Introduction

Michael Cordner, Peter Holland and John Kerrigan

On the title-page of *The Double-Dealer* (1694), Congreve placed a motto from Horace's *Ars Poetica*: 'Interdum tamen, & vocem Comœdia tollit' ('Sometimes however comedy too raises its voice', line 93). As Anne Barton has noted, Congreve is plainly hinting here at 'the dark strain in the play which the Theatre Royal audience had found perplexing', while seeking 'to claim classical sanction for its stridence'.[1] Comedy often seems to feel obliged to warn its readers, even apologise to them, whenever it is going to deal with serious matters, as if the false opposition between the comic and the serious had some element of truth in it. Whenever comedy raises its voice – or puts its head over the parapet – it usually expects to be shot at for arrogantly rising above its literary station.

For comedy to claim to matter has often been considered pretentiousness. For criticism to turn its attentions to comedy has often been considered aberrant. Though Aristotle appears to have had no doubt that comedy mattered and probably spent a significant part of the lost second book of the *Poetics* analysing it, the body of comic theory is notoriously slim by comparison with its non-identical twin, tragedy. Umberto Eco's brilliant fantasy in *The Name of the Rose* of the lost treatise's suppression as a subversive text underlines the dangerousness of comedy in some moods, but evades considering other causes for the paucity of comic theory: above all the conventional hierarchy that places tragedy at the peak of cultural achievement and insists on a lowly status for comedy. Despite the contributions of philosophers and literary generalists from Bergson to Northrop Frye, and the (usually more illuminating) remarks of practitioners from Dryden through Meredith to Barry Humphries, writing about comedy continues to seem less prestigious and culturally significant than writing about tragedy.

Perhaps, though, the critical impulse to stand aside from comedy – to let it go about its mischief unmolested – pays prudent tribute to the mode's antipathy to generalisation and prescription. For the most part dedicated to flouting norms and frustrating expectations, comedy has an ingrained antagonism to rules. When rules are proposed for its own conduct, it sets out to mock or break them, engaging in reflexive literary satire and wilful generic imperialism. This is where plays like *The Critic* flourish, while such scripts as *Bartholomew Fair* and *A Tale of a Tub* show comedy planting its flag in areas of experience marked off as belonging to tragedy ('Hero and Leander' performed by puppets) or court masque (In-and-in Medlay's device). Mention of Jonson is salutory, however, in reminding us of the complexity with which some comic writers combine prescription and subversion. The strains created in *Every Man Out Of His Humour* between satirical action and sardonic, or laughable, commentary, show comedy being pushed so far that, as John Creaser remarks later in this book, the result is 'crammed with judgment' yet impossible to 'take on trust'. In this, as in other respects, Jonson defines an extreme. More often, comedy acknowledges rules in order to establish its freedom.

This collection has no pretensions to filling up the space that might be occupied by a theory of comedy, a space that should perhaps be called 'a much-needed gap in the literature'. But Congreve's appeal to classical authority in his choice of epigraph is part of comedy's recurrent awareness of having its own traditions. Jokes need the trigger of novelty (which is why we usually start them by asking 'Have you heard the one about...?'), even though, as Eric Griffiths points out in the closing essay of this book, 'it is the old jokes we go back to'. Comedies, however, tend to accept (and signal) their belonging to a continuum of written and theatrical practice. Their unruliness is compatible with an awareness of traditional resources. While the exclusivity of high tragedy results in historical and social lacunae, periods and cultures that are conventionally demeaned by not having generated tragedies, comedy has fewer breaks in its fossil record. Like the works which they discuss, the essays in this volume are aware of (without attempting to provide 'coverage' for) the traditions of comic writing in England. In argument they often take their bearings from the work of Anne Barton, a critic whose remarkable explorations in Classical, Renaissance, Restoration and Romantic literature have frequently – as most recently in *The Names*

of Comedy (1990) and *Byron: 'Don Juan'* (1992) – gravitated to comedy. The collection has been produced to accompany and mark the publication, by Cambridge University Press, of a selection from her writings on drama: *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean*. Some of the authors included in *English Comedy* were Anne Barton's students, some were or are her colleagues in Cambridge and Oxford.[2] The pages which follow are offered as a reflection on and tribute to her work on comedy.

Recent critical iconoclasm has made merry with 'the cult of Shakespeare'. A lot of politically knowing laughter has been directed at the excesses of Victorian and Edwardian Bardolatry, as well as more up-to-date manifestations of Bardbiz. Yet the works which we call 'Shakespeare' – perhaps especially the comedies – have reconstituted themselves rather successfully in the culturally relativist and verbally ludic milieu of post-structuralist criticism. Is this yet another endorsement of the 'myriad-minded' timelessness of the man from Stratford, or does it owe more to sustaining continuities within English comic writing? Almost from the outset, those comedies which were gathered in the Folio of 1623 were subject to adaptation: cartoon versions are only the latest twist given to a kaleidoscope which has been turning since Davenant's rewrite of *The Tempest* (starting-point of Peter Holland's essay on Noël Coward) and Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*. Whatever explains the phenomenon, the lasting vitality of Shakespearean comedy is a central theme of this collection. And the opening group of essays establishes in relation to Shakespeare many of the criteria and concerns which will recur throughout: the constrictions and liberations of genre, the negotiations or divergences between comic drama and theory, the operation of comic language, and the need to revalue and redefine the nature of difficult or undervalued work.

From its beginnings, Western comedy has been interested in animality. Had the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* survived, it would doubtless have reiterated his dictum – announced in *De anima*, and ringingly endorsed in the epigraph to *Gargantua* – that it is laughter which distinguishes humanity from the animals. Aristophanes has his frogs, wasps and birds, giving him comic access to the livelier properties of that political animal, man. But if comedy has traditionally enjoyed presenting human behaviour as more like that of animals than society might care to admit, it can also make animals more directly part of its scope. In the first essay of *English Comedy*,

Richard Beadle traces the long pedigree of Crab, Lance's dog in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Examining the use of dogs and their masters (usually gleemen, *joculatores*, clowns) on the medieval and Renaissance stage, he sheds light not only on the kinds of laughter roused by Shakespeare's play but on threatening hints of depravity associated with the recalcitrant Crab. Different comic possibilities from those which now obtain were available when man met dog in the sixteenth century, and Shakespeare (like all playwrights) worked in culturally available materials. Reweighting the balance between theatrical and literary analysis, the essay reminds us that Shakespeare's sources are as likely to be the traditions of dramatic practice as the accidents of his reading.

Even in Aristophanes, characters are more often human than animal. But how human is a character? Stephen Orgel's essay begins by correcting, on grounds as historical as Beadle's, our urge to define Renaissance comedy by polarising it against tragedy, but then proceeds to question character itself. Reminding us of the fondness of early modern plays for 'scenes of writing' and 'handwritten discourse as the mode of action', he indicates some of the consequences which flow from character possessing that quality of writtenness of which Crab is blissfully unaware. Orgel is interested in the witty ambiguities created by written documents in tragedies and histories (as when Marlowe's Edward II is killed by Mortimer's duplicitous Latin) as well as in generic comedy. But he is also concerned to establish a larger relationship between the confined scriptedness of roles and their life beyond the limits of plays. By analysing illustrations and scholarly commentary, Orgel redefines our sense of Shakespearean character, and indicates how performance style remodels the past. This argument is pursued into the verbal minutiae of *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, showing how details of the 'late' comedies have been manipulated by editors not (as one might expect) to make Shakespeare their contemporary but to deflect attention away from what remains troubling in the plays.

Textual details also attract Jonas Barish and Barbara Everett. The former is drawn to those moments of transition (sometimes missed by editors) when Shakespearean comedy moves between verse and prose. What does the dramatist signal by these shifts? What potentials of comic meaning can be found there? Barish established his reputation with a pioneering study of *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (1960). In his contribution to *English Comedy*, he gauges

the artistry of Shakespearean prose (with its 'verbal hijinks, verbal fireworks, and verbal filigree') against the foil provided by a verse which 'serves more often as the vehicle for the nuts and bolts with which the actions and passions of the plot are spun'. Everett's essay on *Much Ado About Nothing* starts with a more local crux. From the editorial problem posed by a few words of Leonato in Act 5, she moves out to the tonal difficulties of a play which has not (compared with Shakespeare's romantic comedies) had its critical due. Admirers of Everett's work will recognise, in this manoeuvre, a tactic resourcefully deployed in her *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies* (1989). And it is towards the more sombre, paradoxical, tragi-comic features of *Much Ado* that her present discussion devolves. For her, Messina is a world in 'which some version of the political, the power-issue, is serious: a world which defers to Courtship and to social hierarchy'. This sounds like the language of new historicism, but Everett is less interested in glancing context (and political moralising) than in defining the play's 'special, almost novelistic sense' of reality.

Adrian Poole completes the opening group of essays by relating memory and forgetfulness to the dynamics of Shakespearean comedy. To characterise the social texture and structural properties of *Much Ado*, Barbara Everett invokes Restoration comedy, Oscar Wilde, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Vogue* magazine. Poole's initial pages ring with authorities far more cosmopolitan – Kundera, Baudelaire, Borges, Giordano Bruno, Freud, Montaigne, Bergson and Charles Péguy – because, like other contributors to the volume (John Kerrigan and Eric Griffiths most obviously), he finds it impossible to talk about particular, English varieties of comedy without invoking strands in European culture generally. Poole's central concern is with 'the ways and means and kinds of forgetting' in the comic parts of Shakespeare, but he shows how this relatively limited subject cannot be unpacked without investigating links between hilarity, vertigo and self-forgetfulness, the mnemonic authority of father figures, the emotional difficulty of forgiving, and the ambiguities (especially where mourning is involved) of oblivion. Noting, with Scots detachment, Peter Burke's observation that 'The English seem to prefer to forget' – and that they can afford to do so because of their success in winning wars – he ends his essay by reflecting on cultural amnesia.

From Shakespeare the next group of essays turns to other English Renaissance writers. If Shakespearean comedy is protean, then

Jonsonian comedy is, in John Creaser's view, enigmatic. At times too 'audacious' in the theatrical demands he made, Jonson alienated audiences and reacted against their displeasure with notorious displays of scorn. Yet to think of Jonson as essentially a prickly and difficult artist is to prevent ourselves registering how far his 'dramaturgy is founded not on distrust but on confidence in the audience'. The dramatist's defiant reaction against those who misunderstood him can be taken as evidence of disappointed trust. Creaser sets out to show how deeply Jonson is speaking for himself when he remarks, in *The Masque of Queens*, 'A *Writer* should always trust somewhat to the capacity of the *Spectator*.' Examining the author's 'artistic greediness', his variety and inventiveness, Creaser finds in the plays a 'radical elusiveness' not unrelated to Renaissance ideas of perspective and habits of dialogue, but having the potential to make Jonson appear the possessor of just that '*Negative Capability*' which Keats famously found in Shakespeare.

In his sympathy for the more flexible, Shakespearean features of Jonson, Creaser is close to Anne Barton. Like the author of *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (1984), he also has a liking for the early and late works of a playwright who has too often been regarded as the creator of only four, Jacobean masterpieces. The problem has always been that, until scholarship makes some sort of case for neglected plays, they have little chance of gaining the performances which generate critical interest. Yet the qualities which deserve to rescue comic drama from neglect are (even more than is the case with tragedy or history) likely to become fully apparent only in production. A cheering example of interaction between the academy and the theatre is provided by the resurgence of interest in Jonson's *The New Inn*. Revalued in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, in the light of 'Elizabethan nostalgia' under Charles I, the comedy was (in direct response to Barton's advocacy) successfully revived by the RSC. Those parts of the script which had been condemned as undramatic – Lovel's long speeches on love and valour, the formidably improbable dénouement – held audiences spellbound.

The next two essays in *English Comedy* deal with a pair of Caroline comedies which have been, like *The New Inn*, misconstrued. Thanks to its commanding central figure, Sir Giles Overreach, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* has, at least since Kean, held a place in the repertory. But, as Martin Butler reminds us, its 'grimness' has troubled critics. Rather in the style of Anne Barton's work on late Jonson (though

with different ideological priorities), Butler returns *A New Way* to the politics of the mid-1620s, establishes with fresh clarity the social position of Sir Giles, identifies Lovell as (historically speaking) his 'real opponent', and, in short, adjusts our sense of the entire play. The result is a comedy of politically, as well as dramatically, vivid 'grimness' – certainly not a script which needs the 'pervasive jollying up' of its last RSC production (1983). Starting from the suggestion that Heywood's *The English Traveller* was written in partial response to Massinger (notably to the 'scepticism' of *The Roman Actor*), Richard Rowland sets out to make a case for this neglected play. While Butler's essay is sensitive to social pressures outside the theatre, Rowland supports his systematic reassessment with telling cross-reference to travel books, classical drama, obscure Stuart plays and other works by Heywood to provide reasons for revaluing a work which, in his view, 'uncovers wisdom, generosity and loyalty in the unlikeliest places'. Theatre directors should note: it is time for *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* to be reconnected to the energies of its historical moment, and time for *The English Traveller* to follow *The New Inn* into the repertory.

Many of the most influential twentieth-century accounts of post-Restoration comedy have spotlit major figures while largely ignoring the bulk of the period's comic output. When the evidence is examined thus selectively, Etherege's *She Would If She Could* stands out as, in the words of John Palmer, 'the first finished example of the new comedy of manners'[3] and therefore, in effect, the prototype for all significant subsequent experiments in the mode. This version of playwriting history has by now been thoroughly discredited, but at least it offered a confident explanation of why, in Thomas Shadwell's words, 'some of the best Judges in *England*' deemed *She Would If She Could* 'the best Comedy...written' since 1660.[4] No generally accepted alternative account has been devised to replace it, and, in the process, re-situate Etherege's comedy more confidently in relation to the varied comic output of the late 1660s playhouses. Michael Cordner's contribution takes a fresh look at *She Would*, the difficulty it caused its first audience, and some of the grounds for the attempted rebuilding of its reputation after the failure of its premiere. He discerns in the play an intricate exploitation of audience expectations, linked to an ambitiously experimental use of a single plot structure. This is a reading which, by implication, makes *She Would* a natural companion piece to the vigorous canvassing of the relative merits of multiple and single

plots in Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesy*, published earlier in the same winter in which Etherege's play was premiered.

Comedies, then, can be 'grim', generically ambivalent, or (like *She Would*) sophisticatedly frustrating of what audiences anticipate. But the comic can also be traced into the smallest particularities of poetic language. In 'Rhyming as Comedy' Gillian Beer 'investigates how rhyme gets under the guard of reason and teases words out of their autonomy, doubling, dissolving, and playing across the rim of meaning'. As a result, her concern is not with rib-tickling verbal consonance but 'with rhyme as dialogue, quarrel, and undersong and with the helpless excess of possibility that poises it always on the brink of comedy'. Far from being arid word-lists, rhyme dictionaries are revalued in her essay as gardens of beautifully useless information, in which 'Familiar and arcane terms jostle each other and fall nonchalantly into the ear's agreement.' Working examples from Herbert and Pope, she shows how rhyme deflects and transfigures. Her reading finds nuances in, and around, lyrics (such as Hardy's 'The Voice') which are far from comic in their subject matter. But rhyme's forcing together of different (often differently spelled) concepts, like 'moon' and 'June', registers, as Beer points out, a dialogic potential. In Bakhtinian language, 'The licensed licence of rhyme...displays "carnivalesque" qualities – tousling language, overturning the hierarchies of signification, locking together terms from disparate linguistic registers.' Hers is an account in which, rather than providing harmonious containment, 'The comedy of rhyme lies in its refusal of established categories.'

The comic resources of Romanticism are explored in the next two essays. Jonathan Wordsworth shows that, although Sterne and Burns anticipate features of 'Wordsworthian comedy', there is, in such poems as *The Idiot Boy*, an unprecedented intermixture of the sublime and the direct, the tersely rhymed and genially relaxed. Shelley accused Wordsworth of being 'solemn' and mocked him for it in *Peter Bell the Third*. Jonathan Wordsworth admits that his poet can be 'a trifle solemn' when justifying his work, but maintains that the verse has different properties. Through patient attention to the shape of passages and timing of lines, to ballad form, mock-epic and 'conversational styles', he shows how much wit, charm and tact there is in early Wordsworth. A context for this defence is provided by Jonathan Bate's 'Apeing Romanticism'. Invoking Byron's cry, 'The days of Comedy are gone, alas!', Bate reminds us that literature of

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century often resisted the
comic. Jonathan Wordsworth's analysis of *Peter Bell* as 'a comedy of
the workings of the mind' becomes the more striking when set against
Bate's insistence that the impulse to fantasy and transcendence in
Romantic verse usually required insulation from the deflating effects
of comedy. By means of an extended comparison between Words-
worth and Byron, Bate identifies a strain of 'anti-Romanticism'.
Against the gaunt, abstemious solitaries of *Lyrical Ballads* and *The
Excursion* he sets the sociable, sensuous, celebratory figures of that
'anti-Romantic manifesto', *Don Juan*. Even the virtuosity of Byron's
technique is found to be integrally comic. In a way that recalls
Gillian Beer's account of rhyme as tacitly sexual and playful, Bate
argues that rhyming in *Don Juan* joins realms of experience
'promiscuously': not so much (as Yeats said of tragedy) a drowner
but a bridger of dykes.

If, for Richard Beadle, dogs command the stage, Jonathan Bate
introduces us to a veritable menagerie. He starts with bears, advances
to geese and parrots, takes in 'a fox – & two new mastiffs' (from
Byron's letters) plus 'a Persian cat and kittens' (from *Don Juan*) while
dilating on monkeys and apes, and finishes his essay with Sir Oran
Haut-ton (cf. orang-utan) in Peacock's *Melincourt*. Links between the
animal and human contribute, similarly, to John Kerrigan's essay on
noses. His piece belongs (with those by Peter Holland and Eric
Griffiths) to the group of three which rounds off *English Comedy* by
starting from, or centering in, late nineteenth and twentieth-century
work while ranging widely through comical history. Quoting the
pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*, Kerrigan establishes the an-
tiquity of those theories which classify personal character by
resemblance to animal features. His discussion of determinism and
stereotyping leads him through Lavater to the Victorian novel; but
at the centre of his attention lie those varieties of exaggerated,
performative comedy which (though branch-lines run through
Sterne and Gogol) naturally belong on stage, in *commedia dell'arte*, at
the Punch and Judy show. This is an essay which puts on a comic nose
and follows it about. As a result, it touches on topics – such as racism,
psychoanalysis and urban drainage – which, if human nature were
better, would not seem comic at all.

Interested in peculiar organs, in noses which set people apart,
Kerrigan's essay tests the boundary between comedy and isolation.
He is interested in the pathos of Cyrano de Bergerac, the laughter-

surrounded loneliness of H. G. Wells's 'man with a nose'. By contrast, Peter Holland's 'Noël Coward and Comic Geometry' takes the reader back to social interactiveness, but concentrates on those systems of partnering and re-partnering in love which can develop into the equivalent of a round-dance or quadrille. Taking a long view of his subject, he shows that a geometrical patterning of relationships holds good across much comedy from Plautus to Joe Orton. These erotic permutations are displayed most lucidly in farce (Marivaux's *La Dispute*) and opera (Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*). But they also contribute structurally to comedies of social and emotional depth, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The danger must always be that patterning of this sort will evoke stock responses from an audience, reactions of recognition which limit comedy's ability to challenge the norm. Holland argues that in Coward's plays, however, and especially *Design for Living*, received geometrical schemes can undergo remarkable transformations, until the 'quadrilateral' of stable desire and the 'triangle' of unstable desire merge in civilised subversion.

English Comedy ends with the apparently unlikely conjunction of Ludwig Wittgenstein and comedy. Ever since Aristophanes' damaging misrepresentation of Socrates in *The Clouds*, philosophy and comic laughter have regarded each other with suspicion. Eric Griffiths sets out to demonstrate, however, that a cultivated sense of absurdity contributed to the work of the greatest English-speaking philosopher of this century. Arguing that Wittgenstein's emphasis on the 'surroundings' of linguistic acts gives his later writings a peculiar affinity with (and relevance to students of) comic drama, Griffiths shows how philosophically informed criticism can elucidate the 'lustrous, swift enigmas' of plays like *The Comedy of Errors*. In dealing with comical 'errors', how far does Shakespeare resemble a philosopher? Developing a distinction implicit in Wittgenstein, Griffiths shows how superficial misapprehensions ('mistakes') differ from more 'deeply' erroneous misalignments of judgement – 'errors' which are likely to have their own cogency. This can shed much light on certain kinds of drama, if we recognise that *All's Well That Ends Well* (for example) is not so much 'a parable of Bertram's mistakes, and how he is rid of them' but a demonstration of 'error's reluctance in several people, especially Helena'. In his closing pages, Griffiths justifies the claim that Wittgenstein 'is a philosopher of genius who understands, depicts (and suffers under) an inward sense of what is funny in philosophising'. Evidence can be found in his method: