I COMEDY: DEFINITIONS, THEORIES, HISTORY

Q. When is a jar not a jar?
A. When it's a door.
(Q falls about. A looks puzzled.)[1]

'Comedy', from Greek *komoidia*, is a word with a complex cultural history. Its modern, as opposed to its ancient, use covers all formally marked varieties of *performed humour*, whether scripted or improvised, group or solo, in any medium: theatre, film, television, radio, stand-up, and various hybrids and mutations of these. It is also, by extension, applied more loosely to novels and other non-performance texts that share recognizable features of plot, theme, or tone with the classical tradition of comic drama; and used more loosely still as a casual synonym for 'humour'. As a countable noun, however, the word is restricted to works with a *narrative line*; thus sketch shows, stand-up, and variety acts can be 'comedy' but not 'comedies'.

Since almost everything that was called comedy in antiquity falls comfortably within the core sense of our word, it is all too easy to lose sight of the sheer weight of additional baggage that the Greek word has picked up in its long and sometimes meandering journey through the western cultural lexicon. Here, by way of illustration, is an exuberantly inclusive overview from a twentieth-century text, which self-consciously revisits ancient comedy through the lens of its modern inheritor forms – in this case, specifically the Broadway musical – annotated to gloss some of the principal generic claims made for 'comedy' as a generically distinct category of performance in line of descent from antiquity.

PROLOGUS: Something familiar, something peculiar,[1] something for everyone,[2] a comedy tonight. Something appealing, something appalling[3] . . . nothing with kings, nothing with crowns;[4] bring on the lovers,[5] liars[6] and clowns.[7] Old situations, new complications,[8] nothing portentous[9] or polite.[10] Something convulsive, something repulsive[11] . . . something aesthetic, something frenetic[12] . . . nothing with gods, nothing with fate; weighty affairs will just have to wait.[13] Nothing that's formal,[14] nothing that's normal,[15] no recitations to recite.[16] Open the curtain,[17] comedy tonight. Something erratic,[18] something dramatic[19] . . . frenzy and frolic, strictly symbolic[20] . . . anything you ask for[21] – comedy tonight. Something that's gaudy,[22]

[1] From the BBC spoof celebrity quiz *Shooting Stars*.

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something that's bawdy,[23] something for everybawdy,[24] comedy tonight. (MILES:) Nothing that's grim.[25] (DOMINA:) Nothing that's Greek.[26] (PROLOGUS:) She plays *Medea* later this week.[27] Stunning surprises,[28] cunning disguises,[29] hundreds of actors out of sight.[30] Pantaloons and tunics,[31] courtesans and eunuchs,[32] funerals[33] and chases,[34] baritones and basses,[35] panderers, philanderers,[36] cupidity,[37] timidity,[38] mistakes,[39] fakes,[40] rhymes,[41] mimes,[42] tumblers,[43] grumblers,[44] fumblers, bumblers,[45] no royal curse, no Trojan horse[46] – and a happy ending, of course.[47] Goodness and badness, man in his madness:[48] this time it all turns out all right.[49] Tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight.[50] [2]

[1]Sense of genre is itself part of comedy's poetics: there is a strong sense of the particular work defining its individuality within a strict genre tradition. [2]Comedy (particularly in contrast to rival genres) claims mass, populist appeal. [3]Comedy repels as well and attracts, magnifying both fears and desires. [4]Whether or not in overt opposition to tragedy, comedy's social centre of gravity lies outside the aristocratic world. [5]Heterosexual love is a strong genre trademark, as are [6]plots of deception. [7]A striking feature, lacking counterpart in tragedy, is a range of specialist buffoon characters. [8]Stereotypy of situation, and the virtuosity of improvising new figures on familiar grounds, are highly valued. [9]Comedy's generic self-image is simultaneously that of the *eiron* or wit [10]and the *bomolochos* or buffoon. [11]Comedy is 'a mimesis of inferior people' (so Aristotle, *Poetics* 5.1449a32). [12]Pacy physical action is a trademark. [13]Comedy is keen to distance itself from tragedy, even at the expense of serious self-misrepresentation. [14]Comedy encourages a Bakhtinian view of itself as anarchic, entropic, centrifugal, and [15]a carnivalesque inversion of everyday life. [16]Static, declamatory modes of performance are deprecated in favour of mobility and improvisation. [17]Metatheatre is a characteristic ingredient. [18]See 14. [19]Comedy is finely attuned to the dynamics of live performance. [20]The carnival model (see 15) is licensed by the fact that its anarchism is fantasized rather than realized. [21]Comic performance claims an element of real-time interactivity and audience empowerment. [22]Comedy welcomes the extravagant, the exaggerated, the larger-than-life. [23]It is able to engage in a non-threatening way with dangerous areas of sexual discourse. [24]Verbal play, especially puns, is prominent in its linguistic register. [25]Violence is made non-threatening. [26]Comedy subverts the classical. [27]Nevertheless, there is free commerce (sharing of personnel, audience, space, etc.) between comedy and its rival genre. [28]Plot twists are highly valued. [29]Intrigue, especially that involving impersonation, is a recurrent motif. [30]Visual spectacle is promoted. [31]Generic markers are found in costume. [32]There are stock character types, who include sexual outlaws. [33]Death is a social rather than a personal event. [34]See 12. Desire is often given manic physical expression. [35]Music is often integral to the dramatic texture. [36]Providers and customers of sexual services are key figures in the situational repertoire. [37]Plots centre on desire: physical, sexual, commercial, social. [38]Human weakness is exposed and ridiculed. [39]Errors, cognitive and practical, are major plot elements. [40]See 6, 29. [41]The discursive register is free to oscillate between the bound and the unbound, the formal and the naturalistic. [42]Non-verbal signification plays a part, and [43]exotic physical displays are especially welcomed. [44]Characters with a misanthropic or surly disposition

[2] Stephen Sondheim, 'Comedy Tonight', from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962).

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are useful to the social and satiric chemistry. [45]See 38–9. [46]See 13. [47]The fulfilment of the narrative lies in order emerging triumphantly out of disorder and sympathetic characters decisively attaining their desires. [48]Comedy at its most professionally ambitious aspires to a distinctive vision of the human condition that claims to be global, humanistic, and life-affirming. [49]Comedy's vision of the world is closural, teleological, and feelgood; but [50]this may be interpreted as a mere deferral of the (possibly, but not necessarily, truer) tragic world-model.

Three general features of this account deserve slightly fuller comment. First, although Sondheim's show tune is a knowingly modern text, the cultural tradition it describes is emphatically classical. His musical is set in ancient Rome and based on five Latin comedies by Plautus;[3] and this famous opening song not only continues a classical tradition of generic self-reflexiveness, but boldly asserts that every element of its expansive definition is already, and archetypally, to be found within the world of Roman comedy itself. Indeed, the theory of comedy is one of the few areas of modern literary theory in which classical scholars can claim to have played a central part. Cornford's 1914 *Origins of Attic Comedy*, one of the landmark works of the group nowadays known as the 'Cambridge ritualists', argued for a ritual basis to the plot patterns of Aristophanic comedy; it was swiftly discredited in classical circles by the criticisms of Pickard-Cambridge (1927) and others,[4] but its basic model, abstracted from the historical claims of actual ritual origins, became the basis of Frye's formal plot pattern, still the most influential grand unified theory of comedy yet proposed. More recently, the studies of Segal and Silk have attempted to use an understanding of the complexities of ancient comedy's own history and generic positioning to address larger definitional questions about comedy's place in the western tradition.

Second, Sondheim is responding to what we can now see to have been the last major phase of the theorization of comedy as a genre, summing up two millennia's accumulated sense of comedy's nature at the very point when its intellectual history may have been coming to an end. The last widely influential attempt at an overall poetics of the mode was Frye's in 1957, though its key elements date from 1948;

[3] Three are normally credited (*Pseudolus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Mostellaria*) but *Casina* has clearly been used for the wedding scene and *Poenulus* for the Erronius storyline. The project originated with librettist Burt Shevelove, who had studied Plautus at Yale and would go on to write the book for Sondheim's 1974 musical version of Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Shevelove introduced co-writer Larry Gelbart, the future screenwriter of *M*A*S*H* and *Tootsie*, to the material; both Gelbart and Sondheim read widely in the corpus. See Gelbart 1998 and Malamud 2001.

[4] More recent appraisal has been more sympathetic, against a background of deeper appreciation of the ritual elements in fifth-century drama generally; see especially Reckford 1987: 441–98; Jeffrey Henderson 1993b: xi–xxxiii; E. Segal 2001: 1–26.

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Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, formulated in 1941, reached the attention of English-speaking scholarship only in 1968; and in the poststructuralist and postmodern eras the focus of theory has moved from comedy as an ideal form to humour as a psychological and cultural process.[5] The reasons for this shift are complex, but one environmental factor has been the rise in cultural prominence of television comedy, which tends to open-ended serial form of a kind difficult to accommodate within traditional notions of the contained comic storyline with its strongly closural festive ending, or else to short sketches and vignettes, which come closer in form to the single joke than to the full-length comic work imagined by classical theories of comedy ancient and modern. The resurgence of non-narrative forms of performed comedy, particularly stand-up, has also been a challenge to the boundaries of traditional formalist models; and in his provocatively titled *The Death of Comedy* (2001) Erich Segal, himself a classical scholar with professional experience in the writing of musicals, articulates the widespread recent view that the Cornford–Frye model of comedy as rite of spring is specifically undermined by the twentieth-century turn to darker, even apocalyptic, comic effects.[6]

Finally, Sondheim brilliantly captures the sheer centrifugality of the definitional project, which is principally due to two things: (i) a struggle to unify the radically different Aristophanic and Menandrean models in a single generic definition; and (ii) a difficulty in clearly disengaging a theory of *comedy* from a theory of *the comic*, or humour.

(i) Essentialist models of comedy tend to underplay the complexity of ancient comedy's own history, both as an evolving cultural form and as an object of reception in later tradition. In 486 BC, a kind of play called *komoidia* was granted its own competition in the Athenian festival of the City Dionysia. It was not the only kind of comic drama at the festivals; at around the same time a kind of mythological romp called satyr-play became an official feature of the competition in tragedy. But, whereas satyr-play remained subordinate to tragedy, *komoidia* remained distinct. By 425 it had developed into a complex popular art form, which used the resources of the Greek theatre in startlingly different ways to its more conservative sibling *tragoidia*, which was performed at the same festivals in the same theatres but never composed by the same poets. Over the course of the fourth century it developed into what would be, for the rest of antiquity, its

[5] Hokenson 2006: 173–265. The major works since Frye have been E. Olson 1968; Gurewitch 1975; Torrance 1978; Simon 1985; Patrick O'Neill 1993; Purdie 1993.

[6] On the emergence of this view, see Hokenson 2006: 126–7.

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classical form: the so-called New Comedy of Menander and his contemporaries, which was translated into Latin in the second half of the third century and the first half of the second. Complete Latin plays by Plautus and Terence survived into the Latin west and seeded the classical tradition in comic drama from the Renaissance on.

But the story of that tradition is one of fracture rather than continuity. The Greek plays on which the Latin comedies had been based only began to be rediscovered in the late 1890s, when archaeologists began to dig in Egypt for ancient papyrus rolls preserved by the dry desert climate. Menander was one of the great beneficiaries of the new philological science of papyrology, because the heyday of his popularity from roughly 200 BC to 200 AD meant that copies were still being made in the period from which actual texts can be recovered. Aristophanes, meanwhile, had disappeared early on from the performance repertoire, and though his plays were extensively studied and edited in the Hellenistic era, it was only under the Roman empire that he began at last to displace Menander in the literary canon. The main reason for this was linguistic: in one of the fits of cultural cleansing to which the Greek language has been occasionally subject in its long history, prose writers from the late first century AD adopted a purist stance that deprecated Hellenistic and later linguistic innovations and modelled itself on the Athenian writers of the fifth and fourth century. Menander, with his exquisitely nuanced early Hellenistic *koine*, was too late and decadent to qualify; the models were the historians, orators, and dramatists of earlier generations, and Aristophanes was of special value as the principal surviving repository of conversational Attic speech, as well as of sub-literary and fantastic vocabulary that would never otherwise have survived.

The upshot of all this is that Menander, arguably the most influential single dramatist in history, was unknown to the later western dramatic tradition he seeded until that tradition's classical phase was already entering its twilight; while Aristophanes, whose direct influence on ancient drama was already long over by the time of Menander's birth, was the one Greek comedian who survived to be read, copied, and preserved throughout the Byzantine middle ages, thus to be rediscovered by humanists and become part of the western classical tradition – yet without ever being part of the living performance tradition, until his belated reabsorption into the theatrical repertoire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Menander remains the direct ancestor of the classical western comedy of romantic intrigue, mistaken identity, and farcical convolutions of

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plotting: a tradition so successful that its ancient prototypes have become increasingly marginal to the performance repertoire and are now almost never staged. But Aristophanes' legacy is more complex and diffuse, and lies more outside theatre history than within it, particularly in verse and prose satire and the latter's legacy; his master plot of the visionary hero's fantasy quest to rewrite the laws of the universe in his favour is the seed of the fantastic-voyage tradition in prose fiction that runs through Lucian to to Swift, Baron Münchhausen, and the lineage of science fiction.[7]

What comedy meant for its *ancient* audiences is thus a question bound up with its history. The Greek word *komoidia* means, not altogether illuminatingly, '*komos* song'; the untranslatable *komos* is a loose term for a processional revel or mobile party such as we find in a variety of contexts formal and informal, religious and secular, civic and private (though always *in* public).[8] When the word *komoidia* first appears to our view in the fifth century, it refers to a particular kind of play that had its own distinct competition at the Athenian city dramatic festivals, differentiated from its sister genre tragedy in a number of theatrical respects. Its chorus was large (twenty-four as opposed to the twelve or fifteen of tragedy); its masks were cartoonish and ugly rather than naturalistic and dignified, and its costume grotesquely padded, with some or all male characters equipped with a distinctive costume phallus. Competing poets produced a single play each rather than the tragedians' two (at the Lenaea) or four (Dionysia), and there was no overlap of authorship between comedy and tragedy. In the time of Aristophanes at least, plays were shaped around elaborate musical set-pieces, often involving structures of metrical and choreographic symmetry, which had no counterpart in tragedy at all. The subject matter could be, and more usually was, contemporary in setting and fictional in plot, in contrast to tragedy's fixation with retelling myths of the heroic age; and time, space, causality, dramatic illusion were all susceptible to kinds of rupture avoided by tragedy's much more literalistic representational system.

It is far from easy to see how or why these particular differences between comedy and tragedy emerged, and indeed many of them would be eroded or obliterated over the course of the century leading up to Menander's first production in the late 320s. But the effect was

[7] For the continuity of the tradition of the *voyage extraordinaire* from Lucian to Verne, see especially now Roberts 2006.

[8] On the *komos* and comedy, see most recently Rothwell 2007: esp. 7 f. and bibliography at 214 n. 3.

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to create a distinctive look, form, and grammar of performance for a kind of festival entertainment whose central feature was the invitation to laughter; and comedy's history in antiquity can be viewed as a series of far-reaching experiments in how to assemble a series of comic moments into a larger performance whose armature is essentially *narrative*. These large-scale, storylined performances we call 'comedies' are in essence a series of explorations of how to scale up the things that humour does at the level of the individual joke – what we might call 'simple' humour – to more complex and extended forms of articulation. And the ancient world's invention of comedy, whose cumulative subsequent history in the western tradition is so amply described in the Sondheim lyric from which we began, comes ultimately from the attempt to discover how humour works as a specifically theatrical activity with a mass audience and an extended narrative line.

(ii) Indifference to the distinction between comedy in particular and humour in general has been the second major impediment to a coherent theory of either. Even today, critics of comedy, classical and otherwise, still tend to take surprisingly little account of the vibrant interdisciplinary field of contemporary humour research,[9] which has largely assimilated or displaced the various reinventions of the wheel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[10] Since the foundation of the journal *Humor* in 1988, there has been significant convergence between what had previously been rival approaches, and a recognition that what in the past have been different kinds of theories of humour are in fact complementary lines of inquiry into a single complex phenomenon. Thus, Attardo's metacritical overview classifies the major categories of humour theory as shown in Table 1.

Like the blind men's elephant, these four categories of theory represent different parts of a single humour process. We may not for literary purposes be much concerned with the physiological aspects of laughter, but a full account of the operations of humour will certainly need to consider its *initial conditions* in the social frame within which humour acts are set, and the relationships thereby constructed between the performer, audience, and target; the cognitive mechanisms, including linguistic processing, then involved in the actual

[9] Robson 2006 is the major classical exception. See especially McGhee and Goldstein 1983; Morreall 1983, 1987; Raskin 1985; Mulkay 1988; P. Lewis 1989; Orin 1992; Nilsen 1993; Norrick 1993; R. I. Williams 1993; and, above all, Attardo 1994 and Ruch 1998.

[10] The canon of classics comprises Meredith 1877; Bergson 1900; Freud 1905; Langer 1953: 326–50; Frye 1957; Koestler 1964; Bakhtin 1984.

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Table 1 Four families of theories (after Attardo [1994: 47], after Raskin [1985: 31–40])

Social	**Cognitive**	**Psychoanalytical**	**Physiological**
Hostility	Incongruity	Release	Neurological
Aggression	Contrast	Sublimation	Muscular
Superiority		Liberation	
Triumph		Economy	
Derision			
Disparagement			

structure and processing of comic texts; and the psychology of comic *response*, and in particular the involuntary or sub-cognitive operation of comic arousal. The four kinds of theories, in other words, address different stages in an essentially sequential process, as shown in Figure 1:



Figure 1

The integration of these different theories has been the aim of the most influential recent model, Raskin and Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), which explains the process of recognizing and resolving incongruity through a mechanism of 'script opposition': significantly contrasted frames of reference, which a joke brings into collision. The process looks something like Figure 2.

Such a convergence of approaches has made it possible to integrate the pioneer studies of Bergson, Freud, and Koestler into what is by now, whether or not we endorse the GTVH model itself, at least a broadly agreed general picture of how humour can be analysed using the tools of social and cognitive linguistics. Such an approach has the power to clarify some central issues in the criticism of comedy, for example by helping us to distinguish at least three different kinds of literary question we may want to ask in thinking about the job it does and how it achieves its effect. If we accept that comedy's defining feature is the targeting of the humour response, then this staged model immediately poses three questions:

- What *social tensions* are being identified and negotiated? (A question of contextual, usually historicist, positioning.)

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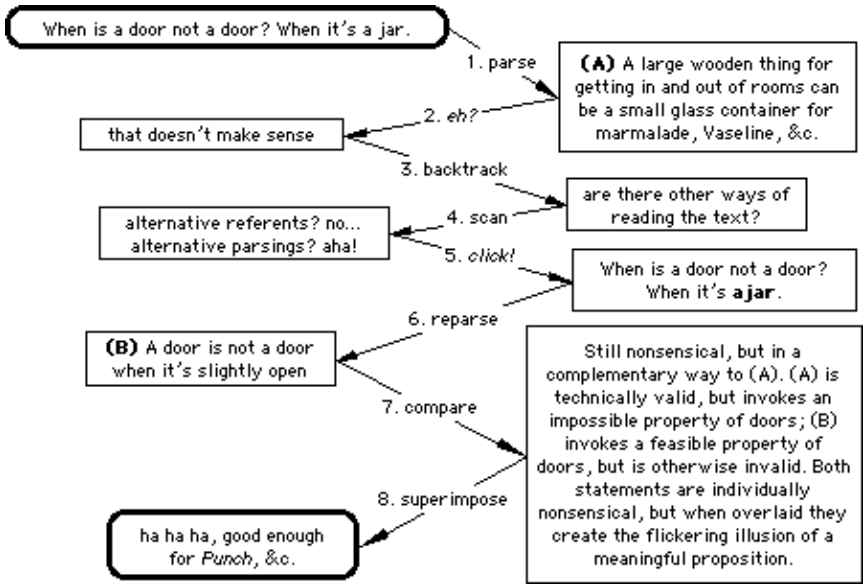


Figure 2

- How is the humorous effect *constructed in the text*? (A question centred in close reading of the actual text against that background.)
- What kind of therapeutic or other *psychological response* is provoked from the audience or reader? (A question that puts text and context back together to confront the effect of humour at the point of reception.)

These are questions that literary models of comedy have not always been very successful at connecting up. Yet the shift in focus from theories of comedy to theories of humour has also left the study of comedy underequipped for a number of its traditional tasks. For one thing, it is a truism that not all comedy is particularly funny. The medieval reconfiguration of the concept of 'comedy', centred on the happy ending as the form's defining feature rather than on the necessary presence of an attempt at humour, is only vestigially present in modern usage. But it remains the case that comic effect is highly vulnerable to nuances of cultural translation, and that a large part of the criticism of comedy, perhaps especially of ancient comedy, lies in unpacking kinds of meaning from the text that transcend any actual impulse to laughter. Menander's *Dyskolos* has a reputation, though largely among those who have not seen it performed, as a play without

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jokes; but, even if true, it would not diminish the importance of the text as a complex expression of citizen ideology in early Hellenistic Athens, to say nothing of its technical accomplishments as a piece of finely constructed theatrical clockwork. This is not to say that comedy is primarily interesting for its serious content; there would at least be something of a paradox in claiming that comedy is significant precisely when it is not being funny. But a humour-centred model risks loading the emphasis too heavily in the other direction.

More seriously still, a recognized limitation in humour research to date has been the fixation on the individual joke rather than the construction of complex extended comic performances or routines of the kind likely to interest students of comedy. There has also been a related tendency to underestimate the complexity of individual jokes, which very often operate on several levels simultaneously, some of them recursive or metacomic. Thus a GTVH-type model is good at explaining simple jokes such as the one presented in the diagram above, but rather poorer with more Aristophanic kinds of surrealism, such as the variation at the head of this chapter (asked of an unwary celebrity contestant on a spoof quiz show of the 1990s that set up its guests for genial ridicule).

To appreciate just how much is going on in a single moderately complex comic moment, it may help to sit down with a relatively straightforward case. (I use a purely textual example here to sidestep contingent issues of performance and other outside variables.) *Monty Python's Big Red Book* ends with a 'Bibliography', whose first two items are:

> *Mowing the Lawn* by H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh
> *How to Spell* by The Quoon[11]

Consider the second line. This is not in any simple sense a joke: rather, it is an item in an ongoing comic sequence, shown in the diagram below as the stepped arrows coming down from the upper left, with dotted lines marking the individual units in the sequence. Each of the three preceding steps is a humorous item in itself, but in the total sequence they are all preparation, part of the frame, for the central item, which is funny in an extremely wide diversity of different but simultaneous respects. It is a profoundly non-linear diagram, traversable in many different ways – something that underpins much of what we would think of as 'complex', 'rich', 'interesting', or

[11] Idle 1971.

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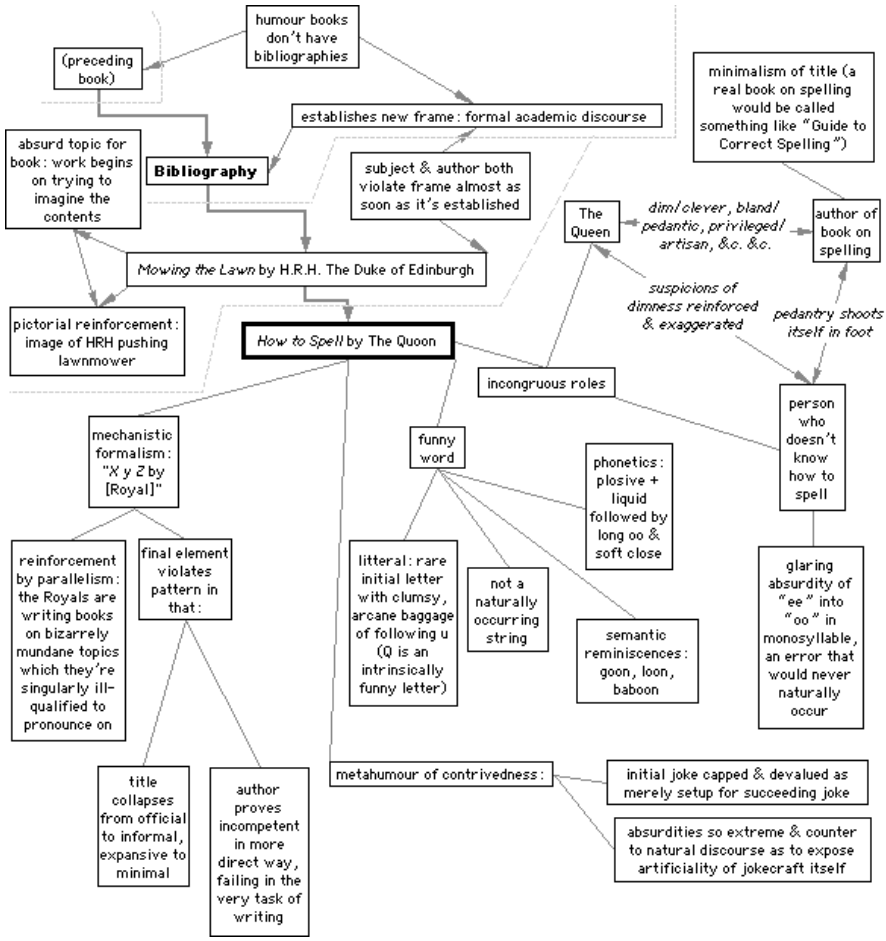


Figure 3

'literary' humour. At the same time, the diagram is far from closed: once we start turning the comic moment over in our minds, we become (as Koestler, in particular, saw) part of the creative process ourselves, extending the mental map with our own further additions (Figure 3). Crucially, although the Quoon gag itself looks like a piece of innocent nonsense, it in fact engages with some highly charged contextual issues:

(i) The British royal family are perceived as over-rewarded, resented as being out of touch with the everyday realities of their subjects, embodiments of undeserving power, and widely perceived as idle; but ambivalence is compounded by the continuing social and ideological

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investment of commitment in the institution of monarchy, as well as by widespread public regard for the Queen herself, and the perception of a disjunction between the Queen and other royals.

(ii) Spelling errors are a source of potential anxiety about how others might perceive and judge one's intelligence, class, professional competence, authority, etc., etc.

Even brief consideration of such a comparatively straightforward example – and jokes in Aristophanes are routinely a great deal more complex than this – shows the limitations of models of humour that treat jokes reductively, as semantically, psychologically, and textually closed or finite entities. In general, jokes perceived to be 'rich' or 'complex' will tend to depend on one or more of five factors:

sequencing:	the sustained manipulation of the audience's arousal state as part of a *series* of jokes linked in a process of cumulative escalation and pacing
concept:	danger (charged subject matter) and/or complexity (significant intellectual or propositional content – though this on its own has no guaranteed *humorous* effect)
multiplicity:	abundance of simultaneous and overlapping incongruities or other invitations to laughter
aperture:	the absence of clearly defined limits to the audience's or reader's imaginative work
metahumour:	self-reflexive exploitation and subversion of comic form, pragmatics, etc.

There is still an oddly persistent belief that comedy is intrinsically impervious to analysis, on the grounds either that humour is irreducibly subjective or that comic effect is irreparably destroyed by the act of dissection. Practical experience suggests that the reverse is true: that close analysis of complex humour if anything deepens appreciation of the comic effect, both as an experience of funniness and as a work of artifice. Such analysis, it is probably fair to say, is still in its intellectual infancy. But, for that very reason, the prospect for comic criticism is an exciting one, with important work waiting to be done.

Scholarship on comedy in antiquity

In antiquity at least, comedy had a central place in intellectual history. Comedy was second only to Homer in the ancient scholarly effort expended on its interpretation, from the fourth-century Peripatetics

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to the abundance of interesting if unreliable treatises preserved among the Byzantine paraphernalia that have accreted round the texts. Chief among the latter are the collections of material known as the *Prolegomena on Comedy*, particularly the comparatively well-informed *Prolegomena III* and the two treatises of unknown date by Platonius *On the Different Kinds of Comedy* and *On the Different Styles of Comic Dramatists*. Like the Aristophanic scholia, these draw ultimately on the work of Alexandrian scholars in the third to first centuries, who in turn drew on the published works of Aristotle – particularly his seminal *Didascaliae* or 'Production Records', a chronology of Athenian drama researched from the official archives, which became the basis for all subsequent dating of tragedy and comedy.[12] Aristotle also reports on his researches into the early history of comedy in his extant *Poetics*, and draws a number of suggestive contrasts in the course of his discussion of tragedy. A passage in the *Rhetoric* (1.11.1371b35) promises a discussion of laughter in the *Poetics* that does not appear in our text, but the case for a lost second book on comedy remains unclosed, notwithstanding Janko's bravura revival (1984) of the suggestion that the remarkable Peripatetic outline known as the *Tractatus Coislinianus* may be a summary of the putative missing book, rather than an extension of Aristotle's argument by another hand.

There was no official text of comic poets corresponding to the Lycurgan text of the tragedians, but Old Comedy fascinated the great Hellenistic scholars of Alexandria and Pergamum. Alexandrian scholarship on Old Comedy began as early as the 270s, when the second generation of poets of New Comedy was still productive; the Ptolemaic tragedian Lycophron, ostensible author of the extant poem *Alexandra*, was the first to write a specialist treatise, though his nine books *On Comedy* seem to have been principally concerned with linguistic and textual minutiae. Meanwhile, Aristotle's work on dramatic chronology was continued by Callimachus in his *Pinakes* ('Tables'), the 120-book encyclopaedia of Greek literature that effectively served as the catalogue of the Alexandrian library. Commentaries on individual plays begin with Lycophron's fellow tragedian-scholar Euphronius, who wrote a companion to *Wealth* – an early sign of this play's special popularity; and Euphronius' pupil, the great Aristophanes of Byzantium, made an edition of the texts of Old Comedy around 200 that would be the basis for all subsequent editions, and

[12] The Aristotle known to the Hellenistic world was a completely different corpus from the body of privately read treatises that survive; for an engaging account, see Canfora 1989: 26–9, 51–8, 173–82.

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his prefaces to each play ('hypotheses') have been preserved in the manuscript tradition. Although all this work was on Old Comedy, it was Aristophanes of Byzantium who was also largely responsible for the canonization of Menander as a classic – and who coined the famous *mot* on Menandrean realism, 'Menander, life: which imitated which?' In the first century, the prolific literary scholar Didymus compiled a commentary from the many works of his Alexandrian predecessors, which in due course became the ultimate ancestor of the marginal commentaries in Byzantine editions.[13]

As the earliest substantial generic tradition in Latin poetry, comedy was also a preoccupation of Latin literary scholars from the late second century on.[14] An early arena of debate was the authenticity of the plays attributed to Plautus, on which the first-century antiquarian Varro was able to cite half a dozen predecessors, including the tragedian and literary historian Accius, who was also responsible for an attempt – disastrously wrongheaded, as Cicero's friend Atticus was able to show – to establish a revisionist chronology for the career of Livius Andronicus. But the first great literary historian of Latin comedy was Varro, who wrote prolifically on early comedy's history and interpretation, and became the single most influential authority on points of controversy. Major surviving monuments of Latin scholarship on comedy include Suetonius' *Life of Terence*, whose attempt to reconcile the conflicting biographical traditions is especially useful for its explicit citation of earlier authorities and their views; the commentary on Terence's plays by Aelius Donatus, which has come down to us in a curious reassembled form following the original's dismemberment into marginal notes; and the treatise *De Fabula* ascribed to Evanthius, which seeks to apply Greek theories of comedy to its Roman form and history.

Chronology and evolution

Comedy had a long run in antiquity. It was already old at the time of its first official festival performances in Athens at the City Dionysia of 486 BC, and new plays were still being written in Latin over five centuries later. In contrast, every surviving classical tragedy we know to have been performed was produced in the space of a single lifetime;

[13] For overviews of ancient scholarship on Aristophanes, see Dunbar 1995: 31–42; Dickey 2007: 28–31.

[14] See Rawson 1985: 268, 271–9.

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and in the half-century spanned by the career of Euripides and the surviving plays of Sophocles, the genre's formal development had already stabilized to the extent that some of Sophocles' plays could come from almost anywhere within that span. But comedy's story is many times longer, and spans a succession of radical transformations that reinvent the genre almost beyond recognition, sometimes within the space of a single generation. Aristotle claimed that tragedy stopped developing because it had by this time reached its mature stage, like a living thing growing to adulthood. But comedy was a much less conservative genre, capable of transforming itself several times over into something unrecognizably different from its ancestral form, and it was not until the early Hellenistic period that the subject matter and conventions of comedy reached the kind of stability that had been reached in tragedy some 130 years earlier.

Further, while we may miss the survival of such seminal tragedies as Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*, Sophocles' *Tereus*, or Euripides' *Telephus*, our picture of fifth-century tragedy as a genre does not seem significantly gappy; whereas our picture of comedy is composed almost entirely of gaps. While for tragedy we can study the work of three dramatists from the same century whose careers overlapped, our two surviving Greek comic dramatists were working a century apart, in phases of the genre so different that, if we did not know that Menander's plays were a direct descendant of the kind of play written by Aristophanes, it would be hard to recognize them as part of the same history at all. What is more, each of these surviving authors is himself the end product of a long evolution whose early stages are known only from fragments and hints. By the time of Aristophanes' earliest surviving plays, comedy already had a rich history behind it stretching back at least sixty years, and probably much, much longer. Of the other great comic dramatists of his day, we have only titles and the odd text fragment. Even over the four decades spanned by the surviving plays of Aristophanes, the kind of play he and his lost contemporaries were writing changed almost beyond recognition. The two crucial generations of experiment and innovation that divide Aristophanes from Menander are known only from titles, ancient quotations, and a small scattering of papyrus fragments; and the other great comedians of Menander's age, some of whom were more successful than Menander himself, survive only in very free Latin adaptations composed a century or more after the Greek originals for a very different world and audience. Thus our two surviving Roman dramatists, who also belonged to different generations, adapted their plays from Greek

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texts a century or more old – all of them now lost – and did so in a theatrical culture that teemed with other, more home-grown forms of popular comedy that do not survive at all.

The history of ancient comedy is thus a fundamentally different *kind* of history from that of tragedy: longer, more complex, and above all more fragmentary. As far as the Greek phase was concerned, Hellenistic scholars tried to impose some shape on the story so far by periodizing it into three ages, which they called Old, Middle, and New. The formal and chronological boundaries between these phases were ill-defined,[15] and each in any case spanned two or three distinct generations of poets and further shorter-lived trends within each, whose detailed history is only very imperfectly recoverable, while some careers, including that of Aristophanes, cut across the divisions anyway. Nevertheless, the terminology is retained by modern scholarship, and the dates conventionally distinguished as follows – with the fifth-century plays of Aristophanes belonging to the tail end of 'Old Comedy' and his last two surviving plays *Assemblywomen* and *Wealth* falling within the early decades of 'Middle Comedy'. At the time of his death, what later generations would view as the golden age of Greek comedy still lay some seventy years in the future, with the 'New Comedy' of Menander and his contemporaries in the early Hellenistic period.

Bibliographic note

Hokenson 2006 is a metacritical history of theories of comedy from Plato to Genette, though sometimes unreliable on classical material and entirely unaware of the new discipline of humour studies (for which, see Attardo 1994 and Ruch 1998). Nelson 1990 is an accessible traditionalist overview, and Erich Segal 2001 an ambitious long history of comedy's life cycle in the western tradition from the classicist's perspective. Two Aristophanists to engage frontally with the larger theoretical debate are Silk (1988, 2000) and Robson (2006).

For ancient comedy in general, the chapters on comedy in the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, by Handley (1985) and Gratwick (1982) in the Greek and Latin volumes respectively, remain the outstanding short accounts. Sandbach's concise introductory volume (1977) is the only broad survey in English of Greek and

[15] For some of the problems, see Csapo 2000; Sidwell 2000.

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Roman comedy as a whole; Maurach 2005 is on a similar scale. Erich Segal's two *Oxford Readings* collections (1996, 2002) assemble strong selections of reprinted articles, including some first English translations of important continental items. Konstan's two collections of essays on individual plays (1983, 1995) offer probing readings of ancient comedy's negotiation of complex unresolved tensions in civic and ethical values, and apply an impressively consistent and compelling critical approach across the whole corpus from Aristophanes to Terence. Important cross-generic histories of ancient theatre with significant material on comedy include Easterling and Hall 2002, and MacDonald and Walton 2007. The sourcebook by Csapo and Slater (1995) collects and translates a wealth of primary documents on the organization and performance of ancient drama, tragic as well as comic. Walton 2006 surveys the translation history of ancient comedy in English, with a full listing of known translations of Aristophanes and Menander.

The best survey history of Greek comedy is Zimmermann 2006; in English, Norwood 1931 is a sparkling performance that still has much to recommend it, though it is outdated on Menander and overenthusiastic in the reconstruction of lost works. On Greek and Roman New Comedy, Hunter 1985 is especially valuable for its unified view of the genre across languages, centuries, cultures, and authors, while Wiles 1991 unpacks the theatrical codes in what is perhaps the single most significant critical work of modern times on post-Aristophanic comedy.

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Greek and Latin comedy and tragedy: outline chronology

Historical events	BC	Comedy	Tragedy
	540		first tragic contest c. 535–533
	530		birth of Aeschylus 525
	520		
Pisistratids expelled 510	**510**		
	500		Aeschylus' first production early 490s; birth of Sophocles 495
1st Persian War; battle of Marathon 490	**490**	first comic contest 486	birth of Euripides c. 485–480; Aeschylus' first victory 484
2nd Persian War; battle of Salamis 480	**480**		Aeschylus, *Persians* 472
ascendancy of Pericles 461–429	**470**		Sophocles' first production 468
	460		Aeschylus, *Oresteia* 458; death of Aeschylus 456; Euripides' 1st production 455
Parthenon built 447–432	**450**	birth of Aristophanes c. 450–445?	earliest extant Sophocles (*Ajax*, *Antigone*) 440s
Peloponnesian War 431–404	**440**		earliest extant Euripides (*Alcestis* 438, *Medea* 431)
death of Pericles 429	**430**	Aristophanes' early plays 427–421	Euripides, *Hippolytus* 428; Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* c. 425
	420	Aristophanes, *Birds* 414; *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazusae* 411	Euripides, *Trojan Women* 415
Athens surrenders to Sparta 404	**410**	Aristophanes, *Frogs* 405	Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 409; deaths of Euripides (spring) and Sophocles (autumn) 406
Socrates executed 399	**400**		
Gauls sack Rome 390; birth of Aristotle 384	**390**	Aristophanes, *Wealth* 388; death of Aristophanes c. 385	
	380		

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Historical events	BC	Comedy	Tragedy
	370		
Philip of Macedon crowned 359; birth of Alexander 356	**360**		
death of Plato 347	**350**	birth of Menander 342/341	
Philip assassinated, Alexander crowned 336	**340**		Aristotle's *Poetics* 335–323(?)
deaths of Alexander 323, Aristotle and Demosthenes 322	**330**	Menander's first play (*Orge*) 321?	
Demetrius of Phalerum 317–307	**320**	Menander, *Dyskolos* 316; *Samia* c. 320–310	
	310		
	300	death of Menander c. 292	
	290		birth of Livius Andronicus 290?
Rome at war with Pyrrhus 280–275	**280**		
1st Punic War 264–241	**270**		
	260		
	250		
	240		Livius' first Latin versions of Greek tragedy and comedy 240
	230		
2nd Punic War 218–202	**220**	Plautus' early plays c. 215–205	birth of Pacuvius 220
Hannibal defeated 202	**210**		death of Livius Andronicus 205?; Ennius' first tragedies c. 204
2nd Macedonian War 200–197	**200**	Plautus, *Stichus* 200; Plautus, *Pseudolus* 191	
	190	death of Plautus and birth of Terence c. 184	
3rd Macedonian War 172–168	**180**		

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Historical events	BC	Comedy	Tragedy
	170	Terence's six plays 166–160	birth of Accius 170; death of Ennius 169
	160	death of Terence 159?	

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