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The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy

This is an accessible, wide-ranging and informed introduction to Shakespeare's comedies and romances. Rather than taking each play in isolation, the chapters trace recurring issues, suggesting both the continuity and the variety of Shakespeare's practice and the creative use he made of the conventions he inherited. The first section puts Shakespeare in the context of classical and Renaissance comedy and comic theory, the work of his Elizabethan predecessors, and the traditions of popular festivity. The second section traces a number of themes through Shakespeare's early and middle comedies, dark comedies and late romances, establishing the key features of his comedy as a whole and illuminating particular plays by close analysis. Individual chapters draw on contemporary politics, rhetoric, and the history of Shakespeare production. Written by experts in the relevant fields, the chapters bring the reader up to date on current thinking and frequently challenge long-standing critical assumptions.

ALEXANDER LEGGATT is Professor of English at University College, University of Toronto. Among his books are *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (1973), *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love* (1974), *Ben Jonson: his Vision and his Art* (1981), *English Drama: Shakespeare to the Restoration, 1590–1660* (1988), *Shakespeare's Political Drama* (1988), *Jacobean Public Theatre* (1992), *English Stage Comedy 1490–1990: Five Centuries of a Genre* (1998) and *Introduction to English Renaissance Comedy* (1999).

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002
 Reprinted 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Sabon 10/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

The Cambridge companion to Shakespearean comedy / edited by Alexander Leggatt.

p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 77044 0 (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 77942 1 (paperback)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Comedies – Handbooks, manuals, etc.
2. Comedy – Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title: Companion to Shakespearean comedy.
 II. Leggatt, Alexander. III. Series.

PR298I.C36 2001
 822.3/3 – dc21 2001025933

ISBN 0 521 77044 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 77942 1 paperback

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CATHERINE BATES is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *The Rhetoric of Courtship in Elizabethan Language and Literature* (1992) and *Play in a Godless World: the Theory and Practice of Play in Shakespeare, Nietzsche and Freud* (1999). She has edited the poems of Sir Philip Sidney and written numerous articles on Renaissance literature, psychoanalysis, and other topics.

EDWARD BERRY is Professor of English at the University of Victoria. He is the author of numerous articles on Shakespeare and early modern English literature, and of four books: *Patterns of Decay: Shakespeare's Early Histories* (1975), *Shakespeare's Comic Rites* (1984), *The Making of Sir Philip Sidney* (1998) and *Shakespeare and the Hunt* (2001).

LOUISE GEORGE CLUBB is Professor Emerita at the University of California, Berkeley, where she is a member of the Department of Comparative Literature and the Department of Italian Studies. She is General Editor of *Biblioteca Italiana*, the bilingual series published by the University of California Press and launched by her edition and translation of Della Porta's *Gli duoi fratelli rivali* (1980). A former President of the Renaissance Society of America, she has been Director of the University of California's Centro Studi at Padua and the Harvard Renaissance Center at Villa I Tatti, Florence, and is a member of the Accademia Galileiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti in Padua and the Comitato dei Garanti at the University of Siena. Her books include *Giambattista Della Porta, Dramatist* (1965), *Italian Plays (1500–1700) in the Folger Library* (1968), *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (1989) and (with Robert Black) *Romance and Aretine Humanism in Sienese Comedy* (Florence, 1993). She is the author of the chapter "Italian Renaissance Drama" in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* (reprinted 1997) and numerous studies of Renaissance comparative literature.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN CREASER is Hildred Carlile Professor of English Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London, and Executive Secretary of the Malone Society. He has published extensively on Renaissance literature, especially on the work of John Milton, Ben Jonson and Andrew Marvell. He has edited Jonson's *Volpone* and collaborated on Malone Society editions of works by Middleton and "Anon." He is a contributing editor to the forthcoming Cambridge edition of the works of Ben Jonson, for which he is editing *Bartholomew Fair*.

JANETTE DILLON is Reader in Drama at the University of Nottingham. She works mainly on medieval and early modern drama, and her most recent books are *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (1998) and *Theatre, Court and City, 1595–1610* (2000). She is currently working on an edition of spectacles in the reign of Henry VIII in Hall's Chronicle.

DAVID GALBRAITH is Associate Professor of English at Victoria College, University of Toronto. He is the author of *Architectonics of Imitation in Spenser, Daniel and Drayton* (2000) and of essays on Petrarch, Erasmus, and Marlowe.

BARBARA HODGDON is Ellis and Nelle Levitt Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at Drake University. She is the author of *The End Crowns All: Closure and Contradiction in Shakespeare's History* (1991), *Henry IV Part 2* in the Manchester University Press Shakespeare in Performance series (1996), *The First Part of Henry the Fourth: Texts and Contexts* (1997) and *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (1998). An associate editor of *ArdenOnline*, she is presently editing the Arden 3 *Taming of the Shrew* and, with Carol Rutter, working on a book about performers and performances.

FRANÇOIS LAROQUE is Professor of English at Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III. He is the author of *Shakespeare's Festive World* (1991; reprinted paperback 1993) and of *Shakespeare: Court, Crowd and Playhouse* (1993). He is currently working on a new book, *Shakespearean Re-creations*, and coediting thirty-five non-Shakespearean plays (from *Everyman* to *The Antipodes*), all in new translations into French, for éditions Gallimard, collection La Pléade (two volumes to appear in 2002 and 2004).

ALEXANDER LEGGATT is Professor of English at University College, University of Toronto. He has published extensively on drama, mostly on the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. His books include *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love* (1974), *Shakespeare's Political Drama*

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(1988), *Jacobean Public Theatre* (1992), *English Stage Comedy 1490–1990* (1998), and *Introduction to English Renaissance Comedy* (1999).

LYNNE MAGNUSSON is Professor of English Language and Literature at Queen's University, Canada, and has published on Shakespeare's language, early modern women's writing, the genre of the letter, and discourse analysis. She is the author of *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters* (1999) and a coeditor of *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language: a Guide* (Arden Shakespeare, 2000) and of *The Elizabethan Theatre*, volumes XI to XV. Currently she is working on a book on early modern women's letters and an edition of *Love's Labour's Lost*.

ANTHONY MILLER is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Sydney. His research centers on the relations between early modern and classical literatures and between early modern literature and history. He has published a monograph on *Antony and Cleopatra* (1989), and editions of *Richard III* (1992) and *Julius Caesar* (1996). His book *Roman Triumphs and Early Modern English Culture* is forthcoming in the Palgrave series *Early Modern Literature in History*.

ROBERT S. MIOLA is the Gerard Manley Hopkins Professor of English and Lecturer in Classics at Loyola College of Maryland. He has written several books on Shakespeare's classical backgrounds and recently published the Revels edition of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* (2000), as well as a volume for the Oxford Shakespeare Topics series, *Shakespeare's Reading* (2000). He is currently editing an anthology called *The Catholic Renaissance*.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL is Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has written on Catullus, Petrarch, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and medieval and early modern theatre. He is the author of *Mirror and Veil: the Historical Dimension of Spenser's Faerie Queene* (1977), *Robert Burton* (1986), and *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early Modern England* (2000). He is currently working on the relation between the mystery cycles and Shakespeare's theatre.

P R E F A C E

In our world comedy is available on a daily basis, packaged and processed like bread and milk: the comic strip in the newspaper, the situation comedy on television. As with bread and milk, predictability is the principle, and surprises are undesirable. The familiar characters, embodied on television by familiar actors, the familiar situations and the running gags, suggest a need to play for safety. Sometimes a strip is worth clipping out, a program (or a whole series) is worth taping and saving. But in general the product, taking few risks and making fewer demands, is disposable, and is meant to be disposable. Stand-up comedy, live or on television, deals, like the other forms, in quick and instantly recognizable effects. Some comedians will refuse to play it safe, evidently aiming to shock and offend: but there is such a thing as acceptable shock, and as a comic pushes the limits the limits simply get wider. Even the comedy of sheer craziness quickly develops its own conventions: for viewers of this editor's generation, the lunatic fantasies of *Monty Python*, the dead parrot and the Ministry of Silly Walks, getting into their thirties now, have become familiar old friends, as comfortable as a worn pair of slippers.

Home-delivery comedy of this sort operates in small units, dealing in quickly established situations rather than full stories. Comedy in the movies shares the qualities I have been describing: recurring conventions, familiar actors, the offensiveness that in crossing the line simply changes the line's position. But it can also develop stories, taking its characters through a period of confusion and misunderstanding towards a final resolution in a way that in broad terms would seem like business as usual not just to Shakespeare but to his predecessors as far back as classical Greece and Rome. Just before I wrote this preface I watched a movie that may be forgotten by the time you read it: the romantic comedy *Notting Hill* (1999, directed by Roger Michell) in which two lovers, played by Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts, overcome the obstacles presented by their social situation (he runs a small, struggling bookshop, she is an internationally famous movie star)

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on their way to that most traditional of comic endings, marriage. As the story develops, the comedy draws laughs from familiar human psychology (the difficulties of conversation between shy people), from the larger idiocies of society (the cult of celebrity in which the victim is raised to divinity, then killed and eaten) and familiar character types (the impossible flatmate, the gormless shop assistant, the pompous hotel desk clerk). If we could dig Shakespeare up and show him this or any one of a number of similar movies, he would need to have most of the jokes and nearly all of the technology explained to him, but he would recognize the basic conventions.

Moving into Shakespearean comedy means moving into a lost world, in which men wore swords, a gentleman's name would be entered on the burial register in larger letters than that of a social inferior, and children would be expected to kneel before their fathers every morning and ask their blessing. The unfamiliarity is cultural as well as social: his comedy throws off mythological references as our comedy throws off movie references; his requires footnotes, as ours will before long. Yet the purpose behind such references is fundamentally similar: to draw on a common pool of knowledge that not only highlights the meaning of a particular moment, but creates a sense of community between the story and its audience. We can see an equivalent play of similarity and difference if we look at the movie *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999, directed by Gil Junger), which transfers plot material from *The Taming of the Shrew* into the world of modern American teenagers. While the play deals with marriage and its expectation of a lasting relationship, the movie deals with dating, the only expectation being that one date may lead to another. This gives the story a different rhythm, a different structure. But when the Petruchio character is paid to date the Katherina character an issue arises that we recognize in Shakespeare, the interplay of personal relations and money.

Comedy is at once a traditional form in which conventions like mistaken identity, rival wooers, and parents who oppose love-matches are handed down through the centuries; and a form attuned to the changing society around it, commenting on manners, dress, and language in a way that as the years go by fixes a comedy in its period. It is formulaic, dealing in the familiar: yet its greatest artists can give new twists to a formula, and make us see the familiar with fresh eyes. This means that the play of similarity and difference we have noted between historical periods can also be seen within a period when a writer, drawing on stock material, deepens the experience it offers.

This collection is concerned first with the traditions Shakespeare inherited and second with the distinctive achievement of his own art. Part 1 begins with the theory of comedy available in his time and goes on to his

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dramatic sources in Rome, Italy, and Elizabethan England. It will be clear that “sources” does not just mean the stories he borrowed, and that the work in question commands attention in its own right, not just as background to Shakespeare. The section concludes with his nonliterary source in popular festivity, traditional in its own way. Part 2 examines his comedies, not taking each play in isolation but setting groups of plays together around recurring themes, structural principles, and comic techniques. As within the larger comic tradition, so within Shakespearean comedy itself there are conventions and preoccupations that appear in play after play but never look the same from one play to another. Shakespeare’s comedies seem at times to speak to each other in a world of their own making, and some of the chapters trace their themes through a large number of plays, seeing each play in a context created by the others. Yet these comedies are also tuned to the world outside, a world in which they themselves can be transformed; other chapters accordingly relate the plays to contemporary politics and contemporary writing on rhetoric, and to theatrical practice through the centuries down to our own time.

The play of similarity and difference can be seen in the decision to include Shakespeare’s final romances in this volume. While in some chapters they appear as part of a continuum that includes the earliest comedies, in the final chapter they appear as a distinctive form with their own tradition. Each approach has its value, and if this is inconsistency, it can be said that Shakespeare criticism has always thrived on inconsistency. Each chapter in the volume is free-standing and can be read on its own; but anyone who reads through the book as a whole will find some problems and questions recurring, as each contributor, from the angle of approach of that chapter, considers what to make of (for example) the taming of Katherina or the treatment of Shylock.

The results differ, as they are bound to do. On a technical level, there has been no attempt to make each contributor conform to a single standard text of Shakespeare for references, and this means that readers will find, just as in the Shakespeare section of a bookstore or library, a variety of texts. The exception, to ensure that we are inconstant about our inconsistency, is that the spelling of characters’ names conforms to the Riverside edition, the one most commonly used by contributors. There is in the Shakespeare text itself, as in the history of its interpretation, a play of stability and shiftiness, which is reflected here.

Much of the comedy of Shakespeare’s time, as of ours, was disposable, and through the centuries his own comedies have shifted in and out of favor, and have appeared in strange mutations. But they have never been off the boards for long, and there are very few writers of comedy about whom one

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could make such a claim. These comedies use and transform the conventions of tradition, both theory and practice; they reflect and question each other; and they constantly provoke us to question them.

My first debt of gratitude is to the contributors, who have maximized the pleasures of editorship while keeping its frustrations to a reasonable minimum. We have had some conversations that made e-mail seem almost a civilized medium. Richard Helgerson, Linda Hutcheon, and Alan Somerset have offered practical help and advice. At the Press, Sarah Stanton has provided wise, firm, and good-humored guidance from the very beginning, and Teresa Sheppard has been unfailingly helpful, often stepping into the breach before I knew there was one. The anonymous readers who commented on an early proposal gave valuable advice that helped shape the volume as it now stands. I am particularly grateful to my wife Anna Leggatt, who not only urged me to take this project on and offered practical help throughout, but was prepared to put up with me on those days when I felt the reality of the old story of the actor on his deathbed who, when asked how he felt, replied, “Dying is easy; comedy is hard.”

CHRONOLOGY

Dates given for plays are of first performance unless otherwise specified; most of these dates are approximate.

- 1564 Shakespeare born at Stratford-upon-Avon
 1566 George Gascoigne, *Supposes* (translation of Ariosto's *I Suppositi*, and source for the Bianca plot of *The Taming of the Shrew*)
 1567 The Red Lion playhouse opens
 1576 The Theatre opens
 1577 The Curtain playhouse opens
 1582 Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway; the license is issued on November 27 and the first child (Susanna) is born six months later
 c. 1584 Lyly, *Campaspe*, *Sappho and Phao*
 1585 Shakespeare's twin son and daughter, Hamnet and Judith, born; Lyly, *Gallathea*
 c. 1586 Shakespeare leaves Stratford; nothing is known for certain of his life between this date and 1592, by which time he is in London
 1587 The Rose playhouse opens
 1588 Lyly, *Endymion*
 c. 1589 Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*; Lyly, *Mother Bombie*; Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*; Anon., *The Taming of a Shrew*
 c. 1590 Greene, *The Scottish History of James IV*; Peele, *The Old Wives' Tale*; Anon., *Mucedorus*
 c. 1592 Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*
 c. 1593 Lyly, *The Woman in the Moon*; Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
 c. 1594 Around this time Shakespeare becomes a sharer in the Chamberlain's Men
 c. 1595 Shakespeare, *Love's Labor's Lost*
 c. 1596 Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*

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- c. 1597 Jonson, *The Case is Altered*; Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- 1598 Jonson, *Every Man in his Humour*; Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*; *Love's Labor's Lost* published in quarto; Richard Barnard's translation of six plays by Terence, *Terence in English*, published
- c. 1599 The Globe playhouse opens; Shakespeare's principal clown Will Kempe leaves the company; his successor is Robert Armin
 Jonson, *Every Man out of his Humour*; Shakespeare, *As You Like It*
- 1600 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing* published in quarto
- c. 1601 Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*
- c. 1602 Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*; *The Merry Wives of Windsor* published in quarto
- 1603 Queen Elizabeth dies and is succeeded by James I, who takes the acting companies under royal patronage; Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's Men, becomes the King's Men
- c. 1604 Marston, *The Malcontent*; Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*
- 1606 Jonson, *Volpone*
- c. 1608 Shakespeare, *Pericles*
- c. 1609 Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*
- c. 1610 Jonson, *The Alchemist*; Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*
- 1611 Shakespeare, *The Tempest*; *Pericles* published in quarto
- 1614 Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*
- 1616 Shakespeare dies in Stratford
- 1623 Publication of the first folio, the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays; in it *The Tempest*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline* are published for the first time