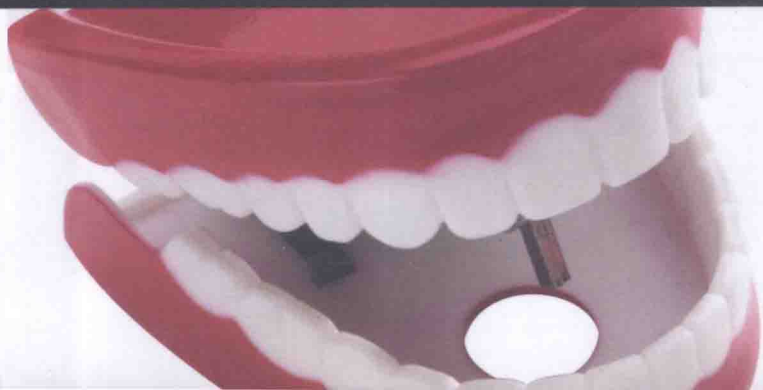


COMEDY

Andrew Stott ■

the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



COMEDY

Andrew Stott

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COMEDY

What is comedy? Andrew Stott traces changing definitions of the term from Aristotle to Chris Morris's *Brass Eye* via Oscar Wilde and *Some Like It Hot*. Providing readers with the ideal critical introduction to the irrepressible genre of comedy, this wide-ranging and thorough overview:

- investigates comic forms, theories, and techniques
- considers comic identity, including that of clowns, stereotypes, and the stand-up comic
- introduces comedy's role in theories of deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and gender
- features analytical case studies on a number of themes, from political satire to slapstick
- considers comic representations of the body and sexuality
- reviews theories of the cultural and psychological purposes of laughter

Introducing complex theoretical ideas in an accessible and lively way, this is the essential guide for those studying comedy in its many forms.

Andrew Stott is Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York, Buffalo.

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

SERIES EDITOR: JOHN DRAKAKIS, UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

The New Critical Idiom is an invaluable series of introductory guides to today's critical terminology. Each book

- provides a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse) of the term
- offers an original and distinctive overview by a leading literary and cultural critic
- relates the term to the larger field of cultural representation.

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In keeping with the communal spirit of comedy, this book is the product of a number of good-natured interactions and has benefited greatly from the assistance of the following people: Keith Hindle and Nigel Mapp were kind enough to comment extensively on drafts, and without the profit of their rigorous and generous readings, this work would be much impaired. Monica Kendall also furnished excellent comments on my final draft. Terry Hawkes graciously allowed me to borrow a bit on Simon Forman I heard him deliver at a meeting of the London Shakespeare Seminar in 2002. Liz Thompson at Routledge is to be thanked for giving me the opportunity to write the book in the first place, and for retaining always the virtue of patient and good-humoured correspondence while I moved countries and generally didn't get down to it. John Drakakis has offered consistently supportive and authoritative editorial advice from first to last, and I am delighted to appear in his series. The final and most outstanding debt of gratitude is owed to Josie Stott, the funniest person I know, whose love, encouragement and support make everything worth doing. For this, and everything else, I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down an open sewer and die.

Mel Brooks

Providing a simple formula to answer the question ‘what is comedy?’ is not so easy. On the one hand, comedy is a reasonably graspable literary form, most properly applied to drama, that uses stock character types in a scenario where some kind of problem must be resolved. Comedies end happily, often concluding with a communal celebration such as a feast or a marriage. We might add that we would expect a comedy to be funny, and that during the course of its action no one will be killed. But this definition is fine just so long as we understand comedy in its strictest and most restrictive sense within literary history. In his study of five centuries of English stage comedy, Alexander Leggatt notes the relative stability of this formula across generations of writers, describing it as our most consistent literary genre, ‘surviving centuries of cultural change with its basic conventions stubbornly intact’ (Leggatt, 1998: 1). Yet any consideration of what we think of as comedy in the modern day exposes numerous anomalies and deviations from this pattern, and a diversity of linguistic and performance practices. As a label, ‘comedy’ can be applied across a range of styles, including traditional categories such

as pastoral comedy, farce, burlesque, pantomime, satire, and the comedy of manners; yet it also applies to more modern subdivisions: cartoons, sitcom, sketch comedy, slapstick cinema, stand-up, some game shows, impressionists, caricatures, and even silly walks. Applying a single uniform definition or methodological approach to such a mixture would be highly unsatisfactory. This terminological range is a product of the fact that comedy is as much a tonal quality as a structural one. While there is a long-standing literary tradition of comedy, 'the comic' is an identifiable mode or tone of writing that manifests itself in a multitude of media, genres, and forms that are not necessarily synonymous with comedy. The mixture of comic with tragic and other elements in writers as diverse as Shakespeare, Dickens, Ibsen, Samuel Beckett, Carol Churchill, or Martin Amis, for example, is indicative of what W. Moelwyn Merchant called the 'permanently recurring affront to the purity of comedy and tragedy as dramatic categories' (Merchant, 1972: 1). In postmodernism, parody, burlesque, and satire – notably 'comic' techniques – are used in the service of serious critiques of Enlightenment philosophy. In practice, then, generic definitions show themselves to be porous, and we often see comic business appearing in contexts structurally inconsistent with that form. This might lead us to suggest that what we call comedy is really humour, a specific tone operating free from generic restraints, which, while not the exclusive property of comedy is closely associated with it. Similarly, laughter, the most immediate meter of comedy's success or failure, does not belong to it uniquely, and is equally induced by humour but also embarrassment, fear, guilt, tickling, or laughing gas.

By retaining a broader understanding of the term comedy we can use it as a means of organizing and understanding a series of persistent themes that we encounter again and again across a variety of settings. These themes include various forms of inversion, the 'world-turned-upside-down' scenario where slave governs master or man bites dog. Foolishness, intellectual myopia, or the rigid insistence on inflexible systems of being or thinking are ridiculed by transformations of different kinds, investigations of alternative identities, or a relaxation of social codes and a suspension of laws governing the body. The matter-of-fact comprehensibility of language is compromised by linguistic contortions that produce parallel or nonsensical forms of meaning. In all these, regardless of where they appear, a notion of 'comedy' is at work. That our

understanding of it is not contained by one definition or narrative arc is one of the principles of this book. 'Comedy' is a term that can refer equally to a genre, a tone, and a series of effects that manifest themselves in diverse environments. This will require us to think of comedy multilaterally, as at once a literary tradition with identifiable structural qualities, and as a way of describing isolated events or passages within other types of work.

As a dramatic form, the historical development of comedy appears to confirm the idea of a relatively permeable form adapting to suit the demands of the day. Cordatus, the moderator of Ben Jonson's play *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1600), offers us this synopsis of its development from its origins in ancient ritual:

'tis extant, that that which we call *Comoedia*, was at first nothing but a simple and continued Satyre, sung by one only person, till *Susario* invented a second, after him, *Epicharmus* a third; *Phormus* and *Chionides* devised to have foure actors, with a *Prologue* and *Chorus*; to which *Cratinus* (long after), added a fifth and sixth; *Eupolis*, more, *Aristophanes*, more than they: every man in the dignity of his spirit and judgment, supplied something: and (though that in him this kind of Poeme appeared absolute, and fully perfected) yet how is the face of it chang'd since, in *Menander*, *Philemon*, *Cecilius*, *Plautus*, and the rest; who have utterly excluded the *Chorus*, altered the property of the persons, their names, and natures, and augmented it with all libertie, according to the elegancie and disposition of those times wherein they wrote?

(Jonson, 1920: Induction, 261–275)

In this version, comedy begins as a simple song for a lone voice gradually accumulating protagonists and interlocutors as each authorial generation presents additions to the form. In this, Jonson, whose own comedies were innovative and markedly different from those that preceded him, suggests that comedy is by definition open to continual adaptation. It offers a welcome opportunity for greater freedom of expression:

I see not then, but we should enjoy the same *Licentia*, or free power to illustrate and heighten our invention, as they did; and not be tied to

those strict and regular forms which the niceness of a few (who are nothing but *Forme*), would thrust upon us.

(Jonson, 1920: Induction, 275–279)

Our knowledge of the origins and development of comedy has not advanced far beyond Jonson's. A clue to its beginnings may be found in the etymology of the word itself, which is generally agreed to be derived from an amalgamation of the Greek words '*kômos*' or '*kômai*', and '*oda*', words that reflect comedy's roots in the Greek peninsula. '*Kômos*' translates as 'revel', while '*kômai*' comes from the word for 'village'. Aristotle (c.384–322 BC) preferred this second definition, remarking that the Dorians 'call outlying villages *kômai* . . . the assumption being that comedians were so-called not from the revel or *kômos*, but because they toured the villages when expelled from the town in disgrace' (Aristotle, 1996: 6). '*Oda*' is uncontroversially translated as 'song', and so comedy is either a hymn of celebration or, as Dante (1265–1321) styled it, 'a rustic song' (Dante, 1984: 31). Most critics and historians agree that comedy appears to be the product of a rural environment rather than an urban one, and to have come into being in association with seasonal agrarian fertility rites. At some stage, comedy also began a long association with the god Dionysus, whose divine characteristics and patronage are clearly impressed on the form. Dionysus, the son of Zeus and Semele, was originally a god of the fertility of nature, a vegetation-spirit who died and was reborn yearly. His cult reached Greece from either Thrace or Phrygia at around 1000 BC, and was particularly notable for its devotional use of wine and the orgiastic revels of its votaries, especially women, who withdrew into the wild to make contact with nature. Dionysus was often described as having a minor god, Phales, as his companion, of whom little is known except his obvious association with the word 'phallus', and by the fourth century BC Dionysus had outgrown his association with organic fertility to become a sponsor of human sexual behaviour. The temperament and qualities of Dionysus and the nature of his worship appear, then, to have exerted a significant degree of influence on the principles of festivity, inversion, relative sexual freedom, and travesty that we find in comedy. Also significant is the removal from the city he encourages, placing him at the fringes of the civic environment and drawing his followers away from urban jurisdiction and inducing them

into conduct that would be unacceptable in the city. Echoes of these Dionysial themes can still be heard much later on, as in the libidity, rusticity, and altered consciousness of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595). Dionysus' most important function in terms of the literary history of comedy was as the patron of both the Lenaea and the 'Great Dionysia', annual Athenian theatrical festivals at which prizes were awarded to the best dramatists. Initially, the Dionysia, the more important of the two, were only for tragedians, with comedies performed only at the winter Lenaea. From around 486 BC, a comedy competition was initiated at the Dionysia, the point at which we may say that comedy is institutionalized as a significant literary form. We can say this because the Dionysia appear to have played an important role as a civic gathering and statement of national identity aside the presentation of theatrics, a platform where the achievements of the state might be annually reiterated, honours granted to citizens of distinction, and the lines of social division and hierarchy be graphically represented in terms of seating and participation. A sense of collective involvement in the issues of government might also be raised through the debates aired in plays (Palmer, 1994: 31–32).

This leads us to a further question asked of comedy: what purpose does it serve, and what, if anything, is its social function or philosophical value, apart from giving pleasure? While the comedy of Aristophanes (c.448–380 BC) sustained an overt political and satirical commentary, comic drama was encouraged to move away from current affairs at an early stage in its development. Aristotle tells us that it was Crates (active 450 BC) who 'first abandoned the form of a lampoon and began to construct universalized stories and plots'; and by the time of Menander (c.342–c.291 BC) nearly a century later, comedy had ceased to intervene in the issues of government, at least explicitly (Aristotle, 1996: 9). Instead, comedy was commended for its realistic representation of the human condition, famously moving the early Alexandrine scholar Aristophanes of Byzantium to ask, 'O Menander and Life / Which of you is imitating which?' (Segal, 2001: 153). By the fourth century AD, the idea of comedy as an instructive literary form takes shape in the work of Donatus, a grammarian who taught at Rome, and who wrote enormously influential remarks on the comedies of Terence, works he would have never seen performed and would have only known as texts. Under these sterile conditions, Donatus declared comedy to be essentially didactic, mirroring everyday life

and schooling us in practical ethics. He also emphasized the academic qualities of comedy, arguing that good comedy should be built according to sound rhetorical principles (Herrick, 1950: 65). Donatus' scholarly and moralistic method fortified comedy with some of the technical respectability of tragedy, and the principal arguments of comic theory from the Renaissance onwards are based on his ideas. That its primary function is corrective is argued in 1698, for example, by William Congreve in response to the clergyman Jeremy Collier's attack on him in particular and theatre in general. 'Men are to be laughed out of their vices in comedy', he wrote. 'The business of comedy is to delight as well as to instruct; and as vicious people are made ashamed of their follies and faults by seeing them exposed in a ridiculous manner, so are good people at once both warned and diverted at their expense' (Congreve, 1997a: 515). Two centuries later, in his 'Essay on Comedy' (1877), the playwright George Meredith made a similar point, although metaphysically enlarging it by personifying comedy as a benign spirit monitoring human behaviour. 'Whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate', he writes,

whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit . . . the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

(Meredith, 1980: 48)

The extent to which we have been profitably instructed, or productively chastised by this 'humanely malign' creature is deeply debatable, especially in the present day.

In the twentieth century, critics have been less keen to subscribe to comedy's didacticism. Some, like Maurice Charney, see a central methodological absence in contemporary discussions of the form that leaves us with 'no common assumptions and no set of conventions by which we could agree on how to speak about comedy' (Charney, 1978: vii-viii).

More assertive critics, like Harry Levin, see comedy as a conflict between the emotions of joviality and sobriety, a 'perennial war of the laughers against the non-laughers', of playboys against killjoys, 'locked in an eternal battle of world views' (Levin, 1987: 40). For Erich Segal, the history of Western comedy plots a long line of descent from the euphoric highs of 'Aristophanic triumph' to the resignation of the 'theatre of inadequacy', represented by the work of Samuel Beckett. According to this thesis, vigorous expressions of life begin to fade and become more complicated and contingent as history and experience instruct us in cynicism, and boisterous, optimistic comic forms are rendered increasingly untenable. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) epitomizes comedy's fate:

The drama will have no happy ending. Indeed, it will have no ending at all. There will be no revel, renewal, or rejuvenation. For whatever Godot may represent, whether salvation or erotic rebirth, one thing is clear. The traditional happy ending is no longer possible – because comedy is dead.

(Segal, 2001: 452)

Rather than proposing narratives of comic function that are intended to hold true in all times and places, some critics, especially those with an interest in poststructuralist theory, are drawn to its apparent indefiniteness and resistance to definition. Andrew Horton claims that 'like language, and like "texts" in general, the comic is plural, unfinalized, disseminative, dependent on *context* and the intertextuality of creator, text, and contemplator' (Horton, 1991: 9). Kirby Olson adopts a similar approach, reading comic fiction through the work of twentieth-century French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze, and finding in comedy an affront to rationality and meta-narratives that attempt to exhaustively explain or incorporate all aspects of the world:

Comedy is an immanent form that does not make us look into the heavens or to God for answers to questions. . . . Comic theory traces a larger discourse over politics of the body and, within that discourse, between orthodoxy and heresy. Like desire, laughter is strangely fluid and cannot be contained by rational thought.

(Olson, 2001: 5)

For Olson, the slippery problem of defining comedy and comic action satisfactorily is evidence of its postmodern virtues: 'Comedy is precisely *a certain freedom from definition*' (Olson, 2001: 6, original emphasis).

Perhaps the only formulation that remains appropriate is also one of the vaguest. In 1900, the French metaphysician Henri Bergson, of whom much more in Chapter 6, argued that 'the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*', a statement that maintains that in all instances, events must at some point intersect with human consciousness to become comic (Bergson, 1980: 62). The humanness of comedy was noted by Aristotle who observed that we are the only creatures who feel compelled to laugh. Comedy is certainly a social activity first and foremost, conceived of always with some kind of audience in mind, and everywhere produced from the matter of dominant cultural assumptions and commonplaces. The question of *how* or *why* things come to be funny is similarly determined by culture. Even though comedy often seems to be suspending, inverting, or abandoning dominant norms, these inversions are produced in relation to the cultural orthodoxies from which they must always begin. It should therefore be possible to trace comic events back to the significations they have transformed. In this way, the comic can be thought of as a means of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives, as each concept culturally established as orthodox simultaneously presents itself for the possibility of comic subversion, like a silent but parallel conversation that could audibly erupt at any moment. Take the traditional story of the Greek poet Philomon, who, we are told, died laughing after he saw a donkey eating figs. The lethal quality of this scene was the perceived incongruity of a beast eating what was categorized as human food. What killed Philomon, therefore, was an event that violated certain prefabricated categories of decorum and appropriateness applicable to figs and donkeys, coupled with his ability to perceive that violation as ludicrous and culminating in dangerously high levels of amusement. We can understand this as an experience of division within the poet that allowed him to interpret multiple layers of significance instantaneously and simultaneously. For Bergson, the division between the perceived and the actual, and the possibility of reading situations in a number of different ways, was a phenomenon he isolated as one of the three principal triggers of laughter. What he labelled 'the reciprocal interference of series' is a scenario that 'belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series