

DRAMA: COMEDY
ENG C27H

ENGLISH COMEDY AND THE COMEDY OF ENGLISH:
LANGUAGE, LAUGHTER, AND IDENTITY IN RENAISSANCE ENGLAND
MONDAY & WEDNESDAY 1:30-3:00
BV 516
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What is it . . . against law of hospitality, to jest at strangers
because they speak not English so well as we do? What do we learn?
Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, 1595

A sentence is but a cheveril glove to good wit.
How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!
Feste, *Twelfth Night*, 1601

The young people today,
they think comedy is dirty words. It's not. It's
words that *sound* dirty, like *mukluk*.
Krusty The Clown, *The Simpsons*

How does laughter help to shape a sense of community? What does laughing at the imperfect English of foreigners or “low” characters teach an audience about its “English” identity? Throughout the course we will explore Renaissance debates regarding the value of the English language together with questions about how the stage use of the English language shaped perceptions about cultural identity in the period. We will focus our attention primarily on English stage comedies from the Renaissance. We will consider how the stage played a role in determining what counted as English (whose speech rises to the level of the “King’s English” and what it means to “hack our English” tongue) in an era when English spelling, pronunciation, and vocabulary were very much in flux. Our discussions will also focus on how cultural stereotypes are deployed and contested through figures such as the clown, merchant, foreigner, pick pocket, scold, wife, and whore. In attending to puns, double entendre, metaphor, simile, malapropisms, and bawdy innuendo, we will explore various ways in which language creates the ambiguity that gives comedy the power to both construct and deconstruct social identities.

In order to tune our ears to jokes now 400 years old, we will begin by reading short philosophical reflections on laughter from antiquity through the Renaissance. In addition, we will consult Renaissance and modern English dictionaries, broadsides, and jest books, all of which shaped ideas about the English language and cultural identity in the Renaissance. Together we will explore the ways in which Renaissance comedy provides a window onto the questions about identity that were most difficult to resolve. Comedy could be festive, bawdy, funny, and joyous but it also encouraged audiences to be social skeptics, critics of the ordering systems (of language, class, ethnicity, and gender) that structured their everyday lives.

Goals


- * To develop an understanding of the many forms of dramatic comedy in the English Renaissance
- * To broaden knowledge of the history of the English language in theory and in dramatic performance
- * To practice exploring one text from different epistemological standpoints
- * To develop critical thinking and writing skills
- * To practice offering constructive criticism of others' academic writing
- * To explore a variety of kinds of historical and literary resources for reconstructing ideas of the past
- * To explore the intersections of language, gender, ethnicity, rank, and sexuality in "comic" literature

Class requirements include a final exam, one 8-10 page essay, regular response writing exercises (1-3 pages), and participation in a group presentation to the class and in workshop exercises. During class, you will be asked to engage in think-pair-share exercises, sharing responses to particular passages or questions. It is mandatory that you have your text with you for every class. This class will actively use Blackboard as a source for posting announcements, as a forum for group discussion, and as a space where you can read and download mandatory reading material. Therefore, it is a requirement of this class that you activate and use your utoronto.ca email account, as this is the account that links us all to our Blackboard class community.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

The following required books are available at the campus bookstore.

1. William Haughton, *Englishmen for my money, Or a woman will have her will*, Ed. Albert Croll Baugh (2007)
2. *The Roaring Girl and Other City Comedies*, Ed. James Knowles (Oxford World's Classics, 2008).
This text also contains the play, *The Shoemakers Holiday*, which we will be reading this term.
3. John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan* (The New Mermaids, 2007)
4. William Shakespeare's, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, Ed. Bruce R. Smith (Bedford St. Martin's, 2001)
5. William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill Levenson (Oxford World's Classics: the Oxford Shakespeare, 2008).
6. Ben Johnson, *Epicoene, Or the Silent Woman* (New Mermaids Edition, 2007)

In an attempt to reduce the cost of books for this course, I have posted many mandatory readings to Blackboard. **Always** print copies of the material posted to Blackboard and bring your copies with you to class. When readings are posted to Blackboard, you will see this  icon on the syllabus. Because we are attending so closely to the language on the page, it is absolutely necessary that you attend class with copies of the texts we are discussing that day.

GRADE DISTRIBUTION

Response Exercises	30%
In Class Participation	10%
Essay	25%
Final Exam	35%

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SYLLABUS

WEEK 1 GETTING THE JOKE: THEORIES OF LAUGHTER, AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

M 8 Introduction

W 10 ■ “Clowning and Laughter” in the Bedford *Twelfth Night* (pp. 357-58); Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (1st century C.E.) (pp. 358-61); “Theories of Laughter” (pp. 375-76); Plato, *Philebus* (5-4th century B.C.E) (pp. 376-80); Plato, *Republic* (5-4th century B.C.E) (pp 380-381); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (4th century B.C.E) (pp 382-383); Giovanni Della Casa, *Galeteo...or A Treatise of the Manners and Behaviors It Behooveth a Man to Use and Eschew* (1576) (pp. 384-85); Theories of Laughter: Incongruity (p 386); Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (1st century C.E.) (p 387-389); Theories of Laughter: Relief (p 389-90); Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter* (1579) (pp. 390-92); Theories of Laughter: Rejoicing (p 392-93); Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter* (1579) (pp 393-95); Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defense of Poesy* (1579-80) (pp. 395-97)

WEEK 2 ATTITUDES TO ENGLISH

M 15 **Due:** Response #1

Bring your copies of last Wednesday’s readings
In class group discussion & presentations

W 17 **Due:** Response #2

■ Jonathan Hope, Introduction to *Shakespeare and Language*, pp 1-13; David Crystal, Introduction & Chapter 12 “Early Modern English Preoccupations” in *The Stories of English* (2004) pp 285-306; George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” (1946).

WEEK 3 COMEDY OF THE CITY: FESTIVE CAPITALISM

M 22 Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday, Or The Gentle Craft* (1600)

W 24 **Due:** Response #3

Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday, Or The Gentle Craft* (1600)

WEEK 4 STAGING FOREIGNERS & ENGLISHMEN: ENGLAND’S EARLIEST “CITY COMEDY”

M 29 William Haughton, *Englishmen for My Money, or A Woman Will Have Her Will* (1598)

W 1 William Haughton, *Englishmen for My Money, or A Woman Will Have Her Will* (1598)

WEEK 5 COMEDY OF CONVERSIONS: TRANSVESTITE THEATRE

M 6 Bedford Introduction &

William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (1602)

W 8 **Due:** Response #4

Select readings from Bedford (TBA) &
William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (1602)

WEEK 6 COMIC CONCLUSIONS IN PERFORMANCE

M 13 Thanksgiving Break

W 15 William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (1602)

Week 7 COMEDY OF THE LONDON UNDERWORLD: CITY AS WUNDERKAMMER

M 20 Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl, or Moll Cutpurse* (1611)
Chapter 4, "Gender and Disguise" in the *Bedford Twelfth Night* (pages 237-239; 265-274)
Oxford Introduction "The Roaring Girl: the fantasticalist girl"

Optional Reading for those interested in theatre history: pp. 240-248.

W 22 **Due:** Response #5

Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl, or Moll Cutpurse* (1611)

WEEK 8 BANKSIDE BAWDY: CITIZENS, WIVES, AND WHORES

M 27 John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605)

W 29 John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605)

WEEK 9 "DICTIONARY" ENGLISH

M 3 **Due:** Response #6

📖 Online readings (TBA), including the Preface to Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabetical* (1604); selections from Thomas Dekker, *English Villanies...The Canter's Dictionary*; entries from *The Dictionary of American Slang*, and select terms from Gordon Williams' *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language*

W 5 CHARACTER TYPES

📖 Selections from Sir Thomas Overbury's *Characters*

See Blackboard for an announcement of which texts to bring to today's class.

WEEK 10 GENDERING THE TONGUE: SEXUALITY AND COURTSHIP IN COMEDY

M 10 Ben Johnson, *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* (1609)

W 12 **Due:** Essay (first draft)

Ben Johnson, *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* (1609)

WEEK 11 WORKSHOP WEEK

M 17 Groups

W 19 Groups

Week 12 "A MONGREL TRAGICOMEDY?": A COMEDY INSIDE OUT

M 24 **Due: Final Essay**

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1595-97)

W 26 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1595-97)

WEEK 13: WHAT IS RENAISSANCE COMEDY?

M 1 Themes Revisited

Final Exam Review