Comedy

Comedy refers to a literary structure, be it drama or novel or film, that moves toward a happy ending and implies a positive understanding of human experience. Comedy is usually funny, although this is not a prerequisite. Dante called his great poem depicting the movement of the human soul toward a final union with God The Divine Comedy. Although there are moments of grim humor in the sections devoted to the punishment of sinners — the flatterers must live in excrement, for example, condemned to swim in what they used to sling — The Divine Comedy is not known for its jokes. But it is comic in form and in outlook. In most comedy the happy ending involves a marriage or at least some kind of union or reunion that resolves the conflict and brings the characters into a state of harmony. In The Divine Comedy, the marriage is between the human soul and God; in less elevated works, the final union is more carnal. Comedy moves from confusion to order, from ignorance to understanding, from law to liberty, from unhappiness to satisfaction, from separation to union, from barrenness to fertility, from singleness to marriage, from two to one.

This progression is easily discerned by comparing the opening and closing of A Midsummer Night's Dream. At the beginning, Duke Theseus is impatient at having to cool his passion and to wait for the day of his wedding to Hipolyta; Hermia is in love with Lysander but is ordered by her father and the Duke to marry Demetrius, who professes love for her; Helena loves Demetrius, who used to love her but now scorns her; Oberon and Titania, king and queen of the fairies, are engaged in a marital brawl that is disturbing the mortal world. In contrast, the end of the play celebrates three marriages and one remarriage. Although the promised joy may be mitigated somewhat, things are better at the end than they were at the beginning. After the festivities of the last act, it is vital that we recognize where the characters go as they leave the stage, and it is the same destination in all of Shakespeare's comedies.

They go off to bed. There may be a dinner first, or a dance of some kind, but these are more polite and social images of the kind of union that will ultimately take place when the hero and heroine are alone together. Love first, then marriage, then sexual union, then, implicitly, birth. At the end of Henry Fielding's Tom Jones, when the proper Squire Allworthy remarks that Tom will use his "best endeavours" to deserve Sophia, the vulgar Squire Western responds: "'His best endeavours!' cries Western; 'that he will, I warrant un. — Harkee, Allworthy, I'll bet thee five pounds to a crown we have a boy tomorrow nine months.'" Embedded within the proper congratulations is a joke about the wedding night and youthful virility and fertility. Sexual union is seen as the happy conclusion that will perpetuate the species. In Much Ado about Nothing, the confirmed bachelor Benedick justifies his unexpected attraction to Beatrice with the words, "the world must be peopled." The characters act on their intuition that the world is good, that life is worth living, that conflict will ultimately find a positive resolution.
Well, yes, one might say, but what about the jokes? The word comedy is more likely to conjure up a favorite sitcom or the Marx Brothers than Dante or Fielding, and such a response is entirely legitimate, since one of comedy's main attractions is the laughter that derives from wordplay, intricate plotting, and pies in the face. But the mirth we associate with comedy depends on our acquaintance with the conventions of the form, especially its customary ending. In other words, we laugh because we know that the characters are protected from serious harm, because we have the distance to enjoy the jokes, because nobody is going to be seriously injured on that banana peel. Modes of literature offer us images of life filtered through a certain kind of lens, and the closure of the comic fiction directs us to conclude that there is good reason to laugh at the world, that life leads finally to satisfaction and away from despair, that problems can be solved, that happiness is possible. It promotes the value of wit, especially in the service of genuine feeling; it sides with youth and passion over age and money; its principal effects are ironic pleasure and confirmation of the social order.

The complementary values just mentioned, wit and desire, provide a spectrum along which we may arrange the major examples of dramatic comedy. So different in emphasis are the various types that it might be more appropriate to talk about comedies than comedy. To name only the most obvious examples, there is farce, satire, slapstick, intrigue comedy, romantic comedy, tragicomedy, religious comedy, and comedy of manners. However earthy the plot and language, virtually all comedy has a religious dimension. The words we use to talk about the endings indicate as much, words such as grace, faith, pardon, union, and love. At the same time, however elevated and romantic, virtually all comedy has a ridiculous dimension. Sixteenth-century critics tended to emphasize the ridiculousness, as the passage from Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Poetry (see p. 171) suggests. Characters behave foolishly, get themselves into embarrassing scrapes, and find themselves turned into asses—literally in A Midsummer Night's Dream, and figuratively in a multitude of other works.

Herein lies the paradox on which theatrical comedy, and especially Shakespearean comedy, depends. Critics may expatiate on harmony, joy, and perpetuation of the species, but people go to see these kinds of plays because they want to be made to laugh. In other words, although the comic ending affirms that men and women can find happiness and that the world is a comprehensible and benevolent place, this clarification occurs only in the last five minutes. For some two hours, the audience is asked to concentrate on and take pleasure in misunderstanding, confusion, envy, and foolishness. The emphasis of comedy is positive, but the human being is shown to be a small and silly creature. The comic dramatist, depending on the point of view that motivates and shapes the work, may elect to emphasize the reconciliation over the comic conflict. In an early play like The Comedy of Errors (1592–94), based directly on two plays by the Roman dramatist Plautus, Shakespeare spends most of his energy magnifying and exploiting the confusion generated by two sets of twins. Several years later, in another twin comedy, Twelfth Night (1601–02), the misunderstandings still evoke laughter and derision, but here the playwright compounds the tone by exploring the pleasures of romantic love and offering large doses of melancholy and music. No comedy is purely farcical or purely romantic, and Shakespeare is the master of the combined response. All his comedies are hybrids, complicated mixtures of farce and romance, sunshine and shadow, absurdity and profundity.

Nature seems to endorse amorous or procreative desires, conspiring to assist the characters in their fulfillment. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, for example, the fairies Oberon and Puck represent natural forces, or supernatural forces that control natural forces, and Oberon's natural impulse is to give the characters what they want, to arrange that Demetrius fall back in love with Helena. In this respect Oberon acts as a stand-in for the playwright, who guarantees that conflicts are resolved and desires gratified—usually, that is. Several Shakespearean comedies have problematic endings, in which the promised marriage is delayed or in some way compromised. In Love's Labor's Lost, for instance, a messenger enters amid the jollity of the final scene to announce the death of the Princess's father. Consequently, her wedding, along with several others that have seemed inevitable for most of the play, is postponed for a year, and Berowne, the main male character, is sent for that year to exercise his wit among the sick. This unconventional ending is uncharacteristic for such an early comedy. As Shakespeare continues to explore the tonal possibilities of comedy, the romantic unions come to seem less joyous and more inflected with irony and potential failure. Such irony tinges even the title of one of the problem comedies, All's Well That Ends Well, for the happy ending to which it refers amounts to a forced marriage between a persistent young woman and a personally unappealing young man who has declared repeatedly that he doesn't want her. In performances of A Midsummer Night's Dream, Demetrius's affectionate return to Helena is usually convincing; in stagings of All's Well That Ends Well, Bertram's final acceptance of his Helena is usually not.

The conventions of comedy, like those of all literary modes, are consistent with the customs of the society in which it is produced; the society of early modern England was patriarchal and authoritarian, inhospitable to disruption or disorder. Shakespeare's comedies, then, can be seen as instruments of social stability in their representation of the unshakable power of husbands, aristocrats, and other dominant cultural voices. It is true that in A Midsummer Night's Dream Shakespeare sides with Hermia in her desire to marry Lysander and thus rejects her father's proprietary claim that she should marry Demetrius, the man he chooses. Egeus's insistence on his right to dispose of his daughter as he wishes indicates, particularly in his use of pronouns, the conventional expectations surrounding arranged marriages:

Scornful Lysander, true, he [Demetrius] hath my love;
And what is mine, my love shall render him.
And she is mine, and all my right of her
I do estate unto Demetrius. (1.1.95–98)
In *Romeo and Juliet*, the parallel tragedy written at about the same time, Juliet's father at first vanquishes enlightened sentiments about needing his daughter's consent before he agrees to her marriage to Paris; but by the fourth act he echoes Egeus in his intemperate assertion of his daughter's right. Although both plays reject such paternal claims, endorsing the daughters' desires for companionsate marriage (a wedding of two kindred souls), they reflect the cultural anxiety pervading early modern England, when notions of romantic love were beginning to challenge the norms of patriarchal authority in the matter of marriage.

Even though he sides with his young women, however, Shakespeare finally marries them to husbands whose superior power is assumed: the last scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents the exchange of one male authority figure for another. Although the other women, particularly Titania and Hippolyta, seek to assert their independence from their husbands, the play ends with their submission. In the wood near Athens where the main events take place, Oberon magically overrides his wife's desire that she be allowed to keep a little Indian boy as her page, and he takes revenge on her by mating her temporarily with the monstrously transformed Bottom. At the end of this episode Titania yields to Oberon and returns to the role of submissive wife. Likewise, Hippolyta seems to understand much better than Theseus what has happened to the lovers in the forest, “the story of the night,” but after hesitating, she keeps quiet and lets her husband think what he likes. Viewed from a feminist perspective, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes a story of female independence thwarted by male power, a depiction of a society in which women either fail to fulfill their desires or, if they do, are able to look no further for that satisfaction than another man.

This problem is especially acute in *The Taming of the Shrew*. For many years critics and audiences regarded Katherine as a miserable, unsocialized creature whose refusal of suitors and defiance of her father are signs of a maladjusted personality and an uncontrolled ego. Thus Petruchio's scheme of marrying her in a wild ceremony and depriving her of food and sleep until she learns to behave — “he kills her in her own humor,” as one of the servents puts it — becomes an exercise in comic justice issuing in marriage and quiet life: “... amid this hurly I intend / That all is done in reverend care of her” (4.1.203-04). In a play full of disguises, role-playing, and transformations carried out in the name of love, Petruchio apparently transforms Kate from miserable shrew to gratified partner. But the same plot can be staged as an insensitive, even cruel exertion of male power, a sexist suppression of female desire in the interests of financial advantage and patriarchal norms. According to this more recent view, Kate's long, final speech about the need for wives to submit to their husbands is nothing more than “a ventriloquization of male superiority” (Boose 193) and the play less a boisterous comedy than an unpalatable document in the history of misogyny.

Which is it? And might this reading not pertain to other comic texts as well? *As You Like It* may be seen as a play in which the unparalleled wit of a Rosalind is squandered on the unworthy Orlando, or *The Merchant of Venice* as