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Shakespeare and comic tradition

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D A V I D   G A L B R A I T H

Theories of comedy

Comedy is notoriously resistant to theorization. There is, after all, something inescapably comic and self-defeating about the scholar, oblivious to comedy's charms, searching out its origins or trying to account for its effects. In Cicero's *De Oratore*, one of the interlocutors in the discussion of the comic notes that everyone "who tried to teach anything like a theory or art of this matter proved themselves so conspicuously silly that their very silliness is the only laughable thing about them."[1] Small wonder then, that at the conclusion of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* the sole manuscript of Aristotle's treatise on comedy, the counterpart to his discussion of tragedy in *The Poetics*, should perish and a fire destroy the monastery library in which the corpus of classical learning has been preserved. But the situation is, of course, more complicated than Eco's fable suggests, both because of widely known alternate accounts of comedy in the classical tradition and of the presence of the outlines of a theory of the genre in *The Poetics* itself. Any discussion of theories of comedy in the Renaissance will inevitably emphasize the importance of these resources in sixteenth-century discussions of the issue.

This approach runs certain risks: there were, after all, sometimes divergent conceptions of comedy in the period. Moreover, Shakespeare's comedies in particular resist theoretical and generic pigeonholing. In fact, Shakespeare seems to take up the language of Renaissance genre theory only to parody it: Polonius catalogues the dramatic range of the players, considering them "the best actors in the world either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.396–400).[2] Bottom is equally confident of his ability to make generic distinctions: "What is Pyramus?" he asks Peter Quince, "a lover, or a tyrant?," echoing the distinction between comic and tragic protagonists which the classical tradition had put into place and which is parodied in the generic confusion of Quince's title, "*The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and*

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david galbraith

Thisbe" (1.2.11–22). The principal justification, though, for emphasizing the classical tradition and its subsequent elaborations is simply that it is in these sources that we find the most sustained accounts of the genre at the level of conceptual generality that we associate with the idea of theory. Shakespeare's parodies would make no sense if these ideas of the genre were not firmly in place.

Even if comedy has sometimes seemed to lack its theorists, it has hardly ever lacked its critics. In 1579, one of the latter, the reformed playwright and aspiring divine, Stephen Gosson, published *The School of Abuse*, "a pleasant invective against poets, pipers, players, jesters, and such like caterpillars of a commonwealth."[3] Gosson's tract, issued only three years after James Burbage had built his theatre, was one of the opening blasts in a controversy over the stage that would flare up repeatedly until the theatres were closed in 1642. It provoked a response from the young Thomas Lodge, best known to Shakespeareans subsequently as the author of *Rosalynde*, Shakespeare's source for *As You Like It*. Modern readers might wonder, though, about their use of classical citation. Both insist that the theatre has immediate social consequences for their contemporaries yet rely on definitions and examples drawn from classical sources. Gosson draws on a long tradition of classical and early Christian opposition to the stage. Lodge begins his discussion of dramatic genres by citing the account provided by the late Roman grammarian and commentator on Terence, Aelius Donatus, of the origins of both tragedy and comedy in the desire "by the learned fathers of the old time to no other purpose but to yield praise unto God for a happy harvest or plentiful year."[4] He goes on to quote a definition attributed to Cicero of comedy as "imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, & imago veritatis" (an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, and an image of truth) (*Reply*, 1, 36), a definition which many readers have found echoed in Hamlet's advice to the players "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.21–24). In foregrounding these sources, Lodge is directing his readers to a tradition which was familiar to any of them who had absorbed the humanist educational curriculum.[5] Prior to the widespread adaptation and elaboration of Aristotle's arguments from *The Poetics* in the second half of the sixteenth century, the authority of Donatus and Cicero in discussions of comedy and of the comic passed almost unchallenged.

In order to bring this tradition into focus, I shall turn first to some accounts of laughter and of the comic and comedy itself in the classical world, and then consider the Renaissance elaborations of these ideas in the early years of the sixteenth century and in the period following the reemergence of Aristotle's arguments. What will become clear in surveying this material,

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however, is that the anxieties that prompted Gosson's attack on the stage were not newly coined in the sixteenth century. In a sense, his repudiation of the theatre stems from the same concerns which typically engender comic theory. Critics of the theatre fear the consequences of depicting misbehavior on the stage; theorists of comedy attempt to account for the relationship between the violations of social decorum which provide comedy's material, and the pleasure produced by its dramatic representation.

Classical arguments

The ancients recognized both the opposition and the proximity of laughter and tears. Both were subject to physiological and psychological explanations. The classical medical tradition, inaugurated by Hippocrates and consolidated by Galen and his followers, attempted to provide physiological explanations of the phenomena, often emphasizing in the case of laughter the role of contractions of the diaphragm. But in the Galenic tradition, the predisposition to laugh stemmed from an imbalance of the humors, the four elements whose combination shaped the human personality. The author of a text ascribed to Meletius, believed in the sixteenth century to have been a fourth-century AD. doctor, combined etymology and humoral psychology in his account of laughter in the treatise *On Human Nature*: "Laughter is called *gelos* by the Greeks, and *gelos* comes from *hele*, which means heat. For those who are hot are considered to be very inclined to laugh. And elsewhere *haema* (which signifies blood), said to be from *aetho* which means 'I am burning.' For it is the hottest of all the humors made in our body; and those in whom blood abounds, their mind is more joyous."[6]

The most famous classical commonplace on the topic of laughter was Aristotle's claim, in *The Parts of Animals*, that "no animal but man ever laughs."[7] Rabelais recalls these words at the beginning of *Gargantua*; they were also frequently cited in sixteenth-century medical texts.[8] Aristotle's argument is physiological: he discusses in the same paragraph the claim that wounds to the midriff can produce laughter in their victims because of the heat produced by the injury. Not all later commentators, however, accepted the potential implication of this assertion, that laughter might even be constitutive of humanity. Many viewed laughter and the comic as potentially dangerous. The early Church father Lactantius responded to Aristotle that "the chief good in man is religion only," noting that other animals also "have a kind of smile."[9] Moreover, Aristotle elsewhere distances himself from some of the implications of his claim. In Book IV of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, for example, he warns of the dangers of an excess of laughter, and of the importance of a "middle state" in dealing with the humorous, one

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which avoids the excesses of "vulgar buffoons, striving after humor at all costs" (*Nichomachean Ethics*, II, 1780 [1128a]). This insistence on a mean differentiates him from Plato, however, who in Book III of *The Republic* cautioned that the guardians of the commonwealth "must not be prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter his condition provokes a violent reaction." Plato goes on to suggest that "if anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter we must not accept it."[10]

The principal reason for the suspicion of laughter and of the comic derived from their association with the vulgar or the base. In the Galenic tradition an imbalance in the humors shapes the personal predisposition to laugh; but what provokes laughter is often ridiculous or excessive. In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato worried that comedy led its spectators to accept what they would otherwise repudiate, arguing that "in comic representations, or for that matter in private talk, you take intense pleasure in buffooneries that you would blush to practice yourself, and do not detest them as base" (*The Republic*, 831 [606c]). Aristotle refines this argument in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. His attempt to posit a "middle state" allows him to distinguish between the buffoon and "the ready-witted man." The former "is the slave of his sense of humor, and spares neither himself or others if he can raise a laugh"; the latter displays the sense of tact and "jokes well by his saying what is not unbecoming to a well-bred man, or by his not giving pain, or even giving delight, to the hearer" (*Nichomachean Ethics*, II, 1780 [1128a]). He extrapolates from this distinction an analogy to the history of Greek theatre, and suggests a progression from the Old Comedy of Aristophanes to the New Comedy of which Menander would become the most important practitioner: "to the authors of the former indecency of language was amusing, to those of the latter innuendo is more so; and these differ in no small degree in respect of propriety" (*Nichomachean Ethics*, II, 1780 [1128a]).

Aristotle's brief account of comedy in *The Poetics* elaborates on these ideas. Unlike tragedy, whose protagonists are men of stature, comedy, he argues, is "an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the ridiculous, which is a species of the ugly." He goes on to specify that, "The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others" (*The Poetics*, II, 2319 [1449a]). He speculates on its origins, suggesting that, like tragedy, it evolved from preexisting poetic forms. Poets gravitated toward one of the two kinds of verse depending on their nature: "the graver among them would represent noble actions, and those of noble personages; and the meaner sort the actions of the ignoble. The latter class produced invectives at first, just as others did hymns and

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panegyrics" (*The Poetics*, II, 2318 [1448b]). Homer provides the precedent for both: his epics (particularly *The Iliad*) point to tragedy; *The Margites*, a burlesque poem ascribed to him in antiquity, to comedy, since it provided, according to Aristotle, "not a dramatic invective, but a dramatic picture of the ridiculous" (*The Poetics*, II, 2318 [1448a]). From their origins in improvised forms, each type of poetry, in turn, acquired characteristic and appropriate verse forms. Ultimately, he suggests, the dithyramb evolved toward tragedy and the phallic songs associated with the cult of Dionysus toward comedy.

Aristotle's ideas about comedy exist only in outline in *The Poetics*. Moreover, the text appears not to have been widely influential until the mid-sixteenth century.[11] Until this time, along with the pervasive influence of Horace's so-called *Ars Poetica*, the most important classical sources for the theory of comedy were Cicero's discussion of laughter and the comic in the second book of *De Oratore*, and the essays attributed to the fourth-century grammarian Aelius Donatus. In Cicero's dialogue on the question of the ideal orator, Julius Caesar Strabo Vopiscus divides the topic of laughter into five sections: "first, its nature; second, its source; third, whether willingness to produce it becomes an orator; fourth, the limits of his license; fifth, the classification of things laughable" (*De Oratore*, 373). The first three of these topics receive only slight consideration. After concluding that "it clearly becomes an orator to raise laughter," he explores both the appropriate limits of humor for the orator, and the varieties of wit. Like Aristotle's "ready-witted man," the orator must exercise caution in provoking laughter. Certain topics are clearly inappropriate: "neither outstanding wickedness, such as involves crime, nor, on the other hand, outstanding wretchedness is assailed by ridicule." The orator must be governed by restraint. Cicero emphasizes that "the things most easily ridiculed are those which call neither for strong disgust nor the deepest sympathy. This is why all laughing-matters are found among those blemishes noticeable in the conduct of people who are neither objects of general esteem nor yet full of misery" (*De Oratore*, 375).

Cicero's speaker then goes on to elaborate at considerable length the varieties of wit. Initially, he distinguishes "two types of wit, one employed upon facts, the other upon words." The latter, wit "upon words," which produces laughter through "something pointed in a phrase or reflection," will later be elaborated extensively, in a long passage that bears comparison to Freud's account of humor in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (*De Oratore*, 379). The former, wit "upon facts," is of two types: the anecdotal narrative, in which "the character, the manner of speaking and all the facial expressions of the hero of your tale, are so presented that these incidents seem to your audience to take place and to be transacted concurrently with your description of them"; and the technique of impersonation derived

from "vulgar mimicry," in which the orator must "borrow merely a suspicion of mimicry, so that his hearer may imagine more than meets his eye" (*De Oratore*, 377–79).

Cicero's dialogue does not, to be sure, engage the question of comic drama directly. Nonetheless, the stage is never far from his mind. The orator must above all, in his use of laughter, avoid "buffoonery or mere mimicking" (*De Oratore*, 375). These are real dangers because the orator relies, in the techniques he uses to provoke laughter, on strategies that he shares with the comic actor. Both varieties of wit "upon facts" depend on forms of representation closely akin to the drama: in the first case on "continuous irony, wherein the characters and individuals are sketched and so portrayed" and in the second on "the infusion of a trifle of mimicry" (*De Oratore*, 379). In the case of wit "upon words" the orator risks "buffoonish raillery" of the type that Cicero associates with characters in pantomimes (*De Oratore*, 379). The task of Cicero's ideal orator is then, to adapt comic techniques while preserving his distance from the contaminating excesses of the comic stage.

During the early phases of the Renaissance, the most important classical treatments of comic drama itself were the essays ascribed to Aelius Donatus. The latter was a figure of considerable cultural authority in medieval Europe, a status facilitated by his role as the teacher of Saint Jerome. Apart from these essays, attached to a sixth-century adaptation of his commentary on the plays of Terence, he was also the author of the *Ars Major* and *Ars Minor*, two of the most important Latin grammars used in the schools. There are two essays on the theatre: one, "On Drama," was considered by early scholars to be by Donatus but is now usually attributed to another contemporary grammarian, Euanthius; the other, "On Comedy," is still ascribed to Donatus.[12] Both were widely cited, and often included in editions of Terence throughout the sixteenth century.

Euanthius locates the origins of both tragedy and comedy "in religious ceremonies which the ancients held to give thanks for a good harvest" ("On Drama," 41). The name *comedy* (*comoedia* in Latin) is derived, he suggests, from the Greek terms "villages" (*komai*) and "song" (*oide*), and refers to the songs sung to Apollo, "the guardian of shepherds and villages" ("On Drama," 41). At first a song performed by a chorus, it later acquired characters speaking in turn. Euanthius emphasizes the complex social dynamics of "Old Comedy." Originally it was not a fiction, for its authors wrote openly about the conduct of members of its audience. But the abuses to which this license gave rise led to the emergence of a new form, the satyr play, which "through the device of crude and, as it were, rustic jesting, attacked the vices of citizens without mentioning specific names" ("On Drama," 42). But this form too was subject to abuse and was ultimately replaced by "New

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Comedy." Aristotle had pointed to the greater propriety of this form; with its Roman adaptation and particularly the achievement of Terence in mind, Euanthius stresses its more elaborately wrought fiction and artifice: "This kind of poem was concerned with more typical situations and in general terms with men who live a middle-class life. It gave the spectator less bitterness and more pleasure, being close-knit in plot, true to life in characterization, useful in its sentiments, delightful for its wit, and apt in its prosody" ("On Drama," 42).

Both Euanthius and Donatus discuss the structural elements of Terentian comedy, using a set of terms which would pass from these essays into common use in Renaissance Europe. In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace had insisted that "no play be shorter or longer than five acts."[13] But comedies, Donatus notes, "are divided into four parts: prologue, protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe" ("On Comedy," 47). The prologue is "the first speech"; the protasis "the first action of the drama, where part of the story is explained, part held back to arouse suspense among the audience"; the epitasis "the complication of the story, by excellence of which its elements are intertwined"; and the catastrophe "the unravelling of the story, through which the outcome is demonstrated" ("On Comedy," 47–48). Euanthius' definitions are similar: he emphasizes that the prologue is "a kind of preface to the drama" and that "in this part only is it permissible to say something extrinsic to the argument, addressed to the audience and for the benefit of the poet or the drama or an actor." In addition, he augments Donatus' accounts of the epitasis and the catastrophe, defining the former as "the development and the enlargement of the conflict and, as it were, the knot of all error," and the latter as "the resolution of the course of events so that there is a happy ending which is made evident to all by the recognition of past events" ("On Drama," 45). These definitions of the components of a comic plot, together with the parallel insistence that a comedy be comprised of five acts, provided Renaissance Europe with the essential vocabulary and the structural understanding of the genre which would inform the theory of comedy throughout most of the sixteenth century.

Euanthius concludes his treatment of the development of comedy with a comparison to tragedy which summarizes succinctly the differences between the two forms:

> Of the many differences between tragedy and comedy, the foremost are these: in comedy the fortunes of men are middle-class, the dangers are slight, and the ends of the action are happy; but in tragedy everything is the opposite – the characters are great men, the fears are intense, and the ends disastrous. In comedy the beginning is troubled, the end tranquil; in tragedy events follow the reverse order. And in tragedy the kind of life is shown that is to be shunned; while in comedy the kind is shown that is to be sought after. Finally in comedy

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the story is always fictitious; while tragedy often has a basis in historical truth.

("On Drama," 45)

This account implies a suggestive itinerary for the development of the genre: moving from its earlier, more socially problematic representations of vice and folly, comedy suppresses both the particularity of its reference and the range of behavior that it will accommodate on the stage. Unlike tragic protagonists, to be sure, comic characters will often be closer in social position to members of the audience. Moreover, particularly in New Comedy they had evolved toward stock comic types. But the comic dramatist will avoid, as much as possible, directly engaging excesses of behavior which might undermine the stability and coherence of the "tranquil" resolution which resolves the action.

Renaissance elaborations

For modern scholars, as for European writers from Petrarch onward, what came to be known as the "Renaissance" was intimately linked to the idea of a revival of classical learning.[14] Such learning had, of course, never disappeared. But the humanist intellectuals of the period saw themselves as agents in a process of cultural renewal and of the restoration of (in Erasmus' famous phrase) "bonae literae" – good letters. One crucial aspect of this process was a reform of the school curriculum. The imitation of the style of classical authors became a central aim. New textbooks, such as William Lily and John Colet's *Short Introduction of Grammar* (*c.* 1510) and Erasmus' *De Copia* (1512) (first prepared for St. Paul's School in London) taught the student the foundations of classical Latin and fitted him with a good prose style. This cannot always have been easy, either for the teacher or the student, as Shakespeare's comic Latin lesson and recitation in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (4.1) suggests.

Comedy, and particularly the plays of Terence, played an important role in the school curriculum. As Erasmus explained in *On the Method of Study* (1512), "[A]mong Latin writers who is more valuable as a standard of language than Terence? He is pure, concise, and closest to everyday speech and then, by the very nature of his subject-matter, is also congenial to the young." [15] Terence offered the additional advantage that his subject matter could rarely provoke moral objections. [16] For Erasmus, comedy was particularly valuable for its techniques of characterization and its observance of decorum. He notes that the teacher "should show that decorum especially is studied, not only in its universal aspect, I mean that youths should fall in love, that pimps should perjure themselves, that the prostitute should allure, the old man scold, the slave deceive, the soldier boast and so on, but

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also in the particular delineation of individual characters as developed by the poet" (*On the Method of Study*, 687). This insistence on decorum – the "fit" of speech and conduct to character – is one of the most pervasive themes of classical and Renaissance rhetorical theory. Comedy, especially the plays of Terence, simultaneously illustrates and validates these principles. Although comedy tends to rely on comic types and conventional plots, the successful comic poet ought nonetheless to aim to impart "individual characteristics even within these general types."[17]

In the early Renaissance, most criticism of Terence, and of comedy in general, derived much of its material from Donatus and Euanthius.[18] Several sets of annotations to his comedies appeared in the years following the first printed edition of 1470. The lengthy prologue to Terence prepared by the French humanist printer Badius Ascensius reflects these developments. Badius' *Praenotamenta* was first printed in 1502 and continued to preface editions of Terence throughout the first part of the century.[19] He begins by discussing the character and dignity of the poet's art. This defence of poetry, which incorporates ideas from a wide variety of classical, early Christian, and contemporary sources, is followed by a brief account of the history of tragedy and comedy based, in its essentials, on the essays of Donatus and Euanthius. These sources also provide Badius with the material for his account of the structure of comedy. Like Erasmus, he is particularly concerned with the issue of decorum, for which he elaborates principles governing characters, things, words, and the totality of the artistic work. Of these, the first receives the most detailed attention: age (as Horace had examined) sex, social position, country of origin, and temperament are cited as components of character (*Praenotamenta*, 106–09).

During the first half of the sixteenth century, then, rhetorical models of decorum informed discussions of comedy and of the comic, whether in arguments over the aims and methods of using drama in the classroom, or in the elaboration of Cicero's account of the orator's uses of humor in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.[20] What though of *Aristotle's Poetics*? To be sure, the text had not been lost entirely to Western scholars during the medieval period. It survived in paraphrases and commentaries, most notably by the twelfth-century Arab philosopher Averroes (Ibn Rushd). However, *The Poetics* was the last of Aristotle's texts to be made available in print, either in Greek or in a reliable Latin translation. It was not found in Aldus Manutius' first "complete" edition of his work in Greek printed in Venice between 1495 and 1498. It was included, however, in a collection of Greek rhetorical texts which Aldus printed in 1508. Until mid-century, however, its impact was relatively slight. The emerging prominence of *The Poetics* is both a response to what Daniel Javitch calls "the new need to classify and define