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*The Ways  
of the World:*

*Comedy  
and Society*

ROBERT  
BECHTOLD  
HEILMAN

# The Ways of the World

*Comedy and Society*

BY ROBERT BECHTOLD HEILMAN

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## Preface

I BEGAN regular work on this volume in 1971-72, when I was a Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities and was on sabbatical leave from the University of Washington, and I finished the first draft in 1975-76, when I was a Guggenheim Fellow. I am most grateful to these three institutions for their generous support. The period of "regular work" had both a before and an after. The before was my pleasant stint as SAGE lecturer in 1971; my primary lecture for the eight universities in the Southeast who were my kind hosts was a sketching of some of the ideas that are developed in *The Ways of the World*. The after was the final revision; I did this in the spring of 1977 when I held the Arnold Professorship at Whitman College, an attractive appointment that allowed some time for writing, and I am happy to acknowledge the official and personal kindnesses of President Robert Skotheim. In both fellowship years I had the run of the British Library and the Marylebone Library in London, as well as the assistance of staff members at both libraries, and of course I constantly had the privileges of the University of Washington Library. I want particularly to mention the many acts of literary rescue-work by Mrs. Bernadette Gualtieri, who has the rare gift of making a request for help sound like a welcome opportunity to dig further into the reference world which she has made her own.

Between 1972 and 1976 Dr. Robert Stevick, the chairman of the Department of English at the University of Washington, kindly allowed me a format of departmental duties which permitted some continuing work on comedy. The department secretarial staff sweetly kept typewriters humming when copy was provided. The editorial staff of the University of Washington Press maintained a round-the-clock security guard against the stylistic and mental disruptiveness that the script could exhibit in its less-disciplined moods. Edith Baras is the research assistant who is an instinctive editorial critic. Dorothee Bowie managed a host of problems in ways that freed more of my time for *The Ways*.

I first started thinking about comedy in the late 1940s, when Cleanth Brooks and I were putting together *Understanding Drama*. I can no longer clearly distinguish his and my contributions to that volume, so I can only hope that I am not unconsciously shoplifting from the well-stocked intellectual store of a former collaborator and an old friend. But even if it were legally demonstrable that all of the present thoughts are wholly my own, I would still be aware of Brooks's permanent and beneficent influence on my ideas of genre. As to other critics that I have used in one way or another, D. H. Monro has done an invaluable survey of theories of comedy, Albert Cook is one of the best on the distinctions between comedy and tragedy, and Elder Olson's Aristotelianism has the fascination of a doctrinal purity that one respects even as one heretically tries to wear only parts of the seamless garment of his thought. L. J. Potts is invariably on target. I have learned from these critics as well as from others represented in the appendixes. "To learn" means at times to experience a felt congeniality of thought that somewhat mitigates the pressure for diffidence in assertion, at other times to benefit from a contributed clarification, and at still others to be aided in perceiving theoretical implications, with their combined benefits and hazards, in sharper outline. Finally, it would be churlish not to note my indebtedness to Anthony Burgess for an accurate and happy formulation of a theory that I had been coaxing from private conceptual pre-existence toward public verbal finiteness.

My wife and the dedicatees are related in more ways than one. She, of course, had to be the steady detector of verbal sound-pollution, intellectual roadside litter, dictional mud-puddles, and syntactic barbed wire. She did well in identifying such roadblocks and unpleasantnesses on the chapter-by-chapter journey, for she coude of that arte the olde daunce. She and I and the dedicatees have traveled some of the same roads. They too know the ups and downs of academic administration, a way of life that can

become a costly habit, and of habitual theater-going, an addiction of which one willingly ignores the cost. Beyond that, they are not only relatives, but friends.

ROBERT B. HEILMAN

Seattle  
July 1977

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# Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	3	
1. <i>Some Ways into the World of Comedy</i>	13	
2. <i>The World as Comic Realm</i>	40	
3. <i>Attitudes to the World: Flight, Challenge, Conciliation</i>		63
4. <i>Melodrama and Comedy: Rival Claimants to the World</i>		98
5. <i>Make Jokes, Not War</i>	125	
6. <i>Infinite Variety</i>	178	
<i>Epilogue</i>	236	
<i>Appendixes</i>	254	
<i>Notes</i>	279	
<i>Index</i>	287	

*The Ways of the World*

COMEDY AND SOCIETY





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## Prologue

EU GÈNE Ionesco's *Foursome*, a one-acter parodying a "summit meeting" of statesmen, consists mainly of a series of 'tis-so-'taint-so exchanges between Dupont and Durand. Using the tireless verbal repetition that is a Ionesco hallmark, the two ceaselessly disagree, initially on a matter that is never defined: we hear only "Yes" and "No," "You're stubborn," and then simply "No" by both parties.<sup>1</sup> Martin unsuccessfully urges a more sensible communication, but even he is drawn into the *melée*. When a Lady enters, all three insist, "This charming lady is *my* fiancée," and in the ensuing scuffle she is half undressed and, according to the stage direction, "has also lost an arm, the other arm, a leg." She closes the play with these words to the audience: "Ladies and gentlemen, I couldn't agree with you more. All this is perfectly idiotic."

What is "idiotic," of course, is the intransigent, irreconcilable, all-or-nothing immovability, the refusal of every combatant to look at either evidence or himself. All trade verbal blows as slapstick artists trade physical blows. *Foursome* is, then, a farce. What is more, it is a farce which portrays a world of noncomedy—a world in which a defensive-aggressive-competitive rigidity cuts off all rationality and civility. Before he too becomes embroiled, Martin chides Dupont and Durand for "refusing to compromise," and Durand insists that with Dupont "no dialogue is possi-

ble. Not on his terms, they're quite unacceptable." When there can be no "compromise," and each party denounces the other's position as "unacceptable," the farce reveals the complete impossibility of the comic. Not only that, but Ionesco's *jeu d'esprit* becomes, as indeed farce often does, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the style of melodrama. Melodrama presents the conflict between opponents, who may in different plays appear as morally equivalent competitors (good or bad or neither) or as embodiments of virtue and vice. Combat is the thing, not concession.

But here my business is not to define "farce" and "comedy" and "melodrama," which get due treatment later on, but to sketch some relationships among them. My discussion of comedy is predictably related to my discussion of tragedy and melodrama in earlier volumes. It is impossible to explore tragedy (as the conflict within the moral nature of man) and melodrama (as the external conflict between different men and groups) without also developing some ideas about the role of comedy, or perhaps better the territory of comedy, in the wide human terrain occupied by these dramatic types. I find myself visualizing a persuasive generic map in which all drama is divided into three parts. Yet this caesarean section, in delivering triplets that have resemblances as well as individuality, should not have the air of setting up a triune divinity, a celestial final solution of the generic problem. In talking about comedy, as in talking about tragedy and melodrama, I am less propounding a "definition"—an ultimate, tight-fitting proof or demonstration slowly reached by dialectical interchange with other Tantaluses trying to grasp an always elusive generic fruit—than offering a hypothesis or using a chosen perspective or a given accent or emphasis. I would like to strike a middle ground between a relentlessly logical and limiting formula for comedy, the heroic prescription that a genre can be only thus and so (one critic is brave enough to acknowledge that his rules reduce the number of Shakespeare's comedies to five), and a lax permissiveness which despairs of discovering a basic comic form and lets the genre become endlessly capacious, a monster of and in miscegenation, a ragbag family with only a tangle of adjectives to identify all the siblings and cousins and in-laws, offspring and foster-children, when the census-taker happens in. The first camp ritually attacks the Polonius classifications; the second practices neopolonialism (and at least one critic manages to have it both ways, abusing the old categories and then realigning and recombining them in a multiple-class system supposedly different from all its predecessors). I probably lean more toward the one than toward the many, since adjectival

incontinence commits one to surfaces rather than substance, to piling appellatives upon ossified underforms. Hence, without vainly trying to cast them on the rubbish-heap of worn-out goods, I seek to shy away from various standard terms, such as comedy of humors, comedy of manners, comedy of character, comedy of intrigue, romantic comedy, tragicomedy, and so on, convenient as these may be in descriptive history. Their very handiness can deflect one from the larger task: the discovery, in all of these, of a comic way of doing things that persists even as variants flourish. One tries not to dictate what comedy must be, but to perceive the kind of thing that comedy habitually does. One hypothesizes about a comic mode of dealing with experience, a comic method prior to the surface styles that first seize the eye.

The mode underlies the modal variants. Conversely, one should be able to act in the spirit of Coleridge's "esemplastic," forming (a number of things) into one. *Entia non sunt multiplicanda*, both within the realm of comedy and within the larger realm of genre. To return for a moment to my generic trilogy—tragedy, melodrama, and comedy. Without further refinements, these three cooperate, so to speak, in marking out large distinguishable areas of human experience and action: the conflict within the personality, with its echoes in the world; the conflict in the world, with the personalities defined only as they must be for this combative life; and the relations within the world that, in contrast with those pictured in Ionesco's *Foursome*, engage personalities not only in conflict but also in finding ways around it or out of it to workable solutions. Here I am not defending these very compressed accounts of three basic styles of human life but only suggesting the useful comprehensiveness of *entia* which have been prevented from multiplying. The three terms are traditional ones; since they are deeply imbedded in the habits of literary talk, it seems better to stick to them and to try to clarify them than to multiply terms while avoiding the multiplication of *entia*. One may, of course, surrender a certain tactical advantage if he fails to use freshly minted terms—I am a little tempted by "psychomachic drama," "politomachic drama," and "irenoplastic drama"—that would have the double charm of novelty and forbiddingness. But they would not notably improve the critical scene. Granted, if one uses the traditional terms he has to attempt some rehabilitation, for, as Eric Bentley has complained, they have all been debased in common usage: tragedy comes to mean anything that goes wrong, melodrama a stereotyped conflict with victory precommitted to the deserving, and comedy anything that gets a laugh. It may not be too late to try a

small resistance to such loose-living populist usages. We shall see, at any rate, that not everything laughable is comic, and that not all comic experiences are laughable.

We can speak of a genre because we observe in numerous plays not only the lineaments that identify them as individuals but also certain formal traits and procedures that relate them to each other. These objective properties reflect certain persisting ways of looking at experience and move spectators to recognizable modes of aesthetic response. The observable habits of plays are rooted, then, in aspects of human nature—its attitudes, feelings, perceptions of reality, its sense of itself as manifested in the individual and in the community. When that rather sonorous term *human nature* crops up, the user may have various motives. By it I mean merely to stress the permanent in comic experience, the constants in what I have termed the comic way of doing things. It is very much of a cliché of our time, overcommitted to change as it is, that traditional forms are gone forever—as if one short century had fundamentally altered or even eliminated central activities of mind and spirit expressed in these forms. Hence, if only for the sake of balance, it should be worthwhile to look for the durable human foundations under the variations of superstructure, which, as they are produced by changing cultural fashions, are so visible that we too easily take them to be primary. In one direction this means identifying traditional elements in twentieth-century comedy, which at bottom often turns out to be less antitraditional than its deliberately surprising surfaces imply. The addiction to change, however, which makes us fancy that we have put “all that” behind us also lets us suppose that all that lies behind us is a series of changes in which one temporariness has succeeded another. One need not decry historical differentiation if one says that it has become an overtraveled route to truth. So it is well to assert that not only *entia* but also *tempora non sunt multiplicanda*. Fortunately some critics continue to resist the multiplication of times or ages and the assignment to each of a characteristic comic method only superficially related, if at all, to before and after. History is indispensable, but one can have too much of a good thing. Still, if an excess of history is misleading, there are ways away from history that are dubious too. One escape from the weight of many past times is timeliness or presentism: leaving to all pasts no role but that of resembling or confirming whatever temporary present we happen to be in. Rather than taking Shakespeare, and every other dramatist for that matter, to be our contemporary, I shall take us to be contemporaries of all of them, or, still better, all of them to

be contemporaries of each other. This is the way of timelessness rather than of timeliness, of keeping in tune with the constants rather than keeping up with the calendar. That there are permanent ways of comedy may be an act of faith, but I hope to show that, in looking at plays of widely separated ages, we find in them as many elements common to the genre as traits belonging only to the individual play in its time.

All acts of faith generate theologies, and theologies in turn are notable generators of dispute that does not often lead, through surrender or self-correction by either antagonist, to unanimity. The *odium theologicum* releases vigor which makes unacceptable anything less than debate *usque ad finem*. Hence in the present essay it is better, I think, to state the basic assumption, and then see how it works in practice, than to put it through a full-dress theoretical conflict with critical structures based on other assumptions. One might undertake to argue for the "durable human foundations" as against phenomenological positions or the credo that an always altering consciousness undermines the concept of human constants. That procedure, however, would impractically extend an already long discussion; indeed it would imply another book, and a different kind of book. The most appropriate test of the basic position which I use, it seems to me, is not the logical case that can be made for it but its convincingness as an instrument for describing the generic characteristics of a considerable number of plays from different times and cultures.

Ideally we are always looking at both genre and play, and much depends on how we do it. I hope not to fall into a simple classification game: to say of a play, "This is comedy" or "This is not comedy," and to imply, "Thank heaven, that one's in the right bin" (as Kenneth Burke used to call it). If I ever seem to do this, then my execution has failed my intention. Obviously there is a risk, since generic terms have to be used. What goes on in criticism, however, should be not a baptismal rite, but rather a seeking out of the generic quality of a play, a showing that it is of such-and-such a kind rather than of some other kind, and hence that it is related to other plays in such-and-such a way. The idea of genre is a way into the play, and at the same time all the plays provide a way into genre. To speak thus, of course, is to assume that genre and play are both realities that are independent of, rather than created by, the mind that attends to them. The reality of the genre is assumed by many critics; even more so, the reality of the play. But eminent English and French critics of recent influence seem almost to deny the objectivity of the work and to see instead, in the guise of a work, only a bottomless well of possibilities to be

dipped into by an infinite series of equally serviceable critical buckets actualizing a potentiality. Perhaps, however, even a critic conforming to this article of faith may unconsciously tend to evade its consequences by hoping, as he mans his windlass, to be hauling up a very big bucket, filling a water-tank which will supply a large community of reader-consumers, and leaving the well, if not dry, at least at a low level uninviting to other bucketeers. It seems an equally tenable, if less startling, assumption that the work is there, that though it does not easily yield to analysis it is still not so elusive as to gain reality only through and because of its pursuers, and that there are ways of dealing with it that identify the work rather than only the dealers.

For the most part we look at plays generally considered comic and try to see wherein they are so. We may find fresh and sound bases for received opinion about generic status. But it is well also to go outside received opinion in testing hypotheses; hence I also approach some ambiguous cases, plays that have been called by different generic names, and try to see what qualities support the use of one name rather than another, or sometimes the use of several. I look also at some plays that are offbeat or at least unexpected in this context (Gorky's *The Zykovs* is one example), for they may reveal either a certain precision or flexibility in the concept of comedy. From applying a perspective to different kinds of plays that at first may not seem accessible to it, it is only a step to applying diverse generic perspectives to one play. In my volumes on tragedy and melodrama I considered some plays usually thought of as comedies, since they had in them materials not adequately accounted for by the label most commonly used. Here I look again at several of the plays that I examined in the earlier essays. This is not, I hope, to overplay the principle of ambiguity but rather to recognize the fact that occasionally playwrights—more often, but not necessarily, modern—do apply different generic perspectives to materials that we must then observe in the same way. In *Tragedy and Melodrama*, for instance, I treated Giraudoux's *Electra* as essentially a superior melodrama which in a scene or two takes on a tragic cast, and I also mentioned in passing that it has some comic aspects; here I view *Electra* as portraying, quite remarkably, a competition between the melodramatic and comic attitudes in a situation which could go either way.

The occasional overlap of examples, then, is not inadvertent. If there is a certain duality or even plurality of modes in a given play, it is possible of course to deal with the situation by using a two-pronged term—a traditional one like "tragicomedy" or a headier one like Ionesco's "tragic farce"

or some other neopolonial linking together of unlikes. I would rather avoid such condominium terms and instead look at the actual procedures, usually found in different parts of a play, which are best described by one generic term or another. It should also be more profitable to observe an actual juxtaposition of comic and noncomic than to fall back on the well-worn generalization that the tragic and comic are intimately related. This cliché, strangely enough, usually seems a sage gnomic utterance, too profound for demonstration and hence expecting, and often receiving, sober nods of approbation. However, the two may be contiguous without a merging of identity, and without either one's having to be thought a mirror-image or transvestite version of the other. Sometimes, indeed, the implied issue of relationship is entirely spurious, the result of a common tendency, when something obviously unfunny crops up in a comedy, to seek some other term for it. The apparent need for a double nomenclature or for a fusion of genres disappears if we remain open to the fact that the unfunny may be genuinely comic.

The ideal selection of plays would be an unselective inclusiveness—an ideal, unfortunately, that would engage the critic for a lifetime and discourage the reader not only by the girth of the end-product but by its depriving him of the pleasure of thinking of unmentioned plays that might support or challenge what the critic proposes. I hope only to have referred to enough plays to seem easily thorough rather than casual or overwhelming; the end to be wished is that a reader will continue on his own, whether to apply or to resist. One keeps recalling other plays that would be good examples of this or that, but he has to stop himself at some point and hope to have chosen suitable plays to illustrate points, knowing that a reader may well think of better cases. I have sought for a reasonably wide spread of plays from different periods and countries, a necessity if one believes that the comic way of doing things reflects human constants more than it does historical and cultural particularities. Plays in English come up more frequently than others, mainly because of the richness and extensiveness of the British comic tradition (and there are simply more of them than of the English translations that one wants to use for general rather than esoteric communication). I talk more about British plays than American ones; we have not been at comedy as long, and besides, with our strong commitment to change and reform, we are less at home with a genre that views human frailties and habits as more enduring than alterable. I try not to overdo recent plays, though the London theater, which has been my perennial museum case, keeps one immersed in them; in



using them, I mean not to record the current scene but to seize upon their aspects that are generically representative. I refer to some plays rather frequently—not careless repetition, I hope, but evidence of the extraordinary meaningfulness of the plays.

So much has been written about comedy that no new approach will be wholly innovative. There is enough partial correspondence between my views and other views to give me some assurance as to the approach, but not so much correspondence as to render this essay gratuitous. One wants to seem neither a furioso or enfant terrible in newfangelnesse nor an honnête homme serenely trafficking in twice-told tales. To identify my own positions vis-à-vis those of predecessors, I have briefly summarized the main views of other critics, with especial attention to areas of overlap, congeniality, or shared faith; to avoid a tedious page-by-page annotation of parallels and divergencies, I have put my glossary of related opinions into appendixes arranged for convenience in comparison. If, as is inevitable, one partly repeats, one also restates and refocuses, changes emphasis and accent. For instance, I depart from the practice of some earlier essays that stick to abstractions rather than applications, and of others that theorize primarily about laughter, humor, and wit and often give plays no time, or little time, or less time than they give to witticisms, jokes, cartoons, and the style of stand-up comedians. My own concern is with the comic stage, though my views ought also to apply to comic fiction (which I mention occasionally). Some critics are interested in the characteristic styles of certain dramatists and do over-all essays on them; though I at times generalize about a dramatist, my business is the individual play rather than the playwright's *œuvre*.

In theories of comedy there is a widespread, though not universal, tendency to see the comic as negative or at least adversary in character—defending this against that, correcting this or that, chastising it or eliminating it. In my view, comedy is rather affirmative, conciliatory, less given to position-taking than to living with different positions as inevitable rather than improvable, as bearable if not always lovable, as amusing rather than contemptible, as expectably imperfect rather than destructive or fatal. There is another tendency in comic theory—to locate the comic essence somewhere outside the realm of rationality, at times on a suprarational height where mysteries invoke more than the human, but more often in subrational regions where the mysteries echo primitive ritual or the persistent dark underside of personality. I do not undertake the mythic, the archaeological, or the geological, that is, the core-borings into