URI ONLINE, Summer 2020

Classics 391

Ancient Laughter: The Comic Tradition in Greece and Rome

ONLINE
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Instructor:

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Required texts:

Joint Association of Classical Teachers, The World of Athens (Cambridge, 2008)

Peter Jones & Keith Sidwell, ed., The World of Rome (Cambridge, 1997)

Aristophanes: Clouds, Wasps, Birds, trans. Peter Meineck
(Hackett, 1998)

Aristophanes: Frogs and Other Plays, trans. David Barrett
(Penguin, 2007)


Plautus & Terence: Five Comedies, trans. Deena Berg & Douglass
Parker (Hackett, 1999)

(plus supplementary materials to be provided throughout the course, available on Sakai)

Course description:

Introduction to the comic tradition in Western literature through its origins in Greece and Rome. Readings in English translation include examples of comic drama, novel, and satire.

Introduction:
“For what qualities ought a poet to be admired?”

“For skillfulness and for good counsel, and because we make people better members of their communities.”

— Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1008-10 (trans. Alan Sommerstein)

Laughter, ancient and modern, comes naturally for us (perhaps more for some than for others). Yet the art of making people laugh — comedy — requires training, practice, and experience. This course will explore the tradition of stage comedy as evolved from ancient Greece and Rome. As we read the plays of Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, and Terence, we will set them in their ancient context in order to examine the prominent role then played by the comic playwright, political and social as well as literary.

The course is intended to be an introduction to Greek and Roman comedy. No prior background or reading is expected from the students. My teaching philosophy is to encourage the students to read the primary texts critically and to draw their own observations and conclusions. They are not expected to conduct rigorous scholarly research. Always my own presentation of the texts ought to be seen as one of many possible explanations; absolute knowledge in this field of study is usually not possible, nor even desirable.

The ancient Greeks and Romans knew how to laugh as much as we do today, and they knew how to put their humor in front of an audience, just as we do today. What stands out about the best-known of the four comic writers, Aristophanes, is that he could tell off his Athenian audience about their politics all while rattling off a fantastic story about clouds, wasps, birds, frogs, monstrous war beasts, oversize dung-eating beetles, Persian slaves, dog-headed demagogues (nice alliteration!), and the most amazing phenomenon of all: WOMEN IN POWER IN ATHENIAN GOVERNMENT!! The audience loved his plots, but even better was when he told them off about just how badly they were running their city, and the best part was, they could give him a prize, applaud his lampoon, and go back to running their city as badly as they ran it before! We all know, of course, that if the Athenians had actually listened to Aristophanes, he would have been out of business.

Similarly, we have many forms of information satire today: *The Daily Show, Real Time with Bill Maher, Last Week Tonight, Late Night with Seth Meyers*, and many others. All of these offer newsworthy commentary about current events and figures of the day (someone with initials “D.T.” may be an example). We tune in, we laugh, we bump up the ratings of said shows, we applaud, and we easily forget — as Jon Stewart often had to remind his viewers — that these shows are not news broadcasts, they are COMEDY. Aristophanes’ commentary to his audience is just as based in realism as the claim of (then) Senator Al Franken that T---- University is a real university of the caliber of University of Rhode Island. Online the students will get to compare recent videos from political shows with Aristophanes’ plays. They will likely find that though the shows are not dramatic plays, the similarities between them and the plays will likely stand out far more than the differences.
Goals of the Course:

(a) To introduce the students to a selection of Greek and Roman comic plays, and to compare these plays with videos taken from modern political shows.

(b) To allow the students to learn what questions to ask as they read works of literature or view works of art, and what methodology to use to go about answering their questions.

(c) To enable the students to read the plays critically, to draw their own observations from the ancient readings, and to present these ideas coherently online.

Objectives for Students:

(a) To LAUGH at the plays, of course! 😊 Which is to say, not only to smile at the playwrights’ explicit jokes and innuendoes, but to understand how and why they mock their states and contemporary fellow-citizens. To GET the jokes, even the obscure ones! 😊

(b) To appreciate, in all seriousness, the endurance of these works of literature that have survived through twenty-five centuries of war, unrest, and decay.

(c) To address questions posed to them by making observations and drawing conclusions that are based on the evidence of the primary texts, and to use their observations to determine the agenda of the comic playwrights. To see how modern political shows form effective analogies of the way Aristophanes could kick the collective butt of his fellow Athenians when they deserved it – and knew it.

(d) To commit these findings intelligently to writing, and share them with online. To work together to determine the messages that the comic plays are designed to convey, and how ancient plays and modern political shows do or do not have similar messages and strategies.

(e) To apply their greater understanding of Greek and Roman comedy to the broader context of the ancient world at large and to the Western world down to our own time. To come away with a deeper understanding of what makes us laugh, and why.

(f) URI Humanities Learning Outcome: To understand the context and significance of the humanities using theoretical, historical, and experiential perspectives.

(g) URI Global Learning Outcome: To develop and exercise global responsibilities.

Greek and Roman Comedy *LINKS*:
(a) ARISTOPHANES (c. 448 - 380 B.C.)  
(http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc13.htm)

(b) MENANDER (342 B.C. - 291 B.C.)  
(http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc14.htm)

(c) TITUS MACCIUS PLAUTUS (c. 254 - c. 184 B.C.)  

(d) PUBLIUS TERENTIUS AFER (195 or 185 – 159 B.C.)  
(http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc22.html)

(e) BookRags  
(http://www.bookrags.com)

(f) Perseus Project Home Page  
(http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)

Format:

1. The format for each class session (Tuesday through Thursday each week) is that students will get online at least once each session. By the time they get online, they should have read the assigned readings, and if they have questions about them, they should contact me online or by phone, text, or e-mail IN ADVANCE of the day itself so that they will be able to complete each online assignment with enough understanding of the text. This includes being able to CITE SPECIFIC PASSAGES FROM ANCIENT TEXTS when requested to be able to support their views – an indispensable skill for writing Essays on the Midterm and Final Exam deserving of high grades.

2. The daily procedure online is as follows:

   a. Each student logs on each day class is in session (Tuesday through Thursday).

   b. The students go through the outline in the Calendar and watch all videos under You-Tube Video Links for that day. In addition, they must complete in writing answers to ONE of any Discussion Questions assigned that day and submit their answers in direct print (not attached) on the Sakai Forum. Each student may choose whichever question he/she wishes to answer. For instance, on Wednesday 6/24/20, the student will answer one question from Discussion Questions Week 1. (TIP: Even if you choose not to write out an outline from Question #1, you should still make an outline for yourself to be sure you know each play’s plot.)

   c. IMPORTANT: After completing his/her own work, the student is REQUIRED to ENTER A RESPONSE to AT LEAST ONE other student’s entry (preferably multiple such) for that class session. (You may also use that opportunity to add responses to prior sessions, and these can be used to catch
up if you were unable to complete this commitment any prior session.) This class is meant to encourage far more dialogue among you the students than between you and me the instructor. For that reason, I will keep my own intervention in the conversations to a relative minimum. Students’ responses will be tabulated on the Gradebook on Sakai.

**The students’ responses to other students’ entries count as attendance in class for that session.** Failure to provide a student response any session counts as an unexcused absence for that session. Entering ZERO student responses through the course will disqualify the student from receiving a Course Grade and the student will automatically receive NW or F.

(Dialogue among students is expected to maintain decorum and mutual respect at all times, with use of appropriate language. Any violation thereof, including but not limited to use of foul, abusive, or insulting language, will be grounds for disciplining the offending student, to the extent of expulsion from the class if that is called for.)

d. On days on which **EXAMS** are due, the students complete Exams at their own pace, but are expected to complete the Exams if possible in a SINGLE SITTING. Once finished, the students must submit Exams as SINGLE COMPLETE DOCUMENTS in their Dropboxes by the end of each DAY OF THE EXAM to avoid getting Late Deductions (these are assessed, at the Professor’s discretion, as 10 points off for each day late). Exams preferably should be in Word or PDF document format.

e. On days on which *** VIDEO DAYS *** are due, these are the FUN days!! You get to watch the videos, and it is permitted to enjoy them. 😊 After having watched and enjoyed them, the students may complete their compositions in advance and submit them on the Sakai Forum in direct print (not attached). These are due in by their DAYS listed on the Calendar below and specified in their descriptions (the file under Assignments).

f. **IMPORTANT:** As an alternative to written-out answers, students are STRONGLY ENCOURAGED to submit answers in video format on the Forums. Additionally students are encouraged to reach out to me and arrange time with me in person (preferably at URI Providence) or by online chat session to deliver his/her answers or other discussion about the class content. Students who wish to arrange this should reach out to me to schedule mutually convenient times.

4. **BE ADVISED!** (Oh, DARN, this is getting distinctly UN-funny. Sorry. 😣)
a. Grade deductions will be taken for unexcused absences (which occur if a student fails to enter at least one response to another student’s entry any session) and for Forum Assignments entered late on the Forums (after the Friday due date listed on each Forum) or missed altogether. The MIDTERM EXAM, if missed, may be made up only at my individual discretion, and only with a 10-point deduction taken off the MIDTERM EXAM grade for each session late.

b. MIDTERM and FINAL EXAMS are to be submitted by Sakai into the Dropboxes. The students MUST get the Exams in to me by the end of the day on the due dates, or start incurring 10-point deductions for late submission. Each Exam will be accessible to students under Resources on Sakai after its Review date.

c. Both the MIDTERM EXAM and the FINAL EXAM include an OPEN-BOOK essay, which counts 60% of the grade and usually runs 5-6 typed pages (1.5 or 2-line space, 12 or 14 font). You may use whatever materials you wish – books, notes, etc. – to prepare the essay. However, you must give proper credit for any source you use – aside from class texts – with a footnote or endnote and bibliography at the end. Additionally, on the first day of class every student must initial the Oath of Academic Honesty stored in the Sakai Forum. Failure to observe Closed-Book protocol constitutes cheating, and failure to provide proper credit for sources used constitutes PLAGIARISM, and….

d. Suspected PLAGIARISM is grounds for failing an Exam.

(Yay, enjoyment restarts now! 😊)

e. On the more positive side, there are opportunities for EXTRA CREDIT, including (but not limited to) submitting written essays on agreed-upon topics, or doing other online projects. In addition, at my discretion, a student may be allowed one time to retake an unsatisfactory MIDTERM EXAM, with a new improved grade supplanting the older grade completely. Students interested in either of these may contact me. All Extra Credit projects (and make-up projects if permitted) are due in by the last session of the course before the FINAL EXAM, and will NOT be accepted at any time thereafter.

f. HELPFUL SUMMER HINT: For the purposes of grading this summer Course, the student is not required to pass in any assignments for the week until the Friday at the end of that week. If he/she passes all the week’s assignments by that Friday, the assignments will be accepted without any Late Penalty.

g. Students with documented disabilities should contact me privately about any necessary accommodations.

Grading: 20% performance in class (including attendance by student response, plus the general impression the student has made on me through the class; however, SEE IMPORTANT NOTES BELOW)
40% MIDTERM EXAM
40% FINAL EXAM
(Bonus Points are added to the total # of course points before the average is taken.)

IMPORTANT: If a student fails to turn in a COMPLETE Midterm, OR makes zero responses to other students’ entries, by the last day of the course before the Final Exam, the student may automatically receive an NW or F grade. This also applies if the student fails to turn in a COMPLETE Final Exam before grades are due in to the University. The instructor reserves the right to enforce this policy strictly or to mitigate it based on extenuating circumstances.

IMPORTANT: The instructor also reserves the right, after calculating a Course Grade mathematically, to shift the result up or down based on his own personal judgement of what the student really deserves, or if there are unusual circumstances warranting the shift.

Eutychoiete, O mathetai! (Good luck, students!)

Syllabus of Assignments

PART I: OLD GREEK COMEDY

Week 1
Tues. June 23 Introduction

Wed. June 24 The World of Athens, Chapter 5
Aristophanes Clouds
SAKAI: Handout #1 (Aristophanes)
Discussion Questions, Week #1
VIDEO DAYS Discussions, Weeks 1-3, 5
Athens & Rome Day Presentations
Map, Ancient Greece
Map, Athenian Empire, 431 B.C.
Timeline of Ancient Greece

Thurs. June 25 VIDEO DAY #1

Week 2
Tues. June 30 The World of Athens, Chapter 6
Aristophanes Wasps
SAKAI: Discussion Questions, Week #2a

Wed. July 1 VIDEO DAY #2

Thurs. July 2 The World of Athens, Chapter 7
Aristophanes Birds
SAKAI: Aristophanes Peace1-150
Discussion Questions, Week #2b
Week 3
Tues. July 7  VIDEO DAY #3
SAKAI: Midterm Exam Review Sheet (after class)

Wed. July 8  Review for MIDTERM EXAM

Thurs. July 9  MIDTERM EXAM (due date for electronic submission)

PART II: TRANSITION FROM OLD GREEK COMEDY TO ROMAN COMEDY

Week 4
Tues. July 14  The World of Athens, Chapters 3-4
Aristophanes Lysistrata (handout)
SAKAI: Aristophanes Lysistrata (handout)
Discussion Questions, Week #4a

Wed. July 15  The World of Athens, Chapter 8
Aristophanes Frogs
SAKAI: Aristophanes Peace 1-150
Discussion Questions, Week #4b

Thurs. July 16  The World of Rome, Chapter 7
Menander Dyskolos
Terence Adelphoe
SAKAI: Handout #2 (Menander)
Handout #3 (Terence)
Discussion Questions, Week #4c
Map, Ancient Italy
Map, Roman Empire
Chapter 1, The World of Rome (outline)

Week 5
Tues. July 21  VIDEO DAY #4
SAKAI: Xeno.Cyr. 1.1-3
Hor.Sat. 1.9

Wed. July 22  The World of Rome, Chapter 9
Plautus Miles Gloriosus
Review for FINAL EXAM
SAKAI: Handout #4 (Plautus)
Discussion Questions, Week #5
Final Exam Study Guide (after class)
Thurs. July 23  **FINAL EXAM** (due date for electronic submission)

The Ancient Laughter **MIDTERM EXAM** and **FINAL EXAM** will each consist of two sections: the first will be closed-book, the second open-book.