**More about Comedy**

**First**, generalizations about Shakespearean comedy:

Comedy in Shakespeare’s time was defined largely by happy endings: reconciliation/recognition/reunion PLUS betrothal or marriage. These endings were usually inclusive of – i.e., happy for – all the characters on stage in the closing scene of the play. (Pay attention to who isn’t on stage at that point!) There were comedies, not by Shakespeare, that were more satiric; these were also less happy and less inclusive.

Sources of comedy tend to be fictional material – narrative romance, folktale, someone else’s comedy – set in the present. Again, satire is different; it’s usually based on true stories.

Plots of comedy begin with the introduction of disorder into orderly society, often in the form of discord between family members or friends but sometimes in the form of a character’s (apparent) death, deposition from power, or disinheritance. Plots proceed with complications that cause characters frustration. Happy endings come only when seemingly impossible or totally unexpected. Endings restore the same social order as at or just before the beginning of the play; relationships are re-established, challenges to the system are fitted into the system or are taken out of it, and new relationships are accepted, approved, and celebrated. Comedy is therefore essentially a conservative genre.

Themes of comedy are usually biological continuation of the species – that’s what marriage meant in Shakespeare’s time – and peaceful succession of power. If the disorder takes the form of a conflict between individuals who are peers (commonly, siblings), one will be in the right and the other in the wrong; the wrong one will need to change in order to restore their relationship. If there is conflict between old and young (commonly, parents v. marriageable children), the young must get what they want and the old must live with it. If a ruler has no male heir, he must either get married to someone who can bear one or get his daughter married to someone who will be a suitable successor to him.

The oldest and most persistent elements in comedy are disguise and song-and-dance.

Characters may be stock types, from whom we tend to keep our emotional distance so we can laugh at their troubles, or somewhat individualized versions of those types, with whom we can identify so we sympathize with their troubles.

Romantic comedy settings are Continental city-states, sometimes contrasted with the country estate or the forest outside the city walls; men rule in the city but women rule outside it, often disguised as men. Comedies that are farcical or semi-tragic tend not to leave town.

**Second**, closer looks at Shakespeare’s first ten comedies (all Elizabethan):

*The Comedy of Errors* has a farcical plot, based on a Roman play, with stereotypical male characters, sympathetic female characters, and comic servants.

*The Taming of the Shrew* has a farcical main plot, based on narrative fiction with sympathetic characters, and a romantic sub-plot, based on an Italian play, with stock types. The mismatch between the characters and their plots is one reason this play is difficult to interpret.

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a romantic comedy, based on narrative fiction, with stereotypical male characters, sympathetic female characters, and comic servants.

*Love’s Labor’s Lost* has a romantic main plot, partly based on recent events, with sympathetic characters, and a satiric sub-plot, based on an Italian play, with stock types.

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has no known sources; Theseus, Hippolyta, Oberon, and Titania occur elsewhere, but the legendary and elfin couples previously appeared in separate stories. It is a romantic comedy, with farcical complications caused by fairies and comic relief provided by craftsmen.

*The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic comedy with no known sources for its multiple plots and with sympathetic characters and comic servants.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a farce with no known sources for its farcical main plot, which features sympathetic characters, or its romantic sub-plot, which features stock types. This mismatch between characters and plots (and a major role for Falstaff) make this play interpretable in quite contrary ways.

*Much Ado about Nothing* is a romantic comedy in both its plots; the main plot, based on narrative fiction, and the sub-plot, with no known sources, have sympathetic characters and comic constables.

*As You Like It* is a romantic comedy, based on narrative fiction, with sympathetic characters and comic rustics. It also has both a fool (a simpleton who tells jokes) and a satirist (a wise man who is cynical).

*Twelfth Night* is a romantic comedy, with no known sources for either its main plot, with sympathetic characters, or its sub-plot, with comic knights and servants. It also has Malvolio, whose treatment evokes either laughter or sympathy, or both, sometimes despite production cues for only one response.

**Third**, contrasts between Elizabethan romantic comedies and Jacobean tragicomedies:

In romantic comedies, fathers’ prohibitions against the desires of young lovers (male and female) delay the happy ending, which includes marriage, which domesticates desire. These plays often feature a female lover disguised as a man who brings about the happy ending by revealing herself and giving herself to her male counterpart. in *All’s Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, the young have no parents, and problems stem mostly from male desire. But a man is also the solution: both plays include a male ruler who disguises himself and, revealed, assigns husbands to marriageable women.

**Fourth** – not at all necessary for your comprehension of Shakespeare – Greek and Roman comedy:

The Greek word for comedy was said by ancient Greek writers to come from kome, village, but modern scholars believe it to come from komos, revel. Everyone agrees it grew out of local festivals.

Old Comedy in 5th-century Athens is known best from works by Aristophanes, the only comic playwright who has complete plays surviving. We have 11 of them, but two are from the 4th century and look more like Middle Comedy. His chorus had 24 members and often gave their collective name to the play (i.e., in 8 of the 11 extant ones). The play itself had a prologue, entrance of chorus, dispute, address by chorus to audience, episodes separated by choral odes, and concluding revel or marriage or both. Plots were fantastic, but the setting was contemporary and prominent characters were often ridiculed. Much of the chorus’s address to the audience was likewise topical and satirical. Myths and deities were also treated with comic irreverence. Actors wore grotesque masks, a phallus for each male character, and exaggerated body parts. No limits seem to exist on words or actions to represent sex, excretion, etc.

Middle Comedy in early 4th-century Athens is again known mostly from Aristophanes’ last two extant works, the only ones surviving in their entirety. Freedom of speech having been lost in the political arena, the chorus ceased addressing the audience about contemporary topics and characters. Mockery of philosophy was often permitted, but not ridicule of citizens other than philosophers. Gradually, the chorus began losing its dramatic function, so that often it sang songs not even written for the play.

New Comedy in later 4th-century Athens is exemplified by only one complete play by Menander, but we know a few things about his other 100+ plays. There were five acts, separated by four choral interludes, and the plots were domestic. Details of everyday life were faithfully reflected in the play’s language and setting, but plot motifs were more romantic than daily life, turning on intrigues, mistaken identities, and recognitions that made all come right at the last moment. Characters were stock types, instantly known by their masks; types included cooks, courtesans, parasites, pimps, soldiers, angry old men, young men in love, clever slaves, etc. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is an excellent example.

Roman Comedy is known from works of Plautus and Terence. Some of Plautus’s plays are the oldest completely surviving literary works in Latin. His plays included three kinds of language: prose, spoken without music; verse, spoken with a flute accompaniment; and songs, as ornate as operatic arias can be. None of the characters were masked. There was no chorus. Plays were not divided into acts or scenes. However, there was otherwise much continuity between Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy.