

# Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse



# Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse

By

J. K. Lloyd Jones

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P U B L I S H I N G

Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse, by J. K. Lloyd Jones

This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-0486-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0486-8

For

PROFESSOR RALPH W. V. ELLIOTT

Only the emotion of love takes higher rank than the emotion of laughter.  
—Max Beerbohm, *And Even Now*

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## PREFACE

Thomas Hardy indicated in comments both written and spoken that he believed himself to be frequently misconstrued and misrepresented by critics. He specifically mentioned that the search for a consistent philosophical reading of his work was futile; that he was an artist, not a philosopher. In seeking to explain Hardy's works in terms of their philosophical meaning critics have not only at times misread them, they have failed to notice what forms of art Hardy was in fact working with. His use of the form of Greek tragedy has certainly been noticed and examined in detail, but his adoption of comedic devices (which equally derive from Greek antecedents) has been most often ignored, underrated, or compared unfavourably with his mastery of tragic themes.

This tendency to regard Hardy as a great tragic writer and to ignore or underestimate the value of his comic works is clearly one of the factors that led him to see himself as largely misunderstood as a writer. It derives no doubt in part from the sheer power of his tragical stories, which causes them to overshadow his other works. But it also derives from the fact that comedy as an art form has been consistently undervalued ever since Aristotle dealt with it so slightly and so slightly, and from the evident disinclination of some readers and commentators to allow an artist a wide scope and multiple voices.

*Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse* therefore offers a discussion of the nature of comedy and of the various theories that purport to explain or define it, together with an examination of Hardy's works in terms of the fundamental comedic forms of farce, humour, satire, and wit. It looks at where and why Hardy made use of these forms, what his historical sources were, and why this side of his work has been so frequently neglected. And it also looks at what insights might be offered by Hardy—both directly and indirectly—to answer the difficult but always tantalizing question: what is comedy?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the incomparable Professor Ralph Elliott for his extraordinary generosity in encouraging, sustaining, and guiding me throughout the writing of this book. His love of language and profound understanding of poetry and story make him an unforgettable and always inspiring teacher of literature. It was initially his idea that I write on the lighter side of Thomas Hardy, the side that saw literature as a means “Whereby gray things golden seem” (as Thomas Hardy puts it in his poem “On a Fine Morning”). Ralph’s own tremendous sense of fun and wonderful good humour contributed immeasurably towards making the project both enjoyable and worthwhile.

I am very much indebted to Professor Simon Haines for generously sharing his wealth of wisdom on matters both philosophical and literary, and for his careful guidance on structuring the book. His insights into the nature of comedy and the long tradition of comic writing encouraged me towards a deeper understanding of the relationship between art and thought and the delicate balance between these rival forces.

I wish to thank the School of Humanities within the Faculty of Arts at the Australian National University for providing a Visiting Fellowship over the course of this project, and I wish to express my deep appreciation to Jacqueline Lo, the Head of the School of Humanities at the ANU, for her assistance and kind encouragement, to Derek Allan, Paul Campbell, Livio Dobrez, Patricia Dobrez, Fred Langman, and Susan Tridgell for offering valuable advice on the manuscript, and to my family for their patience and constant thoughtfulness.

## NOTE ON TEXTS

The page numbers following quotations from Thomas Hardy's novels refer to the Penguin Classics edition, published by Penguin Books in London or Harmondsworth between 1985 and 1998.

The page numbers following quotations from Hardy's short stories refer to Norman Page's edition, *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Stories*, published in London by Dent in 1996. The abbreviation SS stands for Short Stories and refers to this edition.

The abbreviation *Life* refers to Florence Hardy's *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, originally published in two volumes in 1928 and 1930. The page numbers are for the edition published in London by Macmillan in 1973.

The numbers in brackets that appear after Hardy's poems refer to those used by James Gibson in his edition of *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, published in London by Macmillan in 1976.



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **A problem of mistaken identity**

A music critic has remarked on the relative neglect of an early Beethoven piano sonata in E flat major, suggesting that it is the “C minor” approach to life with which Beethoven has so often and so widely been associated that is responsible for the oversight.<sup>1</sup> And, indeed, the picture of a brooding Beethoven shaking his fist at fate and conventional society is deeply etched on the general consciousness: material that does not suit the image is more likely to be ignored than the image altered according to the evidence. Could it be, then, that the tendency to revere certain artists for their resplendently tragic themes leads to a predisposition for commentators (and, following them, everyone else) to overlook works that do not appear to sit easily in the same category?

It would seem that just such a pigeonholing factor is observable in approaches to the works of Thomas Hardy, whose reputation for being a writer devoted to melancholy and gloom has to a substantial degree eclipsed interest in those of his writings that are not tragic.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, little has been done by way of dispelling the not uncommon point of view that Hardy was never favoured by the comic muse. Ferdinand Mount sums up the popular perception of Hardy in a manner that is both succinct and vivid: “Alas, Hardy had about as much sense of humour as a milk churn”.<sup>3</sup>

But in *Thomas Hardy: Art and Thought*, Frank Pinion makes the observation that

much critical attention has been given to the more serious aspect of Hardy’s writings . . . . Yet his humour is considerable, as important as Fielding’s or George Eliot’s, or as Shakespeare’s, with which it has most in common.<sup>4</sup>

This is not the sort of view that may be expressed lightly, for it flies in the face of most received wisdom on the nature of Hardy’s works. That humour should be described as important at all in relation to Hardy is

something that many would find surprising. That the humour in Hardy's works should be deemed "as important as" that found in Fielding, Eliot, or Shakespeare is a proposition some might consider to be verging upon the outrageous. The popular perception of Hardy is of a writer who excelled in depicting misfortune and misery, albeit in a picturesquely rural setting. He is known most widely for his tragic love-stories, for his supposed pessimism, and for his tendency to describe the plight of individuals in the most desperately hopeless situations.

Of course, many readers do not have a broad knowledge of Hardy's works.<sup>5</sup> But critical attention has also tended to be limited in its range, being for the most part concentrated upon a certain sombre selection of the novels: *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*.<sup>6</sup> Few major works of criticism devoted to Hardy address the comic elements beyond a reference, often fleeting, to the supposed "comic relief" supplied by what is usually termed the "rustic chorus". The book by Pinion mentioned above has a short chapter entitled "Humour", and this is unusually excessive by the standards of most Hardy criticism.<sup>7</sup> "All but ignored by critics, laughter remains the least understood aspect of Hardy's writing", G. Glen Wickens claims in his recent book on *The Dynasts*,<sup>8</sup> and there is little reason to believe that this is overstating the case.<sup>9</sup>

Where Hardy's use of comedy in his works has not been ignored, it has sometimes been dismissed or even disapproved of.<sup>10</sup> For example, Irving Howe appears to condemn Hardy's notion of the presentation of comic characters, and the whole tradition that lies behind it, when he remarks:

Like too many nineteenth century English writers, which may really be a way of saying like Charles Dickens, Hardy assumed that if it was amusing to notice the idiosyncrasies of a character, it would be all the more amusing to notice them over and over again.<sup>11</sup>

At times it is as if Hardy is being reprimanded for presuming to encroach upon territory not deemed to be his own: in using comic material he has trespassed and therefore has to be summarily chastised for failing to conform to a contrived image of himself.<sup>12</sup>

That all of this should be so is not necessarily surprising: Hardy was a formidably powerful teller of tragic tales and, understandably, his strength in this area has riveted attention upon such unforgettably vivid characters as Tess, Jude, Sue, Henchard, Clym, and Eustacia and their heart-rending stories. Thus a very potent factor contributing towards the misunderstanding and relative neglect of Hardy's comic side is of his own doing. It is what Michael Millgate refers to as the "retrospective pall" created by the later

novels over the earlier ones. He describes how the unremitting grimness of *Jude the Obscure* has cast a shadow over even the lighter stories:

The apparently excessive suffering of Jude and Sue in the final chapters has caused difficulty to readers and critics alike, and has perhaps cast a kind of retrospective pall over earlier novels of Hardy's in which the outcome is in fact much less desperate and unrelieved.<sup>13</sup>

But without doubt there is much to amuse in Hardy's works: the distinctive wry tone of the narrator of the stories, the lovingly-depicted "crusted characters" among the rustics, the pompous or bungling clerics, the satirical and whimsical verses, and the farcical situations in the plots of some of the lesser-known novels and short stories.<sup>14</sup> These elements, it must be deduced, have a role to play in Hardy's work.<sup>15</sup> My intention here therefore is to highlight the lighter side of Hardy, the side that I believe has been less examined by critics,<sup>16</sup> the side to which it appears he himself was drawing attention both explicitly and implicitly.<sup>17</sup>

### **The type-casting effect**

Hardy was certainly aware that there was a predisposition amongst critics to overlook some of his works, to misinterpret his tone colourings, to misread his intentions, and to type-cast him in certain ways. All of this becomes clear from an examination of his "autobiography", his letters, and the prefaces he addresses to his readers and to posterity: it is a fairly constant theme.<sup>18</sup> For example, he writes in a letter to Robert Lynd: "For, alas, all feeling at being misrepresented is long past for one who has been misrepresented so much as I".<sup>19</sup> What does Hardy mean by claiming to be "misrepresented"?

A number of factors must have contributed towards this. Some of the misunderstanding he is referring to would have arisen because he was seen by some readers as a sort of miraculously gifted peasant who could write uncommonly well on pastoral themes as a result of being himself a rustic and therefore imbued with an insider's understanding of country ways.<sup>20</sup> According to this point of view, Hardy was very acceptable and entertaining as long as he kept to appropriate subjects, but needed to be reprimanded (or at best merely tolerated) when he ranged beyond the Wessex peasantry to the realm of civilization, high culture, art, and philosophy.

But evidence from his works, his notebooks, and *The Life of Thomas Hardy* reveals that Hardy was in fact prodigiously well-read and had met or corresponded with many of the leading writers and thinkers of his day.

His type-casting as an unreflecting rustic was completely inaccurate; but it was extraordinarily difficult for him to escape this stereotype, given his background and family history. Although he consciously tried to ignore it, this prejudicial attitude went very deep; and it seems to remain a fixture in the general reader's perception of Hardy even now. The knowledge that Hardy himself was born in the Wessex he describes seems to incline readers to confuse the author with one of his rustic characters. Pinion remarks that the comic rustics

owe something to the observation of a countryman who could regard local characters with keen humorous detachment after a period of absence in London, but much more to creative genius inspired by Shakespearian and Dickensian influences.<sup>21</sup>

It is "creative genius" that is left out of the equation by those who see Hardy as a merely descriptive writer who chose to depict rural life because it was what he knew best.

Misunderstanding also arose because there was a tendency among (perhaps other) readers to see Hardy primarily as a thinker rather than as a poet. Albert J. Guerard writes that Hardy's

qualities as a popular entertainer and writer of comedy have been submerged under a great deal of sombre theorizing about his philosophy; Hardy the thinker has overwhelmed Hardy the teller of tales.<sup>22</sup>

There is no doubt that Hardy was to some degree a man of his times—but he was also more than that, and frequently wrote in traditions much older than those his contemporaries were engaged in. David Cecil emphasizes Hardy's connections with earlier writers and with the drama, making the point that although Hardy was writing as a contemporary of George Eliot and Henry James, and was subject to many of the same intellectual influences as they were, "aesthetically he was a man of the past".<sup>23</sup> There is a certain atemporality about Hardy's art, and many of his themes and stylistic tendencies cannot be explained by reference to events, opinions, or literary practices current at the time.<sup>24</sup>

But another source of Hardy's belief that he had been "misrepresented" was the persistent view that he was exclusively given to writing in a tragic and pessimistic vein, despite the evidence (as he saw it) of frequent forays into a multiplicity of comic genres. So along with Hardy's frustration at being thought of as a "rustic", or as another George Eliot, went his frustration at being nailed as a thoroughgoing "pessimist". It was not that he was inclined to cleave to the simple-minded tenets of blind optimism,



but that the pessimism / optimism antithesis failed to do justice to the poetical point of view he held to; and this was not aggressively assertive, not doctrinaire, not judgemental, but contemplative and inclusive.

Many arguments have been made (both by Hardy himself and by critics and biographers) against the charge of pessimism.<sup>25</sup> But the label and image of tragedian remain. It is not however that this image needs to be expunged; rather that a more comprehensive picture of Hardy the writer would do justice to his comic side as well: comedy and tragedy are not mutually exclusive, but reinforce and complement one another.

### Redressing the balance

Hardy was not a literary critic; nor was he inclined to write lengthy aesthetic justifications of his works.<sup>26</sup> But he made a number of remarks in the course of his writing that are illuminating on the matter of poetics and the role of the comic in particular within this realm. The argument I wish to present is that the subjects of Hardy and Comedy are not simply related in the sense that a degree of the latter can be found in the works of the former; but that the two are interrelated and able to elucidate one another: certain statements and literary practices of Hardy's reveal an attitude towards the comic which throws light upon that fascinating but problematic area of aesthetics where theories of comedy are to be found.<sup>27</sup> These observations of Hardy's are at times explicit, but are more often cryptically or poetically phrased, and will be noted from time to time as they arise and as they have bearing upon the various forms of comedy under discussion. Perhaps the most significant to the present argument is the following:

As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind (*Life*, 153).<sup>28</sup>

This passage is interesting on a number of levels. Hardy is here claiming for himself the right to deal with tragic material if that is what his mind perceives (and very often, clearly, that was what it did perceive); to follow his own "idiosyncratic mode of regard".<sup>29</sup> But conversely (and because every virtue is the other side of a vice), the statement can also be applied to critics, who, in examining a writer's works will be likely to follow a particular colour in the carpet—that is, to find what they are

looking for, but perhaps ignore another colour, and therefore be unable to perceive the full pattern that can only be seen through observing the interplay of a number of colours. Such has always been the tendency of criticism: to follow the single line as far as it will go—like Gabriel's dog in *Far From the Madding Crowd* who, knowing it is good to chase a sheep, thinks how much better to chase the whole flock over the cliff:

another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion, and attempt perfectly consistent conduct in a world made up so largely of compromise (87),

as the narrator of that story observes.

My aim in *Thomas Hardy and the Comic Muse* is to examine the comic elements in Hardy's works—his novels, short stories, and poetry—and to use this examination as an opportunity to see more deeply into the nature of comedy.<sup>30</sup> The two subjects, comedy and Hardy, are mutually enlightening and it is not my intention to privilege one over the other in terms of importance.<sup>31</sup> Chapter Two, therefore, is on theory of comedy: here is provided an analysis of the nature of comedy, of the relationship of the different comedic forms to one another, and of the various impetuses from which those forms derive.<sup>32</sup> The next four chapters deal with the comic forms of farce, humour, satire, and wit.<sup>33</sup> Each chapter starts with further discussion of the particular form of comedy with which that chapter is engaged, followed by examples and discussion of Hardy's use of that form. The poetry is discussed in a chapter of its own, primarily because form was not for Hardy an accidental attribute of a piece of writing, but quintessentially important: poetry is doing something very different to prose—it uses language differently, its relationship to meaning is different, and its engagement with the reader is on another level to narrative prose. The conclusion looks at the implications for the nature of the relationship of comedy and tragedy that arise from this investigation of Hardy's not infrequent forays into the realm of *Thalia*, the comic muse.

## CHAPTER TWO

### COMEDY

*The true artist in tragedy is an artist in comedy also*

#### **The problem of comedy**

“Comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers”, says Samuel Johnson.<sup>1</sup> And many other writers have counselled against what they regard as the vain and deluded practice of writing on the topic of comedy—almost invariably as a preface to doing just that.<sup>2</sup> Morton Gurewitsch, in *Comedy: The Irrational Vision*, warns that it is “hazardous to declare that comedy has a single meaning”.<sup>3</sup> William J. Martz begins his book on Shakespeare’s comedies with a caution: “There is a sense in which to try to define ‘comic point of view’ is to try to define the indefinable”.<sup>4</sup> And Edward Galligan prefaces his work on the comic vision with the statement:

Like everyone else who has ever written about comedy I have had trouble with terms since the minute I started working on the subject. By its nature the subject will not yield to clear, precise terminology . . . . Comedy distrusts assertions and explanations and delights in gestures.<sup>5</sup>

F. H. Buckley goes further and argues that “there cannot be a rational theory of comedy”.<sup>6</sup> Nor can there be an amusing one, according to Maurice Charney, who, in *Comedy High and Low*, declares that theory of comedy is “a subject that is neither entertaining nor comic in itself”.<sup>7</sup> And James K. Feibleman, in *In Praise of Comedy*, goes a long way towards explaining this unfortunate state of affairs when he writes that “the analysis of comedy can no more be funny than the analysis of water can be wet”.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the comic urge, however difficult to pin down or define appropriately, is older than civilization, and it defines us, whether or not we can or will define the comic: as Walter Nash points out in *The Language of Humour*, “Together with the power of speech, the

mathematical gift, the gripping thumb, the ability to make tools, humour is a specifying characteristic of humanity".<sup>9</sup> And so the commentators, having cautioned sagely against attempts at defining the comic, then rashly present their definitions—some startling, some circumspect, some contradictory. It does not do, however, to be too critical of the critics in this area, for their caginess, imprecision, and contradictions point to the problematical fact that there can never be unanimous agreement on what is comical—in the sense of funny or amusing—because an individual's temperament and experiences will to such a large degree colour his responses and interpretations. And, as word has it, the shortest way to make an enemy is to tell someone that he has no sense of humour: he will not forgive you and, what is more, he will not believe you.<sup>10</sup> That which we term the sense of humour—an appreciation of the comic spirit—is so bound up with a sense of self as to be inextricable. How often does one hear anyone claim to be themselves entirely lacking in a sense of humour? But already the terms "comedy" and "humour" are becoming entangled; and it is one of the purposes of this chapter to disentangle them.

A problem for those seeking to apply definitions to words used in theory of comedy is that many of the terms are in general usage and are capable of sustaining very broad meanings.<sup>11</sup> In everyday parlance, "comedy", "humour", "satire", "wit", and "farce" are frequently used as if some or all of these were interchangeable. Even in scholarly works addressing the subject of the nature of comedy one often finds such words used as vague synonyms for each other.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately there is no agreement on meanings even amongst those writers who attempt to apply such terms technically and to tease out the discrete categories. The involvement of various disciplines—psychology, anthropology, physiology, philosophy, and literary criticism all claim interest in the territory—again causes confusion: terms are appropriated to suit certain agenda and may be misconstrued in cross-disciplinary usage.

The adjectives "comical" and "comic" are also often applied without distinction. It is useful, however, to distinguish between the two in the following way: "comical" means "funny; causing laughter"; the primary meaning of "comic" is "of, or in the style of, comedy", that is, it refers to material related to the literary form of comedy and ultimately deriving from the dramatic tradition of that name.<sup>13</sup> The difference is important, for, in a literary context, the word "comic" (or, as an alternative, "comedic")<sup>14</sup> is meant to bring to mind an entire tradition with a history going back thousands of years; this is not always the same thing as whatever is simply laughable.

Laughter and comedy are often found together, but the presence of one does not automatically indicate the presence of the other. George Meredith describes the relationship between the two—between the comical and the comic—as conditional rather than absolute. Emphasizing the civilizing aspect of comedy over and above its propensity to amuse and provoke laughter, he writes: “One excellent test of the civilization of a country . . . I take to be the flourishing of the Comic idea and Comedy; and the test of true Comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter”.<sup>15</sup> Also on the subject of the imperfect correspondence between comedy and laughter, Elder Olson comments:

The comic function is less one of producing laughter than one of producing a lightheartedness and gaiety with which laughter is associated. . . . [I]t involves achieving a state of mind in which we can view human frailties with smiling indulgence.<sup>16</sup>

Paul H. Grawe, too, wishes to separate the idea of comedy from whatever provokes laughter. He sees the source of the problem to be Aristotle, to whom he is referring when he writes:

Unfortunately, this quick, subconscious identification of the comedic with the laughable or some sub-category of the laughable—the ridiculous or the ludicrous—is an almost universal mistake in the criticism of comedy, a criticism that has made little progress in the last twenty-three hundred years in understanding comedic art.<sup>17</sup>

Laughter itself has of course been the subject of much serious speculation by philosophers.<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hobbes defines laughter as a “sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly”.<sup>19</sup> Kant explains laughter as “an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing”.<sup>20</sup> And Schopenhauer defines it as “simply the sudden perception of incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation”.<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, claims the comic<sup>22</sup> “arises in the first instance as an unintended discovery derived from human social relations. It is found in people—in their movements, forms, actions and traits of character”.<sup>23</sup> The French philosopher Henri Bergson, in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, describes the comic as “something mechanical encrusted on the living”.<sup>24</sup> He says:

The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. . . . Several have defined man as “an animal which laughs.” They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at.<sup>25</sup>

Arthur Koestler takes Bergson’s theory of the comic, elaborates upon it, and arrives at a broader and more encompassing theory, arguing that the source of the comic is in the “bisociation” of ideas:

[Bergson’s] explanation of the comic as a contrast between man as a spiritual being and man as a machine is merely one of the numerous possible variations of the bisociation of two behaviour patterns, or of any two operative fields.<sup>26</sup>

The emphasis in the writings of Freud, Bergson, and Koestler is, to a considerable extent, on the individual’s response to the comical (that is, that which is amusing). But some philosophers and anthropologists have preferred to concentrate on the comic as a specific and formal social phenomenon, concerning themselves with the elements of comedy that derive ultimately from certain customs, religious ceremonies, and taboos, and relating these across cultures and across time. The philosopher Susanne Langer, for example, emphasizes the celebratory nature of comedy, its relevance to festivals and fertility rites, and its “human life-feeling”: “The same impulse that drove people, even in prehistoric times, to enact fertility rites and celebrate all phases of their biological existence, sustains their eternal interest in comedy.”<sup>27</sup>

But while philosophers and specialists from fields such as psychology and anthropology do much to illuminate the nature of the comical, when it comes to a discussion of the comedic in literature it is also important to examine the thoughts of those writing specifically about literature. Writers approaching the subject from a scientific or speculative angle are sometimes looking more at the actual manifestation of the comical in everyday life: practical jokes, eccentric characters, and the enigma of laughter come within their ambit. But literature deals with these matters at one remove—at arm’s length and embodied in an artistic framework that distinctly separates them from reality. And literature is concerned with constructs—the formulae that carry with them a history and tradition governing the appropriate responses to particular literary practices. Many such constructs have been passed on, in original or transmuted form, from the Greeks down to the present day. It is pertinent, then, to look in

particular at how comedy has been defined by writers and literary commentators, and this will be done in the following sections of this chapter, as well as in later chapters.

## Comedy and tragedy

Hugh Walpole said, famously, “This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel”. And it is not uncommon for discussion of the term “comedy” to lead to comparisons with tragedy. This may be owing to Aristotle, whose brief definition of the comic is found buried in amongst his very much longer and more detailed analysis of tragedy. Aristotle, in the few words we have of his extant on the subject of comedy, manages to be rather slighting of the genre as a whole, describing the characters involved as inferior.<sup>28</sup> He writes that comedy is

an imitation of characters of a lower type, not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous is merely a subdivision of the ugly. It may be defined as a defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive.<sup>29</sup>

As Robert M. Torrance remarks, “Aristotle’s indelible contribution . . . was to associate the comic with the trivial”.<sup>30</sup> And Grawe comments:

Given the tenor of Aristotle’s brief remarks in *The Poetics*, it is probably just as well, or better for comedy that Aristotle never wrote the separate work on comedy that he promised or that his comedic discourse has been lost.<sup>31</sup>

Since getting off on the wrong foot, so to speak, with Aristotle, comedy has never really been able to present itself as anything but a poor relation of the magnificent art of Tragedy. “Comedy of all kinds has traditionally been placed lower than tragedy”, as T. G. A. Nelson says in *Comedy: An Introduction to Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema*.<sup>32</sup> This situation remains, despite the attempts of many writers to reinstate comedy as equal to, complementing, or even in some instances, superior to, its more prestigious cousin, tragedy. It sometimes seems to have been forgotten that at the end of the *Symposium* Plato has Socrates say: “the genius of comedy [is] the same with that of tragedy, and the true artist in tragedy [is] an artist in comedy also”.<sup>33</sup>

There is a feeling that opposites help to define each other; but are comedy and tragedy really opposites? The terms originally related to Greek religious rites and to the dramatic performances conducted before the priests of Dionysus. The ancient Greek idea that a comedy should

follow three tragedies as the culminating point of a cycle of plays suggests that the genres should be seen not as opposites, nor as co-existent but largely unrelated forms, but as complementary components of a greater whole, a larger vision. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes:

In antique culture tragedy did not exclude the laughing aspect of life and coexisted with it. The tragic trilogy was followed by the satyric drama which complemented it on the comic level. Antique tragedy did not fear laughter and parody and even demanded it as a corrective and a complement.<sup>34</sup>

Joseph Campbell also emphasizes the symbiotic relationship of tragedy and comedy:

Tragedy is the shattering of the forms and of our attachment to the forms; comedy, the wild and careless, inexhaustible joy of life invincible. Thus the two are the terms of a single mythological theme and experience which includes them both . . . the down-going and the up-coming (*kathodos* and *anodos*), which together constitute the totality of the revelation that is life.<sup>35</sup>

He regards tragedy as merely comedy forestalled—the greater picture shows resurrection following the tragedy of the dying god or hero. Northrop Frye describes this pattern as present in both the Greek and Christian portrayals of cosmic truth:

The Aeschylean trilogy proceeds to the comic satyr-play, which is said to have affinities with Spring festivals. Christianity, too, sees tragedy as an episode in the divine comedy, the larger scheme of redemption and resurrection.<sup>36</sup>

A number of writers on the subject believe tragedy to be impossible in the present age. Walter Kerr, for example, writes:

Essentially, man has come to see himself not as free but as determined, not as mover but as moved, not as demigod earning his own epiphany through pain but as a blind fungus inching its directionless way—unless death and silence be a direction—over the face of the earth.<sup>37</sup>

He sees that comedy

owes everything to tragedy, both the original gift of a thing to be parodied and also the only ultimate promise of a new state of being in which all



private exasperations and secret despairs will be melted away in the annealing passage through time and space.<sup>38</sup>

Kerr, in this beautiful, somewhat enigmatic description, chooses to define comedy specifically in relation to tragedy, even while proclaiming tragedy to be extinct. He regards comedy as a temporary stand-in for tragedy: “The clown . . . stands horror on its head to keep us tolerably happy against the day when tragedy will look horror straight in the eye and stare it down”.<sup>39</sup> But Charney, arguing against this view that deems comedy to be inferior to tragedy—even in the absence of the latter—asserts that comedy needs no apology:

It is unfashionable, and perhaps even unsporting, to insist that comedy is separate from tragedy and to resist the proposition that all comedy aspires to the condition of tragedy. We must reject the glib assumption that comedy is a lesser form of art and experience that somehow needs to be ennobled and completed by tragedy.<sup>40</sup>

David L. Hirst, in contrasting the two forms, maintains that comedy is the more “serious”:

Tragedy plays on our emotions, it involves us and demands our sympathy for the protagonist; comedy appeals to our intellect, we observe critically and laugh at the victim. Yet comedy may be considered the more serious of the two because it has a greater power to disturb the audience’s conventional attitudes, whereas tragedy—certainly as justified by Aristotle—purifies, leaving us, in Milton’s phrase, “calm of mind, all passion spent”.<sup>41</sup>

And Campbell envisions comedy in a triumphal role as the “transcendence of the universal tragedy of man”.<sup>42</sup> In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* he demonstrates how a Jungian understanding of psychology can be used to relate stories of myth and folklore to the realm of dreams and the unconscious. In mystical terms he describes comedy as greater than tragedy, as an ultimate consummation offering the fulfilment of all promises:

[The] sober, modern Occidental judgment [that fairy-tales and tales of heaven are for children and the very old] is founded on a total misunderstanding of the realities depicted in the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedies of redemption. These, in the ancient world, were regarded as of a higher rank than tragedy, of a deeper truth, of a more difficult realization, of a sounder structure, and of a revelation more

complete. . . . The happy ending . . . is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of man.<sup>43</sup>

The belief that comedy is able not just to complement tragedy, but in the end to comprehend and transcend it is a more difficult position to sustain (tragedy, after all has all the props and costumes, the associations with grandeur and grandiloquence); nevertheless—even if for no other reason than this very difficulty—it is the more interesting position.

There is clearly a strong tendency to define comedy by invoking its special relationship to tragedy—possibly in the hope that some of tragedy's *gravitas* will lend a modicum of respectability to the delinquent and improper comedy. But the relationship of comedy to tragedy is not simply one of contrast; there are likenesses as well. Willard Smith makes the claim that “comedy, like tragedy, is *character in action*”.<sup>44</sup> Nelson also stresses the point of similarity: “reversal of fortune . . . is as necessary in comedy, which traditionally moves from a situation of difficulty to one where difficulty is overcome, as in tragedy”.<sup>45</sup>

Nor are the two genres mutually exclusive; the scenes of comic relief in Shakespeare's greatest tragedies are well known: the fool in *King Lear*, the gatekeeper in *Macbeth*, the gravediggers in *Hamlet*.<sup>46</sup> But it is more or less agreed that tragedies differ from comedies most consistently (but not by any means always) in the matter of outcomes: as Byron says in *Don Juan*, “All tragedies are finished by a death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage”. This is clearly meant to be an extreme simplification—and it has of course, in the context of this great satirical poem, a waggish and ironical tone; but it is very broadly true of the two genres.<sup>47</sup>

Comedy should present an individual or a group in turmoil or at least with a problem, and by the ending that problem should be (mostly) resolved, to the satisfaction of (nearly) everyone, and with appropriate revelry and merry-making. As Grawe puts it, “Comedy's basic message is that the human race will survive, that it is destined to carry on”.<sup>48</sup> This is particularly true of romantic comedy, which, since the time of Menander, has presented the problem of a young man pining for a certain young woman (although sometimes the situation is reversed). The winning of the beloved is only achieved after a variety of tests and disappointments have been endured, and the surly objections of fathers and other elderly establishment-figures discredited and dismissed.<sup>49</sup> The final celebrations are then of course in the form of a wedding ceremony and the feast and dancing that follow.

A graph depicting the fortunes of the hero of a comedy would show a wavering but ultimately ascending line; that for the tragic hero would show a line of inexorable descent. The hero of a tragedy begins usually in

a position of power—sometimes a position of immense power and wealth, such as that of a king; but the ending of a tragedy is catastrophic for the hero, and sometimes for whole nations. And there is no hope. George Steiner remarks that the promise of heavenly reward and an afterlife is anathema to tragedy: “where there is compensation, there is justice, not tragedy”<sup>50</sup> Frye sees that there is almost a retrospective type of compensation in the tragic hero’s story:

The tragic hero has normally had an extraordinary, often a nearly divine, destiny almost within his grasp, and the glory of that original vision never quite fades out of tragedy. . . . [W]hile catastrophe is the normal end of tragedy, this is balanced by an equally significant original greatness, a paradise lost.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, despite their apparently contrasting natures and divergent outcomes, tragedy and comedy—tears and laughter—have an overarching commonality, in that they both touch on the peculiar disparity between the world as we find it and the world as we would have it to be. As William Hazlitt says: “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be”.<sup>52</sup>

## Comic characters

The hallmark of tragedy is character development: the tragic hero or heroine (Oedipus or Medea, for example) must be brought to the point of being able to look fully at themselves, at the truth, and at the unbearable consequences of irremediable past actions. This understanding or insight, which the Greeks called *anagnorisis*, is won dearly and changes forever the nature of the protagonist. Lothar Fietz describes this process of winning at the same time as losing: “the hero moves from ignorance to knowledge at the moment of his downfall, and in defeat gains wisdom”.<sup>53</sup> Thus there is a certain type of triumph in despair; but it can only be achieved in tragedy by the descent of the fortunes of the tragic protagonist, by change to his circumstances: a story comprising a series of misfortunes visited upon an already unlucky man would be unlikely to make a tragedy. The tragic hero confronts drastic change in his circumstances and in his relationship with himself: comfort and complacency are never to be his lot.

The comic character, however, is not necessarily required to show any development or to achieve any degree of self-awareness at all; indeed, his static and obtuse insistence upon being always inflexibly the same, even in the face of the various and surprising predicaments he meets, is in itself

frequently the grounds for amusement. Shakespeare's Sir Andrew Aguecheek and P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster provide convenient examples of this comic type.<sup>54</sup>

It should be recognized that the use of character types in comedy is deliberate and not in any way an inadequacy of the form. S. H. Butcher writes that "in respect of character-drawing, [comedy's] usual method . . . is to embody a dominant characteristic or a leading passion, so that the single attribute becomes the man".<sup>55</sup> He continues:

A character so created, exhibiting an ideal of covetousness, misanthropy, or whatever the quality may be, almost of necessity runs to caricature. . . . The single quality, which in nature is organically related to other impulses and powers, is isolated and exaggerated. The process is one of abstraction . . . Even Molière portrays abstract qualities rather than living men.<sup>56</sup>

And Charney asserts uncompromisingly that

comedy deals in stereotypes rather than fully-rounded, three-dimensional, living characters, just as much of social life is conducted by stereotypes rather than by a fresh, objective appraisal of each situation as it arises.<sup>57</sup>

Terms such as "stereotype", "two-dimensional", and "caricature" are often used by critics in a derogatory sense; there is an implication that such characters so described are deficiently drawn. But it must be remembered that it may be the intention of the writer of comedy<sup>58</sup>—in contrast to the writer of tragedy—to present the type rather than the individual; and an apple should not be criticized for failing to be a pear.

The carefully-drawn tragic figure, such as Lear or Hamlet, shows depth and conflicting, intertwining characteristics that can never entirely be teased out; but the comic character is most often repetitive and easily pigeon-holed. Bergson explains that repetition in particular is the source of amusement because "wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living".<sup>59</sup> Contending that the comic arises from "*something mechanical encrusted on the living*",<sup>60</sup> he proposes that anything repetitious, unbending, or automatic in human nature is suggestive of the mechanical, and therefore likely to draw laughter. Thus, twins or doubles are the material of comedy, and so is a character who rigidly repeats himself in actions or speech. Bergson, in fact, argues that character itself—all character—is comic,

provided we mean by character the *ready-made* element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically. It is, if you will, that

which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for that very reason, that which enables others to imitate us.<sup>61</sup>

Hazlitt calls this attribute of self-imitation “keeping” and sees it as the chief delight in the appreciation of the comic character. He defines keeping as “consistency in absurdity; a determined and laudable attachment to the incongruous and singular”, and goes on to explain: “That reason and good sense should be consistent, is not wonderful: but that caprice, and whim, and fantastical prejudice, should be uniform and infallible in their results, is the surprising thing”.<sup>62</sup> This repetitive and undeviating nature of comic character Susanne Langer sees as fundamental to the comedic form and indicative of its origin in myth: “Because the comic rhythm is that of vital continuity”, she writes, “the protagonists do not change in the course of the play, as they normally do in tragedy”.<sup>63</sup>

Tragedy reveals a complex character determining how to act in a situation fraught with contradictions—as, for example, in the *Antigone*. But comedy presents a plurality of highly entertaining—but static and sometimes obsessive—characters enmeshed in a complex situation. Nevertheless, there is a perennial delight in comic characters, predictable as they may be. The convoluted plots and bizarre situations typical of the form provide novelty and excitement, but the focus of interest is also on the interplay of familiar character types. “Comedy not only depends on types rather than individuals”, writes Thomas McFarland, “but also finds these types adequate in themselves, or at the very least, not dependent upon any particular comic plot”.<sup>64</sup> He gives the example of the *commedia dell’arte* skits, which were, he notes:

in regard to plot, usually extempore, because stability resided in the unchangingness of the comic types assembled in the acting company: Pantalone was always himself, Harlequin always himself, regardless of plot.<sup>65</sup>

In a similar vein, Bergson writes: “In a comedy, we feel any other situation might equally well have been chosen for the purpose of introducing the character; he would still have been the same man though the situation were different”.<sup>66</sup>

The comic character is drawn from the exterior and so dress and appearance may be used emblematically to indicate a type. Charney makes the point that external characteristics such as “occupation, social class, wealth (or absence of it), and even mood and temperament”<sup>67</sup> are commonly used to define a comic type. It is the character’s social self, the

self he chooses to project, that is of interest, not his eternal soul. And this can give rise to contradictions, when circumstances are such as to cause the projected self to be undermined by the surfacing of his real feelings: for example, the strutting coxcomb of a soldier is revealed to be a quaking coward in the face of danger, the revered old man behaves like a child when he can't get his own way, the learned man (whether doctor, cleric, lawyer, or schoolteacher) is shown to be a pedant and a fool.

But while the comic character may be composed of contradictions, he is not usually aware of them. Bergson writes that "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious".<sup>68</sup> And Jessica Milner Davis, following Bergson and adopting his idea that rigidity is the essential feature of the comic character, says: "Type-characters are . . . quite unconscious of their limitations. They act and react blindly, driven by their rigidity".<sup>69</sup> By her definition, type characters belong properly to farce, which she describes as "comedy with *self-awareness* left out".<sup>70</sup>

Agnes V. Persson makes the point that "unawareness and ignorance are not necessarily comic, but a comic character is usually ignorant in some way".<sup>71</sup> Similarly, "a character ceases to be comic after he gains insight".<sup>72</sup> She contends that ignorance can be of two kinds: "first, lack of awareness induced by external circumstances, and second, lack of awareness due to the inherent nature of the character".<sup>73</sup> The first type of ignorance, she says, concerns irony of circumstance, and may involve any of the deceptions or misunderstandings common to comedy, such as disguise and tricks. The second type of ignorance indicates irony of character: "The reader is aware of the shortcomings and deficiencies in the character, but the comic character, who lives an unexamined life, is unable to perceive them".<sup>74</sup> However, she then tempers this remark with the observation that

many of the great comic characters are flexible, unique, often intelligent and at least partially aware of their own nature, of others, and the ways of the world. . . . If a person becomes aware of his specific folly, he can either eliminate the fault or consciously indulge in it, in which case he becomes an eccentric. One often approves of an eccentric because he dares to follow his inclinations, whereas we laugh at those who are not conscious of their faults and are blindly victimized by their shortcomings.<sup>75</sup>

The type of character Persson is referring to here—the wilful, irrepressible eccentric—is usually found in the form of the comic hero. The comic hero differs markedly from the hero of tragedy or of epic or melodrama. And he is not the same thing at all as the male half of the central pair of lovers found in New Comedy and its successors (for example, romantic comedy