Comedy: Literature, Film, Theory
Spring 2020
ENG 131a

Prof. Sherman
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office: Rabb 136
office hours: Thursdays 12:00-2:00 and by appt

Class Schedule:
M / W 2:00-3:20
Rabb 119

This course is an exploration of comedy as an enigma at the heart of social belonging, psychological coherence, and philosophical speculation. We will investigate the basic strangeness of laughter and compare comic literary and film genres in different historical periods as a way to ask: what is the nature of comic pleasure? How does comedy organize desire and make sense of suffering? How are communities regulated by comedy, and how is comedy involved in social freedom? How are basic philosophical questions about minds and bodies illuminated by comedy? In this course, we will approach the comedic as a defining element of human life in order to develop critical terms for understanding how it works and what it does.

As a four-credit course, it is based on the expectation that students will spend at least nine hours a week, in addition to class sessions, preparing for classes and completing assignments.

The learning objectives for this course include:
- an ability to compare prominent philosophical, psychological, anthropological, and rhetorical theories of comedy and humor, and to distinguish comedy from humor
- familiarity with several comedic genres in the history of literature and film
- analyzing comedic and humorous texts in order to explain how they produce their distinctive effects
- learning to describe the social functions of humor and theorize the political meaning of comedy
- writing / doing comedy and humor

Required Texts:
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (Hackett, trans. Ruden)
Paul Beatty, *The Sellout* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels* (Grove) *[Molloy, the first novel, is the only required reading]*
Plautus, *Amphitryon* (Johns Hopkins)
William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors* (Signet Classic)
Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (any edition)
Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* (Penguin Classics)

Class Policies and Requirements:
- Laptops may be used in class only for accessing relevant course materials on LATTE. If you use a laptop for other purposes (email, web browsing), you will be asked to leave the class and be considered absent for the day. Bring other materials (e.g., paper, pens) for taking notes. No ebooks.
- Use of cell phones in class for talking, texting or reading/writing email is prohibited. If you wish to leave your cell phone on in silent mode because of an ongoing emergency
situation that you may need to respond to, please speak to me at the start of class to let me know.

- Three unexcused absences lowers the final course grade by one plus/minus, and each additional absence by another plus/minus.
- Brandeis seeks to welcome and include all students. If you are a student who needs accommodations as outlined in an accommodations letter, please talk with me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as you can. I want to support you. In order to provide test accommodations, I need the letter more than 48 hours in advance. I want to provide your accommodations, but cannot do so retroactively. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Support (SAS) at 781-736-3470 or access@brandeis.edu.
- You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.

Grades and Assignments:
Final course grades are based on the total points earned from all assignments throughout the semester. The total number of points, for all assignments, is 100. Point values for each assignment are listed below.

Thoughts and Questions: These reading responses are due on LATTE the morning before class on days indicated (1/22, 1/27, 2/3, 2/10, 2/26, 3/11, 3/16, 3/23, 3/30, 4/6, 4/22). In a paragraph, explain your interest in or curiosity about some aspect of our assigned texts. How would you start a conversation about them? What about these texts do you find striking, challenging, significant? If there are two or more assigned texts for the day, please refer to at least two. These posts will often be used in class discussion, so please be prepared to discuss your thoughts and questions in class. Ten posts total, each worth 2 points. Full credit for thoughtful meditations that demonstrate careful reading, partial or no credit for underdeveloped posts. Note that there is an extra date for posting, as make-up or extra credit.

Stand-Up Blog: Two posts to class blog anytime during the semester before 4/27. Your posts should address a stand-up comedian you find worthwhile—funny, strange, powerful, surprising—or some general issue in stand-up that interests you. These posts can recommend particular performances or artists, as evaluative commentary, or offer interpretations about the meaning of stand-up performances. The main purpose of these blog posts is to introduce others to someone or something in stand-up that you think deserves consideration. Think of the blog as a useful class resource for exploring the world of stand-up. Posts should be a few paragraphs and can include images, clips, quotations, and further links. They can also respond to previous posts by classmates, as part of a conversation. 5 points each. Full credit for thoughtful discussions that
offer a vivid and knowledgeable sense of this stand-up topic, partial or no credit for underdeveloped posts.

**Theoretical Conversations 1 and 2:** Two comparative analyses of theoretical readings, 3-4 pages each. Questions tbd. Due 2/14 and 4/3. 10 points each.

**Satire Essay:** An essay on satirical techniques in Beatty, Swift, Adjei-Brenyah, and/or Saunders. Questions tbd. 5 pages. Due 3/20. 15 points.

**Comedy Piece:** A short story, dramatic piece, essay, memoir, fake document, satire or other kind of creative writing intended to make others laugh or otherwise feel pleasurable estrangement from what they take for granted. 5-10 pages, supplemented by an approx. 2-page critical reflection on your piece in which you use course readings, if appropriate, to describe what it is and how it works. Graded according to the comedic skill of the piece and nuance of the self-reflection. Note that comedy pieces will not be graded on some semblance of originality, so for this piece you should learn from the techniques of those on our syllabus, and you may in fact consider this assignment a kind of investigation into your understanding of the comedic techniques we’ve been reading. Proposal due 4/1. Final due 4/20. 15 points.

**Final Essay:** Topics to be assigned, primarily addressing Plautus, Shakespeare, Wilde, O’Connor, and Beckett. Approx. 5 pages. Due 10/16. 20 points.

**Schedule:**

M 1/13
Introduction

**Opening Anarchy**

W 1/15
Norman McLeod, dir., *Monkey Business*
Bob Black, “Theses on Groucho Marxism”

M 1/20: *No class in observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday *

W 1/22
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 1 Due*
Bakhtin, from *Rabelais and His World*, 1-29, 48
M. Lane Bruner, “Carnivalesque Protest and the Humorless State”
Vermin Supreme website: https://verminsupreme2020.com/

**Brief Interlude: Love, the Saddest Joke**

M 1/27
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 2 Due*
Tao Lin, “Love Is A Thing on Sale for More Money than There Exists,” “Sincerity”
Lorrie Moore, “Willing” and “Real Estate”
Weapons of the Weak
W 1/29
Aristophanes, Lysistrata

M 2/3
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 3 Due*
Charlie Chaplin, dir., City Lights
Baudelaire, “On the Essence of Laughter”

W 2/5
Wyndham Lewis, “The Meaning of the Wild Body”
Henri Bergson, Laughter
Mary Douglas, “Jokes”

M 2/10
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 4 Due*
Lenny Bruce, “The Carnegie Hall Concert”
John Limon, “InRage: A Lenny Bruce Joke and the Topography of Stand-Up,” from Stand-Up
Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America
Richard Pryor, “Bicentennial N-----”

W 2/12
Alenka Zupancic, “Another Turn of the Bergsonian Screw,” from The Odd One In: On Comedy
Dundes, from Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes, ch. 1, “The Dead
Baby Joke Cycle”

*Theoretical Conversation 1 Due on Friday 2/14. Happy Valentine’s Day*

2/17-2/21: no class for midterm recess

Satire and the Limits of Social Critique
M 2/24
Paul Beatty, The Sellout

W 2/26
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 5 Due*
Paul Beatty, The Sellout

M 3/2
Jonathan Swift, Gulliver’s Travels

W 3/4
Jonathan Swift, Gulliver’s Travels

M 3/9
Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*

**W 3/11**  
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 6 Due*  
Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* and “A Modest Proposal”

**M 3/16**  
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 7 Due*  

**W 3/18**  
George Saunders, “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” “CivilWar Land in Bad Decline,” “Pastoralia”

*Satire Essay Due on Friday 3/20*

**Mistakes of Identity / Identity as Mistake**  
**M 3/23**  
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 8 Due*  
Plautus, *Amphitryon*  
Northrop Frye, from *Anatomy of Criticism*, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy”

**W 3/25**  
William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*  
Mladen Dolar, “Comedy and Its Double”

**M 3/30**  
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 9 Due*  
Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*  
Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”

**Radical Estrangement and Other Amusements**  
**W 4/1**  
*Proposal for Comedy Piece Due*  
Brian Booker, “The Fourteen Stages of Tequila”  

*Theoretical Conversation 2 Due on Friday 4/3*

**M 4/6**  
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 10 Due*  
Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, chs. 8-14  
Niebuhr, “Humor and Faith”

4/8-4-16: no class for Passover break

**M 4/20**
*Comedy Piece Due*
Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, sec. 1

**W 4/22**
*Thoughts and Questions Posting 11 Due (Extra Credit)*
Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, sec. 2

**M 4/27**
Workshop

**Conclusion, or, The Punchline**
**W 4/29**
Olivia Wilde, dir., *Booksmart*

*Final Essay Due Monday 5/4, noon*