

## **Literature Notes: Introduction to Comedy (4/2/14)**

### **Origins of Western Comedy**

- Originated around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC:
  - o Greeks had institutionalized humor in the ritual known as komoidia,
  - o “Both tragedy and comedy evolved from the single source of the cult of Dionysus” (Feldman),
  - o “Aristotle locates the origins of comedy in “ancient ithyphallic songs” of the Dionysiac religion;
- Aristotle’s Poetics was written in 2 parts, but the second part (on comedy) was lost;
- Aristotle, in the first part of his Poetics, places comedy as a lesser form than tragedy:
  - o He says comedy originated “from the prelude to the phallic songs” (Aristotle, in Dionysiac processions),
  - o He says that “comedy... is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly.” (‘Ugly’ is explicated as “the quality of being ludicrous and therefore in some degree contemptible) (ibid),
  - o Comedy “consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster” (ibid)
  - o Note: Aristotle explains that comedy is based off inferior people (as compared to noblemen), as he still needed to maintain relations with the noblemen (and hence he wrote tragedies that immortalized their greatness) but he scorned at the inferior about whom he wrote comedies;
- Comedy and Tragedy have similar origins and were both part of the same festival of Dionysus – hence they have similarities:
  - o Both were based on the violation of mental patterns and expectations
  - o In both the world is a tangle of conflicting systems where humans live in the shadow of failure, folly and death,
  - o Both represent life as full of tension, danger, and struggle, with success or failure often depending on chance factors;

### **Tragedy VS Comedy**

Tragedy	Comedy
Valorizes serious, emotional engagement with life’s problems, even a struggle to the death.	Embodies an anti-heroic and pragmatic attitude towards life’s incongruities.
Extols ideals and the willingness to fight for them, all the while retaining honor.	Espouses the handling of conflict through underhanded means such as deal-making, trickery, drunkenness.
Inspires virtues of obedience, honor, loyalty, single-mindedness, resoluteness, and pride.	Encourages critical thinking, shrewdness, adaptability, appreciation of physical pleasures.
People of note are ones of stature.	Incorporates more characters and more kinds of characters; women play a more prominent role and many protagonists come from lower classes.

Meant to incite emotions of terror, fear, and pity.	Meant to evoke feelings of comic scorn and the archaic <i>cheer</i> (modern translation: 'self assurance').
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### Definition of Comedy

"Hegel affirms the primary element in the comic is 'self assurance capable of rising superior to its own contradiction, and experiencing therein no taint of bitterness or sense of misfortune whatever. It is the happy frame of mind, a healthy condition of soul, which, fully aware of itself, can suffer the dissolution of its aims.'" (Feldman)

- An excerpt from Hegel's *Philosophy of Art*, which espouses a theory of comedy that is derived from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* offers a beginning point from where we can form a definition of comedy.

### Ancient Greek Comedy

- Greek theatre's origins are rooted in the celebration of the God of Wine and Fertility – Dionysus.
- Aristophanes is recognized as the formative playwright of Greek Comedies. His comedies were bawdy, ephemeral, closely related to the politics and social customs of the times. (ie these comedies were extremely temporal, so later societies will not be able to understand the social norms of the times in which the comedies were written)
- Menander who was writing around the time that the power of Athens was in decline, and he is hailed for a "New Comedy" which was more pleasantly humorous, politically inoffensive and dealt with comic situations of contemporary urban life.

### Ancient Roman Comedy

- Began around 240 BC
- 2 popular playwrights of this period are:
  - o Titus Maccius Plautus (Plautus): he based plays on Greek originals but adapted them to be more topical and contemporary
  - o Publius Terentius Afer (Terence): his plays were characterized by lesser buffoonery than Plautus' plays and were more universal in their themes
- However, by the time the Roman Republic collapsed, these comedies became like the tragedies of Seneca, more suited to being read than performed and comedy after the collapse became loosely associated purely with ribaldry and in fact like all theatre was forced underground by imperial powers

### Salient Features of Greco-Roman Comedies

- Topical and contemporary
- Bawdy, licentious
- To some extent was a celebration (especially in the Greek world of religious ritual, festivity and orgiastic revelry of the cult of Dionysus)
- Dealt with a critique or commentary on socio-political issues prevalent in their relevant societies

### Theatre in the Dark – Medieval Ages

- Theatre during the Dark ages was mostly forced underground although the theatrical traditions were carried forward by Bards and roving troupes
- In the medieval ages theatre saw a revival through liturgical drama. Especially around the celebration of the Christian festival of the Easter
- Plays eventually moved out of the church but yet retained their liturgical content and are more commonly known as mystery plays in England
- Eventually when liturgical drama moved out of the church, it was performed in play-cycles around Europe.
- Herein comedy was integral to the tragedy and the medieval plays was “tragedy with a happy ending” (Hartnoll, 45)
- In Easter plays the “first comic characters to be introduced were merchants at whose shops the Marys stopped on their way to the tomb” to buy spices for embalming (ibid)
- In Christmas plays “it was easy to introduce comic characters among the shepherds” (ibid)
- “The greatest comic character was Satan himself with his attendant devils... these devils were also allowed to intrude into many scenes where they had no business... to satisfy the popular demand for comic byplay”
- Interestingly they “wore masks as horrifying as any of the classical masks”
- Acrobatic dancing and farcical mining became commonplace
- Performances became increasingly complex including smoke belching mechanisms of Hell Mouth, floods, fires, lightning, and earthquakes. But the main source of Comedy remained the farcical devils and their merited punishments towards the end of the plays

### Comedia dell’arte

- Form of theatre that depended primarily on the actor and not the playwright
- Dialogue ranged from being a simple exchange between two comedians to full-scale plays with sub-plots.
- Involved stock speeches which were adapted for different plays and stock characters which superseded the identity of the actors.
- Involved visual humour, similar to those found in Marlowe’s Dr Faustus, standard jokes, Ilazi- slighter comic touches. Burle- longer acts with practical jokes.
- Both Ilazi and burle afforded room for improvisation
- Because there was no elaborate script the commedia dell’arte involved actors with a high degree of skill and quick wits
- Actors however still wore comic masks.

### From Medieval to Renaissance

- The transitions in theatre from the Mystery and Morality cycles to the *Comedia dell’arte* and including the Italian revival of the Opera (specially for tragedy) were an integral part of the shaping of modern theatre

- Comedy in the Renaissance continued in partly the traditions of comedy in the *Comedia dell'arte* and the Morality plays while adding socio-historical and topicality of its own.

#### Comedy in the English Renaissance

- Ralph Roister Doister (1562) is regarded as the first English Renaissance Comedy
- It borrows its stock character and theme from the comedies of Platus which itself is loosely based on ancient Greek comedy
- However the productions that were more popular than those for educated audiences involved one-act comedies (called Interludes) that incorporated a mingling of native farce with classical allusions
- It was from the players of Interludes that the first professional English actors finally emerged.
- Ben Jonson's Satiric comedies had a lasting influence on the development of English comedy. In the Prologue to Every Man in His Humor Jonson describes the purpose of Comedy as to "show an image of the times, / And sport with human foibles, not with crimes."
- Where Tragedy presents human weaknesses (and foibles) in a manner where they lead to ruin, Comedy presents the overcoming of these foibles.

#### Characteristics of Renaissance Comedy

- Predominance of characters who make themselves are a object of laughter
- Other characters make for of the above type and intensify them as objects of scorn
- Witty commentary or with through which objects of scorn are ridiculed add to the cmic effect
- Character interactions such as deception, betrayal, and flattery also result in comic effects
- Stock characters and stereotypes are also predominantly used (specially in Jonson's comedies)
- Forms of renaissance comedy:
  - o Satire
  - o Parody
  - o Irony
  - o Farce
  - o Black comedy (less common)

#### Satire

- A very broad category where vices or foibles are held up to ridicule with the aim of being constructive rather than solely for the purpose of hsaming
- Satire has a long history of beginning with Ancient Egyptian drama until the modern day however its core values remain the same
- Usually characterized as:
  - o Horatian: Gentle upbraiding of human vices through wit, self-depreciation or exaggeration

- Juvenalian: Contemptuous and abrasive censure through scorn, ridicule, and outrage
- Often claimed as a kind of social commentary. Usually a character is presented with a certain foible and the audience is encouraged to laugh at their lack of self awareness
- The joke is at the expense of the character who is mocked and makes use of the gap between the characters conception of him/her self and the audience (or other's) perception of him/her, such as in Malvolio in 12<sup>th</sup> night
- Tools of satire: irony, sarcasm, parody, burlesque
  - Irony – Generally irony is the difference between what someone does or says in relation to what is understood about what is done or said, and it generally takes 3 forms all of which have well defined characteristics:
    - Verbal irony is the use of words to convey something other than, and especially the opposite of the literal meaning of the words, to emphasize, aggrandize, or make light of a circumstance or subject. A common example of this use verbal irony is the scenario of a man staring out a window looking at a miserably muddy rainy day and remarking “lovely day for a stroll”
    - Dramatic irony is employed to heighten the suspense in a given situation. In this form of irony the words and actions of the characters, unbeknownst to them, betray the real situation which the spectators fully realize. The characters speaking may realize the irony of his word while the rest of the actors may not or he or she may be unconscious while other actors share the knowledge with the spectators; or the audience alone realizes the irony. The perfect example is Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet
    - Situational irony occurs in literature and in drama when persons and events come together in improbable situations, creating a tension between expected and real results.

### Farce

- Farce is the simplest type of comedy. It aims to elicit laughter, usually uproarious, rather than just smiles
- It uses absurd situations, unexpected reversals of fortune, and high degree of exaggerated physical action of a violent kind
- Generally in farce verbal wit is subordinated to visual (slapstick) humor.
- The arbitrary guardians of arbitrary canonicism would distinguish farce as Low comedy and Wit and High Comedy which in the unaware can become excellent material for High humored satire

### Parody

- It is the deliberate use of a mode of writing which makes fun of itself and is self-critical
- Particularly a particular mode of writing is lampooned rather than an individual, however the application is extendable to individuals and characters.

- Eg: The performance of the mechanicals in A Midsummer Nights' Dream which is also a development of the earlier forms of Interlude that were prevalent 50 years prior.
- Performances using highly compressed excerpts (from tragedies), played in an exaggerated manner becomes a parody of the original. This is something that Renaissance audiences would be more likely to recognize.

### Restoration Comedy

- After the Restoration of Charles II's monarchical rule in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century a more licentious comedy. Encouraged by the King who was deeply influenced by Spanish and French Renaissance theatre while in Exile in France.
- This theatre was characterized by sexual explicitness, topicality, and included for the first time in England professional actresses.
- Depicted a world of inverted values, cuckoldry and intrigue
- Wit became more important than romance
- Comedy of the time was meant to reflect accurately real life and satirise it thereby critiquing the institution of marriage and the manners of contemporary society
- Exposing the excesses of society and its deep moral corruption. While trying to bring about reform in manners, taste, etiquette, and decorum

### Comedy in Poetry and Prose

- By the conclusion of the Restoration period and the later prudishness of the Victorian Age Comedy in the English theatre specially of the Restoration period was subject to strong censure and was clamped down.
- However, Comic forms saw a revival in the Eighteenth Century mock-epic poetry and early forms of the novel- travelogues (a classic of the former is Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock while Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels is an excellent example of the latter.)
- Both texts use forms of Satire to effect social change by lampooning both social mores as well as other writers.
- Such a tradition of lampooning other writers (Parody) had gained popularity in poetry of the Restoration period specially in and around London
- John Dryden's MacFlecknoe, a mock- heroic epic (mocking the form of the epic itself), is a good example of this
- Eventually comedy was taken up in the early novels and several aspects of comedy became prominent features in the literature of the Victorians
- For example, in both Charles Dickens and Jane Austen satire is used to critique the social evils such as the effects of the industrial revolution and marriages or the state of women in Victorian England
- Austen specially attributes to her heroines a penchant for cutting witticism
- Around this time, people started writing satirical essays (such as 'The Modest Proposal' by Jonathan Swift) by writers such as Matthew Arnold (who wrote 'Culture and Anarchy')

### Comedy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

- Branched out into several forms:
  - Theatre of the absurd: A newer version of comedy for social commentary and its champions - Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Edward Albee used it with great effect by writing plays that were emblematic of the post modern disconnect that Western society was facing
    - Led to things like the postmodern movements, where people felt an overwhelming disconnect to the world and extreme apathy

### Theories and Theorists of Comedies

- Plot
  - Comedy as a rite (seasonal – Northrop Frye)
  - Comedy as a movement from trouble to peace (Dante's *The Divine Comedy*)
- Character
  - Aristotle: Comedy investigates ethos (the character/nature of man) while tragedy investigates pathos (the suffering of man)
  - Plato: The comic arises as a failure of self knowledge – since the character is unaware of his flaws and follies, he continues to commit errors
  - Ben Jonson: Comedy may be a result of the physiological imbalances (blood, phlegm, choler, melancholy) in a character (Comedy of Humours)
- Function/ Purpose
  - Baudelaire (in 'The Grotesque'): Laughter comes from superiority (man over man) – here the laughter is condescending and derisive
  - Henri Bergson & George Meredith: Comedy as a socially corrective force – laughter generated in comedy as intended to 'bring the comic character back into conformity with his society whose logic and conventions he abandons'
- Craft
  - Hazlitt: The role of wit as 'product of art and fancy', a conscious art; mental agility and linguistic grace
  - He believed that comedy is supposed to reflect and showcase the writer's technique