts of theater, and what makes them comic is not only the way they subvert the order of public society, but also the way they subvert the order of literary drama.

A. Thus, monologues or soliloquies are often used by a central character to develop plot, announce character entrances or actions, comment on action, moralize on the topic at hand, delineate the character of the speaker, or simply add to the comic effect.

B. Scenes of eavesdropping or asides were frequently used for comic effect, to create the tension in the audience for the resolution of states of knowledge; that is, as one character or set of characters knows something, we anticipate the other set of characters to know it.

C. Entrance and exit announcements are used to name characters in the play or call attention to particular physical or moral features of characters for the audience.

D. Scenes of reading, which are rare but do occur in Greek drama, are often central to the humor of Roman plays. The letter or the book becomes a figure for the script; the actor in character becomes the actor as reader.

III. Key social issues in Roman comedy.

A. Family, marriage, lineage, class: The need exists to maintain legitimate inheritance and social standing. Often, young love is a threat to that (because the son wants to marry or have a relationship with a woman of a different gens, family, or social class).

B. Money, goods, value, commerce, exchange, hospitality:
   1. The idea of maintaining harmonious social and economic relations outside the family and within the social order is important.
   2. Plautus’s plays are often about money, payment, value, and commodity. They call attention not just to the commodified quality of urban Roman life, but to the key point that the comedy is itself a paid-for public performance.

IV. Plot motifs.

A. For the first theme, of family, marriage, and so on, the primary comic tension is between fathers and sons. For the second theme, of money, goods, and so on, the primary comic tension is between masters and slaves.
   1. The father > son hierarchy is subverted by an illicit or disapproved of sexual relationship.
   2. The master > slave hierarchy is subverted by surreptitious machination and control of others.

B. The comic resolution of these two reversals hinges on scenes of social and political ritual. For the father/son relationship, it ends with the successful union of the boy and girl. For the master/slave relationship, it ends with the manumission (freeing) of the slave.

C. During the third century B.C., Rome was engaged in two so-called Punic Wars. These were wars against the North African city-state of Carthage (the most famous episode of which was Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps with his elephants), and they brought Rome in contact with both North African peoples and the Greeks. By the end of the Punic Wars, Rome was established as a great Mediterranean power.
   1. Roman identity is shaping itself against a clearly defined other; what we today might call ethnic or national, or even racial, identity, is central to Roman political life.
   2. Plautus wrote toward the end of the second Punic War and afterward (his dates are 254–184 B.C.; Pseudolus can be dated to 191 B.C.).

V. Plautine comedy, in this historical and cultural context, is thus largely about the making of a Roman identity and the threats to such identity: threats to relationships of family, economics, slavery, gender.

A. Plautus’s plays are often based on Greek originals (e.g., Menander and the New Comic legacy). Although they are Roman in idiom and texture, they are set in the Greek world (e.g., Pseudolus is set in Athens; Miles Gloriosus is set in Ephesus, which is Greek-speaking Asia Minor).

B. Both of these plays illustrate the major themes and devices of Roman comedy.
   1. Both show us figures of illusion or masquerade.
   2. They use figures of public swagger and exaggeration.
   3. Plot devices hinge on payment or retribution.

C. In particular, consider the figures of the pimp and the cook in Pseudolus as figures for the dramatist himself.

D. Even the “marriage plot” in Pseudolus hinges here on payment and retribution, on the idea of woman as commodity (she is mute in this play).

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
I. What are the major themes of Roman drama?
2. How do the central devices of Roman New Comedy remind you of many of the key devices of modern comedy?

Lecture Six
Plautus: Play, Performance, and the Arts of Theater

Scope: This lecture looks closely at two plays by Plautus that exemplify the Roman, New Comedy tradition. The plays Pseudolus and Miles Gloriosus are the best known of Plautus's plays, in large part because they offer up the most precisely delineated figures of the Roman comic theater: the clever slave and the swaggering soldier. Both figures, though, are not just representatives of Roman society or of Plautine drama, but are also emblems of a certain kind of theatricality. Both of these plays are really about the theater itself. They are full of characters who stand in for the playwright and actor, and they are also full of plot devices that are concerned with role-playing, impersonation, and display. Plautus's comedies undermine the order of everyday society to reveal how much of public life is really a performance.

Outline

I. Pseudolus was performed in 191 B.C., when Plautus was about sixty-three. It is one of the longest of Plautus's plays, and its plot centers on an old story.
A. The slave helps a young man rescue his beloved from prostitution.
   1. This is a stock story from the older Roman plays.
   2. As a basic New Comedy plot, it concerns itself with generational shifts, money and love, and sex and power.
B. The main characters are Pseudolus, the slave (whose name means "the liar" or "the impersonator"), and Ballio, the pimp.
   1. Both of them are figures from Roman society and comedy.
   2. Both, too, are representatives of theatricality itself.

II. The plot lines of the play script out a story of theater itself.
A. The young man Calidorus enters first, with his father's slave Pseudolus.
   1. They are reading a letter.
   2. This long opening scene shows how important texts are to the play.
   3. For it is as if the plot line of the play is written in the letter. In other words, it is like two actors reading a script.
B. Ballio the pimp then shows up.
   1. He is constantly manipulating his women, dressing them up, putting them out to work.
   2. Think of him as a figure for the stage manager or director.
   3. Think of him in contrast to Pseudolus, the maker of lies or fictions, the playwright.
C. Ballio has taken and sold Calidorus's girlfriend. He says that she was sold, "just as she stands, no clothing included, but with all her body organs complete."

D. Pseudolus must rescue her.
1. He offers a long soliloquy to the audience in which he describes the trickery he will use to rescue the girl.
2. "I'll be a poet": in other words, he will create a "fiction" to "look very much like a fact."

E. Again, Pseudolus addresses the audience. He details his activities, as he says, "for the purpose of keeping you amused as long as the play lasts."

F. Pseudolus gets someone to impersonate an officer to buy the girl back; he explains the whole ruse to Calidorus: "Well, look, this play is being acted for the benefit of the audience; they know what happened because they saw it happen. I'll tell you about it some other time."

G. There then follows an interlude with a cook.
1. The cook, too, is a figure for the playwright, an entertainer but also a healer and an organizer.
2. A dinner party is like a play.

H. After an extended episode of impersonations, confusions of identity, name-calling, and exchange, the girl is rescued, and the boy and girl get permission to marry.

I. Pseudolus ends the play with a drunken revelry, "Greek style," after the manner of Dionysian ritual.

III. Here we have the key figures of self-conscious Roman comedy:
A. Pseudolus as playwright/director/actor
B. Pimp as stage manager
C. Prostitutes as actresses.

IV. These issues in Pseudolus are developed in greater detail in Miles Gloriosus.
A. Pyrgopolynices, the swaggering soldier of the title, appears as a matinee idol, a preening, swaggering actor figure.
B. Palaeastro, his slave, is again a kind of stage director and playwright.
C. The historical fact of doubling in the Roman grex (i.e., one actor playing two roles) becomes a theme, because the girl, Philocomasium, will play two roles.
D. The whole ruse plot becomes theater itself.
E. The house is a stage set, viewed by an internal, as well as an external, audience.
F. Characters are constantly recostumed, taught lines, asked to perform.

V. These plays ask questions that are basic to Roman theater and society.
A. How does a good writer/director deal with a recalcitrant, preening, and self-absorbed actor?
B. What happens when women become actresses?
C. Is being a woman in society really just simply an actress, playing a role, especially in the case of prostitution, playing a role for money?

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. How do the slave figures reflect the problems of the playwright? As you read and review these plays, consider how they dramatize problems in comedy itself.
2. But also consider how these plays illustrate the ways in which social roles (e.g., soldier, politician, woman, servant) are performances.
3. Pseudolus and Miles Gloriosus were synthesized into the modern Broadway musical and, later, movie called A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. If you know the modern show, how does it transform the Roman originals—and does a knowledge of those originals help you appreciate the comic resonances of the modern show?
Lecture Seven
Language and the Body, I:
Chaucer and Medieval Comedy

Scope: This lecture looks at some aspects of medieval literary comedy by focusing on Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale, one of the funniest and most intellectually challenging of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (written in the last decades of the fourteenth century). The lecture also looks forward to a larger set of issues in medieval and Renaissance comedy that focus on the presentation of the human body and the humor of the body displayed, embarrassed, and excessively on parade. We look back, then, to some of the traditions of classic comedy, while looking forward, too, to Rabelais and his comic novel of excess.

Outline

I. Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale and Rabelais’s Gargantua (1532) may fit together in sequence along several important and thematic lines:
   A. The representation of the body and the excesses of bodily functions (sexual, alimentary, scatological) as the site of social satire and public humor
   B. The idea of plot and the centrality of characters who manipulate, lie, deceive—in short, act or stage-direct
   C. The figurations of the puerile, that is, the idea of the schoolboy or the student, or scenes of school education, as the loci of humor
   D. The decay of language and the place of malapropism, double-talk, nonsense, pun, and sheer inarticulate utterance in the making of comedy.

II. The Miller’s Tale: scatology and eschatology.
   A. Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale is a fabliau: a form of comic, domestic narrative poem (developed by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Old French writers), the humor of which hinges on escapades of sexual misconduct among members of the lower or middle classes.
   B. Like Plautine comedy, the fabliau is plot driven.
      1. Its humor hinges on twists of narrative and unexpected resolutions.
      2. It often takes as its theme the story of the beguiler beguiled.
      3. Usually, the woman in the story comes out relatively unscathed.
   C. But, unlike anything that has gone before, what makes the tale truly a product of the Christian Middle Ages is its overall concern with creation and judgment.
      1. The feeling of an Edenic world at the beginning is undermined by a devilish intruder.

III. The Miller’s Tale takes place in Oxford.
   A. An old carpenter, John, has married a beautiful young woman, Alisoun.
      1. Nicholas, a university student (or clerk) is boarding with the carpenter and seduces his wife.
      2. But Absolon, a local cleric—distinguished by his vanity and effete appearance—also desires Alisoun.
   B. Nicholas convinces John that another flood is coming.
      1. He instructs John to build boats out of kneading tubs and to hang them from the ceiling.
      2. When the flood comes, they will cut the ropes and sail off.
      3. Of course, this is a ruse. Nicholas hopes to have sex with Alisoun while John is asleep in his tub.
   C. While Nicholas and Alisoun are in bed and John is asleep, Absolon appears at the window, courting Alisoun.
      1. Absolon asks for a kiss.
      2. Alisoun sticks out her naked behind, which Absolon kisses.
      3. Infuriated, Absolon runs off to the local blacksmith and gets a hot iron poker.
      4. He returns, begging for another kiss; this time, it is Nicholas who sticks out his behind and farts loudly in Absolon’s face.
      5. Absolon smites Nicholas with the hot poker.
      7. This wakes up John, who thinks the flood has come. He cuts the ropes of the tubs, falls crashing to the ground, and the whole story ends in a welter of anger, accusations, screams, and ultimately, laughs from the townsfolk.

IV. Character and comedy.
   A. The figure of Nicholas is a stage director, fiction-maker, actor/dramatist. He makes up ruses, concocts stories, performs (in all senses of the word).
   B. The figure of Alisoun is a chattel or commodity.
      1. Her dress and her bearing make her into another barnyard creature here.
      2. She participates in Nicholas’s ruse, thus becoming an actress in the theater of cuckoldry.
   C. The figure of Absolon is the effete (if not effeminized) clerk who also wants Alisoun.
      1. He is all costume and dress, all hair and makeup (right down to the herbs he eats to sweeten his breath).
      2. His pretensions will be stripped away at the tale’s close.
D. The figure of John, the carpenter, is the old man who has married a young woman.
1. He is the classic figure of cuckoldry.
2. He is also a survival of the old Roman comic figures of the bemighted or swaggering dupe.
3. He believes Nicholas's story, helps build the elaborate machinery to escape the flood, and in so doing, becomes an unwitting actor conscripted into Nicholas's wild play of deceit.

V. Key moments in the tale and their comic import.
A. The rhetorical descriptions of Alisoun and Absolon; physical form, costume, and social position; the performance of gender.
B. The language of Nicholas and Alisoun; its baseness, its avoidance of euphemism, its vulgarity (though it is not really vulgar simply for the sake of being vulgar; it just calls things as they are. N.B.: The Middle English queynte, which is the word for the part of the female anatomy).
C. The elaborate stage set of the kneading tubs and ropes; theater, dramaturgy.
D. The scene of the so-called misdirected kiss: Absolon asks for a kiss; instead, Alisoun puts out "her naked hole" and he kisses "her naked arse," which he and Nicholas recognize as "a beard."
E. The retribution: Absolon returns with a hot poker; Nicholas farts in his face; Absolon slaps his ass with the poker and burns him.
F. "Water, Water!" John the carpenter hears Nicholas and mistakenly cries out, "now comes down Noel's flood," instead of Noah's flood; he cuts the cords, the tubs fall down, and everything collapses into a heap.
G. The final scene of the townsfolk looking at this whole thing, gaping at it and laughing; they become the fictional audience for this performance, and their activities and responses are a model for our own.

VI. The comedy of the tale lies in two interlocking areas.
A. The tale is locally funny, with individual moments of humor and excitement.
B. The whole tale is a story of inversions: of the body, of language, of life.
1. Behind for mouth
2. Berd for beard
3. Fart for speech
C. It is, to use John's own words, a "world ful tikel," a world upside down.

Readings:


Questions to Consider:
1. The Miller's Tale is funny, but it is also comic in a larger sense. What is the relationship as you understand it between the funny moments of the tale and its broader, perhaps "cosmic," comic inversions?
2. How does the tale use the inheritance of New Comedy in a "medieval" way?
Lecture Eight
Language and the Body, II:
Rabelais, Carnival, and Renaissance Comedy

Scope: Rabelais is a great writer of the human body, and his humor often
devolves to the representation of the body not only as the site of excess,
expulsion, ingestion, and grotesquerie, but also as the site of social,
political, and ethical criticism. The body is the body politic, the social
body, but it is also at the heart of the great parody of Christ’s body and
the rituals of Christian faith that center on the ingestion of sacred food
and drink. This lecture explores some of the central comic elements of
Rabelais’s Gargantua (1532), both in light of the historical trajectory of
the course and in light of the critical writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and
their implications for a theory of comedy.

Outline
I. Rabelais fits along several vectors of this course’s historical focus.
   A. The imagery of drinking and of drunkenness.
      1. Dionysus, god of wine and aegis of the Greek theater, as the main
         character in The Frogs
      2. The scenes of drinking and the figure of the drunken, celebratory
         Pseudolus in Plautus
      3. The Miller’s Tale, too, in which Chaucer’s Miller himself is so
         drunk that he barely can sit on his horse and in which drinking
         figures prominently.
   B. The theme of language and its degeneration.
      1. Rabelais offers a parody of church language.
      2. He uses nonsense or double-talk.
      3. His language descends into nonverbal forms of expression out of
         the body, that is, farting, burping, vomiting, excreting, urinating.
      4. And, too, he uses many slang and vulgar terms for these actions.
   C. An interest in the institutions of learning and the genres of comedy.
      From the Greek public rituals, through the Roman greg, through the
      estates of the English Middle Ages (represented in The Canterbury
      Tales), to those blends of folk and learned culture in Rabelais.

II. Rabelais is also important to the course because he stimulated the writing of
    a major modern work of comic theory: Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World.
    This book, it is important to note, was written over a couple of decades
during the mid-twentieth century in Soviet Russia. It does have a strong
Marxist edge to it, and its interests in folk culture and the history of
bourgeois realism are, to a large degree, ideologically motivated. Yet, this is
an important piece of literary criticism, too, with a great impact on

subsequent literary theory. I introduced Bakhtin in Lecture Two. Here are
some of his major points in detail.

A. The history of laughter is social history. The question is what place
does laughter have in society, and how is canonical literature keyed to
enjoyment and education?

B. Bakhtin introduced key terms, such as carnavalesque, into literary
   studies.
   1. Bakhtin here is referring to the ways in which popular or folk
      rituals infuse high culture with a sense of self-parody, the
      inversions of satire, and the possibilities of restorative humor.
   2. Transvestism is central to carnival, as are scenes of feasting
      (carnival itself, Mardi Gras, is the last blowout before Lent, a
      period of self-abnegation).

C. The “material body” as the site of social satire and political reform.
   1. Bakhtin finds in Rabelais and other writers the ways in which the
      body, especially the “lower stratum,” becomes the place where
      social criticism is written.
   2. Scenes of ingestion and expulsion become ways of metaphorically
      representing a whole range of social complexes, such as the unity
      of the group in the body politic and the establishment of systems of
      belonging in communities; the almost psychic need to return to the
      womb, or the earth itself; and the ways in which folk beliefs, as
      well as individual psychologies, often hinge on the desire to return
      to the source of birth, either to escape the world wholly or to be
      reborn anew.

D. The class-based nature of comedy in social life.
   1. The history of laughter, or more generally, the history of comedy,
      is the history of social classes in conflict.
   2. Thus, we can see that often the humor of a given play or narrative
      as we have read it lies in the conflict of upper and lower classes; of
      aspirations among individuals that cross class boundaries; of
      transgressions of class boundaries; and especially in the case of the
      Roman comedy, of the ultimate refurging of class relationships at
      a play’s end (i.e., by having the son marry the girl in spite of the
      father’s disapproval or by having the master free the slave).
III. Rabelais's *Gargantua* can be read as an essay in the excesses of the body, the comedy of experience, and the ways of parodying all the forms of social life in Renaissance Europe. Rabelais, too, is a humorist of the book itself: of literate learning, of the book trade, and of the experience of reading and writing (in this, he fits in with a larger interest in the course in the representation of scenes of reading and writing, often drawn from New Comedy). I'd like to concentrate on a few representative chapters to illustrate the themes and problems here and to relate Rabelais to the larger concerns of the course.

A. The opening chapters on the birth of Gargantua, his mother's pregnancy, the landscape of the lower strata.
   1. Here, the exaggeration and grossness of the descriptions make the human body into a grotesque parody of itself.
   2. As Bakhtin would note, in such episodes as these, Rabelais uses bodily exaggeration to criticize or satirize the decorum of social life and the hypocrisy of the upper classes.

B. Gargantua as a child (chapter 11).
   1. Rabelais sees the child as an inherently comic figure in society.
   2. He also finds humor in the ways in which childish behavior is regulated by adults.
   3. Rabelais illustrates what happens when social decorum takes a back seat to the childish body.

C. He does this through the device of the catalogue. The most grotesque of these catalogues is Rabelais's description of the world in Gargantua's bottom (chapter 13). This passage restores our faith in the vast cornucopia of experience. Here, we have an encyclopaedia of obscenity, a world of experience in wiping the bottom.

D. Rabelais parodies the learning of the schools and the church in the speech of master Janotus in chapter 19. Like Nicholas in *The Miller's Tale*, or like Pseudolus in Plautus, master Janotus uses garbled language and learning to enable the author to poke fun at the pretenses of the educated.

E. Chapter 21 is a litany of body sounds. As in *The Miller's Tale*, language descends to the sounds of mere bodily expulsion.

F. Another list is in chapter 22, where we have the catalogue of games and the parody of the literate encyclopaedia tradition.

G. In chapter 44, the body itself is dismembered.
   1. Cutting up the body is a horrible joke (akin, in fact, to that hideous scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* when the progressively dismembered knight keeps willfully fighting on).
   2. But Rabelais is also figuratively showing us the dismemberment of the social body: a way of talking about, in other words, the breakdown of society and the difficulties of keeping order in the human world.

IV. Rabelais shows us, then, a world made up of talk, lists, excessive speeches, long enigmatic poems, and wild swatches of eloquence. He is giving us an anatomy of the world.

A. Like Chaucer, Rabelais illustrates a comic world made of words.

B. Like Plautus, he shows how characters can make a new reality out of mere talk.

C. Uniquely, he blends together folk idiom, learned eloquence, and a Renaissance fascination with humanity to illustrate—comically and, at times, horribly—the foibles of the everyday and the inversions of the carnivalesque, comic self.

Readings:


Questions to Consider:
1. Do you find Rabelais really funny? Where do you draw the line between productive comic social criticism and simple gross-out?
2. How can Bakhtin's notions of the comic help us understand other literary or social forms of behavior, such as Mardi Gras, cabaret theater, public spectacle, political lampoon, and the like?
Lecture Nine
Shakespearean Comedy, I:
Contexts, Overviews, Form

Scope: This lecture surveys the transitions from the classical and medieval comic traditions to those of the Renaissance, especially those that bear on Shakespeare's comic theater. It reflects on the central features of Renaissance courtly life, especially its public and performative nature. It then examines some of the key techniques and thematic concerns of Shakespeare's comedies, preparing us for the following lecture on his Taming of the Shrew.

Outline

I. The comic form on the Renaissance stage.
   A. Renaissance comedy owes many debts to Plautus, Terence, and the New Comedy traditions.
   B. Central conceits:
      1. Mistaken identity
      2. "Rustic" humor
      3. Language of the university wit, especially pun and wordplay.
   C. The autonomous Elizabethan stage emerges out of the various practices of late medieval and early Renaissance theater:
      1. The cycle play or miracle play (based on biblical themes; in The Miller's Tale, the Miller enters speaking in "Pilate's voice" and Absolon acted Herod on a scaffold)
      2. The wit plays of the Inns of Court and the universities
      3. The court interludes.
   D. The overarching question of the performative nature of courtly life develops; that is, being a courtier involved playing a part.
   E. Thus, by the last third of the sixteenth century, a heightened awareness of the self-consciousness of professional theater emerged. Its themes are
      1. Impersonation and display
      2. The necessity of family and/or dynastic continuity
      3. The value of money
      4. The overwhelming sense that England now stands on a world stage.

II. Many Renaissance dramatists and critics took these elements and sought to synthesize them into a new concept of comedy itself.
   A. Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson, has two characters debate the nature of comedy in his play Every Man out of His Humour. The character Cordatus says:

   "Quid sit comedia [what is comedy]? If he cannot, let him content himself with Cicero's definition... who would have a comedy to be imitatio vitae, spectum consuetudinis, imago veritatis [an imitation of life, a mirror of customs, an image of truth]: a thing throughout pleasant and ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners."

   B. Comedy teaches here, and Jonson's views reflect those of many Renaissance thinkers.

   C. In addition to considering comedy as a mirror of life and a corrector of behavior, such thinkers also distinguished two general types of comic plots.
      1. Romantic comedy is the story of young lovers; it is the basic New Comedy marriage plot, set in a world of fantasy or imagination. Often, it contrasts the country and the city or operates in the world of dream and vision.
      2. Satiric comedy is the comedy of social reform; it shows us characters who behave as they ought not to, and it owes some debts to the Old Comedy traditions of caricature and burlesque.

   D. It is fair to say that most of Shakespeare's comedies are Romantic (though satiric elements appear in many of his plays).

III. In the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's works (printed in 1623), his editors classed fourteen plays as comedies. Among these are the famous Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, All's Well That Ends Well, and others. But The Merchant of Venice is called a comedy, too, as is Measure for Measure.
   A. We may find little that is funny in some of the "dark comedies," but we may also find much that is funny in the histories and tragedies.
      1. The gravedigger scene in Hamlet (Act V), for example, is often considered the paradigm of comic relief. As in Rabelais, the theme of the body politic is prominent.
      2. A play such as Henry IV, Part I, although a history, has a deeply comic structure, with its theme of the replacement of the older generation with the younger one. It is a history written with a comic resolution.
      3. So, too, may the history play Henry V be seen as a comedy here, a marriage plot comedy linking the young king and the French princess Katherine.

   B. What links many of these plays and their comic elements is a larger argument for comic theater as the site of political restitution, domestic restitution, commodity exchange, and literary entertainment.
      1. Political restitution: Many of the plots of Shakespeare's plays (comic plots even in historical or non-comic plays) hinge on the successful replacement of an older generation with a younger and, in the process, the maintenance of a political order.
Lecture Ten

Shakespearean Comedy, II:
The Taming of the Shrew

Scope: This lecture looks in detail at The Taming of the Shrew as an example of Shakespearean comedy. It focuses on the play's relationships to the key themes of this course; its place in the comic tradition generally; and its specific features of plot, theme, image, and character that locate it in Shakespeare's distinctive transformation of that tradition.

Outline

I. I have chosen this play because:
   A. It most explicitly frames its performance as a play within a play.
   B. It fully develops the problem of "actorial" impersonation.
   C. It raises questions about female life and experience that are central to the issues of gender in the comic tradition.
   D. It most explicitly, if at times a bit awkwardly, develops many of the New Comedy features we have seen throughout the course:
      1. Marriage plot
      2. Generational subversion
      3. Master/servant relationships
      4. Parodies of education
      5. Complex sub-plotting with disguised characters and scenes of reading and eavesdropping.

II. The "introduction" to the play: the Christopher Sly story.
   A. What is this story doing here?
      1. The set-up of the play raises the central questions of Shakespearean comedy, which are the nature of spectatorship and the social function of comedy.
      2. The set-up also creates for us a lens through which we can see the play as a whole.
   B. Key themes and problems.
      1. Spectatorship: Watching a play is made a theme of the play as a whole. The Taming of the Shrew thus functions as an elaborate play-within-a-play (akin, say, to the performance in A Midsummer Night's Dream).
      2. Impersonation: The characters in the introduction are actors in a ruse staged by the Lord, who is tricking the drunken Christopher Sly.

IV. The key point about Shakespeare's comedies is that they are comedies of spectatorship. They take as their theme, and often embed within their plots, the audience's experience of watching a play.
   A. A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play within a play.
   B. Twelfth Night and As You Like It embody the self-consciousness of boys playing women playing boys.
   C. In Henry IV, Part I, Hal and Falstaff play roles and exchange them; think of this play as a comedy, a generational plot, but also one of performance and spectatorship.

V. All these themes, techniques, and literary and social issues find themselves expressed in The Taming of the Shrew, a complex and witty example of Shakespeare's comic artistry and of Shakespeare's own reflections on the place of comedy in society.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. How can you compare the structure of Shakespeare's comedies with that of Chaucer or Plautus?
2. In the Shakespeare plays you know (or like to see) what is the function of the play within the play or the scenes of role-playing?
3. Crossing of class and gender boundaries: The introduction makes
explicit the fact that boys played female roles in the Elizabethan
theater.
4. The alehouse and intoxication: The introduction locates the play, as
it were, under the sign of Dionysus, within the realms of drink and
intoxication, and thus takes us back to the origins of comic theater.
C. A key statement can be found at Intro.2.106ff: “My husband and my
lord, my lord and husband/I am your wife in all obedience.” Though a
joke in this scene, this statement may be seen as something of an
epigraph for the action of the Shrew play that will follow.
D. The messenger announces the arrival of the players; the humors are to
be rebalanced, thus showing the therapeutic effects of comedy
(Intro.2.130ff).
E. The introduction and the play as a whole share overarching plot lines.
1. The Taming of the Shrew is a play about a change in personality, in
this case, Kate’s.
2. But the introduction has had Christopher Sly change his personality
(at least temporarily).
3. The joke is that he has been persuaded that he is a great lord who
has been deranged for fifteen years.
4. Sly buys into this ruse and, at times, even changes his language
from prose to blank verse (the language, of course, of aristocratic
theatrical role-playing).
5. Sly is like a foil for Kate, and the introduction is much like a five-
finger exercise for the play as a whole.
F. Indeed, one may well compare this introduction with some of the motifs of
Midsummer Night’s Dream, where Bottom is transported into a
world of the imagination—made, in effect, a lord of dreams—before
being brought back to his own world.
III. Central themes, motifs, scenes, and points for discussion of the play include
its plots, language and its decay, the roles of Petruchio and Kate, language
and learning as sex, food and the body, and other issues.
A. Plots:
1. The plot of Petruchio/Kate; the taming of the shrew.
2. The plot of Bianca and her suitors.
3. This kind of material is all right out of the Plautine comedies of
impersonation and disguise we saw earlier.
B. Language and its decay, especially in the opening scenes of the play
itself:
1. Note the use of Latin and Italian to indicate the comic degeneration
of language.
2. Compare the nonsense of Rabelais, the malapropisms of The
Miller’s Tale, the double-talk of Plautus, the “brekekeke koax
koax” of Aristophanes’s Frogs.
C. Petruchio and his roles:
1. A master with a servant
2. A buyer in the world of money (“wive it wealthily”)
3. A creature of the theater (see, especially, I.2.198ff)
4. A schoolmaster; note his “taming school” (4.2.54).
D. Kate and her roles:
1. A shrew, she fits into classic medieval/Renaissance misogyny.
2. Is she tamed or is she simply acting tamed?
3. The central question for the play is how do we take Kate’s final
speech (5.2.136ff): straight or ironic? This is the world of double
entendre.
E. Language and learning as sex:
1. Look at the entire scene between Petruchio and Kate at 2.1.182–
273. Here, the sex is in the talk.
2. Look at the scene between Bianca and her suitors at 4.2. Language
and sexuality come together in confusing and wild ways.
F. Food and the body, the taming of Kate as the problem of eating: In 4.3,
the taming of Kate hinges on food and its denial. But the key point here,
and in what follows in the scenes with the tailor, is that this whole scene
in effect rewrites the Rabelaisian moment of the feeding, nurturing, and
clothing of Gargantua.
G. Is a kiss just a kiss?
P: First kiss me, Kate, and we will.
K: What, in the midst of the street?
P: What, art thou ashamed of me?
K: No sir, God forbid, but ashamed to kiss. (5.2.142–45)
Compare The Miller’s Tale:
“Alas,” quoth Absalom, “and welaway!
That true love ever was so ill betest!
But kiss me, since you’ll do no more, my pet,
For Jesus love and for the love of me.”
H. Here, we see the recognition that everything is in the middle of the
street, everything is done before an audience.

Readings:
William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew, ed. with an introduction and
Karen Newman, Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama
Questions to Consider:

1. Is The Taming of the Shrew a different play, for you, without the introduction? How does Shakespeare's setting up of the play help us understand the conventions of his comic theater and the themes of his play?

2. Do you think Kate is really "tamed" at the end, or is she just playing along?

3. This play is the basis of the Cole Porter musical (and film) Kiss Me, Kate. How can you compare the framing of Shakespeare's play with the framing of that musical? Does a reading of this play help you understand the comic effect of the musical (and vice versa)?

Lecture Eleven

Classical French Comedy: Molière and His Worlds

Scope: A reading of Molière's Tartuffe raises many of the problems we have confronted throughout this course, but it does so in some historically specific (and, I'd suggest, new) ways that bear on the cultural problems of theatrical artifice, the later modern literary history of comedy, and the relationships of politics, culture, and the theater that are unique here. This lecture and the next one focus on the contexts of Molière's life and work and some approaches to reading Tartuffe.

Outline

I. Molière and his world: the courtly performance.
   A. Molière came of artistic age during the early part of the reign of Louis XIV (r. 1661–1714). Louis established, perhaps more than any sovereign previously (with the exception of England's Elizabeth I), a court politics based on the mythologized spectacle of the sovereign himself.
      1. Court festivals, great artistic performances, and political spectacle were at the center of Louis's reign.
      2. The Abbé Charles Cotin wrote (in 1663): "He is the living image of God himself; he is not the simulacrum and the idol of royalty. He is one of those divinities who, from time to time, descend from heaven to testify upon the earth to the truth of all that is said, all that is beloved about Providence."
      3. Louis is the unique, omnipotent spectator. He is not an actor; he simply "is."
   B. The courtly festival world had two large-scale effects on French society.
      1. Louis reinstated the old feudal practice of gift-giving; that is, he bestowed upon his aristocratic and noble supporters gifts of great largesse, designed to show the wealth, power, and support of the king.
      2. But these gifts were so sumptuous that no one could reciprocate. Such acts (and the festival performances that constituted a form of gifts, too) had the effect of establishing not a bond of reciprocity between monarch and subject but rather a feeling of bedazzlement.
      3. No longer was the monarch simply a man among men, although greater than all others or chosen by divine right; he was divine himself. The relationship of king and subject was no longer a difference of degree but one of kind.
      4. By transforming courtly life into spectacle, Louis transformed his aristocracy into courtiers. That is, he made them participants in a
life of spectatorship, where the physical presence of the king (his body, literally, as well as allegorically) was always at the center. Louis made the very rule of France the consummate theatrical act.

C. Louis used patronage of the arts and letters to effect this spectatorial culture. Molière’s plays, in particular, function as entertainments under royal sanction, the purpose of which was to enable the playful satire of social excesses under the benevolent negis of an all-knowing monarch.

D. The logic of this patronage was the logic not of personal whim but of classical model.

1. The mid-seventeenth century in France was a period of classicism, of modeling literary forms on the earlier examples and theoretical statements of Greek and Latin writers.

2. Thus, through the examination of earlier works of literature or visual art, French writers and artists sought to imitate idealized models. Precepts were established and theories were developed that were designed to make artistic production conform to classical norms.

3. For this reason, Molière himself was very interested in the definition and social function of comedy as a genre (witness the letters to the king that preface Tartuffe). This interest in classical norms also explains why Molière’s plays are so indebted to the classical traditions (especially New Comedy) that we have explored in this course. Molière established Greek literary theory (such as the Aristotelian unities) and Roman literary practice as his models.

II. Molière: actor, playwright, entrepreneur.

A. Born Jean Baptiste Poquelin, the son of a merchant upholsterer (a very well off one, too; his father was upholsterer by appointment to the king), in 1622.

1. He gave up on succeeding his father to become an actor.

2. With the Béjart family, Molière founded the Illustre Théâtre in 1643. The enterprise was fraught with difficulty; Molière was imprisoned; another theater was formed; Molière wrote for the troupe, and they staged many of his plays; he spent thirteen years in provincial France with the troupe, mostly as their leader.

3. Eventually, the troupe established itself in Paris. Molière sought and received the patronage of the king. By the 1660s, he was writing his most distinctive works under royal patronage.

4. Molière died in 1673 just after a performance in his own play, Le Malade Imaginaire (The Imaginary Invalid).

B. What was comedy for Molière and his age?

1. Urbanity: An elaborate, class-based naturalness of speech and movement, though paradoxically highly stylized and rhetorical; it is urban, too, because it is the idiom of Paris, the city.

2. Imitation: Comedy aspires to be a mirror to everyday life; the life represented here is that of the urban, successful middle and upper-middle classes: wealthy, well-domiciled, aristocratic even. This is a reflection of classic literary models.

3. Correction: Comedy’s goal, as Molière says in the preface to Tartuffe, is “to chastise human weaknesses” (“de corriger les vices des hommes”). In its etymological sense, correction puts people on the right path.

4. He restates the point in the First Petition to the King: “The duty of comedy being to correct men’s errors in the course of amusing them…” (“Le devoir de la comédie étant de corriger les hommes en les divertissant…”).

Readings:

Questions to Consider:

1. How do the categories of comedy for Molière and his age resonate with some of the categories of comedy we have seen in earlier texts?

2. How is the relationship of royal patronage for Molière and his contemporaries similar to, and different from, other relationships of institutional control in the comic tradition (e.g., the Athenian civic aegis for theater, the Roman graces?)
Lecture Twelve
Molière’s Tartuffe

Scope: Tartuffe is a comic play by Molière, first performed before King Louis XIV in 1664. Many critics take it to be one of the major plays of Molière and one of the major comic plays in the history of the theater. This lecture focuses on the large thematic and structural features of the play. It locates Tartuffe in the broader interests of the course, calls attention to some of its more notable episodes, and places it, in particular, in the traditions of New Comedy.

Outline

I. Tartuffe is a play about imposture and hypocrisy.
   A. It takes as its central characters figures who delude and who are self-deluded. It is a play about correction, the central issue in Molière’s theory of the stage.
   B. But it offers scenes of great critical philosophy that may reflect on Molière’s own notions of theatrical representation.
      1. Cléante’s speech in Act 1 is a good example of Molière’s notions of theatrical display—how we accept the shadow instead of the substance.
      2. The play also offers scenes that reflect on the actor’s craft itself. For example, Tartuffe’s speeches in Act 3 are exemplars of phenomenal acting in themselves.

II. The prefatory letters, or supplications, that were published with the play describe the nature of comedy and the relationships among social, political, and artistic goals central to Molière’s work.
   A. Molière wrote, “It is the purpose of comedy to chastise human weaknesses.”
   B. “The theater is a great medium of correction.”
   C. “People can put up with rebukes but they cannot bear being laughed at: they are prepared to be wicked but they dislike appearing ridiculous.”
   D. These, and other similar statements in the prefatory letters, offer up a theory of comedy in its social function. They also help us locate the themes of acting, imposture, and hypocrisy in the play.

III. Even though most modern English translations are in prose, note that Molière wrote his plays (as did his contemporaries, the tragedians Racine and Corneille) in Alexandrines: rhymed couplets, each line of which had six feet (hexameter).
   A. Much of the wit and flow of the language in the play works because it is poetry.
   B. Consider a brief portion of Richard Wilbur’s English verse translation from Act 3.

IV. The plot of this play is about marriage.
   A. Molière takes the New Comedy plot about marriage and turns it into a vehicle for social satire.
   B. The central issue of this plot is how a marriage between members of a younger generation is impeded by members of the older generation.
   C. Instead of using the traditional Roman New Comedy structure of father/son relationships, Molière recasts them as father/daughter relationships. The child or servant in the play (both females) can see more than the parent or master does.

V. The theme of this play is imposture; that is, not just impersonation, but hypocrisy.
   A. Tartuffe himself is the great hypocrite. Note, in particular, the servant Dorine’s remarks in Act 1 on imposture and, more broadly throughout the play, on role-playing.
   B. Tartuffe is a figure of theatricality.
      1. Not only is he a satire of social pretense, but he is also a commentary on the nature of acting itself.
      2. Compare his entrance in Act 3 with that of Pyrgopolynices, the swaggering soldier, in Plautus’s Miles Gloriosus.
      3. Tartuffe asks his servant to “put away my hair shirt and my scourge,” as if he is telling his dresser to put away the props and costumes of a performance.

VI. Some particular episodes worth noting that link Molière to the New Comedy include the following:
   A. The comedy of interruption in the exchange in Act 2.
      1. This episode hinges on people constantly interrupting others.
      2. As Dorine says, “It’s maddening not to be able to speak.”
      3. It looks back to episodes of interruption in the old Roman New Comedy traditions.
      4. But, as Dorine says, it also reflects on the problems of being an actor in a world of unappreciative audiences.
   B. Notice, too, the scene of eavesdropping (remember the New Comedy tradition) where Damis emerges out of hiding in Act 3.
1. Again, Molière represents characters in the play's fiction acting as audiences for the play's action.
2. Damis says, "I was there and heard everything." In such moments, Molière turns New Comedy elements back on themselves, telling us in doing so about the relationship between males and females.

VII. This play is also very much about women.
A. The play addresses the social role of women.
   1. What does it mean to be a mother?
   2. What does it mean to be a lover?
   3. What does it mean to be a servant?
B. The play also considers the expectations of the kind of language women may speak, about their desires.
C. One may productively compare the female characters here with those of *Taming of the Shrew*. Both plays illustrate problems of sincerity, obedience, playacting, costume, make-up, and physical beauty. As in Shakespeare, part of the excitement and humor in this play comes from the fact that female parts are played by boys. To be a woman in society, Molière is saying, is always to be a great actress.

VIII. Finally, this play is both about and a product of the politics of theater. Molière fashions his own kind of *deus ex machina*.
A. The officer's speech in Act 5 says a great deal about how the experience of living under the rule of King Louis XIV is the experience of living in a theatricalized world.
B. The officer says, "We live under the rule of a prince inimical to fraud, a monarch who can read men's hearts, whom no impostor's art deceives."
C. Molière, in essence, asks the following question: What does it mean to be a man of the theater, an artist of imposture, for a kingly audience who cannot be deceived by an "impostor's art"? It is the responsibility of the comic playwright to unmask fraud and confirm the harmony of the social order.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. How does Molière recast the New Comedy traditions and techniques in *Tartuffe*?
2. How do the women's roles in this play compare to the representations of women we have seen throughout this course?
3. Is there a politics of comedy in Molière, and how does *Tartuffe* provide us with some ways of understanding the social function of this genre?
Timeline

486 B.C. ............................................ Earliest recorded performance of a comic play in Greece.

c. 450–c. 388 B.C. ...................... Life of Aristophanes, leading Greek dramatist in the Old Comedy tradition.

405 B.C. ............................................. Performance of Aristophanes’s The Frogs, a major play in the Old Comedy tradition.

c. 320–292 B.C. .................................. Period of activity for Menander, Greek comic playwright associated with the origins of the New Comedy tradition.

254–184 B.C. ...................................... Life of Plautus, a leading Roman comic playwright and reviver of the New Comedy style.

119 B.C. ........................................... Date of the performance of Plautus’s Pseudolus, a major play in the Roman New Comedy tradition.

c. 1340–1400 ..................................... Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, England’s leading medieval poet and writer of many narrative poems that use comic devices.

1380s ............................................. Likely period of composition of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, including The Miller’s Tale, perhaps the best and best known of his comic tales.

c. 1490/94–1553 .............................. Life of François Rabelais, France’s greatest Renaissance comic writer and author of Gargantua and Pantagruel.

1532 ............................................. First publication of Gargantua, a major comic work of prose fiction and an important statement of Renaissance European conceptions of comic form and social laughter.

1564–1614 ..................................... Life of William Shakespeare, England’s greatest and most versatile playwright; author of many comic plays.

1593/94 ........................................... Likely date of composition of The Taming of the Shrew, one of Shakespeare’s early comic plays and an excellent example of the uses of comedy on the Renaissance English stage.

1622–1673 ...................................... Life of Molière, born Jean Baptiste Poquelin, France’s greatest comic playwright; author of many plays that had a major impact in their own day, as well as in ours.

1648–1660 ...................................... Period of the Interregnum in England; led by Oliver Cromwell, the period of Puritan rule in England; theaters were closed.

1660 ............................................. Theaters officially reopened in England; once again, it is legal to perform plays publicly.

1661–1714 ...................................... Reign of Louis XIV, King of France; patron of literature and the arts, leading patron of Molière, who writes about the king’s power and about the king as audience of his own (Molière’s) plays.

1664 ............................................. First performance of Molière’s Tartuffe, a play about impersonation and hypocrisy and one of the most important texts in the comic tradition.

1716–1779 ...................................... Life of David Garrick, England’s premier actor and stage manager in the eighteenth century; founder of the modern styles of acting.

1737 ............................................. Licensing Act in England gives royal sanction to two theaters in London and a few provincial theaters.


1755 ............................................. Publication of Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary, a major work of English lexicography and a major statement of ideas about language in eighteenth-century England.

1775 ............................................. First performance of The Rivals, Sheridan’s first major comic play and perhaps his greatest theatrical achievement.

1776 ............................................. Sheridan named manager of the Drury Lane Theater on Garrick’s retirement.
1854–1900. Life of Oscar Wilde, perhaps the defining figure in late-nineteenth-century English theater and social life, author of many plays in the comic tradition.

1893–1981. Life of Anita Loos, leading figure in the literary world of 1920s and 1930s America; author of novels, screenplays, and essays that established her as one of the leading female comic voices in America.

1895. First performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s greatest comic play and one that speaks directly to the traditions of comic theater developed in the eighteenth century in England.

1899–1973. Life of Noel Coward, English actor, playwright, social critic, and wit; author of several major comic and satiric plays and a key figure in the rise of the “camp” sensibility in the later twentieth century.

1906–1989. Life of Samuel Beckett, the leading figure in the absurdist tradition of literature in the twentieth century; author of novels and plays, notably *Waiting for Godot*.

1920s–1930s. Heyday of Laurel and Hardy, highly influential and popular comic duo in both silent and early talking films.

1925. Publication of Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, her most popular and important work and a key text in the comic tradition in America.

1929–1941. The Marx Brothers make their movies; they represent the epitome of the Vaudeville tradition, but turned literary; of great influence on later comic styles, but also (through their writers, S.J. Perelman and George Kaufman) indebted to earlier historical forms of comedy.

1940s–1950s. Heyday of Abbott and Costello, popular radio and television comic pair.

1941. First performance of *Blithe Spirit*, Noel Coward’s most important comic play and the one that draws most directly on the traditions of the comedy of marriage developed throughout the history of the genre.

1948. *Waiting for Godot* written in French; produced in Paris in 1953; in English translation in 1954; probably Beckett’s greatest play and the defining work of the post-war experience; bleakly comic and with great influence on later literature and popular culture.

1960s–present. The comic career of Woody Allen (b. 1935), author of many essays, vignettes, and screenplays; director of many films; creator of comedy routines.

1960s–present. The comic career of Mel Brooks (b. 1926), director and star of many films.


Glossary

Absurd: In the theatrical and comic traditions, a form of narrative that stresses the inexplicable nature of everyday life and that relies on seemingly unrelated events operating in sequence (non sequiturs), on seemingly motiveless action, and on seemingly nonsensical utterances.

Body: As developed in the comic tradition, the term that refers both to the human physical form and to the body politic. Relationships between the two are often the site of comic narrative.

Burlesque: The exaggerated display of social life for purposes of parody or satire. The term came to mean, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a form of vaudeville performance.

Camp: The self-conscious, theatrical, often self-parodic display of wit, associated in the twentieth century with Anglo-American gay culture. Its origins, as traced by Susan Sontag, lie in the flamboyant humor of Oscar Wilde, but they also lie in the highly refined social commentary of Noel Coward.

Caricature: The exaggerated representation of an individual or social type, often for purposes of satire.

Carnavalesque: The subversion of public authority through the display of folk or popular festivity. Associated with the period of “carnival” before Lent, its major features are exaggeration, parody, grotesque representation, feasting, and the like.

Drag: The theatrical act of cross-dressing or of gender impersonation.

Eschatology: In theology, the study of the end of the world, of last things.

Fabliau (pl. fabliaux): Old French literary form, appropriated by Chaucer in his Canterbury Tales, that concerns domestic sexual encounters. It often focuses on cuckoldry, on scenes of explicit sexual activity, and on bawdy body humor.

Farcical: From the Latin verb, meaning “to stuff.” Comic form developed in medieval French literature. Associated with clowning, buffoonery, mistaken identity, and elaborate stagings of escape and hiding.

Fetish: A body part or object associated with the body (e.g., an item of clothing) that becomes the object of desire, sexual arousal, or commercial value on the part of the beholder (or on the part of a group or society).

Greek: The Latin word for the company of actors in the Roman theater.

Grotesque: In the comic tradition, the term refers to the exaggerated representation of the human body or of social activities, often for satiric and reformist ends. It often relies on scatological humor, obscenity, and horrific physical presentations.

Malapropism: From Sheridan’s Mrs. Malaprop in The Rivals, the term refers to the misuse of a word or phrase, often as a result of intellectual or social pretension and with the consequence of mocking or satirizing the pretensions of the speaker.

Monologue: A performance or speech given by a single character, often directly to a listening audience.

New Comedy: Greek comedy, originating in the fourth and third centuries B.C., associated with the playwright Menander, appropriated by Roman comic playwrights Plautus and Terence. Emphasis on plot-driven narrative, little social satire, stereotypical characters (e.g., fathers, lovers, pimps, servants, and so on). It is a comedy of social and domestic life keyed to resolution in a marriage.

Old Comedy: Greek comedy of the fifth century B.C., developed from rites associated with the god Dionysus. Developed most fully by Aristophanes. It is a comic form keyed to social satire and exaggerated parody, often with burlesque elements, cross-dressing, and choral episodes. N.B.: In New Comedy, the chorus disappears.

Parody: The literary form (dramatic or narrative, poetry or prose) keyed to the mockery of some specific, prior literary text or tradition, designed to expose the excesses or pretensions of those texts or traditions.

Phallic: In Greek Old Comedy and Dionysiac ritual, the exaggerated representation of the male genitalia.

Pun: A form of wordplay that depends on one or more words or phrases sounding alike; the humor lies in exposing the listener’s expectations of one statement and getting another.

Satire: The literary form (dramatic or narrative, poetry or prose) keyed to the critique of society, often with the goal of reforming political excess or corruption or with exposing class pretensions.

Scatology: Humor that focuses on jokes about or representations of excrement or the act of excreting.

Soliloquy: A speech given by a character alone on stage, often to him or herself. Sometimes, it is addressed directly to the audience.

Travesty: Literally meaning cross-dressing, the term has come to mean the exaggerated, parodic display of a social habit or literary form, often to the point of destructiveness.

Vaudeville: The theatrical tradition developed in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America and England that blended comic skits, musical numbers, and spectacular displays. Vaudeville comedy was often keyed to ethnic and racial stereotypes and dialect humor.
Wit: Not just humor or jokes, but the carefully crafted display of incisive, funny commentary, often delivered in brief, one-line maxims or aphorisms.

Biographical Notes

Allen, Woody (b. 1935). American humorist, comedian, and filmmaker, best known for his comic routines and films about alienated urban American male life.

Aristophanes (c. 450–c. 388 B.C.). Greek comic playwright whose plays defined the forms of Old Comedy in ancient Athens and whose surviving works are the most fully representative examples of comic theater in the ancient Greek world.


Beckett, Samuel (1906–1986). The leading figure in the absurdist tradition of literature in the twentieth century; author of novels and plays, notably Waiting for Godot.


Coward, Noel (1899–1973). English actor, playwright, social critic, and wit; author of several major comic and satiric plays and a key figure in the rise of the “camp” sensibility in the later twentieth century.

Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939). Viennese psychologist and psychoanalyst, founder of the modern study of the subconscious, author of the influential theoretical and social study of comedy Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious.

Garrick, David (1716–1779). England’s premier actor and stage manager in the eighteenth century; founder of the modern styles of acting.

Loos, Anita (1893–1981). Leading figure in the literary world of 1920s and 1930s America; author of novels, screenplays, and essays that established her as one of the leading female comic voices in America.

Louis XIV, King of France (r. 1661–1714). Known as the “Sun King,” patron of literature and the arts, leading patron of Molière.

Marx, Groucho (1890–1977). Leading figure in the Marx Brothers, American comedy team of the early to mid-twentieth century, best known for his witty rejoinders and fast-talking comic representations.

Menander (f. 320–292 B.C.). Greek comic playwright, usually credited with the development of the New Comedy style of writing.

Molière (born Jean Baptiste Poquelin; 1622–1673). France’s greatest comic playwright; author of many plays that had a major impact in their own day, as well as in ours.

Plautus (254–184 B.C.). Leading Roman comic playwright whose plays represent the Roman appropriation of the New Comedy tradition.


Roth, Philip (b. 1933). Jewish-American novelist, best known for his comic novels of Jewish life in mid-century America, notably Portnoy's Complaint.


Sontag, Susan (b. 1933). American literary and social critic, who developed a theory of comedy in her essay "Notes on Camp."

Wilde, Oscar (1854–1900), perhaps the defining figure in late-nineteenth-century English theater and social life, author of many plays in the comic tradition.

Bibliography

Primary Sources: These are the basic texts for the course, in the best and most recent editions and/or translations and the most available paperback printings. Many of these editions also have excellent critical and historical introductions, as well as full critical bibliographies.


Secondary Sources: These are the basic critical readings for the course. They include studies of historical background, literary interpretation, biography, and social and cultural theory. Among them are some recent works of criticism, as well as some "classics" of history and interpretation.


Comedy Through The Ages

Part II

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Lecture 14: Sheridan's The Rivals
Lecture 15: Wilde and Coward I—Comedies of Class, Aestheticism, and Camp
Lecture 16: Wilde and Coward II—The Ends of New Comedy
Lecture 17: Rituals and Rites in Modern Comedy
Lecture 18: Camp—History, Criticism, Comic Texture
Lecture 19: Women in Comedy I
Lecture 20: Women in Comedy II—Anita Loos and the Female Comic Voice
Lecture 21: Beckett—Comedy and the Absurd
Lecture 22: Waiting for Godot—The Landscapes of Comic Emptiness
Lecture 23: Ethnicity and Humor—From Vaudeville to Philip Roth
Lecture 24: The Comic Legacy—Present and Future

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Comedy through the Ages

Scope:

This course is about the history and scope of comedy in Western literature. Its goals are to survey the genre from its origins in Greek and Roman theater through medieval, Renaissance, and modern literary forms. Comedy lies in the unexpected: in reversals of experience, inversions of social hierarchies, the undermining of meaning, and shifts in public and private life. What is funny often resides in such inversions, whether they are large-scale upendoings of political and cultural life (as in Aristophanes, Chaucer, Rabelais, Beckett) or more finely nuanced twists of words that give us pun and parody (as in Shakespeare, Sheridan, Wilde, Coward, Loos). This course highlights the comedic as a literary genre and as a way with language and a habit of life.

This course also explores a set of key terms central to the forms of comedy and their social history, including such general terms as pun, parody, satire, and performance and such historical and generic categories as Old Comedy and New Comedy, fabliaux, and wit. The course also addresses a set of larger social issues that frame the development of comedy: for example, the relationships of class and power (especially in the portrayal of masters and servants), the relationships of age (especially in the portrayal of parents and children), and the relationships of gender (in the portrayal of men and women). Characters in comedy are always pretending to be people they are not. The stories of these impersonations constitute the main plots of the comic works we will examine.

We will also try to understand the comic tradition through a set of theoretical or critical frameworks. Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin explored the history of laughter; we will use his concepts of the grotesque and the carnivalesque to understand medieval and Renaissance comedy (as well as more modern cases). Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, developed a theory of jokes that is central to many of the twentieth-century works we will explore. Finally, Susan Sontag, the cultural commentator, has advocated for the importance of “camp” (the theatrical, self-parodic display of personal wit) in modern literature and society. This course locates comic plays from Sheridan's The Rivals, through Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, to Coward's Blithe Spirit in this context.

Although the primary focus of the course is the history of comedy as a theatrical form, we will spend some time with narrative poems and works of prose fiction to explore their role in shaping social notions of the comic. We will also look at these kinds of works to see just how "theatrical" they are. Finally, the course suggests some ways of understanding contemporary comic forms (film, television, and stand-up) in the larger history of the comic tradition. In the end, the course hopes to provoke us to consider a central literary form with impacts that are social and cultural, personal and public, poignant and uproarious.
Lecture Thirteen

The 18th-Century Comedy of Words

Scope: This lecture surveys the intellectual and social histories of England in the eighteenth century to locate the new flowering of English comic theater in that period. It identifies key themes and techniques in preparation for the following lecture on Sheridan's *The Rivals*. The lecture also argues that foremost among those themes and techniques is the question of language itself: the meaning of words, their histories, their changing connotations, and their social function. The classic comic theater of the English eighteenth century—and of the entire tradition of English comedy from Sheridan through Oscar Wilde to Noel Coward—is a comedy of wordplay, and this lecture sets the intellectual stage for understanding that tradition.

Outline

I. What was post-Shakespearean theater?
   A. The theaters in England were closed in the 1640s by the Puritans and during the Interregnum (i.e., the rule of the Protector Oliver Cromwell).
      1. Theatrical public performance was banned.
      2. Only house theater (i.e., masques and private performances or "closet dramas" that were intended to be read and not performed) were sanctioned.
   B. The theaters were reopened with the Restoration in 1660. Restoration drama largely focused on three areas:
      1. Shakespearean revivals and revisions
      2. Moral tragedies
      3. Comedies of social class and wit.
   C. The Restoration in England saw women actresses on the stage, officially, for the first time.
   D. In 1737, the Licensing Act gave royal sanction to only two theaters in London, Drury Lane and Covent Garden.
   E. The key figure in eighteenth-century English theater was the actor/manager David Garrick.
      1. Garrick established the defining style of acting on the English stage from the 1740s until his retirement in 1776.
      2. He practically invented the modern notion of the actor as star, including charisma, defining theatrical roles, great emotion and sentiment, and the relationship with the audience.
      3. Central to the Garrick style was a kind of tableau vivant, that is, the use of gesture, facial expression, modulation in voice. The actor

II. Some intellectual and cultural contexts for the late eighteenth-century theater.
   A. Masquerade and the culture of performance and spectatorship.
      1. There were public and semi-public occasions for dress-up and impersonation.
      2. Masquerades came to stand, by the mid-eighteenth century, as the site of social mobility and identity formation.
      3. They were also occasions for the theatrical presentation of the self, occasions for role-playing *en travesti*. The adventure now lies in being a transgressor, not a member of the ruling class.
   B. The rise of literary criticism in the eighteenth century and, in particular, the interest in a theory of comedy.
      1. The reading of the classics inspired a notion of literary style and taste calibrated to particular formal and theoretical standards.
      2. A theory of comedy was developed based on the idea of incongruity, that is, the mixing of otherwise separate kinds of people, words, events, or situations.
      3. Laughter became the expression of benevolence. Thus, writers distinguished between the risible (good, healthy amusement) and the ridiculous (from the word *ridicule* and, therefore, bad and derisive).
   C. Class stratification and the nature of social mobility and impersonation is an extremely complex issue.
      1. Suffice it to say that the important question for our purposes is how individuals of relatively low background can advance in society through wit, verbal prowess, professional activity, and carefully selected patronage. This is a notion of the self-made man.
      2. The rise of the newspaper and of print journalism in the eighteenth century often became the venue for individuals to make their marks on society and, in the process, to influence taste and opinion (e.g., Addison and Steele in the early part of the century). The critic rose to be someone who wrote not for a pastime but to earn a living.
      3. Sheridan himself (but also such figures as Samuel Johnson and Garrick [see above]) may stand for the problem of social mobility and economic success: using verbal prowess to secure patronage and economic security in an age when products of the literary
imagination (be they plays or books or, in the case of Johnson, the Dictionary) become commodities for middle-class consumption (but also activities in need of aristocratic or royal patronage, still).

D. This tension often found itself expressed in language. The scholarly study of language and, in particular, eighteenth-century theories of words, word meaning, and human communication, ensued.

1. Eighteenth-century scholars had a fascination with the history of the English language, etymology, and the nature of language change.
2. Johnson’s Dictionary (1755) had an enormous impact on attitudes toward language use, in particular to the idea of language use as the marker of education, class, and moral quality of a person.
3. But the interests in etymology and word histories are really “metaphysical” rather than philological; that is, words are seen as fossil poems, as relics of earlier cultural or social phenomena.
4. We consider, for example, the history of the word silly. If word meanings aren’t fixed over time, how can languages be said to be totally stable?
5. A general question about the origin of language itself and about the possibility of whether one can think without language came to dominate philosophical discourse (hence the eighteenth-century fascination with people who are deaf and mute, as well as with the so-called “wild children”).

III. Sheridan’s The Rivals, in many ways, dramatizes these intellectual issues, as it comes to represent a comedy of words and a recalibration of the New Comedy plot lines (together with some incorporations of some Old Comedy figures). The individual who embodies all this, as we shall see next, is Mrs. Malaprop.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. What is the difference between the eighteenth-century masquerade and the Renaissance courtly performance (as we saw it in the discussions of Shakespeare)?
2. We still live, in many ways, with the legacy of eighteenth-century notions of language, class, and education. How do some contemporary comic phenomena (e.g., situation comedy, stand-up) play with notions of language and education—especially with what we will see in the next lecture as “malapropism”?

Lecture Fourteen
Sheridan’s The Rivals

Scope: Like Molière’s Tartuffe, Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s The Rivals has long been seen as one of the great comic plays in the tradition of the theater. Like Tartuffe, it satirizes the social pretensions of its day; like Tartuffe, it works through the New Comedy marriage plot, updating it for current audiences. And like Tartuffe, it bequeaths to the literary tradition a theatrical character who emblematizes a particular social condition. For just as Tartuffe himself becomes the emblem of religious pretense, so does Mrs. Malaprop become the emblem of linguistic pretense. This lecture works through the central themes, episodes, and characters in The Rivals to illustrate its centrality to the comic tradition.

Outline

I. Sheridan and The Rivals.
A. The play was the first major production of Sheridan.
1. It was hated on opening night.
2. Sheridan quickly revised the play for a subsequent production and it was successful (1775).

B. Central plot line and themes: New Comedy devices are used in self-consciously classical ways.
1. Impersonation: Captain Jack Absolute pretends to be Ensign Beverley.
2. Language use and misuse: Mrs. Malaprop as the site of linguistic impersonation; that is, her words pretend to be words they are not and she pretends to a level of education she does not have.
3. Marriage plot: Sir Anthony Absolute wants his son to marry the woman of his choice to inherit his estate; the irony is that this woman is the very one (Lydia Languish) with whom Jack, posing as Beverley, intends to elope.
5. Scenes of reading and writing: The function of books and the satire of taste; letters and documents.
7. The resort and the city: Bath functions as a place of escape, where social norms can be twisted and people can be other than who they are in the city. Compare, for example, the forest of Arden in Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream or, better yet, the function of Padua in Strew, where Petruchio comes to the provincial town to participate in his performance courtship.
II. Key scenes and episodes in the play (N.B.: numbers in the following items stand for act and scene numbers).

**A.** At the beginning of the play (I.1), plot is revealed through the conversation of servants. This device makes clear the thematic relationship of masters and servants in the play and takes us back to the New Comedy traditions.

**B.** Mrs. Malaprop enters at I.2.

1. The scene is one of women reading; Sheridan interrogates the place of literacy in the female imagination and brings us to the question of women and writing also keyed to the New Comedy tradition.
2. But Mrs. Malaprop is a figure of the female misuse of language, and her speeches take us back to the intellectual concerns of eighteenth-century English society on language, class, and identity.

**C.** Jack and his father discuss marriage and money at II.1. Here, the old New Comedy problems of the price of marriage, the relationship of love and money, and the larger question of the commodity value of theater itself are raised.

**D.** Perhaps the major episode of the whole play is III.3, which we will discuss.

1. The themes here are language and translation, reading, and mock-discovery.
2. These themes are central to both the literary traditions of the play and the social contexts of its performance.

**E.** The question of Englishness is also central to the play: How can one write, in essence, a truly English version of the comic?

1. Other playwrights, like Plautus, have already raised the idea of vernacularity.
2. Notice Bob Acres’s remarks on dancing (III.4): “Mine are true-born English legs; they don’t understand their cursed French lingo.” One could say of Sheridan that he is creating a true-born English stage.

**F.** *The Rivals* is a play about role-playing and impersonation; the real unmasking occurs at IV.2.

1. Notice how reading and feminine understanding is made central to the discussion: “Zounds, the girl’s mad! Her brain’s turned by reading.” In one scene, Lydia replays a farcical scene from *Tartuffe*, but with books rather than people.
2. Notice, too, what Lydia herself says: “So while I fondly imagined we were deceiving my relations, and flattered myself that I should outwit and incense them all, behold, my hopes are to be crushed at once by my aunt’s consent and approbation. And I am myself the only dupe at last.” In other words, it was a great relationship when it was illicit. Sheridan has twisted the New Comedy marriage plot into fantastic adventurism.

3. And, brilliantly, Captain Absolute again: “Why, Jack, you are not come out to be anyone else, are you?” This will have an important resonance in later comedy—*The Rivals* will become a basic text for camp.

**G.** V.3 offers the denouement; revelation and unmasking in a public space; the end of masquerade; the resolution of the marriage plot; the comic ritual (here the duel) as the site of generational restoration.

III. In the end, *The Rivals* transforms the New Comedy tradition into a uniquely eighteenth-century English world.

**A.** It looks back to Molière by rewriting relationships of parents and children, masters and servants, and performers and impersonators.

**B.** It also looks forward to Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward, because it shows us a British theater of passing and the origins of the playful camp consciousness that will be at the heart of English comedy in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Readings:


Questions to Consider:

1. How does *The Rivals* deploy and, perhaps critique, the conventions of the New Comedy tradition?

2. In comparing *The Rivals* to *Tartuffe*, how do the themes of impersonation, hypocrisy, generational conflict, and master-servant relationships enable you to define the uniquely eighteenth-century features of this play?
Lecture Fifteen
Wilde and Coward, I: Comedies of Class, Aestheticism, and Camp

Scope: In this and the next two lectures, we will look closely at the work of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) and Noel Coward (1899–1973), two of the defining figures for English literary comedy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their most important plays—Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*—both explicitly look back on the traditions we have explored so far, and anticipate some developments in comic form in the later twentieth century. This lecture surveys the life and work of both Wilde and Coward to frame the more detailed discussion of their plays. The lecture also points to some ways in which Wilde and Coward themselves became figures on a comic stage of their own making: a stage of public life and popular attention.

Outline

I. Oscar Wilde’s life and works script out a life in the public eye.
   A. Born in Dublin in 1854, he was educated there and at Oxford University.
      1. Early on, he established himself as one of the most theatrical of cultural figures in late Victorian life.
      2. He was involved in the movement that came to be known as aestheticism, associated with art historians John Ruskin and Walter Pater.
      3. He formed part of the larger cultural landscape of late nineteenth-century artistic life.
   B. He is best known today for his trial for homosexuality and his quips and bon mots: “I put my talent into my work, but my art into my life.”
   C. Wilde established a public persona key to self-presentation (if not self-caricature).
      1. He traveled to America to give a famous set of lectures.
      2. He was himself the subject of caricature and parody, from Gilbert and Sullivan to Max Beerbohm.

II. Among his many plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* fits pointedly into the trajectory of comic literature.
   A. The plot concerns two friends, Algernon and Jack, who spend their lives pretending to be people they are not.
      1. Jack pretends to be “Ernest” when visiting the country, while Algernon pretends to be off visiting an old friend, “Bunbury.”
      2. Algernon’s aunt, Lady Bracknell, disapproves.
      3. In the course of the play, it is revealed that Jack is, in fact, Algernon’s older brother.
      4. All the confusions are resolved, and the two young men may marry the two younger women. In a series of resolutions, the conventions of the New Comedy tradition are played on.

   B. Much like *The Rivals*, this is a comedy of marriage and a farce of impersonations.
      1. It locates the comic place in the country, rather than the city.
      2. It has a younger generation successfully replace an older generation in power and control.
      3. It resolves that older generation’s objections to marriage.
      4. It is full of wordplay, wit, and verbal confusion.
      5. The afterlife of Mrs. Malaprop can be seen in Lady Bracknell. These are the origins of high camp.

III. Wilde and his play can be productively read in tandem with Noel Coward and his *Blithe Spirit*.
   A. Like Wilde, Coward was a public figure who used his theatrical personality and his taste for verbal witicism to create a type of idealized identity.
      1. Coward himself was an actor in his own plays, a cabaret performer, and a movie actor.
      2. If Wilde is iconized in silk stockings holding a lily, Coward is iconized in a dressing gown with a cigarette.
   B. In both is a strong blend of the seductive and the destructive. In both is a kind of benighted puerility.

IV. *Blithe Spirit* (1941) is the play that best captures Coward’s wit (he wrote the play really for himself) and fits most pointedly into the trajectory of the comic tradition.
   A. The writer Charles Condomine is living peaceably in the country with his second wife, Ruth.
      1. During a séance, led by Madame Arcati (the local eccentric), the spirit of Charles’s first wife, Elvira, is accidentally conjured up.
      2. Elvira haunts Charles (only he can see her).
      3. She kills off Ruth.
      4. Both Elvira and Ruth come back to haunt Charles. The spirits are finally dispelled.
      5. At the end of the play, Charles feels finally liberated and takes off on a trip, as his house’s effects come crashing down through the anger of the dead wives.
B. If the traditional comic plot is a comedy of marriage, this is a comedy of remarriage.
   1. Instead of having two men in love with the same woman (a traditional device), Coward has one man effectively “married” to two women.
   2. Instead of having living characters impersonate others, Coward has the dead come back—in essence to show that all existence is really a performance and a show.

C. Both plays make fun of or ironize the New Comedy.
   1. These comedies desexualize marriage. Children are rarely legitimate.
   2. Thus, we see an uneasy relationship between New Comedy and the camp aesthetics of Wilde and Coward.

V. *Importance* and *Blithe Spirit* represent also two forms of the “camp” aesthetic: forms of witticism, along with arch performance and self-conscious irony (if not self-parody) that contribute to the twentieth-century comic sensibility. We will analyze these in subsequent lectures.
   A. This aesthetic is described at length by critic Susan Sontag.
   B. The literary origins of the later camp view of the world can be found in these two plays. The camp view offers a new prism through which to see Old and New Comedy.
   C. Sexuality and comedy come together here to challenge our expectations of just what exactly is funny.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. How does the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* draw on the traditions of the comic theater? What are its New Comedy elements? How is it like an eighteenth-century comedy in nineteenth-century dress?
2. How does the plot line of *Blithe Spirit* comment comically on the traditional plot lines of comic theater?

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Lecture Sixteen

Wilde and Coward, II: The Ends of New Comedy

Scope: This lecture approaches *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Blithe Spirit* together, discussing them thematically and structurally. The discussion is organized around some of the major thematic, historical, structural, generic, and literary issues of the course as a whole (thus reviewing the course’s major foci in the course of reading the plays). In this and the following lecture, I suggest that we see these two plays as something of the end of New Comedy or, to put it more precisely, as the camp recalibration of the literary history of a genre.

Outline

I. Central to the New Comedy tradition is the relation between plot and subplot.
   A. As we have seen, many of the plays of the New Comedy tradition work through elaborate subplots centered on minor characters. The purpose of these subplots is to:
      1. Reflect on the major plot problems of the play, especially in the themes of marriage, parental guidance, class, and impersonation.
      2. Offer caricatures of particular social or personal types, often of particular historical or topical relevance to the play’s original audience. Subplot characters are often Old Comedy types.
   B. Wilde and Coward illustrate the move in modern comedy to the progressive elimination of the subplot.
      1. In *Importance*, the Prism/Chasuble subplot becomes wholly absorbed into the main action; in fact, Prism becomes herself central to that action’s resolution. Meanwhile, Mr. Prism becomes a prism by which the white light of the play is broken down into a spectrum of “Wilde” colors.
      2. *Blithe Spirit* has virtually no such subplot at all; minor characters exist only as props for action (one can see the possibilities of subplotting raised, for example, with the Bradmans or Edith, but they are dropped). Edith’s entrance, like Prism’s, shows us how the subplotting of New Comedy is transformed in Wilde and Coward as a key feature of the main plot line.

II. Masters and servants.
   A. Master/servant relationships have long been the loci for critiques of class consciousness and political control. From Plautus to Sheridan, it is the slave or servant who is really in control, the figure of knowledge, artifice, manipulation, or vision.
B. In Wilde, the relationship is similarly inverted: the servants drink champagne.
   1. Importance creates a vision of master/ servant relationships in which the servant, especially Lane, is as much a part of the theater of impersonation as the master is. Note, for example, the conversation on marriage (Act I) and the cucumber sandwich episode. Wilde shows us that the relations between master and servant are matters of play, not reality.
   2. Note, too, how Lady Bracknell effectively treats everyone as a servant; that is, the construction of oneself as the master is central to the class-based comedy of the play (and note how Lady Bracknell is as much a figure of impersonation as Algernon and Jack are).

C. In Coward, the servant is the deus ex machina, the figure that resolves the plot.
   1. Edith is the key to the plot resolution; her reentry at the play's close makes possible the dismissal of shades of the two wives.
   2. But more to the point, the world of Blithe Spirit is a world in which servants fail: Edith is a really lousy maid, and the cook is probably not very good (she quits in III). N.B.: Mrs. Bradman: "Servants are awful, aren't they? Not a shred of gratitude—at the first sign of trouble they run out on you—like rats leaving a sinking ship."
   3. The key point here is that, by the 1940s, the servant culture had changed dramatically, and part of the theme of this play is the way in which certain devices of the theater and of the genre of New Comedy no longer correspond to the social realities of contemporary life.

III. Doubles.
   A. Comedy has always been the story of doubles: mistaken identities, impersonations, twins, siblings, two men in love with the same woman, and so on. They are the stuff of comic plotting.
   B. In Wilde, doubling is the key theme and plot device.
      1. Algernon and Jack/Gwendolyn and Cecily
      2. Jack as Earnest
      3. Algernon and his Bunbury; Algernon pretending to be Jack's brother
      4. Algernon and Jack turn out really to be brothers.
   C. In Coward, doubling is effectively inverted; instead of two men in love with the same woman, we have two wives for the same man.
      1. Furthermore, the plot device of having the second wife also die creates a new twist on the doubling motif: a recognition that there are "real" and "spectral" selves.
      2. What does it mean to cross over to the other side? Are we the same over there as over here?

D. In fact, Wilde and Coward suggest that doubling is the essence of what we would now call the camp sensibility: the recognition that there is always another, seemingly similar version of the same thing or person out there—one live, one dead; one city, one country; one straight, one not; one sincere, one ironic.

IV. Parents and children.
   A. Unlike virtually all the texts we have read to this point, Wilde and Coward offer worlds in which parent/child relationships are either wildly distorted or completely eliminated.
   B. In Wilde, only Lady Bracknell is a parent (she is Gwendolyn's mother). All other relationships are surrogates, that is, play parents:
      1. Jack is Cecily's guardian.
      2. Lady Bracknell is Algys aunt.
      3. Remember, Jack has lost both his parents.
      4. The traditional procreative functions of parent and child have no role in Wilde and Coward.
   C. In Coward, there are no parent/child relationships. There may be a few highly abstracted ones (e.g., Edith is childlike, Madame Arcati is like one's dotty aunt), but the fact is that we are in a world without procreation.
      1. Indeed, the opening scene of the play notes that the former servant was dismissed for being pregnant.
      2. Sex is the surrogate in Blithe Spirit. Madame Arcati's trances are explicitly linked to sexual responses (indeed, again, look at Madame Arcati's speech on bicycling: look at the way she describes her first spiritual experiences; and note, later in the play, what happens when Elvira blows in her ear).
      3. Sexuality can only be subjugated or surrogated in a world of camp sensibility.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. How can you compare Wilde and Coward in their representations of men and women, masters and servants? Do you see a change from the 1890s to the 1930s in these representations?
2. How is Madame Arcati like Lady Bracknell? How, for that matter, are Ruth and Elvira like Gwendolyn and Cecily?
Lecture Seventeen

Rituals and Rites in Modern Comedy

Scope: Throughout the history of comedy, certain public and private rituals determine relationships of humor, power, and character. Eating/drinking and reading/writing are two sets of such relationships that have governed comedy from its beginnings. This lecture reviews these relationships, with special emphasis on Wilde and Coward, to trace their transformations and the ways in which they characterize the “modern” in the comic tradition.

Outline

I. The rites and ritual of eating and drinking.
   A. The social rituals of ingestion governed comedy from its beginnings.
      1. Dionysus, god of wine: Greek and Roman comic traditions emerge from Dionysiac rituals and are keyed to the comedy of ingestion.
      2. The cook figure in Plautus’s plays comes to represent a kind of playwright, that is, a creative artist who brings together a range of ingredients for the delectation of the audience.
   B. The Miller’s Tale and Gargantua sustain these traditions.
      1. Scenes of excess and intoxication appear.
      2. In addition, the very subject matter of the character (e.g., the Miller himself, Gargantua himself) is keyed to the alimentary world.
   C. In the Renaissance, the tavern, and in the eighteenth century, the coffeehouse are the places of social congregation and the sites of imaginative performance.
      1. These places also govern the establishment of social class.
      2. They help define the nature of the comic itself (the association of the theater and the tavern is a sub-theme of the history of comedy).

II. The Importance of Being Earnest is a play filled with the nuances of the table, from the cucumber sandwiches that disappear to the muffins in the country.
   A. “When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me.” We will look at the whole muffin scene in Act II. In these plays of camp New Comedy, episodes of eating have decided sexual undertones.
   B. Notice, too, the earlier business about teacake and bread and butter. Cecily and Gwendolyn engage in a “tempest in a teacup.” Teatime is war by other means.

III. In Coward, the social rituals of food and drink are central to the plot of the play.
   A. Consider the after-dinner séance, the cocktails, the tea, the lunch, the bad cook: “Tell cook to put Alka-Seltzer down on my list, will you.” The rituals of eating and drinking, like their Renaissance analogues, are the sites of theatrical imagination. The dinner table is the new stage of life.
   B. This is also, now, a world in which smoking functions as eating and drinking did.
      1. It is another of the rituals of ingestion and oral gratification keyed to class identity and the performative quality of individual life.
      2. There is an ironic representation of Noel Coward himself, laughing in a smoking jacket while holding a cigarette in a long cigarette holder, the very symbol of sophistication.

IV. Reading and writing.
   A. A central feature of the New Comedy tradition is the scene of reading or writing
      1. Documents, texts, letters, books, and so on all function as the props for defining character, as devices for advancing or describing the plot, and as tricks for comic invention.
      2. Recall the letter at the opening of Pseudolus, the “reading” of the stars by Nicholas in The Miller’s Tale, the parodies of the encyclopaedia tradition in Rabelais, the scenes of female reading in The Rivals. The sexually comic quality of the reading scenes had been present from the very beginnings of comedy—sexuality and textuality.
   B. Writing and books are major plot and character devices for Wilde.
      1. Notice the scenes with the diaries of the two women, especially Cecily; they brilliantly illustrate the ways in which the written becomes more real than the lived. Wilde used scenes of reading and writing in a diary to subvert the idea of the happy ending.
      2. “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily; that is what fiction means.” So says Miss Prism. But Prism is herself the novelist, and her confusion years before—the book/the baby—is the hinge of the plot.
      3. Literally and figuratively, the “book” replaces the “child” in the Wilde/Coward version of New Comedy. Creation rather than procreation is the goal of Charles Condomine’s life and work.
   C. In Blithe Spirit, Charles Condomine is a novelist looking for a new plot. He invites Madame Arcati for the seance to get fuel for his novel.
      1. In this story, a work of fiction gets away from its creators.
      2. Madame Arcati and Charles are in some sense figures for Coward.
3. They both try to manipulate fantasy characters who, in a very real sense, come to life.

V. In the modern comic tradition represented by Wilde and Coward, these rituals redefine relationships of social class and the dynamics of character interaction.

A. They remind us of the master/servant relationships that are at the core of the comic traditions (Old and New).

B. They reflect on the personae of the playwrights themselves as figures of public renown in their own social circles.

1. Both Wilde and Coward were themselves actors on a stage of their own making.

2. They lead us to understand the distinctively modern phenomenon of the public figure as comic hero.

3. And they point to some of the defining features of the "camp" sensibility that is one of the mainstays of twentieth-century comedy.

Readings:
This lecture discusses the major texts of the course, but it specifically asks students to review the following:

Questions to Consider:
1. How do Wilde and Coward sustain, or subvert, the rituals of eating and drinking in the comic tradition?

2. What is the function of letters, papers, and other written objects (and the acts of reading and interpretation) in Wilde and Coward, and how do those objects and actions reflect on these authors' notions of comic theater?

Lecture Eighteen
Camp: History, Criticism, Comic Texture

Scope: This lecture returns to the work of Susan Sontag to explore the meaning of "camp" in the comic tradition. It reviews Sontag's claims and locates them in twentieth-century cultural thought, then applies them to a tradition of comic impersonation and performance running from Sheridan through Wilde and Coward. The lecture tries to help us understand how contemporary features of popular life are embedded in the earlier history of literary and theatrical comedy. It also tries to help us see how certain "low-culture" versions of comedy (for example, Monty Python) rely on the parodic engagement with this literary tradition.

Outline

I. What is camp and why does it matter to us?

A. The word "camp" emerged in the 1920s to define a certain form of overdone, theatrical, or self-parodic behavior associated with gay life. Camp is likened to the non-normative.

B. In the 1960s, Susan Sontag codified the emerging features of this form of social and literary behavior in her "Notes on Camp," which may stand for us as a document of the theory of comedy.

1. Sontag argues that camp is a "mode of aestheticism." It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.

2. Sontag continues, "Camp sees everything in quotation marks...to perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater." Camp suggests a sense of global world-weariness, comic ennui.

3. Camp emerges, for Sontag, in the eighteenth century, with the interest in masquerade, the fascination with artifice, and the rise of mannerism.

4. "Camp," for Sontag, "is a mode of seduction."


6. "Camp proposes a comic vision of the world," she writes. "But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment."

II. Oscar Wilde, as Sontag herself notes, is the essence of camp.

A. In Wilde, everyone speaks in aphorisms.

1. There is a sense that every utterance is already a quotation, that everything has already been said.
2. The memorability of Wilde’s phrases, therefore, lies in the fact that they appear, in the play, as if they were already memorable.
3. The lines should be delivered as aphorisms.

B. Language itself thus becomes a cultural artifact.
1. The descent of language (a key theme of the course) is now a descent into the already-been-said, the sense that words can no longer describe the world; all they describe is our own weariness of it.
2. Camp aphorism is the language of cosmic ennui.

III. So, too, in Coward’s Blithe Spirit, we have the eternal sense that nothing is original.

A. The function of the song “Always” in the play works precisely in this way. It is the artifact of camp, the quoted and quotable thing, the “bad” piece of music, which at the play’s end, becomes weirdly ventriloquized in Edith’s Cockney singing of it in her trance.

B. Comic detachment and the sense of world-weariness leads to a feeling of above-it-all bitchiness.

C. This is Coward’s “other side,” the world of the ghosts.
1. When we die, we will all become Elvira (even Ruth becomes like Elvira when she dies).
2. Note Elvira’s line about Madame Arcati: “Tell the silly old bitch to mind her own business.”
3. Every scene in Blithe Spirit is one of sexual sublimation. This bitchiness leads to the high point in the camp tradition.

IV. Drag is a form of camp.

A. Transvestism was always a feature of the theater.
1. In the Greek and Roman plays, the female parts were played by boys.
2. So, too, in the Renaissance theater; indeed, this form of impersonation is explicitly addressed in the introduction to The Taming of the Shrew and is often a thematic feature of Shakespeare’s plays.

B. When women started to act in the theater (after the Restoration in the later seventeenth century), the thrill of transvestism was gone. Thus, modern (i.e., post-Renaissance) comic plays often use the devices of impersonation or dress-up (some of it gendered, some not) to maintain the excitement of role-playing and unmasking that used to be the purview of the all-male theater.

C. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, transvestism of a kind becomes a form of comic performance. Drag emerges in the music hall and on the stage.

D. In Wilde and Coward in particular, older women figures of authority become parodic figures of the genre.
1. Lady Bracknell and Madame Arcati become, in essence, drag versions of Mrs. Malaprop or Madame Pernelle.
2. One could go so far as to say that the whole point of Blithe Spirit is to imagine the afterlife as drag: the place where you are always dressing up, camping it up, and bitching it up.

V. An epilogue to camp: Monty Python.

A. Monty Python sustains the English music hall tradition of transvestism.

B. The troupe’s comedy always transcends music hall to remind us of the crazy thrill of camp impersonation and drag theater.

C. Monty Python’s movie, The Meaning of Life, has the episode with Mr. Creosote.
1. This episode functions as the Rabelaisian parody of Coward-style elegance.
2. It is the ultimate unmasking of camp: it reveals bodily activities and body parts and, in the process, exposes camp not as the sophisticated performance it purports to be, but rather as the butt of socially critical parody itself.

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. What is the camp sensibility, and how do the plays we have examined generate it and explore it?
2. What role do you think camp has in popular culture today, and what are the legacies of such writers as Wilde and Coward in that culture?
Lecture Nineteen
Women in Comedy, I

Scope: Is there a female comic imagination? This lecture and the next examine different ways of understanding the place of women in the comic tradition. One way is to locate the female character—the girl, the old woman, the lover, the wife, and so on—as the source of humor in plays and fictions. The other is to locate the woman's authentic voice as author, comedienne, and commentator on the comic. This lecture reviews the materials in the course thus far to write what we might call a genealogy of girlhood in the comic tradition. The next lecture looks closely at one major work of comic fiction, Anita Loos's Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, that may exemplify the ways in which women work within the tradition and challenge it from without.

Outline

I. The genealogy of "girlhood."
A. We have, throughout the course, explored a variety of literary genealogies: masters, slaves, young men in love, impersonators, older women of authority.
B. Here, we can review a genealogy of younger women.
   1. The slave girls in Plautus: They interrogate the relationship between sex and money.
   2. Alisoun in The Miller's Tale: She's a kind of barnyard Venus. The female is associated with an unbridled sexuality but is also a cherished commodity.
   3. Kate and Bianca in The Taming of the Shrew: Is marriage a contract? An agreement? The plot is a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy of the Elizabethan audience.
   5. Lydia Languish in The Rivals: Her name transparently represents the danger of the idle woman.
   7. Ruth and Elvira in Blithe Spirit: Although not girls, they are a paired set of females who subvert the comic tradition and question the roles of women in everyday life.

II. In Plautus, and in the Roman comic play in general, female characters are often silent.
A. These characters may have been played by men, but they may also have been played by women and would not, thus, have been permitted to speak on the stage.
B. The female is the object of monetary exchange (e.g., slave girl).

III. In The Miller's Tale, however, Alisoun is both an object of desire and a character in the action.
A. Her characterization defines the animalistic in her.
B. Her sexuality is explicit and demanding.
   1. Her body becomes the site of male humiliation.
   2. She remains the one character in the tale who is not damaged or humiliated at the end.

IV. In Shakespeare, the heart of Taming of the Shrew lies in the definition of the proper female role.
A. Kate and Bianca represent the two poles of female behavior.
   1. Kate is all speech, and the talking woman becomes an archetype of social challenge.
   2. Bianca and the Widow at the close of the play become "headstrong," and Kate is asked to give them a lesson.
B. Kate's final speech in Act V raises some important questions for the place of women in the comic tradition.
C. Female identity becomes a spoken identity. In the tradition of women in the theater, the slave girl has become articulate. Kate's is the first utterance in the history of the articulate woman, but it is spoken by a male actor.

V. Molière's Tartuffe takes Shakespeare one step further by making the women themselves—the daughters, the mothers, the servants—the motivating figures in the comedy.
A. Dorine represents the power of female speech.
B. Notice this exchange between Mariane and Dorine in Act 2:
   Dorine: Have you lost your tongue? Do I have to do all the talking for you? Fancy letting him put a ridiculous proposal like that to you and never saying a word in reply!
   Mariane: What would you have me do in face of the absolute power of my father?
C. Molière empowers his women to become mouthpieces of his own social criticism and dramatic vision.

VI. In The Rivals, Lydia Languish represents the speaking woman now as a reading woman. As in so many of these plays and fictions, the woman's relationship to language is central to her role.
A. Notice this scene in Act I, scene 2:
   Mrs. Malaprop: You thought, Miss! I don't know any business you have to think at all; thought does not become a young woman. But
the point we would request of you is, that you will promise to forget this fellow—to illiterate him, I say, quite from your memory. Lydia: Ah, madam, our memories are independent of our wills. It is not so easy to forget.

B. Does speech become a young woman? Often, the comic inversions lie in the fact that women seem to think and speak on their own.

VII. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, we have Cecily and Gwendolyn.

A. As we have seen, diaries, memory, reading and writing, and the ideals of feminine attraction are central to these exchanges.

B. Recall, in particular, the discussion of diaries between Cecily and Miss Prism.

C. Recall, too, Cecily's remarks: "You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication."

D. And later, the exchange between Gwendolyn and Cecily on the relative veracity of their diaries, which culminates in Gwendolyn's remark: "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train."

E. In the world of this play, where is the real person? Wilde has used his female characters to show us earnestness itself.

VIII. Finally, in *Blithe Spirit*, the paired sister-like girls of *Importance* become the competing wives Elvira and Ruth.

A. Here, the central question concerns the nature of seduction and the ways in which Elvira functions as a kind of spectral camp bitch of smoldering sexuality.

B. What is the role of woman in the comic tradition? The answer is speaker, subverter, and challenger to the canons of male authority. Now we move to the female comic imagination itself.

Readings:
This lecture reviews the major primary texts of the course.

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you see the role of women in the comic tradition as evolving or static? How do various stereotypes work to provoke social satire?
2. How do pairs of women (e.g., friends, sisters, ex-wives, mothers and daughters, and so on) work in the comic tradition; how do they differ from "buddies" (i.e., pairs of men)?

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Lecture Twenty

**Women in Comedy, II:**

**Anita Loos and the Female Comic Voice**

**Scope:** In addition to being figures in comic action, women came to be their own comic writers. Beginning in the eighteenth century, women writers developed literary (and, at times, comic) voices. By the early twentieth century, such writers as Anita Loos, Dorothy Parker, and Dawn Powell came to express the transgressive possibilities of women as funny social critics. This lecture reviews these traditions and focuses on Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as the best sustained literary example of the comic tradition as appropriated (and, in some sense, challenged and subverted) by the female writer.

**Outline**

I. In addition to being represented in works of theater and fiction, women began to take on comic voices of their own.

A. Jane Austen and Fanny Burney in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries offered social criticism through their novels.
   1. At times, their work is almost parodic (witness Jane Austen's near parody of the Gothic novel tradition in her *Northanger Abbey*).
   2. Throughout their work, however, these authors use precise observation to dismantle social barriers and find a place for the female in literate society.

B. The woman writer becomes the woman comic in the early twentieth century in figures like Loos, Parker, and Powell.
   1. These are the New York and Hollywood wits.
   2. They make their names by writing novels and screenplays.
   3. They also make their names as public figures of witticism and performance.

C. They were members of, or associated with, such groups as the Smart Set or the Algonquin Round Table.
   1. Not unlike Wilde and Coward, they defined the comic voice through the riposte, the one-liner, the bon mot.
   2. They are, thus, in some sense, public competitors with the male social critic.
   3. The female comic voice emerges in these women as a way of subverting the male codes of comic behavior.

II. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) fits perfectly into the trajectory of the comic tradition while offering a comic critique of it as a whole.

A. The novel is an important marker of popular culture.
1. It became the basis of a play, two musicals, and two films.
2. By the time of Loos's death in 1931, the novel had appeared in 85 editions and 14 languages.
3. It is the story of the adventures of one Lorelei Lee as she travels the world, seduces and is seduced, and comments blithely on the rich, the famous, and the socially up and down.

B. As a novel in the form of a diary, it fits in with what we saw earlier as the association between women's identity and diary writing. Compare it with Gwendolyn's and Cecily's diaries in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

III. Structurally, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* fits into the comic types and genres we have seen.

A. Masters and servants: In *Blondes*, it is Lorelei and Lulu.

B. Naming and impersonation: Lorelei is a stage name; in effect, she is a great impersonator, or impostor, and the book as a whole chronicles the ways in which 1920s society is effectively grounded in a theatrics of imposture.

C. Eating and drinking: Champagne is the drink of choice here, and it generates a series of Wildean maxims. Intoxication becomes the mode of social theatrics.

D. Doubles: Lorelei and Dorothy function as doubles; not only are they paired together, but they also function as something of a parodic versions of each other.

1. We can compare them with Cecily and Gwendolyn.
2. We can also compare them with Ruth and Elvira.

E. Money and sexuality: Throughout the course, these two phenomena have been linked together. *Blondes* develops their relationship into the narrative spine of the novel.

1. Sex becomes a commodity fetish, that is, an object whose value lies not in its worth in a system of exchange, but rather in the attraction that individuals have for it. Sex is valuable because people want it, not because of what they can get in exchange for it.
2. Sex also works through fetishes in the Freudian sense: that is, certain parts of the body or certain objects of dress or accessory take on an erotic/economic value of their own and become objects of desire that displace the body as a whole.

IV. Some broader issues in comic theory and feminist criticism can help us also locate the comic power of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

A. In feminist theory, gender is not an identity but a language (a form of discourse or speaking).

1. The critic Barbara Johnson has written: “The question of gender is a question of language.”

2. This position implies that gender difference lies in language rather than in the body or social form of man or woman. There is, then, nothing “natural” about gender itself. Language is itself marked by gender in this view.

3. Furthermore, the body is the place where language and the world intersect. In other words, the body writes, but it is also something that is written upon; that is, it is itself a text to be read.

B. Feminist theory thus seeks a place for the woman’s voice, for the possibility of the writing body as distinctively gendered, and for the language of the female as distinctively different from the language of the male.

C. What is the nature of writing the body in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*?

1. The body as the counter in an economy of sexuality.
2. Sex is constantly deferred in the story. No one apparently has sex—rather, a series of sexual surrogate activities takes place that transforms sex into discourse.
3. Sex is talk and writing: Discussions with men, writing in the diary, malapropism and misspelling as the feminine difference.
4. Sex is shopping: The material economy of capitalist acquisition as the modern displacement of sexual drive.
5. Sex is travel: The experience of “education” and travel to different places is the modern public site of excitement.

V. We have fetishism, money, sex, impersonation, lies, theatricality. All this begs for Freud.

A. Diamonds are a girl's best friend.

1. The tiara episode is the key moment in the book.
2. The tiara had long been the object of desire for Lorelei: “I mean I think a diamond tiara is delightful because it is a place where I really never thought of wearing diamonds before.”
3. Paste and the jewelry store; imitation diamonds: “But I told him I thought that any girl who was a lady would not even think of having such a good time that she did not remember to hang on to her jewelry.” In fact, the story of “faking it” has been the central story in the comic imagination.
4. By the time we get to the tiara scene itself, we realize that the imagery of the diamonds, the tiara, the pockets and purses, the public and private, come together to create a dazzling scene of sexual fetishism and displacement.

B. Calling Dr. Froyd.

1. Lorelei actually meets the analyst.
2. “So then Dr. Froyd said that all I needed was to cultivate a few inhibitions and get some sleep.”
3. Freud wrote: “The comic arises in the first instance as an unintended discovery derived from human social relations.”
C. The comedy of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* thus comes from the subversive, humorous undermining of male forms of understanding, of which Freud's theory of sexuality is the most obvious example for early twentieth-century American readers.

**Readings:**


**Questions to Consider:**

1. How does *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sustain a uniquely female comic voice? Or does it really—is it really different from the comic portrayals of women in the works written by men that we have read?
2. What is the place of Freudian theory in this novel? How is the encounter with "Dr. Ford" an invitation to a special way of reading this novel?
3. If you have seen the movies or the musicals based on this novel, how does a knowledge of the novel help you understand the transformations wrought by Broadway and Hollywood on Loos's comic vision?

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**Lecture Twenty-One**

**Beckett: Comedy and the Absurd**

**Scope:** This lecture introduces the life and work of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), a central figure in the history of modern theater. Beckett is best known for his plays of the absurd condition of modern life, and although many of them seem bleak and pessimistic, they are truly comic in that they reveal the absurdities of the everyday and the humor inherent in language, gesture, and power. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* will form the core of our approach to his comic vision and serve as the focus of the next lecture.

**Outline**


A. Beckett was an Irish writer, born in Dublin in 1906, but he spent most of his professional life in France.
   1. He began as a student of the classics in Dublin.
   2. After receiving his degree from Trinity College, Dublin, he taught in Paris and Dublin, moved to London, and eventually settled in Paris in 1937.

B. Beckett soon joined the circle of writers and artists around James Joyce, then living in Paris.
   1. Beckett was for a while Joyce's amanuensis while the latter was working on his final novel, *Finnegan's Wake*.
   2. It is important to understand this relationship of master and secretary, because it may inform the dramatic relationship between the master and servant, Pozzo and Lucky, in *Waiting for Godot*.

II. Beckett ultimately wrote some of the defining works of modern literature in four broad genres (N.B.: almost all of Beckett's works were originally written in French and later translated by him).

A. Novels: Beckett wrote six novels, each of which explores the absurdity of the modern condition. They rely on scenes of slapstick; features characters who are radically displaced from society; and deploy a kind of bleak, black comedy. The most important of these novels are:
   1. *Murphy* (1938), the story of a man who becomes a nurse in a lunatic asylum
   2. *Watt* (1945, pub. 1953), the story of a gentle tramp, almost a Charlie Chaplin-like figure, who becomes a manservant
   3. *Molloy* (1951), a tale of a writer writing in his dead mother's room
   4. *Malone Dies* (1951), a monologue by an old man
   5. *The Unnamable* (1953), a monologue from the underworld.
(1. B. Critical prose: Throughout his life, Beckett wrote about other major works of literature.
   1. His master’s thesis at Dublin was on Proust.
   2. He contributed an important essay to the earliest critical collection on Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*.

C. Radio drama: Beckett helped define the genre of the radio play in the mid-twentieth century.
   1. *All That Fall* (1956) explores the nature of the human voice and represents the ways in which that voice—on the radio—has a power to express individual character.
   2. In other radio works and in a range of one-person performance pieces (many written for the English actress Billie Whitelaw), Beckett explores the possibility of disembodied characters, voices almost without people behind them.

D. Like Rabelais, Beckett searches for a comic way to organize experience. The mathematical structure of the passage from *Molloy* shows how the modernist temperament gives meaning to the human condition. Here, novelty or variety is an illusion.

III. Beckett’s *Godot* (first written in French in 1948, produced in Paris in 1953 and translated, by Beckett himself, into English in 1954) may be seen in the contexts of this course as a modern version of the themes and motifs of the entire history of comedy, a history now shattered and reassembled into a pastiche of highly allusive fragments.

A. *Godot* looks back explicitly to the Old Comedy traditions of burlesque character and travesty.
   1. In some ways, it is Aristophanic, giving us a nearly plotless account of characters traveling through a barely recognizable landscape.
   2. In some ways, too, it is vaudevillian. Both *Frogs* and *Godot* begin with characters finding their way juxtaposed with a pastiche of old jokes, old tales, and bathroom humor. This makes the full circle of the history of comedy. Old Comedy traditions of farce and character exaggeration were revived, in essence, in the vaudeville stage show and silent film.
   3. *Godot* is full of soliloquies, of addresses to the audience (or to no one in particular) that effectively travesty the New Comedy devices of extended monologue, but that also travesty the Shakespearean soliloquy as the defining device of high drama.

B. *Godot* may also be seen as influencing a whole range of post-war theatrical and public discourses. In particular, we may see its legacy in the non sequitur absurdism of Monty Python, the "nothingness" of Seinfeld, and the ironies of everyday life.

Readings:


Questions to Consider:

1. How does Beckett’s vision of the absurd affect our sense of everyday life? What is comic about the everyday in an absurdist way?
2. How does the modern condition of waiting for things to happen inflect Beckett’s work? How, in turn, can you find a comic quality to this experience in everyday life?
Lecture Twenty-Two
Waiting for Godot:
The Landscapes of Comic Emptiness

Scope: Waiting for Godot represents the twentieth-century comedy of the absurd at its greatest. This lecture looks at Godot through the traditions of the comic theater as they have been developed in the course to locate Beckett in the history of comedy. By framing a reading of the play through Freud, through the structures of doubles or couples, and through the patterns of country and city, the lecture explores Beckett's play as the culmination of the course's argument.

Outline

I. Godot: Jokes, Freud, and therapy.
   A. Freud's sense of joke and humor—caricature, parody, travesty—may help us understand some of the comic elements of the play.
      1. We review Beckett's story of the Englishman in the brothel; in Godot, it's really a joke that is not a joke. The inanity of Freud's Hungarian joke resonates with Beckett's.
      2. Laughter and urination; Vladimir and laughter.

   B. Also, the conversation in the play is a form of therapy, another link between Godot and Freud. Consider, for example, the dialogue in Act 2: "one is not master of one's moods," a Freudian epigram if there ever was one.

II. The structure of the play.
   A. Doubles and couples. How are Vladimir and Estragon like:
      1. A married couple? How do they bicker; is their relationship akin to the married couple relationships of earlier comic plays?
      2. An old vaudeville team? Vladimir and Estragon are something of the Gallagher and Sheen of the absurdist movement.
      3. A buddy act? In some ways, they go back to Dionysus and Xanthias in Aristophanes's The Frogs.
      4. Parent and child? Beckett shows us all pair relationships for what they are. When any couple finds itself at a loss, one becomes a "parent," the other a "child." We will look at this relationship in detail in Act 2.

   B. They are also self-conscious performers. Tricks with hats and clothes and with movement make them explicit figures from the stage.
      1. In many ways, Vladimir and Estragon call attention to the performative theme of Godot itself. One passage bears a strong resemblance to the stone-sucking scene in Molloy, the essence of vaudeville.

   2. Their actions resonate with, for example, those of Pseudolus, of Tartuffe, and of others who are great and self-conscious performers.

III. Pozzo and Lucky.
   A. These two represent the master and servant/slave relationship that is familiar throughout the comic tradition.
      1. The obviousness of the relationship is clear from the start.
      2. Pozzo and Lucky are archetypes of power and abuse.
      3. Pozzo can't sit down without creating a relationship of subordination to those around him.

   B. But they, too, are great actors.
      1. Compare Pozzo with Miles Gloriosus or Tartuffe.
      2. Lucky is also a great actor; his monologue in Act I may be compared with the great political and literary discourses of the twentieth century.
      3. It bears a resemblance to Tartuffe's great monologue on beauty, because both are speeches of seduction.
      4. The self-conscious theatrics of Aristophanes's Dionysus and Xanthias, Peripolynesies and his servant, Absolon in The Miller's Tale, and so on are all reflected in Lucky's monologue.

IV. The country and the city.
   A. The setting of Godot offers an abstracted version of the country/city displacement phenomenon we've seen elsewhere in the history of comedy. Compare:
      1. Sheridan's Bath
      2. Wilde's Bunbury landscape
      3. Coward's country house.

   B. In the traditions of the theater, comedy is often located in the country; characters leave the city to engage in performances of impersonation and indulgences of action that they could not get away with in the city (that is, in everyday life).

   C. The place that Vladimir and Estragon inhabit is an absurdist, modern transformation of the countryside of comedy:
      "Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery!"
      "You and your landscapes!"

   D. Beckett is transforming the city/country dichotomy into an absurdist world. This is the opposite of the Wildean aesthetic—without beauty, without life, without vision.
V. Here, and throughout the play, Beckett transforms the comic tradition as we have witnessed it into an absurd, almost parodic take on the literary genre.

A. In the process, he makes us question whether traditional literary comedy has any place, any more, in modern society.

B. Can we, in a late twentieth-century, and now early twenty-first-century world—a world of war, disease, conflict, and competition—find anything really funny? Or, is Beckett really saying that the only response to such a world is a kind of absurd laughter?

Readings:

Questions to Consider:
1. Compare Vladimir and Estragon with other buddies you know; for example, Tom and Huck or Huck and Jim from Twain's novels or maybe the two cops from the Lethal Weapon movies?

2. How does Beckett transform the monologue or soliloquy into a profound statement about the disorientation of modern life? Just what is Lucky's role in the play, as you understand it?

Lecture Twenty-Three
Ethnicity and Humor: From Vaudeville to Philip Roth

Scope: Ethnicity has long played a role in the comic tradition. From the Greeks and Romans through the modern period, the social "other" has been defined as the butt of humor. This lecture reviews some of the traditions of ethnic humor and locates one modern response to those traditions in the work of Philip Roth, especially his 1969 novel Portnoy's Complaint. Roth's novel brings together the main themes of the course—language and identity, naming and power, the theory of the joke (especially Freud's), travel, eating and drinking, parents and children, sex and money, and so on—and, like Loos's Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, offers a comic take on the comic tradition itself.

Outline

I. Ethnicity and humor are a mainstay of comedy from the beginning of the genre.

A. Even from the time of the Greeks and Romans, ethnic "others" were the butt of stage comedy.

1. Africans, Persians, Asians—all found their representation on the classical stage.

2. "Dialect" jokes were common in the classical world, as they were too in the Middle Ages.

3. Chaucer's Reeve's Tale, for example, is an extended dialect joke, in which the tale's two Northern English students mis-speak and misunderstand in their barely comprehensible regional dialect.

4. Shakespeare's jokey "others" are often comic rustics (whose language would have been full of regional dialects), although Shakespeare also figures ethnic or racial others as tragic figures (e.g., Othello, Shylock).

5. The Rivals has as one of its sub-themes, in fact, a whole set of Irish resonances. Sheridan himself was Irish, and for centuries, the Irish were often the object of British mockery.

B. The ethnic other is best thought of as a kind of Old Comedy figure.

1. The other is an exaggeration or caricature whose overdone features are the object of humor.

2. Freud defines the nature of this caricature in his book on jokes, which helps us understand the ways in which ethnic humor works.

C. In the vaudeville traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnic stereotypes were the building blocks of comedy.

1. Consider the Marx Brothers, for example. They began, really, as stereotypes of the ethnic groups on the old vaudeville stage: Chico
(Italian), Harpo (whose red wig made him, in fact, originally Irish), and Groucho (German, then Jewish).

II. Jewish humor in particular has played a central role in American popular culture.

A. Early Hollywood comedy domesticated the old Jewish vaudevillian techniques.
1. What I'm calling the culture of wit governed the work of such writers as S. J. Perelman, George S. Kaufman, and others. It was marked by pointed witticism and barb, using the language of those in power against themselves.
2. Their writings—in plays, screenplays, and humorous essays and vignettes—centered on the persona of the knowing Jewish outsider, who uses irony and wordplay to defuse prejudice or anger.

B. These writings deploy a variety of techniques that are central to twentieth-century Jewish humor, as in a selection from S. J. Perelman.
1. The use of complex sentences; often leading to inane conclusions
2. The use of overdone, ethnic-sounding, but invariably parodic names
3. The placement of the ironic, or displaced, Jewish narrator in an alien situation (e.g., a higher social situation, a foreign country, a room full of beautiful women).

C. In many ways, this is the genealogy of humor leading up to Woody Allen and Mel Brooks. Think of Allen as a Jewish “new comedian,” using generational conflict with marriage as the solution. Mel Brooks, on the other hand, embodies the Old Comedy of burlesque, farce, and ethnic stereotypes.

III. Just as Anita Loos parodied the condition of women—and used the figure of the faux naïf woman diarist for comic effect in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes—so, too, does Philip Roth deploy the stereotypical Jewish male to offer humorous and, at times biting, social commentary on the general American condition.

A. His best-known novel, Portnoy’s Complaint, tells the story of Alex Portnoy and his adventures as a boy, an adolescent, and a young man.

B. We realize, soon, that the narrative is itself the record of a therapeutic session. Just as Loos’s novel takes the form of the diary (the ultimate female narrative form), so does Roth’s novel take the form of a therapy patient’s talk (what may be argued, for the novel’s time, as the ultimate Jewish male narrative form).

C. Portnoy’s Complaint offers several parallels to the traditions we have explored.

IV. Portnoy’s Complaint, in the end, takes us back to Freud and his theory of the joke, his notion of caricature, and his understanding of the place of humor in society.

A. Like Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, Portnoy’s Complaint is an absurdist comedy of the post-war human condition.

B. And, like the best of the comic literary works we have explored, it not only makes us laugh, but also makes us think seriously about human social relationships and the craziness of everyday life.
Reading:


Questions to Consider:
1. How is the tradition of ethnic humor part of the larger comic tradition? Can you identify other ethnic comic traditions, in addition to the ones remarked on here, and locate their comic force in the trajectory of comedy?
2. How does Roth's novel fit into the traditions of comic theater as we have seen them? In other words, even though it is a novel, what is dramatic, theatrical, or performative about it?

Lecture Twenty-Four
The Comic Legacy: Present and Future

Scope: This lecture reviews the key themes and structures of the comic tradition to provide some frames for noteworthy twentieth-century comic genres and performers. It locates some popular cultural phenomena in literary history while illustrating the applicability of the older historical traditions to discussions of modern comedy. Finally, the lecture suggests some directions for appreciating the future of comic performance and for the place of comedy in our increasingly complex world.

Outline

I. Off and on throughout the course, I have alluded to the Marx Brothers as comic archetypes.
   A. They may be thought of as Old Comedy figures trapped in New Comedy plots.
      1. Their movies present them as burlesques (almost Aristophanic characters), who call attention to the silliness of the New Comedy marriage plots that are the frames for the movies.
      2. Their movies also call attention to just how radical their comedy was. This comedy is deeply satirical and political, provoking laughter in the service of social reform.
      3. Groucho Marx in particular—invariably working from the scripts of his writers Perelman, Kaufmann, and others—illustrates the comedy of language, what Freud called the "toxic mood of cheerfulness."
   B. They illustrate, too, the three theoretical and critical positions on the comic tradition this course has developed.
      1. They are figures of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, as Bakhtin would put it.
      2. Their humor is constantly exposing what Freud called the "moral backside" of society; their jokes are Freudian, always making explicit (through wordplay, double entendre, gesture, and inflection) that which we try to suppress.
      3. Their movies are themselves objects of high camp as the New Comedy lovers' plots become exaggerated and ironized versions of sentiment and desire.

II. The team is central to the comic tradition and to much twentieth-century comic performance.
   A. Duos have filled our course, from Dionysus and Xanthias to Vladimir and Estragon. So, too, the twentieth-century tradition is full of duos:
1. Laurel and Hardy
2. Abbot and Costello
3. Martin and Lewis
4. Elaine May and Mike Nichols. They are a wild burlesque of the married couple.

B. At the heart of buddy comedy is the straight man and the fool.
   1. The humor of the team involves exposing the pretenses of the straight man.
   2. But it also involves exposing pretenses of the fool, including his malapropisms, his attempts at learning, his social aspirations.
   3. The Abbot and Costello “Who’s on First?” routine brilliantly deploys these techniques to show us the comedy of wordplay.

III. Although situation comedy may appear to be an innovation of late twentieth-century television, it is in fact keyed to historical traditions traced in this course. It comes in two kinds.

A. Office comedy: a nod to Old Comedy.
   1. The office is invariably populated by a collection of caricatures, burlesque figures, or exaggerated types, deployed for humorous effect.
   2. They operate through wit and banter (which is why most office comedies are set in places of verbal professionalism, such as the newsroom, the magazine editorial offices, the television show itself).
   3. Office comedies, like Old Comedy plays, are not plot-driven; they tend, instead, to work through vignettes or skits. They rely for their humor on the verbal and physical interaction of characters.
   4. Great office comedies include the Dick Van Dyke Show, the Mary Tyler Moore Show, and more recently, such shows as Just Shoot Me.

B. Home comedy: a nod to New Comedy.
   1. The home is populated by a representative version of the social (i.e., modern American) family.
   2. Home comedies, like New Comedy, are plot-driven. Each episode relies on the resolution of a dilemma; at the end, the marriage is restored, family and generational relationships are clarified, and obstacles to domestic harmony are overcome.
   3. The great home comedies range from Leave It to Beaver to Home Improvement.
   4. The genius of the Dick Van Dyke Show was to synthesize both office and home comedy.

C. The genius of Seinfeld was to dislocate both the office and the home comedy from their respective sites.
   1. The Seinfeld “family” is not really a family at all.

2. The characters are office comedy types who are placed in home comedy situations.
3. The show is avowedly about “nothing.” It may be said to offer a Beckett-like, absurdist take on the traditions of situation comedy itself.

IV. Is there a future for comedy?

A. We may still believe that comedy is about joke telling.
   1. The unexpectedness of obscenity remains one of the surest (and the easiest) ways of getting a laugh.
   2. The stand-up comedian, both male and female, has become the archetype of the comic.
   3. The buddy teams have disappeared as comedians, but have reemerged as figures in larger narratives (e.g., the Lethal Weapon movies).

B. This course has shown that the comic is about plot, character, language, and society.
   1. The goals of comedy are to subvert playfully the norms of social experience while maintaining those norms as the structure for everyday life.
   2. Comedy is, in the end, restorative, because it restores our faith in human laughter to reveal who we are.

Readings:
Among the many books about the Marx Brothers, Abbott and Costello, television and movie comedy, and the modern comic tradition, the following brief selection offers some specific readings keyed to the verbal wit and comic structures of these materials as they bear on the course.
William Irwin, Seinfeld and Philosophy (Chicago, Open Court, 2000).

Questions to Consider:
1. How can you locate the legacies of Old and New Comedy in contemporary comic forms?
2. What are your favorite comedies (or favorite comedians)? How can you explain what makes them funny in the terms that this course has set out?