

## Comedy, Satire, and Laughter in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Britain

Instructor: Thomas Leonard-Roy (tleonardroy@g.harvard.edu)

What do people find funny? What are the ethics of comedy, laughter, and satire, and what are their social and political functions? What is the relationship between comedy and violence, misery, and cruelty? How have the forms and standards of comedy changed over time? In this course, we will address these questions by diving deep into the great age of British comedy and satire, the eighteenth century.

Now, in the digital age, we are witnessing a dizzying proliferation of comic forms, as well as urgent debates about the ethics of comedy and satire. Yet such phenomena and debates are not new. In this course, we'll explore an astonishing range of comic forms and theories of laughter in order to better understand the past and our current moment. We'll study comic novels, poetry, drama, ballad opera, and visual art, as well as more fugitive genres such as jestbooks and puppet shows. We will read these texts alongside critical and theoretical readings, including theories of laughter and jokes from Thomas Hobbes to Sigmund Freud, as well as exemplary social history and literary criticism. As we immerse ourselves in eighteenth-century comedy, we'll trace its roots in Aristophanes, François Rabelais, and Miguel de Cervantes, as well as its afterlife in recent adaptations and period films, including Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Favourite* (2018). This approach will allow us to think deeper about the multivalent history of comedy, including the comic origins of the European novel and the uneasy relationship between satire and sympathy.

**General goals of the junior tutorial:** The main goal of the junior tutorial is to introduce students to advanced literary study by reading primary texts alongside critical and theoretical works that adopt various methods and perspectives. Students will conduct their own research on a topic of their choice. The ultimate product of this research will be the critical essay. We will devote plenty of time to discussing sources, research practices, argumentation, and finding your own voice in critical writing.

**Goals of this tutorial:** By the end of this tutorial, students will be able to: discuss and write about the comedy and satire of eighteenth-century Britain across many genres, as well as the broader history of European comedy; interrogate the meaning and ethics of comedy and laughter using a range of influential theories;

and identify and discuss contemporary adaptations of eighteenth-century British comedy and satire.



William Hogarth, detail from *The Rake's Progress*, plate 3 (1735)

### **Required texts:**

Please buy, borrow, or rent the following editions, which are widely available (at Lamont, Widener, Harvard Book Store, Harvard Coop, Raven Used Books, Porter Square Books, or online). I will provide copies of other course texts.

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, trans. Sommerstein (Penguin)

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, and Sanditon*, ed.

Johnson (Oxford World's Classics)

Aphra Behn, *The Rover and Other Plays*, ed. Spencer (Oxford World's Classics)

Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, ed. Keymer and Wakely (Penguin)

John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera and Polly*, ed. Gladfelder (Oxford World's Classics)

Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, ed. Parnell and Jack (Oxford World's Classics)

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Rawson (Oxford World's Classics)

### **Assignments and grading:**

Short essay (5-7pp): 10%

*Due week 5*

Prospectus and annotated bibliography: 10%

*Due week 8*

First draft of critical essay: 10%

*Due week 10*

Second draft of critical essay: 10%	<i>Due week 12</i>
Final critical essay (20-25pp): 40%	<i>Due week 13</i>
Participation (including mini assignments): 20%	<i>Ongoing</i>

## **Schedule:**

### **Week 1. Introduction: How they laughed**

Jokes from *Joe Miller's Jests* and other jestbooks

Henry Fielding, preface to *Joseph Andrews*

Criticism and theory: Simon Dickie, "Introduction: The Unsentimental Eighteenth Century, 1740-70," from *Cruelty and Laughter*; Thomas Hobbes, from *Leviathan*; Sigmund Freud, from *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*

### **Week 2. Comedy and gender on the stage**

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

Aphra Behn, *The Feigned Courtesans* and *The Lucky Chance*

Criticism and theory: Earl of Shaftesbury, from *An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*; Francis Hutcheson, from *Reflections Upon Laughter*; Catherine Gallagher, "Who Was That Masked Woman? The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Comedies of Aphra Behn"

### **Week 3. The grammar of comedy: mock epic and visual satire**

Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

Visual satire by William Hogarth, James Gillray, and Thomas Rowlandson

Criticism and theory: Henri Bergson, from *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*; Vic Gatrell, from *City of Laughter*; David Francis Taylor, from *The Politics of Parody*

### **Week 4. Comedy and genre: burlesque, parody, and puppets**

John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*

Puppet opera by Martin Powell (d. 1725)

Yorgos Lanthimos (dir.), *The Favourite*

Criticism and theory: William Empson, from *Some Versions of Pastoral*; Toni-Lynn O'Shaughnessy, "Single Capacity in *The Beggar's Opera*"

### **Week 5. Library/Research Visit with Odile Harter (Dates TBA)**

**\*\*\* Short paper due \*\*\***

### **Week 6. Satire and the body politic**

François Rabelais, from *Gargantua and Pantagruel*

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*

Criticism and theory: Mikhail Bakhtin, from *Rabelais and His World* and "Epic and Novel"; George Orwell, "Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of *Gulliver's Travels*"

### **Week 7. The comic novel (1): comic form**

Miguel de Cervantes, from *Don Quixote*

Fielding, *Tom Jones*, Books 1-6

Criticism and theory: William Empson, "Tom Jones"; Nicholas Hudson, "Fielding's Hierarchy of Dialogue: 'Meta-response' and the Reader of *Tom Jones*"; Ian Watt, from *The Rise of the Novel*

### **Week 8. The comic novel (2): satire and the novel**

Fielding, *Tom Jones*, Books 7-12

Criticism and theory: Claude Rawson, from *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress*; Thomas Keymer, "Fielding's Satire and the Jestbook Tradition: The Case of Lord Justice Page"

**\*\*\* Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due\*\*\***

### **Week 9. The comic novel (3): historical, political, and gender contexts**

Fielding, *Tom Jones*, Books 13-18

Criticism and theory: Homer Obed Brown, "Tom Jones: The 'Bastard' of History"; John Allen Stevenson, from *The Real History of Tom Jones*; April London, "Controlling the Text: Women in *Tom Jones*"

### **Week 10. Satire and sentiment**

Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*

Sofia Coppola (dir.), *Marie Antoinette*

Criticism and theory: Robert Markley, "Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue"; John Mullan, from *Sentiment and Sociability*

**\*\*\* First draft due \*\*\***

### **Week 11. Austen, comedy, and adaptation**

Jane Austen, *Lady Susan*

Whit Stillman (dir.), *Love & Friendship*

Criticism and theory: Jill Heydt-Stevenson, from *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions*; Kathryn Sutherland, "Jane Austen and Invention of the Serious Modern Novel"

## **Week 12. Romanticism and the legacy of eighteenth-century comedy**

Lord Byron, extracts from *Don Juan*

Criticism and theory: recommend one piece of criticism or theory you've found during your research for the class to read.

**\*\*\* Second draft due \*\*\***

## **Week 13. Peer draft workshop**

**\*\*\* Final essay due Sunday, Dec. 8, 4pm \*\*\***

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*"

Collaboration: You are *absolutely encouraged* to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others' work. In individual assignments, academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Attendance: Your attendance in tutorial is necessary to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole; so is your attendance in Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. *Each student is allowed one unexcused absence.* Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the work we're doing together: 2 lates = 1 absence. If you have attenuating circumstances, please communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss how to deal with it.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by 11:59pm on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial.

Email: I'll use our course listserv to distribute important info throughout the semester — from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you'd like to use a non-Harvard email address.

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:** *“Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”*