

Penny Gay



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Shakespeare's Comedies

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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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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page ix
1 Introduction: comedy as idea and practice	1
2 Farce: <i>The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	16
3 Courtly lovers and the real world: <i>Two Gentlemen of Verona, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice</i>	35
4 Comedy and language: <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	58
5 Romantic comedy: <i>Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It, Twelfth Night</i>	71
6 Problematic plots and endings: clowning and comedy post- <i>Hamlet</i> : <i>Measure for Measure, All's Well That Ends Well, The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline, The Tempest</i>	103
7 The afterlives of Shakespeare's comedies	124
<i>Conclusion</i>	138
<i>Further reading</i>	141
<i>Notes</i>	143
<i>Index</i>	151

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.

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

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

(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