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978-0-521-67269-6 - The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies

Penny Gay

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*The Cambridge Introduction to  
Shakespeare's Comedies*

Why did theatre audiences laugh in Shakespeare's day and why do they still laugh now? What did Shakespeare do with the conventions of comedy that he inherited, so that his plays continue to amuse and move audiences? What do his comedies have to say about love, sex, gender, power, family, community, and class? What place have pain, cruelty, and even death in a comedy? Why all those puns? In a survey that travels from Shakespeare's earliest experiments in farce and courtly love-stories to the great romantic comedies of his middle years and the mould-breaking experiments of his last decade's work, this book addresses these vital questions. Organised thematically, and covering all Shakespeare's comedies from the beginning to the end of his career, it provides readers with a map of the playwright's comic styles, showing how he built on comedic conventions as he further enriched the possibilities of the genre.

PENNY GAY is Professor of English and Drama at the University of Sydney.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521672696](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521672696)

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First published 2008

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Gay, Penny, 1945–

The Cambridge introduction to Shakespeare's comedies / Penny Gay.

p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-85668-3 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-67269-6 (pbk.)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Comedies. 2. English drama (Comedy) – History and criticism. I. Title. III. Series.

PR2981.G39 2008

822.3'3 – dc22 2007050651

ISBN 978-0-521-85668-3 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-67269-6 paperback

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## *Preface*

Why did audiences laugh in Shakespeare's day, why do they still laugh now? What did Shakespeare do with the conventions of comedy that he inherited, so that his plays continue to amuse and move audiences? What do his comedies have to say about love, sex, gender, power, family, community, and class? What place have pain, cruelty, and even death in a comedy? Why all those puns?

These questions have fascinated me for at least thirty years of my professional life. I am grateful to Sarah Stanton for the opportunity finally to explore them and to begin to map out their connections. I must also thank my colleagues at the University of Sydney, particularly the members of the Early Modern Literature and Culture group, for providing clues and answers to odd matters. Kirsten Tranter was an imaginative and thorough research assistant, and I have enjoyed many illuminating conversations with drama specialists Kate Flaherty and Margaret Rogerson.

My daughter Virginia Gay read the whole book from the double perspective of Shakespeare enthusiast and professional actress; I am profoundly grateful for her insights and her insistence on clarity. As my test reader, she kept me to the book's aim: simply to help twenty-first-century readers, theatre-goers, and actors find their bearings and increase their enjoyment of plays which – as Duke Theseus says – 'need no excuse'.

Quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from the individual editions of the New Cambridge Shakespeare, wherever possible; other editions, where used, are indicated in the notes.