Curtain raiser

When you were six you thought mistress meant to put your shoes on the wrong feet. Now you are older and know it can mean many things, but essentially it means to put your shoes on the wrong feet.

Lorrie Moore, ‘How to Be an Other Woman’ (1985)

What does comedy mean? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as ‘a stage-play of light and amusing character’, before conceding that the term extends to other kinds of ‘humorous invention’ as well as being used figuratively with regard to ‘action or incidents in real life’. The same widening of horizons occurs in the *Dictionary*’s definition of ‘the comic’: ‘the comic side of drama, of life, etc.’. The movement from ‘drama’ to ‘life’ to ‘etc.’ covers quite a bit of terrain, and the dictionary writers’ need for latitude has been shared by others. In Plato’s *Philebus*, Socrates speaks of comedy ‘not only on the stage, but on the greater stage of human life; and so in endless other cases’. Endless? Hardly a cheering prospect for those in search of a clear-cut definition. It almost sounds as though thinking about comedy or humour as categories may be some kind of category error. The cartoonist Saul Steinberg hinted as much: ‘trying to define humour is one of the definitions of humour’. Better, then, to come right out with it and say that comedy can mean many things, but essentially it means to put your shoes on the wrong feet.
Taxonomic tangles aside, comedy’s varied incarnations raise diverse but related sets of questions. One line of enquiry might focus on comedy as a theatrical and literary genre, and ask: What are the form’s main features? How has it retained consistency and changed over time? But taking into account the *OED*’s sense of comedy as a broader impulse at work and play in life, we could also ask: How can humour be used? When do we laugh, and why? What is it that speakers as well as writers enjoy—and risk—when they tell a joke, indulge in bathos, talk nonsense, or encourage irony? This book pursues both types of question. By the 19th century, after all, one proprietor of a Punch booth could note ruefully that ‘Everyone’s funny now-a-days, and they like the comic business.’ Funny business plies its trade across the boundaries between recognized, institutionalized forms of writing and more experimental, popular kinds of entertainment, so it’s helpful to think about comedy as a literary genre and as a range of non-literary phenomena, experiences, and events. This means focusing not only on the classics of comic drama, prose fiction, and poetry, but also on forms of pantomime, circus, comic opera, silent cinema, music hall, stand-up acts, rom-coms, and sketch shows. In addition, there are countless moments when comedy-as-performance breaks out off-stage—people tell witty anecdotes, play on words, do funny walks and impressions, and so on.

Given the topic’s range, this book will need to be a very fast as well as a very short introduction. Some orientation may be useful before the curtain goes up. Many guides to comedy try to get readers from A to B by offering a potted history of the dramatic form (from Aristophanes to Beckett), or by providing a run-through of theoretical perspectives (from Aristotle to Bakhtin). This introduction is not a history of comedy, although individual chapters are structured in a broadly chronological way to draw out a sense of how the mode has developed from the Greeks to the present. I occasionally succumb to the temptation to write things like ‘comedy relies on X’ or ‘the comic revels in Y’. This is not to say that comedy is held up as some kind of Eternal Principle rather
than as a historical phenomenon (what comedy has meant to different periods and cultures has varied). But whilst comedy takes shape in time, discernable ideas and patterns recur over time. I’m interested here in thinking about what might be termed the repertoires of comedy—with comedy conceived as an instinct that can exceed specified boundaries, as a container for expectations and surprises, and as a way of encountering the world.

The book is organized around a series of interrelated topics: beginnings, bodies, characters, plots, power, pain, and endings. My aim is to allow comic theory and practice to talk to one another, and to encourage comparisons between different periods and modes from high and low culture. The devil is in the comic detail, so I’ll be leading by examples, quoting quickly and often, trying whenever possible to let comedy tell its own story. Not that the examples are unrelated to precepts: certain people, scenes, moments, and styles are chosen and examined as representatives of larger debates. The case studies are meant to support (and test) the broader theories and generalizations.

A very short introduction should suit this subject. Brevity is the soul of wit. Buster Keaton told his father that a good comedy could be written on a penny postcard. Nothing worse than labouring a joke by explaining it, after all, because a joke—as the philosopher Theodor Lipps pointed out—always ‘says what it says . . . in too few words’. From the ridicule of Socrates in Aristophanes’s Clouds to the ribbing of the Crane brothers in Frasier, the comic imagination has frequently picked on intellectuals, hair-splitters, pedants, and other animals drawn to prolixity. Max Eastman rightly observed that ‘the correct explanation of a joke not only does not sound funny, but it does not sound like a correct explanation’. Still, if comedy deals in failures of intelligence then it should exercise ours; we can take comedy seriously without taking it solemnly. Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed that ‘a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes’. This is perhaps
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because jokes are one way of inviting us to think about what we know—and what we think we know. The surprise that accompanies getting a joke can prompt us to wonder about the expectations that were toyed with to get us there, and what these expectations may tell us about ourselves. Paolo Virno has recently argued that ‘Every joke puts into focus . . . the variety of alternatives that come forth in applying a norm.’ This in turn can encourage reflection on whether we want to inhabit or resist that norm.

It may be that rumours of comedy’s subversive, radical nature have been greatly exaggerated. Indeed, certain strands of Marxist thought see it as yet another opiate for the masses; Adorno and Horkheimer bemoan the Culture Industry’s use of jokes and comedy as a narcotic, lamenting how ‘it makes laughter the instrument of the fraud practised on happiness’. Some laughs can be like this, but not all. Besides, comedy is about more than jokes, and it needn’t always arouse laughter. Several forms of thought and expression that are not necessarily jokey or laugh-out-loud funny—vocabularies of ‘folly’, for instance, or ‘fertility’, or ‘the absurd’—seem to move within the orbit of comedy, and I’ll reflect on these relations and others along the way. For now, though, one opening hypothesis is that study of the comic involves a consideration of ‘that which is laughable’ (with the provisos that the ‘laughable’ may or may not lead to laughter, and that, if it does, this laughter can be hard to gauge).

In Anita Loos’s Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1925), when Lorelei Lee enjoys Piggie’s jokes—‘So then Piggie laughed very, very loud. So of course I laughed very, very loud and I told Piggie he was wonderful the way he could tell jokes’—it is delightfully uncertain whom, exactly, the joke is on. Is Lorelei laughing at Piggie, or are we laughing at her, or—last but not least—is the book laughing at us, coyly counselling against too knowing an attitude to the heroine? Sigmund Freud (or, rather, ‘Dr Froyd’, a man Lorelei will herself meet during her travels) suggests that ‘we scarcely ever know what it is we are laughing at in a joke, even though we can
settler it afterwards by analytic investigation’. More recently, the philosopher Ronald de Sousa has argued that, when it comes to laughter, analysis stops nowhere: ‘If we can answer the question “What did you intend by laughing?” then it was not genuine laughter.’ So perhaps an introduction to comedy should savour the pleasure of its subject by keeping questions open, even as it tries to tease out what the salient questions might be. When Federico Fellini was asked to comment on what his documentary-fantasy Clowns (1970) was getting at, he replied: ‘When I ask a good question, I don’t care about the answer.’