Dramatic Genres
Studying Comedy
Acknowledgements

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### Introducing comedy – Professors Adam Roberts and Dan Rebellato

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3. There and back again – the comic structure 3 mins
4. Theories of comedy 3 mins 40
5. Applying the theories of comedy 8 mins 40
   a. *Abigail’s Party* – superiority theory
   b. *What the Butler Saw* – relief theory
   c. *The Importance of Being Earnest* – incongruity theory
6. Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* 3 mins 30

### Shakespearean comedy – Dr Eric Langley

7. Defining Shakespearean comedy 6 mins 30
8. Theatre and comedy in Renaissance England 9 mins 10
9. The festive dynamic 6 mins 30
10. Happy endings? 7 mins 10
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13. Cross-dressing, women and gender identity 8 mins
14. The pastoral world of comedy 11 mins 30
15. The language of comedy 6 mins 20
16. Desire 8 mins 30
17. A slideshow of production stills*

* Use the play or skip keys (▶) to move through the images in the slideshow.

### The DVD also includes:

- the complete publication as a printable PDF
- colour PDFs of the production stills on pages 24-35 and Bruegel’s ‘The Fight Between Carnival and Lent’ (page 105) for printing or showing via a data projector
- the ‘Using the Interviews’ pages as worksheets, with space for notes.
An overview of the publication

*Dramatic Genres: Studying Comedy* provides resources and classroom approaches to support teachers and students studying play texts as examples of dramatic comedy. Concepts and theories are illustrated and exemplified through particular texts, but the ideas and the activities are not specific to any one.

The materials and activities in the Resources and Introductory sections provide an overview of comedy as a dramatic genre, raising central ideas and concepts. This is achieved through the use of production stills and extracts from a wide range of play texts, chosen to cover a span of time and a selection of the most common sub-genres. By dipping into a range of extracts, students can be given a sense of how their own plays fit into the bigger picture of dramatic comedy. The mini quotations, elements of comedy grid and key concepts and theories cards could form a core resource for students, establishing the significant features of comedy as a genre, that they can then explore in the context of their own play or plays (see page 6 for further notes on these resources).

For Shakespearean comedy, there are two introductory approaches, to give students a sense of the scope of these plays as a whole (including typical settings and characters, conventional plot-lines and structure), before they begin to study their own play or plays in detail.

The introductory material and resources are followed by sections on significant aspects of dramatic comedy. These range from a focus on genre, structure and character conventions in comedy, to ideas particular to dramatic comedy, such as the green world, festival, carnivalesque, fools and the Lord of Misrule. These sections aim to introduce students to new and sometimes challenging ideas, through a combination of activities, critical extracts and short discursive passages.

A few notes on using the resources section

1. Theatrical Comedy – an Overview (pages 8-10) and Timeline (pages 17-23)

The article Theatrical Comedy – an Overview gives a sense of the broad sweep of comedy as a genre and would be useful to read early in the course, to set the study of individual plays in a broader generic context.

The Timeline is designed to be used in conjunction with Sean McEvoy’s historical overview, to give students a sense of where their plays fit into the broad sweep of the genre over time.

You might want to ask students to find their plays on the timeline, to see whether their play was part of a ‘movement’ or type of comedy specific to the period and whether there are other plays they might either dip into, or try to go to see if they’re on at the theatre.

For instance, if they’re studying *School for Scandal*, your students might share out a few other Restoration Comedies, read just the cast list and first two or three scenes and report back on how their allocated comedy relates to *School for Scandal*, in terms of comic characterisation, situation, language or devices.
2. Elements of Comedy (page 11), Types of Comedy – Definitions (pages 12-13) and Key Concepts and Theories of Comic Drama (pages 14-16)

The introductory activities exploring production stills (page 22) and longer extracts (page 52) both use the Elements of Comedy grid (page 11), the Types of Comedy – Definitions (pages 12-13) and Key Concepts and Theories of Comic Drama cards (pages 14-16). However, they could also be used in a range of other ways during the study of the set texts.

Students could use the grid to identify the most significant aspects of comedy and themes in their own plays, either as an introductory activity based on the reading of the first few scenes, or as a summing up activity towards the end of their study. They might do a colour-coding exercise to look at points of commonality between the two plays, for example highlighting elements for one play in one colour, for the second play in another colour, and shared elements in a third colour.

The Key Concepts and Theories cards provide very brief explanations of some of the most significant underlying ideas and theories about comedy as a dramatic genre. Each of the ideas is developed more fully in particular sections of the publication, using critical quotations to provide more detail and give a greater sense of the critical debates around them. These explanatory cards could be used as an initial introduction to key concepts but also as a simple reminder of the most significant ideas at a point when students are planning their writing, to make sure that they focus on at least some of the underlying ideas. Which of the concepts or theories they address will depend very much on the plays you are teaching. For instance the notion of green worlds as a way of analysing dramatic comedy will not be very relevant to an absurdist black comedy like *Loot* but may have a surprising significance in *Waiting for Godot*, another absurdist play, where you could argue that the characters are trapped permanently in that outside space, beyond society, unable to return to the social world, as is conventionally the case in comic drama.

A few notes on using the short extracts

As well as the activities suggested in the publication, you might want to make use of the short extracts in other ways. Here are a few suggestions.

- Identify extracts which are particularly relevant to the plays you are teaching, either because they share common generic conventions, or raise similar underlying comic ideas, or share character types. Use the extract cards to extend and enrich students’ understanding of how their play fits into its generic context, asking students to find points of connection with the play or plays they are studying. For example, if the play being taught for the unit is *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson, then extracts that might connect well with it include:
  - *Volpone*, also by Ben Jonson (another city comedy)
  - *The Hypochondriac* by Molière (character types, caricature)
  - *Loot* by Joe Orton (trickery, deception as a conventional comedy motif).

- Use the extracts when teaching a particular aspect of comedy, for example language or character, to go beyond the set texts and place them in the context of other plays within the genre. For example if you’re teaching about Touchstone as a licensed fool character type in *As You Like It*, you could compare him with clowns and fools in the following extracts:
  - *Twelfth Night* (Feste, another licensed fool)
  - *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Bottom, a natural fool)
  - *Jerusalem* (The Professor, a simple, innocent character despite being called ‘The Professor’).
Production stills (pages 24-35)
The stills on pages 24-35 are from the following productions:

1. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* RSC 2005 d. G. Doran Photo © Stewart Hemley
3. *Waiting for Godot* Scena Washington International Theater Photo © Ian C. Armstrong
4. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Orlando Shakespeare Theater 2011 d. D. Lee Photo © Rob Jones
5. *She Stoops to Conquer* National Theatre 2011 by Goldsmith d. J. Lloyd Photo © Johan Persson
6. *As You Like It* Theatre Royal, Bath d. P. Hall Photo © Nobby Clark
8. *Jerusalem* Royal Court Theatre, 2011 d. I. Rickson Photo © Geraint Lewis/Rex Features
10. *One Man, Two Guvnors* National Theatre 2011 d. N. Hytner Photo © Johan Persson
12. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* RSC 2005 d. Greg Doran Photo © Stewart Hemley

The stills are also available in colour on the DVD as a PDF and as a slideshow.

The overall shape of a Shakespearean comedy (page 92-95)
The simplified summaries on pages 94-95 are: Play 1 *Twelfth Night*; Play 2 *As You Like It*; Play 3 *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Dramatis personae (pages 118-119)

BIBLIOGRAPHY
In working on *Dramatic Genres: Studying Comedy* we have found the following publications particularly interesting and illuminating:

Kiernan Ryan: *Shakespeare’s Comedies* (2009)
Andrew Stott: *Comedy* (2005)

Extracts from Shakespeare have been checked against the RSC *Complete Works*, edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (2008)
EXPLORING ASPECTS OF COMEDY THROUGH PRODUCTION STILLS

For this activity, each group will need a copy of the following resources:

- Elements of Comedy grid (page 11)
- Types of Comedy – Definitions (pages 12-13)
- Aspects and Theories of Comic Drama (pages 14-16)
- A set of the production stills (pages 24-35).

NB: The production stills are also available on the DVD accompanying this publication as both a colour PDF and as a slideshow on the DVD menu.

The images on pages 24 to 35 are all production photos of comedy plays.

1. Talk about the impression you get of comedy as a dramatic genre from looking at these images. You could think about typical characters, settings, actions and so on.

2. Look more closely at the production stills, using the Elements of Comedy grid on page 11 to help you explore:
   - the type of comedy (for example farce or romantic comedy)
   - any particular aspects of comedy the image seems to you to illustrate (for example cruelty or subversion)
   - underlying themes the play might be exploring (for example identity or love).

Use the definitions of genre and key aspects and theories on pages 12-16, as a reference while doing this activity.

The example on page 23 shows you the sort of thing you might look for.
IDEAS ABOUT COMEDY – MINI QUOTATIONS

The quotations below and on pages 62-66 show the range of ideas critics, playwrights and philosophers have had about dramatic comedy.

1. Use the mini-quotations to help you explore issues and debates about the genre of dramatic comedy. You could use them with:
   – the production stills on pages 24-35
   – the short or long extracts on pages 38-51 and 53-60
   – the plays you are studying.

We might say that comedy traces the movement from distress to happiness, from 'bad' to 'good'.

_The University of Vermont_ http://www.uvm.edu/~lschnell/engs135/comedy.htm

As a dramatic form, comedy can exist without laughter, but most of the plays that we consider comedies are engines of laughter, and one of the great pleasures of comic theatre is the feeling of exhilaration and release that laughter provides.


The basic formula for comedy has had more to do with conventions and expectations of plot and character than with a requirement for lewd jokes or cartoonish pratfalls.

_Deapul University, Chicago_

The Tragic and the Comic fade into each other by almost insensible gradations.

_Denton Jaques Snider: The System of Shakespeare’s Dramas_ (1887)

Comedy involves men of middling estate; its perils are small-scale, its outcomes peaceful.

_Susan Snyder: The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare_ (2001)

Comedy, beginning in turmoil but ending in harmony, celebrates life.

_Susan Snyder: The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare_ (2001)
INTRODUCING THE ORIGINS OF DRAMATIC COMEDY

Clip 1 Old and new comedy – an overview (6 mins)
1. Watch Professor Adam Roberts introduce comedy as a dramatic genre. Use the bullet points below to help you follow the clip:
   - Ancient Greece – Athens
   - Aristophanes and Old Comedy (5th century BC)
     - Key characteristics
   - Menander – New Comedy (4th century BC)
   - Roman New Comedy
     - Key characteristics
   - Two traditions of comedy and laughter
     - vulgar, rude, slapstick
     - refined, witty, civilised
     - bringing the two traditions together.

2. In pairs, talk about whether and in what way the ideas he explains relate to any comedies you have seen (films, TV sitcoms, as well as plays in the theatre).

3. You could now go on to talk about the ideas in relation to any or all of the following:
   - the images on pages 24-35
   - the short extracts on pages 38-51
   - the plays you are studying.

Clip 2 The status of comedy as a dramatic genre (3 mins 45)
1. Watch Professor Dan Rebellato discuss the status of comedy as a dramatic genre. Use the bullet points below to help you follow the clip:
   - comedy’s reputation now and over time
   - high-status tragedy v. low-status comedy
   - Aristotle and the origins of tragedy
   - the lost treatise on comedy
   - Plato’s views on comedy.
THE OVERALL SHAPE OF A SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

Summaries of three Shakespearean comedies are included on pages 94-95.

1. Working in groups of three, share out the summaries between you. Read and annotate your summary with anything you notice about its structure. For instance, you might notice a period of confusion right in the middle.

2. Take it in turns to introduce your play. Together, talk about any similarities or repeated patterns you notice across the three plays.

3. Share what you notice in class feedback.

A simplified model

One of the many observations you may have made is that all three plays share an overall movement towards happiness or fulfilment.

The two critical extracts below describe this basic structure as one of the defining features of a dramatic comedy.

Extract 1

many genres are characterised by a particular shape of action. Most obvious, perhaps, is romantic comedy, which begins in discord and ends in accord […] The plots of many romantic comedies also briefly contain, and all suggest, a time of harmony before the disharmony. The feeling that there is a natural order of things to be returned to … Plays that work towards a happy final synthesis are said to have a comic structure.


Extract 2

Beyond laughter and jesting, for both performers and audiences in the theatre, comedy exists as a narrative form or structure. This form is based on the expectation that the delightful temporary disorder of the tale will be resolved with reincorporation into normal society.


In very simple terms you could describe the basic phases of a dramatic comedy as:

- Harmony
- Complication
- Disorder or chaos
- Resolution
- Restoration

The events or actions which create the broad phases of a comedy are listed on page 93.

4. In pairs or as a class, talk briefly about where you would place each of the events or actions in the simplified model, above.
Subversion, Festival and the Lord of Misrule

FESTIVAL AND THE LORD OF MISRULE – ONE KIND OF SUBVERSION

Exploring a painting

1. Look at the painting on page 105 and on your own, make a note of your first impressions. You can do this in any way you want – as key words, free writing or annotations round the painting. *(This painting is also included on the DVD as a colour PDF and at the end of the slideshow on the DVD menu.)*

2. Get into small groups and share your first impressions.

3. Now use the prompts below to help you think in more detail about what is happening in this picture.

   - Fun or frightening?
   - Play or work?
   - Plenty or want?
   - Life or death?
   - Individual or social?
   - Religious or secular?
   - Celebration or riot?
   - Controlled or out of control?
   - Chaos or order in society?
   - Liberation or oppression?
   - Who are the figures?
   - What are the figures doing?