Comedy

This course is an introduction to the genre of comedy. It surveys examples of comedy across a long historical range—from classical Greece to contemporary America—and a breadth of media forms, including drama, novel, film, and stand-up. Among other questions, we’ll ask: why is comedy so difficult to define, despite its persistence across history and saturation of everyday life? Why is it often treated as less important or meaningful than other genres, like tragedy? If comedy is light entertainment, why is it so often the genre that most directly comments on politics? How can comedy be at once associated with the best and worst of living with people, of laughing at others and laughing with others?

Required Texts


You are required to buy the correct print editions of the texts listed above. Versions of the play that are online, for an e-reader, or published by a different company are not acceptable.

The total cost of the above editions on Amazon is currently $29.70, cheaper if you buy used. If you are looking for ways to lower costs, contact me and we can go over options.
Calendar

Week 1
1/8: Introduction

Week 2
1/15: Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* lines 1-705
1/17: *Lysistrata* 706-1320. In-class workshop for Paper 1

Week 3
1/24: Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” “Wife of Bath’s Tale”

Week 4
1/29: Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Act 1
1/31: *Midsummer* 2

Week 5
2/5: *Midsummer* 3-4
2/7: *Midsummer* 5

Week 6
2/12: Austen, *Northanger Abbey* 5-49

Week 7
2/19: *Northanger* 92-139. **Paper 2 and Journal due.**
2/21: *Northanger* 139-187

Week 8
2/26: Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times*
2/28: *Modern Times, I Love Lucy*

Week 9
3/5: Stanley Kubrick, *Doctor Strangelove*
3/7: *Strangelove*. In-class workshop for Paper 3.

Week 10
3/12: Sketch and Stand-Up: *Key & Peele, Portlandia*, selected stand-up comedy.
3/14: **Paper 3 and Journal due.**
Assignments

Attendance: Coming to class on time, ready for discussion, with the correct text is required. Missing more than three classes will result in your final grade being lowered by 2.5 points for each additional absence. Coming to class without the text or without having done the reading will count as an absence.

Discussion Questions: Once a week, you will submit a question about the day’s reading for discussion with the class. Along with the question, include 2-3 sentences explaining why this question interested you and/or how it relates to previous class conversations. Each submission must include at least one citation from the reading. At the beginning of the term, half the class will be assigned to Tuesdays, half to Thursdays. Submissions are due via Canvas by class time—late will not be accepted. You are allowed to miss three submissions without penalty. (10%) 

Commonplace Journal: Throughout the term, you will create a commonplace journal, a text file where you keep and collect quotations from the reading. Each week, you will add at least three entries. Entries should be organized alphabetically by topic, and you can make as many topics as you want at any point in the term. For each entry, include a sentence or two about how it fits the topic. Journals will be collected three times throughout the term. (15%) 

Paper One (1-2 pages plus quotations): At the beginning of the term, we will give over several influential theories of how comedy works. For this paper, you will choose one of those theories and, first, collect two quotations from Aristophanes’ Lysistrata that you think support it. Then, write two paragraphs explaining the theory to a reader and illustrating how it works through the examples you chose. Your paper should include pieces of the excerpts sandwiched in the middle of its own sentences—neither at the beginning or end. (15%) 

Paper Two (2-3 pages): Satire and irony are particularly complex features of comedy in that they never quite say what they mean. For this paper, you will write an analysis of one substantial passage from Arabian Nights, Canterbury Tales, Midsummer, or Northanger that uses satire and irony in relation to some social issue. You will answer the following questions: what is satire or irony doing here? What is it saying about the social issue that it portrays? Before writing your paper, you will bring to class a list of five possible thesis statements about the passage for a peer workshop. Your paper should include strong evidence from the passage. (25%) 

Paper Three (4-5 pages): Your final paper will address one or more of the big questions we have been raising throughout the term. Can comedy be serious business? What are its functions, powers, and possibilities? Why is it important? In answering these questions, you will draw on two texts we have read this term. Make sure to show both their similarities and differences in terms of the question you’re addressing. In addition, to help show the continuing relevance of comedy, please include either 1) a news article from the last five years, or 2) an experience from your life. More space should be given to our texts than the above—consider using it for an introduction and/or conclusion. (35%)
Policies

Accessibility: Please let me know if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center (formerly Disability Services) in 164 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu.

Advisory: Be aware that the material we read for this course can be disturbing in its treatment of sexuality and violence, and our discussions will cover these topics. If you feel you can’t participate in discussion around a particular issue or text, let me know and I will try to design alternative work.

English Language Learners: Anyone can succeed in this class whether or not English is their primary language. You will likely have some additional challenges: readings and papers will take longer to complete, participating in class discussion may be more intimidating. If you’re having trouble with participation, you can earn points by sharing your ideas in email or office hours. If you’re struggling with readings or papers, come to office hours and we can discuss. You should know that grammar, syntax, and spelling are a relatively minor part of paper grades. As with all students, I expect you to show care with your language, but your argument is what is most important.

Formatting Papers: Your assignments must be in twelve-point font, double-spaced, and have one-inch margins. Submitting assignments electronically is acceptable, but you need to use .doc(x) or .pdf format (not .pages or .odt). You can follow either MLA or Chicago guidelines for citations, but be consistent. Great guides to either format can be found at Purdue’s OWL website (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/). You are expected to proofread your work; too many errors will result in a small penalty to your grade.

Late Assignments: I give out extensions readily, but you need to ask in advance. Exceptions may be given for emergencies and other drastic situations. Late assignments are graded down half a letter grade per day late. Assignments are due at the beginning of class unless stated otherwise; assignments turned in after that will be considered a day late. Papers will be accepted in print, by email, or by Canvas.

Plagiarism: All work must be your own and written solely for this class. Plagiarism can be unintentional, so be careful and make sure you understand the rules. If you’re not certain, ask me. If you quote, paraphrase, or borrow ideas from an article, website, editor's note, friend, or any other outside source, you need to provide documentation. I encourage you to look at the library's guides for citing sources and avoiding plagiarism (https://library.uoregon.edu/citing). The same link will also allow you to access the university's official policy toward academic misconduct; you should read over the policy if you’re unclear on what counts as cheating or plagiarism.

If you're struggling with a paper, I encourage you to contact me. It’s better to submit a paper late, unfinished, or in poor quality than risk the penalties for plagiarizing.