Discussing Comedy—an Interrogative Approach

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During the last ten years before I retired in 2009, I often taught a course in narrative and dramatic comedy. I justified my affection for comedy by lamenting the usually heavy stuff in undergraduate English fare—tragedy and the literature of victimage. I admit I may well be a trivial person. Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* appeared the same year as *The Great Gatsby*; Mary Chase's *Harvey* had its premier the same year as *The Glass Menagerie*. If only one text from each year could survive, I'm not sure how I would vote.

My course was organized somewhat historically: students always read, beside Loos and Chase, a few Plautus plays, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I also assigned a changing assortment of texts (by, e.g., Aristophanes, Molière, Hrabal, Nabokov, Flann O'Brien, Thurber). We took account of contemporary plotted comedy with class reports on comedies that students themselves selected, usually from television and film, though there was the occasional book (*Catch-22*). For these reports, incidentally, the most popular and sought-after topic was *Seinfeld*. But beyond that, selections were surprisingly varied and I never had to go back to students for more choices beyond the three they initially submitted.

Theory of comedy in the class came in small doses, with glimpses of Bakhtin, Bergson, Frye, Susanne Langer, and James Wood. I also provided input with a handout, "Tools for analyzing comedy." This began as a simple list of questions and later became a more discursive, though still largely interrogative, handout. That is the origin of the present writing (thanks to

Kristin Bovaird-Abo and Theresa Buchheister for help with the early handout). Rather than pose a single theory of comedy here, I assemble the kinds of questions one can raise whether in class or just in thinking about comedies. This can be considered a tool or heuristic for those who take comedy seriously and want to go beyond "why is this funny?" in the work of analysis. Needless to say, every viewpoint quoted in what follows can become a question for discussion.

When leading a class discussion of a tragedy, teachers often find it useful to fall back on criteria or "rules" offered in Aristotle's *Poetics* (hubris, "tragic flaw," reversal or peripety, fall from greatness, etc.). Aristotle's book on comedy does not survive (see Eco's *Name of the Rose* for speculation as to its fate), but other smart people since have come up with good and applicable theories and valid questions. It seems useful to consider undertaking the formal analysis of this genre especially if, as James Wood has claimed, the very heart of modernity has been characterized by an interest in "irresponsible" comedy (Wood 16-18).

Questions that comedy shares with other genres:

1. Historical, Biographical, and Literary Historical Données

The usual **historical, biographical, and literary historical *données*** and what can be inferred from them. Questions arise about the times, reception history, sources, authorial obsessions, and textual interrelations. In this category, a special problem for comedy might concern the historical determinants of humor: a comic moment can depend on class differences no longer understood, or on differences no longer seen as laughable. Sir Philip Sidney says in *An Apology for Poetry* that "we" laugh at cripples. A more civilized era finds Henry Fielding, in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, declaring that it uncivilized to laugh at the unfortunate. Ugliness or lameness, he says, is no laughing matter, unless the ugly person would pretend to be beautiful or the lame person to be agile. Then there are matters of social class no longer evident. In Plautus's *Asinaria* (memorably staged in

2011 by the University of Missouri, Kansas City) two household slaves tell the master's son that if he wants his girl he has to go through a humiliating scene, carrying one of them on his back like a horse. Renaissance critics, citing this scene, faulted Plautus because his slave characters were too free in their behavior. Satirical comedy always depends on knowing at least some historical context. Except for explaining these matters, I try to avoid the thudding question "Why is this funny?" One might conceivably ask whether the author has a "comic vision," and what that is, and its kindred construct, "the comic spirit." (With "author," throughout, I mean to include the collective authorship evident in films and plays.)

2. Plot

Plot raises questions such as the rationale for ordering of events. Traditionally, in ancient and medieval criticism, comedy moves from disorder to harmony, and tragedy develops the other way. Does that rule persist (e.g., in Marx Brothers films)? Does the author play with it? What determines the harmony, or order, and the disorder? In comedy specifically: what parts are driven by intrigue or scheming, what parts are determined by fortune, and how do the two forces work together? Often both realms involve the trickster (whose plot is the plot) and the fool (who gets by on luck). Susanne Langer said that fortune is to comedy as fate to tragedy (352). A novel's plot that works entirely by luck could be criticized as unrealistically dependent on coincidence: does that necessarily weaken a comedy? How is the **resolution** or denouement managed? Comedies often **begin** with a law or rule that is decreed, making things difficult for the fool, the hero, or the lovers. The plot consists of circumventing that difficulty. Northrop Frye (123-24) said that comedies **end** not in the orderly way of novels and tragedies but as a result of a **metamorphosis** occurring near the end, a magic moment wrapping everything up with

seeming arbitrariness. Think of comedies that are resolved when the main character unexpectedly inherits a lot of money or her twin brother shows up. Do such endings constitute ill-advised use of the "deus ex machina," or is that okay in comedy? It has been said that "As comic plots near their end they tend to accelerate rather than subside in rhythm, seemingly heading toward an enactment of uncontrolled riot or unbearable deadlock" (Jagendorf 17). The problem then is to get around riot or deadlock. Why did early modern critics make so much fuss about the "unities"—one day, one place, one action—in plots of comedy, not just tragedy? The same critics often insisted on the need for **surprise** and **wonder** in a good comic plot: where and how are these attained? (Examples: Titania's awakening to fall in love with Bottom wearing the ass's head in *Midsummer Night's Dream*; Lady Bracknell's sudden fondness for Ernest/Jack in *Importance of Being Earnest*). Renaissance critics of comedy often insisted there should be a *cognitio* or moment of **recognition**, something like Aristotle's *anagnorisis* in tragedy. Plotted comedy begins with Greek and Roman New Comedy which, unlike Old Comedy (Aristophanes), developed a fairly plausible, as opposed to absurd, **situation**. Does the comedy's situation flirt with the line between plausible and absurd? Would there be any justification for adding more to the plot? Can a comic plot be too complicated? Clubb writes of the increasing complexity sought by Renaissance Italian comic playwrights, e.g., having three sets of twins involved in similar relationships: "In the process, they systematically outcomplicated the ancients and strained to do as much to one another" (53). An excellent student of mine was utterly baffled by the compound-complex plot of *Merry Wives of Windsor*, though I think a good performance would have clarified everything for her. But have we become too inattentive as readers to keep track of complex plots?

3. Comic Plot

Does the comic plot **imitate life**, as Aristotelians think, or is its design dictated by something else? The interest in absurdity seems to indicate that comedies are not "realistic." If they do not imitate life is it silly to want them to be mimetic? Yet the seventeenth-century scholar Daniel Heinsius, drawing on several classical authorities, claimed that Roman comedy's "only goal was to know and imitate human behavior" ("Cuius unicum propositum, humanos nosse atque imitari mores") (79). Some current theory, of course, holds that literature generally imitates, not life, but other literature. Edith Kern argues that, based historically as it is on phallic revelry, comedy belongs "to the realm of fantasy and play rather than mimesis" (26-27). If so, can "naturalism" ever be comic (or vice-versa)? As Halliwell puts it, does imitation mean "world creating" or "world reflecting?" (5). A *New Yorker* article, comparing the sitcom *The Office* in its British and American versions, suggests that culture, not nature, underlies all: "The American show is much more willing to bend reality in the service of a joke" (Friend 99). How does the comic writer maintain the illusion of the natural? At what point(s) is it broken?

4. Character

How do details of plot help reveal **character**—and do they need to? Does the comedy permit sympathy with the characters? (See topic no. 8) Questions of characterization in comedy will usually run up against the genre's tendency toward **stereotyping**. Comedy, like culture, continues to discover new stereotypes: the aspiring career girl, the office Romeo, the extravagantly gay guy (Nathan Lane's character in *The Bird Cage*; Martin Short's in *Father of the Bride*). So culture will always offer possibilities for "well-drawn" characters who are utterly flat—that is, predictable. Like Jonson's "humor characters,"

they will always act as they do. Generally the comic cast will include at least a **trickster** and a **fool**, with a supporting cast including types such as eiron (Touchstone), alazon (Falstaff), and agelast (Malvolio). Some deny the possibility of "round" characters in comedy but Falstaff? Don Quixote?). What do the characters contribute to the comedy as a whole? Do foils or antagonists help construct main characters? Which characters ultimately owe their existence to Roman Comedy types (parasite, clever servant, prostitute, et al.)?

The fool may be malicious like Moliere's miser, Harpagon; he may be loveable, like Elwood P. Dowd in *Harvey*; or dangerous, like Shakespeare's Feste or Touchstone. A good brief description is Susanne Langer's account of what she calls the buffoon. Langer thinks the fool originates in the primitive past:

> He is essentially a folk character, that has persisted through the more sophisticated and literary stages of comedy as Harlequin, Pierrot, the Persian Karaguez, the Elizabethan jester or fool, the *Vidusaka* of Sanskrit drama; but in the humbler theatrical forms that entertained the poor and especially the peasantry everywhere before the movies came, the buffoon had a more vigorous existence as Hans Wurst, as Punch of the puppet show, the clown of pantomime, the Turkish Karagöz (borrowed from Persian tradition) who belongs only to the shadow play. These anciently popular personages show what the buffoon really is: the indomitable living creature fending for itself, tumbling and stumbling (as the clown physically illustrates) from one situation into another, getting into scrape after scrape and getting out again, with or without a thrashing. **He is the personified *élan vital***; his chance adventures and misadventures, without

> much plot, though often with bizarre complications, his absurd expectations and disappointments, in fact his whole improvised existence has the rhythm of primitive, savage, if not animalian life, coping with a world that is forever taking new uncalculated turns, frustrating, but exciting. He is neither a good man nor a bad one, but is genuinely amoral, now triumphant, now worsted and rueful, but in his ruefulness and dismay he is funny, because his energy is really unimpaired and each failure prepares the situation for a new fantastic move. (342)

Langer mentions Hans Wurst, a boorish farmer type, who appears in surviving German pre-lenten carnival plays (*Fastnachtspiele*) notably those by Hans Sachs; he is an ancestor of the still-surviving comical rustic (*My Name Is Earl*). As a counter-rational force, folly is enough like **madness** to allow mention here of mad fools like Harpo Marx or Kramer on *Seinfeld*. Regarding the fool, then, we should ask: how does he or she (think of Lucille Ball's Lucy) support the comedy's *élan vital* (vital spirit, enthusiasm for life)? Against what forces is the battle for survival being waged? It was Bergson, of course, who coined the expression *élan vital* in his *Creative Evolution*, written shortly after his work on laughter and the comic.

5. Atmosphere

Describe the world of the comedy and its **atmosphere**. Is it the polite society of comedy of manners, and thus, as Wilde says, one that treats the trivial as significant, and vice-versa? Is it a divided world in the way of some Shakespearean comedies—a court-centered, complex world set against a green (forest or pastoral) one? How does the juxtaposition give delight or advance the festive spirit? Does it parody or create a burlesque version of a recognizable world, as with comedies that ridicule the James Bond

film or horror film? If it's a city comedy how does Rome or London or Manhattan create feelings specific to that place?

Questions especially pertinent to comedy alone:

6. Forms of Comedy

There may be some reason why "comedy," including its equivalent terms in other languages, was, in earliest known uses, understood as **dramatic** rather than narrative. If the text being studied is a dramatic comedy, could it be easily changed to narrative with no loss of effect (does that signal strength or weakness?), or could a narrative easily be dramatized? Instructive here is a comparison of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in the original narrative with the impoverished theatrical and cinematic versions. What dramatic qualities, such as physical action, onstage blocking, the visual effects, and dialogue, especially support the comic? Is **performance** more determining of success in comedy than in other drama?

7. Types of Comedy

What **type** of comedy is it? "Pure" (see no. 8), satiric, farce, black, dark, tragi-, romantic, "comedy drama," sentimental, other? Insofar as the purpose is discernible, does the type suggest a purpose other than entertainment? Cervantes' narrator says *Don Quixote* was written to warn readers against the dangers of chivalric romance, which is not entirely true. Nabokov's *Lolita* almost seems to have been written on a bet (bet you can't write a comedy about child abuse). So comedy may involve risk: is the gamble successful? Langer (see no. 4) thinks comedy celebrates life (*élan vital*, roughly the same as G. B. Shaw's life force), and such appears the case with dark comic movies like *Life is Beautiful* (in a Nazi concentration camp) or *Slumdog Millionaire*. Do the elements of satire, romance, morality-play, etcetera support or impede the comedy? F. Scott

Fitzgerald wrote his story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" as a comic parable, tongue-in-cheek, about the quest for eternal youth. The film version sentimentalizes the situation—poor Benjamin lives backward in time and can never really find happiness. Why do some audiences always ultimately resist sentimental comedy? How do the aims of satire coincide with those of comedy? **Satire** has been defined as "mocking criticism (more or less artistic) of current human behavior. Current: not necessarily strictly contemporary behavior, but, so to speak, behavior still in the public domain. Criticism: unlike comedy, which may be sympathetic (as Pirandello argued), or "innocent" (Freud), or all-embracing (Bakhtin). Satire is negative and addresses a definable target" (Silk 10). Andrew Stott's recent book on comedy observes that satire is "the most directly political of comic forms" (109) though his concluding sentence suggests that "comic forms" may not actually belong to a real set: "Perhaps then we need to stop trying to define comedy on a generic level, and think of it instead as a series of more or less connected effects, traditions, and modified themes treated with the aim of opening up understanding for the purposes of laughter" (148).

8. Pure Comedy

In **pure comedy** (most Plautus, Jonson's *Alchemist*, Monty Python productions, *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld*, *30 Rock*) nothing is sacred, everything is open to laughter or ridicule. Such comedy alienates both the audience and the play from the familiar world. How successfully does it manage to do this, or does reality impinge by authorial (in)attention? Sometimes, as in *Some Like It Hot* or *Blazing Saddles*, the comedy occurs in a past that popular culture has made mythical, and thus unreal. Elder Olson, who finds only one pure comedy in Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*, succinctly describes what would occur if you were creating what he calls "extreme" (pure) comedy:

> [Y]ou would make the characters as *unlike* you as possible, and their misfortunes as *unlike* any that might befall even the persons involved. Much has been made of Brecht's theory of the Verfremdungsaffekt, or alienation effect, but it is merely a modified form of **comic alienation**. The point is that the extreme comic is produced by making the observer so indifferent to the fortunes of the persons he is observing that he can concentrate on the absurdities of actions and fortune as such, without emotional commitment. (78)

Writing at about the same time, Marie Delcourt calls this feature **comic impartiality.** It is, she says (7), a property of the genre that ancient and Renaissance writers understood very well, though Shakespeare and French Renaissance playwrights typically show partiality to lovers (but Shakespeare does mock them in *As You Like It*). Is the comedy being discussed "partial" as opposed to impartial or alienating? A recent comic academic novel was spoiled for me, I think because the protagonist was the one smart guy in a world of fools. Does pure comedy have any "moral" or message or **theme** except to say that we're all fools? Segal says, "True comedy should banish *all* thought—of mortality and morality" (14). How does any comedy guard against, or circumvent, emotional commitment? Finally, some have held that comedy has a **catharsis** just as tragedy does. If so, the process would seem to be most obvious in pure comedy, but just what is purged? (An early book of comic songs was subtitled "Pills to purge melancholy.")

9. Farce

Could the comedy be called a **farce**, and does that differ from pure comedy? The accepted meaning of "farce" varies remarkably, but here is the one from the *OED* 2nd edition: "A dramatic work (usually short) which has for its sole object to excite laughter."

(The same definition appears in the 1st edition.) But can one reliably determine the "object" of a work? A gifted drama and film critic says, "One of the great natural differences between farce and comedy is that farce is about people who are impervious and unshakeable"(Gilliatt 46). But this sounds like the world of Olson's "comic alienation," in no. 8. An article on Georges Feydeau, the prince of farce, sees him as "a serious commentator on the human condition" (Marcoux 135–*pace* OED). Shaw thought that farce works "by turning human beings onto the stage as rats are turned into a pit, that they may be worried for the entertainment of the spectators." Spectators can then feel "that horrible, derisive joy in humiliation and suffering which is the beastliest thing in human nature" (G.B. Shaw, *Our Theatre in the Nineties*, quoted in Marcoux 132). It may have been this feeling that alienated some Renaissance critics from comedy dependent on **laughter** or "the ridiculous." A respected scholar of early modern comedy takes it as a rule that "Laughter, in so far as it is derisive and aggressive, works against the concord the comic ending tries to create" (Leggatt 137). Not surprisingly, Shaw's admirer Eric Bentley follows the dramatist's lead in his absorbing comments on farce vs. comedy, where "In comedy, the anger of farce is backed by conscience" (296). Comedy, he contends, must engage the moral sense. (Bentley writes separate chapters on farce and comedy, as if they are as categorically different as comedy and tragedy.) But if comedy must appeal to the moral sense, can "comic impartiality" (see no. 8) be a property of comedy? Comedy would also then be placed at odds with the carnival spirit, in which, supposedly, lie its origins (see no. 11).

10. Identity in Comedy

Comedy often depends on confusion of **identity** because problems of identity are recurrent in comedy. Plautus has twins or doubles in four or five of his 20 plays. How does the comedy manipulate identity markers such as names, relationships, property, reputation, family, and behavior? A pompous, self-important character may find that his family is not who he thought they were. An obsessed character may find (or not, as with Malvolio) that his obsession has prevented him from fulfillment. In Plautus's endings the stereotyped characters may lose the most visible sign of their stereotypicality, as when the clever slave trumps the old master and becomes free, or the dirty old man is publicly shamed. Romantic comedy, a natural subset, offers people in love who "find themselves." This is not unrelated to the belief that in comedy the group asserts itself upon the identity of the flawed individual or eccentric (hence fools are sometimes obsessed or dominated by a single "humor," a fixity that is of course central to Bergson's theory of the comic). How is identity discovered or shaped? What advances and what impairs the sense of identity in the comedy?

11. Comedy and Festive or Carnival Spirit

How does the comedy ally itself with the **festive or carnival spirit**, both internally and externally? The early pages of Aristotle's *Poetics* envision all drama's beginnings in primitive revelry (*komoidia*). In antiquity comedies were produced chiefly on holidays, when work was canceled and when public and family authority were sometimes and somewhat relaxed. For this reason some think that comedy is inherently anti-authoritarian. If so, is it therefore unrealistic? (See no. 3). The very title of *Twelfth Night* suggests that this comedy was written with the Christmas holidays in mind. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* has given rise to a belief in the persistence of the

carnivalesque in comedy as inseparable from all human culture, relying on grossly physical and grotesque elements, on the scatalogical, or on just plain silliness.

12. Comedy and Social Morality

Does the comedy **support or subvert the values of the society** in which it exists? If the word "values" is questioned, substitute "public opinion." The classic (Bergsonian) view is that comedy takes aim at self-centered anti-social types. In some ways can comedy both support and subvert? What if, for example, the society is wrongheaded, but is brought back to its usual commitment to right-thinking? On *South Park* the kids may do something dramatic to show the town's majority the folly of, e.g., racism or celebrity worship. In Thurber's "The Day the Dam Broke" (a metropolitan version of his family-centered "The Night the Bed Fell"), everyone in Columbus, Ohio thinks the town is about to be inundated and runs through the streets in groundless panic. Wilde's Lady Bracknell supports the values of class but also (hypocritically?) those of money. Shaw's "theater of ideas" often hinges on such conflicts. Someone wrote in the 1950s, "The whole theory that comedy upholds a golden mean which coincides with the mores of an ideal majority should be re-examined" (Enck 234). The writer is a worthy critic, but after so many battles over "theory" his sentence now seems, to say the least, ingenuous.

13. Physical Elements of Comedy

Then there's sex and violence. Can we describe how physical action in a given comedy reinforces the *élan vital* that Langer sees as the mainspring of comedy? Consider especially the way **sexual elements** (or other bodily matters such as Rabelaisian eating and excreting, as discussed by Bakhtin) support this feeling. Again, **romantic comedy** is a natural sub-genre because sexual attraction entails the perpetuation of the species. Grotesque representation arouses laughter in visual art. Does it function in the same way

in comedy? Does it require controls to avoid excess and can it sometimes undermine more or equally important elements in the text?

In summary:

Here is a list of more pointed questions related to the above topics that may help to generate ideas. Some of them, as with the above thirteen topics, will assume more or less importance depending on the text. The temptation will be to arrive at declarative sentences, "rules," until you reflect on actual comedy by the superstars, who always push the envelope. So after answering the questions, you can raise questions about your answers.

1. How do historical circumstances (author, times) shape the comedy?
2. How does the ordering of things create an effective plot?
3. How are stereotypes (characters) made interesting? Any original-seeming traits?
4. What particularly foolish traits mark the fool? How do these embody the life force (*élan vital*)?
5. Describe the atmosphere of the comedy. How does it advance delight?
6. As comedy, is it merged with other elements (sentimental, dark, satiric, romantic)? Why? To what effect?
7. Does it reflect comic alienation or impartiality? Does (not) doing so enhance its success as a comedy?
8. How is character identity enhanced or impaired (e.g. by love or greed) in the process?
9. Does the comedy support or subvert the values of its society (public opinion)? Is it anti-authoritarian?
10. How does a *cognitio* or moment of recognition help resolve the plot?

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