

Chapter 1

Introduction: comedy as idea and practice

Laughter

Laughter is universal; we all need to laugh, and many different events can bring it about. Throughout the sixteenth century there were significant discussions of the role of laughter in relation to the ‘decorum’ – or proper conduct – of daily life, especially among the gentry and nobility, who were considered the patterns of Renaissance behaviour. Here is one such discussion:

He is a living creature that can laugh: because this laughing is perceived only in man, and (in manner) always is a token of a certain jocundness and merry mood that he feeleth inwardly in his mind, which by nature is drawn to pleasantness and coveteth quietness and refreshing, for which cause we can see men have invented many matters, as sports, games and pastimes, and so many sundry sorts of open shows . . .

And although all kind of jests move a man to laugh, yet do they also in this laughter make diverse effects. For some have in them a certain cleanness and modest pleasantness. Other bite sometime privily, otherwhile openly. Other have in them a certain wantonness. Other make one laugh as soon as he heareth them. Other the more a man thinketh upon them. Other in laughing make a man blush withal. Other stir a man somewhat to anger. But in all kinds a man must consider the disposition of the minds of the hearers.

Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, tr. Thomas Hoby (1561), Book 2

What is the relation between laughter and comedy? It will be the business of this book to tease out the distinction, to look at the ways in which Shakespeare, writing in the 1590s and the first decade of the 1600s, combined laughter-causing moments with a form of dramatic story-telling that has a long and ancient history. Whatever happens along the way in a dramatic comedy, the ending will offer an image of happiness – for at least some of the characters whose fortunes we have followed. If for others there is sadness and exclusion, that is a reminder that comedy’s optimism is an artificial and selective view of the world (just as tragedy’s pessimism is). Shakespeare plays many variations on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85668-3 - The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies

Penny Gay

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*

the mix of laughter and sadness within the form of comedy – and productions of these plays can opt for greatly different moods and emphases. One constant, however, is the practice of clowning: the contribution of actors whose job it is to amuse the audience – hopefully, to make them laugh – at various points in the play.

When Castiglione speaks of ‘the disposition of the minds of the hearers’ he is reminding us of the most vital aspect of comedy: its audience. His list of ‘jests’ acknowledges that things strike us as funny in different ways at different times. Yet in writing a comedy, the playwright must provide the opportunity for clowns to do their work. To begin, then, with a question: what is the funniest Shakespeare scene you (the reader) can recall in performance, either professional or amateur? Most people, without having to think much, will enthusiastically offer the performance of the play ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ in the last act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. After this, three other comic models often come to mind: Malvolio's letter scene and cross-gartered appearance before Olivia (*Twelfth Night*); Beatrice and Benedick's volley of sarcastic put-downs and their ‘overhearing’ scenes (*Much Ado About Nothing*); and – my personal favourite – the one-sided conversations between Lance and his oblivious dog in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

What is it about these scenes (and their analogues) that almost infallibly produces laughter when played on a stage? (though it may very well not do so in silent reading). Between them, like Castiglione's list, they create a rough taxonomy of types of comic *events*, or ‘business’.

- (1) The play-scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the ‘rude mechanicals’, ‘hard-handed men’ with little or no formal education, take on the performance of a classical tragedy, as written (it seems likely) by Peter Quince. They know how tragedy is supposed to go, with high passions expressed in elaborate metaphors, a hopeless love, and a drawn-out death scene. Nick Bottom, who plays the hero Pyramus – and would happily play all the other parts – believes profoundly in his own gifts as an actor, and the importance of getting the story told with maximum effect. In fact, he and his companions are a little ‘afear’d’ of theatre's potential to stir feeling, to convince the audience that what is happening on stage is ‘real’; so various prologues, explanations, and interruptions are scripted into the play to reassure the audience. Each of the actors takes his role in telling the story with immense seriousness: Snout (Wall) as the first-act ‘set’, very important as the symbol of separation of the lovers; Starveling (Moonshine) as the ‘lights’, a role often under-appreciated in the theatre, as Starveling is made mortifyingly aware; Snug (Lion), anxious to let all know he is no villain really, but ‘a very gentle beast’ – his role is of course vital, for without

him there would be no tragedy of misunderstanding. Then there are the eloquent hero and heroine, each of whom has a dithyrambic death scene, Thisbe's ending the play with such self-believing passion (Flute never steps out of role to explain it) that it often silences the patronising on stage audience and wrings a tear. This brief analysis suggests that the play-scene is funny because its situation is so familiar to everyone in the audience: the community recognises its own passion for drama, and laughs, not in contempt like the on stage audience, but in delighted acknowledgement of that irrational need – and of the courage of the actors who would respond to it, whatever absurdity that may involve.

- (2) Malvolio's letter scene, and its follow-up, the cross-gartered scene, represents the classic come-down of a self-important figure – the banana-skin joke. Here we laugh, as Hobbes said, because of a 'sudden glory':

Laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.

Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature* (1650), ch. 9

We might gloss this by adding that we sense that the world is momentarily just and has punished the overweening by making them *look* funny. As early as 1602 law student John Manningham noted his enjoyment of this aspect of *Twelfth Night*: 'a good practice in it to make the steward believe his lady widow was in love with him, by counterfeiting a letter as from his lady, in general terms telling him what she liked best in him, and prescribing his gesture in smiling, his apparel, etc., and then when he came to practise, making him believe they took him to be mad'.¹

- (3) The gulling of Benedick, making him believe that Beatrice loves him, is another version of the Malvolio joke: his reactions to the set-up scene (he has to pretend he's not there, 'overhearing' his friends) provide opportunities for great physical comedy. Some Beatrices go the same way in their parallel scene, seeking laughter by excessive mugging as she listens, but as I shall argue in chapter 5, the style of the text suggests a more serious reading of this scene. On the other hand, the several scenes between Beatrice and Benedick, right up to the last moments of the play, are full of attempts by each to outdo the other in sarcasm, and they can be very funny if the actors invest them with enough venom.
- (4) Lance and his dog, in *Two Gentlemen* 2.3, 2.5, and 4.4. As Lance delivers two brilliant stand-up monologues (2.3, 4.4), the dog, who is partly the subject of them, does whatever dogs do (or whatever an actor in a dog-suit thinks will get a laugh). The joke here is the demonstration

4 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*

(without danger) before our eyes of the absurd uncontrollability of the natural world in which we live.

To these examples of what is basically *visual* comedy (that is, the undermining of seriously intended speech with bodily incongruities or indignity), we can add some specifically *aural* laughter-producing mechanisms, when a character mangling and misapplying the English language tickles the collective funnybone because of his departure from the norm.² Don Armado's extraordinarily florid utterances sound even weirder when delivered in a Spanish accent – in fact, most accents that are not London or the home counties are automatically funny to English ears. Dogberry's, Elbow's, Mistress Quickly's, and others' malapropisms frequently produce an unintentional indecency (the Latin lesson in *Merry Wives* 4.1 is a virtuoso example); they have the same laughter-producing effect as an unrepressed fart or belch. They remind us that we are all ultimately comic, i.e. potentially grotesque bodies, and that decorum cannot or should not be always maintained.

The place therefore and (as it were) the headspring that laughing matters arise of, consisteth in a certain deformity or ill favouredness, because a man laugheth only at those matters that are disagreeing in themselves, and (to a man's seeming) are in ill plight, where it is not so in deed . . . to make men laugh always is not comely for the Courtier, nor yet in such wise as frantic, drunken, foolish and fond [silly] men and in like manner common jesters do: and though to a man's thinking Courts cannot be without such kind of persons, yet deserve they not the name of a Courtier.

Castiglione, *The Courtier* (tr. Hoby), Book 2

Castiglione understands that laughter is necessary to mental health, and he is aware – perhaps grateful – that there are people who can be employed professionally to provide this. He is consistently anxious (as the rest of his discussion makes clear) about the tendency of the educated gentry to imitate the witty 'jests' and 'merry pranks' of the professional performers. This ambivalence can be found in many of Shakespeare's depictions of young men – perhaps most strikingly in the comedy that turns to tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's clowns, however, never doubt their right and ability to make a joke.

Comic models

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 – or at least a gesture towards that: a gesture that can be, on occasion, deeply ironical. Comedies, as a genre, end with weddings and feasts rather than deaths and funerals – though the latter can often be sensed not too far away.

Models of comic structure were provided in the pre-Shakespearean English theatre via a number of routes:

- (1) Roman comedy, the plays of Terence and Plautus, were used in schools to teach Latin, even though their plots usually displayed the ‘immoral’ triumph of the young lovers, aided by clever servants, over the foolish father-figures. Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* is an adaptation of Plautus’ *Menaechmi*: he outdoes his master by adding, among other plot elements, another pair of twins to the Antipholi – their comic servants the Dromios. Other character-types that occur in Roman comedy and are picked up by Shakespeare in various plays include the boastful soldier, the doctor (either as conman or foolish old man), and the shrewish wife.
- (2) These comic types were developed in sixteenth-century Italian comedy: both what was called *commedia erudita* (literary comedy played in aristocratic courts and academies and widely published) and *commedia dell’arte*, the work of travelling playing companies that ‘ransacked the literary plays for materials for their improvised three-act scenarios or for their own occasional five-act scripted plays’.³ Some *commedia* companies (with their adult women players) visited England in Shakespeare’s lifetime, and his energetic use of the *commedia* style in, for example, *The Taming of the Shrew* suggests his possible acquaintance with a theatrical example rather than just travellers’ reports, or a reading of published scenarios. The major collection of *commedia* scenarios was published (in Italian) in 1611, too late for Shakespeare to make specific use of them; yet they clearly, as Louise Clubb writes,

memorialize several decades of experience in the Italian professional theatre and demonstrate much of its range. They attest to a continual mining of the kinds of fictive material also used by Shakespeare and to a method of selecting, combining and disposing stageworthy elements from a shared repertory . . . common among them are errors involving twins; the bed trick in a dark room; disguise of sex or social condition in order to serve a beloved, often entailing carrying messages to a new love and becoming the object of his or her affections; revelations of identity and reunions of separated families; tricks to fleece misers and to mock would-be seducers, presumptuous wooers and fortune-hunters; madness and pretended madness; supposed death.⁴

6 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*

- (3) In the mid-1580s the English writers John Lyly and George Peele wrote and published highly literary plays that were performed at court and read by fashionable ladies. Janette Dillon writes, 'It is with Lyly that the exploration of love and its effects on lovers begins. We find the musings of lovers on their own feelings, the mockery of their folly by others, the careful plotting of the game of love . . . Lyly also anticipates Shakespeare in providing witty minor characters who indulge in extended repartee . . . wordplay and chop-logic.'⁵

The stage was now set for Shakespearean comedy.

Shakespeare and comedy

Shakespeare's major comedies were written at a peculiarly fertile time in English cultural history: the 1590s. The professional public theatre was flourishing (purpose-built theatres had only appeared in London in the 1570s); London was a rich melting-pot of people of all classes; printed books were becoming cheap and popular; artistic and philosophical discussions were fashionable, but so were gossip, travellers' tales, and stories of the teeming underlife of the city. 'Mongrel' theatre (as Sir Philip Sidney called it – see below), or hybrid forms, would seem to suit the very temper of the times.

In general, there was already a strong tradition of 'miscellaneity' in the earlier English drama; Janette Dillon lists examples of plays that were successfully given at court. Thomas Preston's *King Cambises* (c. 1558–69), for example, 'has a title page describing it as "a Lamentable Tragedie, mixt full of plesant mirth"'.⁶ So Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, commenting on the 'very tragical mirth' offered by 'Pyramus and Thisbe', should be well used to the mixed genre, and although he finds it amusingly naïve, unlike Egeus (or Sidney), he appreciates the work of 'imagination' and of 'simpleness and duty' – the humility of the actors in making their offering.

There were objections, both moral and intellectual. The anti-theatricalist Stephen Gosson wrote in *Plays Confuted* in 1582, that 'bawdy Comedies in Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish, have been thoroughly ransacked to furnish the playhouses in London'. He was simply recording a fact: that professional English theatre was in its early heyday, and writers and owners of the theatres were energetically availing themselves of anything that could be adapted and would sell to an audience. As well as the long tradition of moralising against the theatre, here represented by Gosson, there was also aesthetic criticism. Sir Philip Sidney's famous complaint in his *Apology for Poetry* is typical:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85668-3 - The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies

Penny Gay

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Comedy as idea and practice* 7

all their plays be neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in clowns by head and shoulders, to play a part in majestic matters, with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained.

Sir Philip Sidney, *Apology for Poetry* (written c. 1579–80, published 1595)

Sidney was an aristocrat and a poet; his perspective comes from his classical education – and he wrote well before Shakespeare began his career. At the centre of his argument is the theory of decorum, or fitness, which is to be found in all the major theoretical treatises of the sixteenth century, for example Castiglione (quoted above). As Viola remarks after her conversation with Feste about the job of being a jester: ‘He must observe their mood on whom he jests, / The quality of persons, and the time . . .’ (3.1.50–4).⁷

As for a witty man, so for a play, goes the classical theory. But the popular and successful plays of the sixteenth century got their laughs and their popular success by being *indecorous*, by combining ‘kings and clowns’, just as Shakespeare went on to do; miracles and rough magic; grotesque bodies and graceful heroics. Imogen’s lament (*Cymbeline* 4.2) over the decapitated body of Cloten, which she thinks to be that of her husband, is an extreme example of this teasing and disruption of the audience’s responses by refusing to obey the rules of decorum: actresses performing this scene never know whether they will get laughter or sympathetic, suspenseful silence. The scene was anticipated more than ten years earlier, in Thisbe’s lament over Pyramus in the *Mechanicals’* play (*Dream* 5.1), with verbal cues suggesting a comic response. But even here, a determined Flute/Thisbe can silence laughter by the intensity of ‘her’ performance.

The same effects can be found in the English vernacular tradition of drama that Shakespeare knew: the Mystery plays, dating from the fifteenth century when England was still a Catholic country and the church engaged the imagination of the people through the annual amateur drama festivals that re-told the narratives of the Christian faith. The Annunciation play (often known as ‘Joseph’s Trouble about Mary’) always gets a laugh on Joseph’s line ‘Who hath been here since I went?’ as he points at Mary’s heavily pregnant belly. Mak the sheep-stealer in the *Second Shepherd’s Play* (telling of the birth of the Christ child) is a clever conman who finally gets his comeuppance, tossed in a blanket.

In the Morality plays of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, in which allegorical figures such as Everyman underwent moral and religious adventures, the figure of the ‘Vice’ became prominent. The Vice (he has various names in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85668-3 - The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies

Penny Gay

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*

different plays) represents the attractive face of wrong-doing: he is cleverer than anyone else on stage; he chats to the audience about how he is going to fool everyone with his tricks, thus making the audience complicit. He almost always gets found out, so that the audience has learnt a lesson – however clever or superior they think they are, ultimately goodness and righteousness will win. Shakespeare models his blackly comic Richard III on the Vice, and develops it further in much later plays – Iago in *Othello*, Iachimo in *Cymbeline*. But arguably, the Vice's habit of witty chat to the audience, his penchant for turning up unexpectedly – and taking advantage of the situation – influence the development of the Shakespearean clown.

Clowns

It is important to distinguish between the several types of clown on the Elizabethan stage. The servant (e.g. the Dromios of *The Comedy of Errors*) is a figure derived from Roman comedy and its sixteenth-century Italian descendants, notably in the *commedia dell'arte*. This type of clown indulges in witty exchanges with his master and others, but is also subject to constant physical abuse, though the genre of farce can make this seem merely comical. I discuss this type of comedy in chapter 2.

The country clown is a creation of the English native tradition – a sweet-natured but unsophisticated figure, whose view of the world is entirely restricted to his local activities. He can be witty, but it is more often an accident than a deliberately professional attempt to hold the intellectual high ground. Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost* is an excellent early example of this type (his exit line in 3.1 about the monetary difference between a 'remuneration' and a 'guerdon' always gets a laugh); and he is still to be found in the delightful Young Shepherd of *The Winter's Tale*, conned out of his money by the Vice or 'rogue', Autolycus.

A variant of this type is the non-rural worker: he may be the community constable (Dogberry, Dull, Elbow); he may be the castle porter (*Macbeth*); he may be a pimp (Pompey in *Measure for Measure*) or a grave-digger (*Hamlet*). Although these roles may simply be classified as 'comic', they function – as do the country clowns – as satirical commentators on the doings of the higher folk.

It is this commentary role, whether conscious or unintentional, that is at the heart of the clown's function. It acts a bridge between stage and audience. The Fool, the most consciously witty of Shakespeare's clown roles (always played by a specialist actor in Shakespeare's company), is a professional jester, who makes

his living by begging tips for his jokes and songs; he is usually attached to a noble household, though he may not actually live there. His role is to deflate, through wit (at times obscure, perhaps deliberately so), the more pretentious attitudes of those in power. In *Twelfth Night* 3.1 Feste draws our attention to this role in his conversation with Viola; in *As You Like It* Touchstone's 'moralising' job is greatly envied by Jaques, himself a somewhat sardonic outsider; in *All's Well* Lavatch foregrounds his relation to the audience by satirising the fawning behaviour of courtiers in his virtuoso 'I have an answer that will serve all men . . . "O Lord, sir!"' (2.2). All stand aslant to the society on which they depend. In the course of this discussion of Shakespeare's comedies, I will be suggesting that often the heroines take on a double role, as another Fool, chatting wittily to the audience about their situation and their position as outsiders to the powerful (and patriarchal) court.

Actors

The French word for actor is *comédien*; it began to be used about the middle of the sixteenth century, 'indicat[ing] a general sense of a new form of entertainment or a new type of occupation'; professional acting, in short.⁸ Olivia asks Viola (disguised as Cesario) at their first meeting, 'Are you a comedian?' Viola replies equivocally, 'No, my profound heart; and yet, by the very fangs of malice, I swear, I am not that I play' (*Twelfth Night* 1.5.151–3). This exchange sets up one of the most persistent themes of Shakespearean comedy: its metatheatrical consciousness. Like a number of his contemporary playwrights, Shakespeare does not want the audience to lose themselves in the story to the degree that they forget that they are in a theatre. This awareness, these plays suggest, actually adds to their pleasure – the audience, trained and sophisticated by decades of public theatre, becomes a privileged assistant to the actors' job of story-telling.

Actors were nevertheless, at this time, legally 'vagabonds', having virtually no rights in the social structure. The safest way around this situation was to become a member of a company of players attached to a nobleman or member of the court. Shakespeare's company began as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and mutated triumphantly into the King's Men on the accession of James I. This position gave them a modicum of protection from prosecution, but it also put them in the position of having to keep their patron on side. The role of the Clown has thus a particular resonance: because he is 'an allowed fool' (*Twelfth Night* 1.5.76), and an accomplished verbal quibbler, he is the locus of any satirical protest that the successful, commercial company – operating in

10 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*

its own theatre well away from both court and puritanical city – might want to express against their feudal situation.

Audiences and spaces

This somewhat constrained situation is echoed in a peculiarity of Shakespeare's plays. Fictional 'theatrical performances' – plays within plays – always have an aristocratic audience: the Mechanicals play before Theseus and Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the rustics play for the King of Navarre and the Princess of France and their lords and ladies (*Love's Labour's Lost*); the Players play for Claudius' court in *Hamlet*. In reality, most performances of Shakespeare's plays were in the public theatre, where audiences were of all sorts and conditions of men – and women. Aristocrats and gentlemen would also visit the purpose-built outdoor theatres, sitting perhaps in the 'Lords' room' above the stage or the 'gentlemen's rooms' in the first bays next to the stage. The rest of the theatre held a mixed audience, from the 'groundlings' standing around the thrust stage – and able to get right up to its edge and make their presence felt – to those sitting or standing in the three storeys of covered galleries.⁹ The reproduction Shakespeare's Globe on London's South Bank provides a wonderful modern experience of the actor–audience relationship in all parts of the theatre – though most scholars now agree that the building itself is too big, and the placing and size of the stage pillars remains controversial.

All Shakespeare's plays had to be viable for touring, or for performing at court, in a college hall, in a great country house, or in the indoor hall theatres increasingly built after the turn of the century. They were written with these conditions in mind: 'plays were performed with a minimum of scenic and mechanical aids, in costumes whose lavishness would surprise us more than it surprised the first audiences . . . Disguise flourishes on such a stage, because it stands out, and because the audience is interested in clothes.'¹⁰ Peter Thomson further points out that 'Timid acting has no chance in such a setting. The Elizabethan actor, if he was to be effective, must have determined to dominate both the platform and the surrounding audience' (43).

This is a space for actors to fill with their energy; it cannot depend on scenery or lighting for its effects. At times the stage will be full of actors – for example, in the opening scene or the masked dance scene (2.1) of *Much Ado About Nothing*: out of this crowd first one group of speakers, then another, will emerge to focus the audience's attention; and thus, this play's themes of gossip, rumour, overhearing are made visible for the audience. Or the stage may hold just two or three speakers, in dialogue, or even one, in soliloquy. At