

Comedic Aims

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *This was written for Prof. Scott Shershow's class on comedy during the fall quarter of 2013. The assignment was to write a "Shavio-Socratic" dialogue—in the style of G.B. Shaw's monologuel conversation-heavy plays, and Socrates' actual dialogues—that incorporated any of the authors, theorists, or even characters that had been discussed over the course of the quarter. They were tasked with discussing the nature of comedy in general. Of course, it's a totally impossible task to try to guess what great figures—much less the characters they create—might think or say in such a debate—but I tried it anyway. I did my best to give each of the speakers the personality I thought fit him, at least based off what we know of them now. I can only hope I did them and their fascinating ideas—which brought me so many great hours of entertaining contemplation—justice.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *English 43 is a survey course about the idea of comedy and the experience of laughter, and we study a wide variety of different materials, including classical comic plays, selections from comic theory (from Plato to Freud), and even contemporary "stand-up" comedy. One of the course's themes is the elusiveness of comedy as an object. Is it possible to study comedy rigorously without robbing it of the very things that make it interesting — its unruliness, its license, its always-risky performance of social and psychic violence? As one option for the final paper, I invite the students to write a kind of philosophic dialogue, inspired loosely by the dialogues of Plato, in which two or more of the playwrights and philosophers we have read meet and debate about their plays and ideas. This unusual format sometimes paradoxically seems to help students write with a greater clarity and confidence than when they are simply expressing "themselves." For example, Mason Harper, in "Comedic Aims," imagines Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and others joining in a fantastic scholarly colloquy on the problem of comedy as "art." This fascinating dialogic meditation on the idea of comedy articulates a wide range of ideas and questions with astonishing concision, and sometimes even manages to be comic in itself.*

—Scott C. Shershow, Department of English

We arrive mid-discussion, at a meeting of historical comedic playwrights and theorists. Thomas Hobbes is giving his perspective on things (though it is, admittedly, not too well-received).

[THOMAS HOBBS] Well, just look at yourselves! Laughing at this poor man who by all rights might have just been imparted brain damage by that crazed clown and his stick! If that is what you call comedy, then I want none of it, and I should say it belongs nowhere in decent society. It is a base, vulgar expression of humanity's cruel side, and should be shunned by all those who claim to adhere to any semblance of the rules of propriety.

In general uprising, the rest of the assembly proceeds to throw whatever's close at hand towards Hobbes, until he is at last disheartened, and retreats, grumbling, back into his seat.

[GEORGE BERNARD SHAW] Aw, shut up, you! [*to everyone else*] Always the downer, that one. Why did we even invite him?

[SOMEONE IN CROWD] Maybe to keep us in check? Morally and whatnot...

[HENRI BERGSON] No, comedy keeps us in check by itself. It's like I said in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*: "Society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded... In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbor" (Bergson 2).

[SHAW] I'm not quite sure I get what you mean by that, Bergson. Since when does comedy correct anything? Wouldn't you say comedy is fairly *incorrect*?

[BERGSON] It is, and that's precisely the point. Comedy is incorrect, but by having us laugh at that incorrectness, it is essentially making clear to us how *not* to act in society. It aids in teaching us correctness for real life, by humiliating the incorrect on-stage.

[SHAW] But one must also consider the fact that whatever the virtues of comedy may be, it will always be partly defined by that vice of cruelty toward and derision of our fellow man. You have looked at that vice, and claimed it to be a bad example that the observer will acknowledge as such, and choose not to emulate. But what guarantee can you give that the observer *will*, in fact, acknowledge it as a bad example? What keeps us from *accepting* the cruelty?

[BERGSON] I feel confident putting my faith in the fact that comedy

is a purely human expression—and humans are naturally inclined to find the good in things. We lean towards the moral. That is what naturally pleases us. That’s partly why all comedies feature a happy ending. If the “bad guys” won out, and morality lost its never-ending struggle, then we would not be satisfied, and the comedy would end up being tragedy. Comedy *must* correct to the moral, just for the sake of retaining its title.

[SHAW] I agree that the ending of a comic play should be “happy.” But I take issue with giving “happy” such a strict definition. I find it an odd assumption that for an ending to be happy, it must end how it “should” end—that is, with the good winning out, the bad finding justice, and the moral fully expressing its dominance over the immoral. Because when does that ever actually happen in real life? It could be said that an observer of art gets the most out of it, when he can relate to it. So when does a person really have the opportunity to relate with the idyllic happy ending? Most of us never do.

[BERGSON] That doesn’t mean we can’t wish for it. I’d say that a large part of the appeal of comedy is that it gives us that type of idyllic moral ending we crave.

[SHAW] I’d argue that the average, everyday working man, a man who knows the cruelty of the real world all too well, and has been slowly hardened against it, would take real-world justice over a fake morality any day.

[BERGSON] But why would a hardened working man go to a *play* if he was looking for real-world justice? I would think the point would be to get away from that. For was it not the same justice that hardened him in the first place?

[SHAW] I can’t pretend to know what an observer wishes to get out of a play, and you can’t either. But it is a human instinct to find more significance in that which we can relate to, and very few humans have ever experienced a real “perfect” happy ending, with “good” and moral beating “bad” and immoral. So how could a happy ending be defined only as such? Real life doesn’t like absolutes, and morality is included in that. I’ll give you an example: the character Stephen, from my own play *Major Barbara*, was limited by his insistence of moral absolutes. In his mind, “Right is right; and wrong is wrong; and if a man cannot distinguish them properly, he is either a fool or a rascal: that’s all” (Shaw 9). But humans are not so simple as that. Morality cannot be given such strict definition; as Stephen’s father so aptly put it (if I do say so myself),

“There is only one true morality for every man; but every man has not the same true morality” (Shaw 20). Happiness (along with success, or morality, or any other judgment) can never be universally defined, and thus can never fit into a specific formula. By not realizing that fact, Stephen was never able to grow out of his “childish” close-mindedness, and so is an observer limited in his perception of a comic play if he accepts only the ending of a perfect world.

[BERGSON] When I speak of comedy as a social corrective, I’m not implying that all endings must be moral—or even socially acceptable! I am not so puritanical. In fact, the more immoral a comedy is the better! It will more clearly demonstrate for us what *not* to emulate.

[SHAW] But is your argument not just the same as the puritan’s, taken from a slightly less direct perspective? Are you not both arguing that the purpose of comedy is to, in the end, lead one towards morality?

[BERGSON] Well, what else would you have it lead us to?!

[SHAW] This is exactly what I’m trying to say! I see no need for comedy to be “moral” in the traditional sense at all: to “fight the good fight” and help the kids grow up right. I see comedy as more of a chance to escape such archaic expectations. Besides, by its very nature, comedy is less refined than other types of drama. Most theorists have agreed that comedy is, at least in part, about losing or releasing for a while the many piles of inhibitions that we acquire over a lifetime in modern society.

[ARISTOTLE, *yelling out half-asleep (he naps a lot these days, being quite old)*] Catharsis!

[SIGMUND FREUD, *not to let that go unanswered*] Cathexis!

[SHAW, *hurrying so as to reestablish his ownership of the floor before Aristotle and Freud start that stupid fight on terminology again*] Right. The comedic clearly has an affinity for the immoral and tendentious. So why would we always want our comedies turning out how society and morality *says* they should turn out? Yes, we take pleasure in justice—it’s a (rather encouraging) trait of humankind to want those who are good people to be rewarded against those who are not. But we also take pleasure in innocent misbehaviors and the daring of the rebel.

[OSCAR WILDE] I heartily agree. As long as it’s not too bad (which it generally never is in comedy), most people prove quite easily satisfied by wrongdoing; it’s a chance to release some of those pesky *moral* inhibitions they build up for the sake of society.

[BERGSON] But I am still skeptical of this claim that a comic play

need not return to the moral, at least by the end. Bergson over there is so ready to talk of the “hardened man of real life,” but I still cannot imagine that this victim of modern society would be so willing to accept the human vices that made him a victim in the first place. Wouldn’t a man who’s been beaten down by the selfish powers that be hope for a few *more* of those “pesky” moral inhibitions to be spread out unto the world?

[WILDE] I really don’t think so. Realistic people are all naturally cynical. They just allow themselves to be triumphant in their cynicism, in the face of a human nature which they more than likely figure cannot be remedied at this point. And it’s fun to do this because frankly it makes things easier. Constant judgment can be tough on a fellow, and society is a particularly hard grader. Sometimes it just feels good to not have to be so correct about everything all the time. And comedy is a guilt-free opportunity to be just that: incorrect. My play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a good example of this. The poor oppressed people who come to see it find so much pleasure in living vicariously through the characters and their extraordinary utility for illogic. When dear Cecily says to Algernon, “I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy” (*Earnest* 29), the people laugh in their seats, delighted by the nonsense that it is—but also perhaps relishing, for the moment, in the idea that the nonsense might not have to be nonsense at all. That maybe for a little bit, respectability could be suspended, and the wicked could be celebrated, while the good be called boring, as we all secretly know it to be. Comedy is not for society and all its judgments and moralities; comedy is for the people, whose eternal lot in life it is to deal with society. Poor old Jack and Algie used their bunburring as a means of escaping the suffocating restrictions of their society. They weren’t selfish—they were human. And comedy is just the same. Comedy is deeply interested in humanity; one might even say, it is *purely* human. In fact, you *did* say that, good Bergson. You have to agree with that aspect of it at least.

[BERGSON] I will allow that, on comedy being a human phenomenon, you are correct.

[WILDE] It is indeed. In so vulgar an age as this, we all need masks, and comedy is very convenient for the purpose.

[BERGSON, *eager to have his side of the story heard*] What you say is true, Wilde, but you and your characters’ apparent willingness to completely *embrace* wrongdoing I’d say is unusual, and sets a rather bad precedent.

[NICCOLÓ MACHIAVELLI] I am more wont to side with Wilde on that particular issue. Drawing from my own experience, I'd say that triumphant cynicism can even be *healthy* for the modern mind. My play, *La Mandragola*, was a product of my cynical phase—and I daresay it *was* quite liberating. Lucrezia's loss of purity, and success by corruption, was not meant to be an example of how not to live life; rather, I think it acts more as an example of how universally flawed we are, and how really there should be no shame in abandoning society's accepted morals, if it means we find satisfaction for ourselves and for others. I assure you, Signor Bergson, I would not have had my characters succeed, if I did not think their methods of achievement worthy of impartation.

[BERGSON] So would you say you created a utopian perspective on human nature, or an ultra-realistic one? Because you act like you've found a utopia, but to the rest of us it just looks like you're cynical to the point of having given up on principles.

[MACHIAVELLI] In asking that question, are you not just bringing up the subject of “happy endings” again? To you, and to many, it may appear like I just gave up trying to keep a moral standard for my characters, but, to me, I simply see a group of individuals who were able to overcome the needless inhibitions of society and find happiness in the process. In other words, what may appear ultra-realistic and cynical to you may be utopian to me. What counts as a happy ending for you very probably would not satisfy me, just as my happy ending seems totally perverted to you.

[WILDE, *quietly to Shaw*] Bernard, my dear man, your cannon maker seems to be winning the day so far.

[SHAW, *quietly back to Wilde*] He's a subtly sensible fellow, that Andrew Undershaft. And, needless to say, is immensely useful when it comes to disagreement between parties. Who needs God on their side, when they've got what that wicked man preaches?

[SHAKESPEARE] I like this idea of utopia and realistic ideology competing for dominance in the interpretation of comedy. I wholeheartedly agree that a happy ending depends on the perspective of the observer, so why not give him two options at once? [*Cheers from the assembly. The Bard is immensely respected by them all, and it's not hard to see why.*] It's so much the better if a comic play can simultaneously produce a triumphant cynic on one side and a skeptical moralist on the other. Or even a combination of both: a triumphant moralist and a skeptical cynic.

Why not? Our art knows not what moralities men adhere to, so let the men decide what morality our art reflects. My play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example, could be interpreted in a couple of different ways. The “taming” of Katherine from the “stark mad” (Shakespeare 1.1.69) shrew she was into an obedient, male-respecting woman, could be seen as a terribly bleak ideological observation of the gross reality of modern gender profiles. Or the convincing of that “[wonderfully] froward” (Shakespeare 1.1.69) young woman whom she would match perfectly with, and be happy married to, the equally wild Petruchio, could be seen as an immensely hopeful argument for the existence of “made-for-each-other” true love and a celebration of the community of human-kind.

[SOMEONE ELSE] Is there one interpretation you prefer over the other, Bill?

[SHAKESPEARE, *chuckling*] I daresay, it changes with my mood.

[SHAW] So it’s decided then: comedy shall stay true to its nature. No joke will ever satisfy everyone, and so no ending to a comic play will ever be able to conform to everyone’s definition of “happy.” All we can do is write something that is bound to satisfy *someone* and have the people decide for themselves whether it meets their standards or not.

[*General applause and cheers.*]

[BERGSON, *defensively, for he now feels like the crowd has definitively turned against him*] Well, I still don’t believe a play can truly be “triumphantly cynical.” All my life, all my experience, supports the fact that any observance of the incorrect simply acts to make us even more aware of what *is* correct in normal society. Regardless of any moment of cynicism one might experience, it all in the end reverts back to sensibility, and every moment of base pleasure we derive from the immoral is quickly acknowledged by our more proper natures to be an inappropriate approach to life’s challenges...So perhaps, your so-called triumphant cynicism actually does us a service: it helps us expel all our hidden evils and insecurities, and our rage against inhibition, and leave it in a place where it cannot hurt anyone, and can truly just be laughed at. [*Aristotle starts in his sleep next to Bergson, and moves as though he’s about to yell out his theories on how drama comes back home with the observer, but is promptly stifled by a firm punch from Bergson*] Comedy, perhaps more than any other genre, understands the word *play*.

[*Respectful applause for Bergson’s solidarity, and for his obvious devotion to comedy, however he may interpret it.*]

[WILDE, *who's got a last point he feels must be made*] That is an acceptable perspective to take—it is, after all, *your* version of a happy ending. But I cannot let rest the basis of your ideas. If comedy truly acts as the “social corrective” you speak of it as, then it would stand to reason that the acts of comic characters are specifically intended to be examples of what we should *not* do in real life; that we should disregard the perspectives of comic characters as fundamentally incorrect and improper. But I argue that this is an affront to comedy itself. We have no right to judge the actions of such characters so absolutely. It is not in the nature of the genre to be defined. *Comedy is a work of art*, and, as such, it does not inherently have any practical use, as a corrective, or as anything else.

[BERGSON] But *is* it art?

[WILDE] Why can't it be?

[BERGSON] Well—to comply with your definition of art—because comedy has usefulness. It is a social corrective. As I once said before, “comedy lies midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art is. By organizing laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment; it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature” (Bergson 6).

[WILDE, *now a man on a mission*] I'm afraid I must flatly refute that. Triumphant cynicism is not a social corrective. Nor is comedy itself. In fact, comedy in and of itself, contains no mechanism at all. Comedy *is* art because it *is* useless. I once said that “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (Gray 4). Triumphant cynicism is not inherently present in comedy; comedy does not directly lead us to triumphant cynicism. As art, it *cannot* lead a spectator in such a way. In truth, triumphant cynicism is only a spectator's possible *reaction* to a well-written comic play, and that reaction is wholly independent from the work itself. If you'll permit me to quote myself again, I have also made the point that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all” (Gray 3). If a comic play incites something within a spectator, it is simply evidence of a well-written play, evidence that it was beautiful enough for the spectator to find meaning in it (or perhaps invent meaning worthy of the play's beauty, as humans no doubt have trouble accepting beauty for beauty's sake. We have an incessant need to define things, and in such processes

we attempt to give meaning to meaningless things). But there is no useful significance in it inherently—just what significance the spectator gives to it. This is all because of what Shaw’s character said: morality is what each of us makes it, and it is unique to each of us. Comedy *cannot* be a social corrective, because it has no way of knowing what “morality” means to each of us individually, and so cannot purposely push us towards it. (And I have already made the point that there is no such thing as a universal morality). Comedy is art, and just as useless. Human minds, on the other hand, are not: they need their exercise. And as far as genres that may provide them opportunity for said exercise, comedy is a common path to run down. It contains areas that are usually obscured by our overgrown inhibitions, and at least gives us the *option* to explore them—which is more than most anything else in modern society can lay claim to.

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