CHAPTER TWO

Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was notorious for playing the clown, once said that in comedy, something always *escapes* (1992: 314). He could just as well have said that something of the comic always escapes comic theory. Or, that comic theory always runs behind comic practice. How far behind is a matter for debate. According to Jan Hokenson, “it still seems to take over fifty years for comic writers’ discoveries and conceptual shifts to reach the thresholds of critical theory” (2006: 173). This chapter will ask whether the twentieth century was when comic theory finally caught up with comic practices. The answer will be that it certainly tried, but that it is a race that cannot be won, for, as Agnes Heller believes, comic practices are simply too heterogeneous to be captured within any single theory (2005: 4–15). Keeping in mind that every theory of comedy that claims to encompass all things comic is bound to have left something out, this chapter will outline some of the most influential comic theories and theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In doing so, it will examine theorists on their own terms, spelling out key ideas, but also consider what aspects of the comic tradition they emphasize and what aspects they put to one side.

The chapter begins by examining the comic theorists who drew on James Frazer’s anthropology in their search for the origins of Greek tragedy, and rediscovered the ritual basis of the comic in communal celebration. To do this, the chapter reaches back into the decade prior to the period it officially covers in order to outline the thought of Francis MacDonald Cornford, a crucial influence on C.L. Barber and others, as well as a lightning rod for those who rejected the ritualist tradition. The height of this tradition will be considered in the case of Northrop Frye and his re-creative theories of comedy in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). It will be argued that this theory gained longstanding currency and “universal” applicability, partly through Frye’s exclusion of Attic drama and medieval traditions. While Frye, a neo-Aristotelian, continued to subscribe to the superiority theory, the next section of the chapter will address the flourishing, from the 1960s, of populist theories of the comic that were inspired by or coincided with the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, especially *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1968). Although Bakhtin pre-dates Frye, the influence of his ideas, particularly the carnivalesque, proved a turning point for comic theory after Frye, not just in the attention Bakhtin paid to the medieval traditions that Frye neglected. The chapter will note the directions taken along the path established by Bakhtin in the work of Charney and Gurewitch, but also the new vistas opened up by a return to Aristophanes and the disorderly Attic drama in the case of Torrance in *The Comic Hero* (1978), as well as Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theorizing of the “signifyin(g)” practices of African-American trickster figures. From there, the chapter will move to consider politically inspired contestations of comic theory by feminist thinkers, and the Marxist critique of mass culture as mere “medicinal” fun (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 112).

The elusiveness of comedy’s essence did not deter those specialists in essences, the philosophers, from trying their hands at pinning the comic butterfly to the wall in this period. Although the most important twentieth-century philosopher of the comic, Henri Bergson, is dealt with in the theory chapter of the previous volume, his presence continues to be felt here, especially with the importance given to the resilience, the insistence, and the sheer exuberance of “life” in the comic. Susanne Langer’s *Feeling and Form* (1953) is an important bridge between the populist and philosophical positions, abandoning as it does the superiority theory and opening the way to the vitality of the comic hero. Probably the most influential of the philosophers addressed in this section is John Morreall, whose three-part division of comic theories—superiority, incongruity, and relief—has provided a useful, if perhaps overused, shorthand for many who followed. The “relief” part of Morreall’s schema refers mainly to Sigmund Freud, who, like Bergson, is handled in a previous volume. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* ([1905] 1976), Freud professed himself poorly qualified to speak about the comic, which he strictly separated from jokes and humor. This has not prevented theorists of the comic, psychoanalytic, and otherwise from taking up Freud’s joke book as comic theory, if only to dismiss its contribution to comic theory. Post-Freudian theorists of the comic to be considered here include Ernst Kris, Eric Bentley, and Alenka Zupančič.

This chapter will argue that the way that one theorizes about comedy and the comic often depends on what one includes or excludes, what one counts as comedy. While much of this chapter’s emphasis is on comic theory which focuses on comedy as a genre, as a narrative form, it does not limit itself to this, and it extends to the comic as a mode more generally. It does, however, draw a line there, not venturing into the heterogeneous field of humor studies or the rich literature on games and play. Nor does it take up at any length the various theories of laughter expounded in the twentieth century, except where they refer to the comic specifically, not least because, as Anca Parvulescu puts it, “there is no stable relation between laughter and comedy” (2017: 507), or as Elder Olson says, we only identify the two with each other because of a “tendency to associate an effect with its most frequent cause” (1968: 11). The line is perhaps drawn arbitrarily, but it had to be drawn somewhere.

RITUAL, HOLIDAY, *MYTHOS*

Strictly speaking, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914) is just a little too early for this volume, but its influence is so pervasive on what follows that it needs to be treated here. In it, Francis Cornford argues that the key to understanding the meaning and origin of Aristophanic comedy lies in a plot pattern that is found in all the plays. He observes that “underlying the plots of a whole series of comedies on very diverse themes, we can distinctly make out the framework of a regular series of incidents. The hypothesis is that these form the moments in a ritual procedure” (1914: 93). The regular series of incidents is composed of *Agon* (or contest), Sacrifice, Feast, Marriage, and *Komos* (or procession), punctuated by one or more direct addresses to the audience by the Chorus in the *parabasis*. The ritual procedure embedded in this structure is the death of an old King (or God) and the rise of a new one. So, for example, *The Knights* (424 bce) is not just a scabrous secular satire on Athenian politics and social life, in which a low-born sausage-seller, Agoracritus, defeats the pompous and corrupt Cleon in his influence over an old man representing the people (Demos), but underlying this plot is the rejuvenation of that very Demos through the action of the play. When Agoracritus boils Demos like a piece of meat near the end, it is not just another absurd and amusing incident, but the birth of a new Demos, capped by a feast and celebration.

One of the reasons that Cornford found in Old Comedy the theme of the death and rebirth of a king was that he was looking for it. He was looking for it because it was a theme central to the work of the academic group to which he belonged, the Cambridge Classical Anthropologists, or Cambridge Ritualists, consisting of Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, A.B. Cook, Cornford, and others. The group was inspired by the anthropology of James Frazer, who, in *The Golden Bough* (1890), argued that many ancient religions were unified by myths and rites of fertility and the worship and sacrifice of a sacred king. Just as Frazer had found the death and resurrection of a king in many religions and myths, so the Cambridge Ritualists detected this pattern in the literary and dramatic works of classical cultures. They determined that tragic action was rooted in ritual forms rather than derived from earlier dramatic or literary models, with the stages of ritual becoming stages in the plot of tragedy.

Tragedy, then, was by far the main focus of the Cambridge group, and after Harrison’s *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) and Murray’s *Euripides and his Age* (1913), Cornford’s *Origin of Attic Comedy* was a comparative afterthought. Cornford nevertheless brought new light to the Old Comedy, particularly through his emphasis on the usually neglected endings of the plays, with their feasts and marriages, and their processions that echoed ritual phallic processions, and in one case—*The Acharnians* (425 bc)—reproduced one directly. In doing so, he finds elements of renewal and celebration where Aristotle, for so long the main authority on the subject, found mainly derision. So, where Aristotle noted the satire and invective that accompanied the phallic procession, Cornford argued that these processions were “intended to secure the fertility of the earth and of man and beast” (1914: 53); and in the impostor figure (*alazon*) he espied a sacrificial scapegoat who “bears upon his head … the sins and evils of his people” (1914: 151). The *parabasis*, meanwhile, that piece of Brechtian direct address *avant la lettre*, may have gradually disappeared from Aristophanes, Cornford claims, because “it has all the air of a piece of ritual awkwardly interrupting the course of the play” (1914: 122).

Cornford builds his arguments on a detailed close reading of the eleven extant plays of Aristophanes, and so roots his thesis in a specific oeuvre. At various points, though, he hints at the wider applicability of his model. For example, he tells us that the “popular tradition of ribaldry and personal invective” found in Aristophanes may have been gradually purged from comedy in the fourth century bce, but that its analogues can be found in the medieval Feast of Fools, the *companies des fous* and the *confreries des sots* (1914: 45). Later, he even suggests that aspects of the ritual *agon*—sacrifice and feast—can be found in Punch and Judy shows (1914: 144). Indeed, for the sufficiently determined, the residues of ritual can be traced in the most unlikely places. For example, could it not be argued that Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) features a sacrifice (of the fictional Bunbury), feasts (the devouring of muffins and cucumber sandwiches), and the death and rebirth of the fantastical “Ernest”? Even if it is the case that the classically educated Wilde was perfectly equipped to produce such mock ritual, such applications show the limits of the universalizing approach: Frazer in particular came under much criticism for bringing heterogeneous cultures under the sway of a single myth.

On firmer ground among the inheritors of Cornford is C.L. Barber, whose *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* (1959) does not universalize, but seeks the patterns of Shakespeare’s middle comedies in Elizabethan cultural forms. Where for Cornford the key concept was “ritual,” for Barber it is “holiday.” The “social form of Elizabethan holidays,” he says, “contributed to the dramatic form of festive comedy” (1959: 4). “Festive comedy” is the term that Barber applies to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and the Falstaff episodes in *Henry IV*. All comedy is festive he claims, but these plays by Shakespeare are especially so. Pagan and Saturnalian traditions may have been waning in Shakespeare’s time, especially in the cities where theatre flourished, but they found a second theatrical life on the Elizabethan stage. This is evident in the titles of the plays, which allude to festive parts of the calendar (midsummer, Twelfth Night) even if they do not represent them directly, and in direct references, such as Rosalind’s playful line in *As You Like It*, that“I am in a holiday humor, and like enough to consent”; or in Theseus’ speculation that the youth of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* “rose up early to observe/ The rite of May,” an allusion to the May games, which celebrated fertility, growth, and the change of seasons.

One of Shakespeare’s most striking comic borrowings from festive traditions was the Lord of Misrule, embodied in Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*, and especially Sir John Falstaff in the two parts of *Henry IV*, and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The Lord of Misrule was a sort of mock king who commanded temporarily at Christmas feasting, overseeing a period of license and disorder: gambling, drinking, masques, and mummeries. In Falstaff, Barber tells us, Shakespeare “fused the clown’s part with that of the festive celebrant,” thus integrating theatrical and holiday conventions (1959: 13). Falstaff also provides Barber with his more general formula for the pattern of festive comedy: “clowning could provide both release for impulses which run counter to decency and decorum, and the clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit” (1959: 13). Falstaff’s drunkenness, his bragging and swaggering, his jokes, all allow for expression of “impulses” normally condemned, and in the end they *are* condemned: in the comic mode, decorum must be restored and limits clarified. “Through release to clarification” is in fact Barber’s four-word summary of what happens in all these comedies, and by association in all comedy: a period of license and disorder, followed by a clarification of rules and limits. In other words, not only does comedy borrow from and allude to Saturnalian traditions, but in many ways *enacts* the same rhythms as those traditions.

Barber limits himself to Shakespeare’s middle comedies: the festive allusions and Saturnalian patterns are less evident in the comedies that precede and follow this sequence, and the formula of “release through to clarification” sits uneasily with a play such as *Measure for Measure*, in which the release seems less benign and the “clarification” is unpalatable and far from clear. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Shakespeare’s sequence of “festive” plays provides a blueprint for much of what is now known as romantic comedy, in which conjugal union is the outcome of the chaotic disruptions unleashed by love. To take just one example, we could see the pattern at work in the Hollywood comedy *The Philadelphia Story* (Dir. George Cukor 1940), which is set in the country estate of a rich socialite family at a time of festivity: the wedding of the daughter of the estate, the tellingly named Tracy Lord (Katherine Hepburn), and the rich upstart, George Kittredge (John Howard). Into this situation enters a Lord of Misrule in the shape of the heavy drinking first husband Dexter Haven (Cary Grant), who enables the entrance into the closed community of a class outsider, the reporter Mike Connor (James Stewart). “Release” comes amid drunkenness as Tracy threatens to pair off with Mike and so destabilize the class hierarchies, but in the end does not. “Clarification” comes with Tracy reunited with Dexter, whose apparent cynicism about the institution of marriage dissolves just in time. Strict social hierarchy is essential to the plotting, with the ultimate exclusion of class outsiders (George and Mike) and the reincorporation of the Lord of Misrule, who is always an insider. The model is thus still effective where social hierarchies are a given, and harmony the outcome, but by no means is this the case in all comedies.

The case that comedy is in its essence harmonious was most successfully made by the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, the most influential mid-twentieth-century theorist of comedy, and of genre more generally. Frye made his major contribution on the subject before Barber, but is taken here after because of the greater distance he marks from Cornford. The distance is greater, even if Frye invokes ritual, because Frye’s analysis of comedy is further removed from the anthropological data and makes much stronger claims for the universal applicability of his thesis. This thesis was outlined in two key publications, the short essay “The Argument of Comedy” ([1948] 1964), and the chapter “The mythos of Spring” in Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). By “argument,” Frye really means plot, but by using the former term he implies that there is a certain logic to the comic plot, and that it proceeds through a series of reliable statements and propositions. At the same time, it sits alongside three other plots or arguments in the canons of literary genre: romance (summer), tragedy (autumn), and irony (winter). The genres in their turn align with phases in the life of an individual: comedy and birth, romance and youth, tragedy and maturity, irony and death. So, where Cornford and Barber start with *cultural* phenomena, some of which are connected to the seasons, and show how comic conventions are derived from them, Frye loosens the link to culture, starting with comic conventions, and deriving from them a set of *natural* rhythms.

That comedy is somehow natural suggests that it is also inevitable and comes about organically. It is therefore doubly significant what Frye takes to be the natural plots of comedy, and what he leaves aside. Noting that “Old Comedy… was out of date before Aristophanes himself was dead,” Frye claims that “when we speak of comedy, we normally think of something that derives from the Menandrine tradition” ([1948] 1964: 450). The Greek New Comedy of Menander was inherited by the Roman comic playwrights Plautus and Terence, and it is from these two that Frye sources the fundamental argument of comedy. This argument has a “regular wish-fulfilment pattern” modeled on the “Oedipus situation” in which a young male lover encounters an obstacle, usually an older man, in his love for a young woman ([1948] 1964: 450). The overcoming of the obstacle coincides with the defeat of a father by a son, sometimes symbolically, sometimes literally. This mildly Freudian scenario shows its actual roots in Jungian psychoanalysis in Frye’s investment in character and plot typology. He identifies, for instance, a basic conflict at the heart of comedy between the figures of the *alazon* (imposter) and the *eiron* (ironist), with victory generally guaranteed to the latter. It is a conflict that has been reworked by Harry Levin as the “eternal opposition” between playboys who just want to have fun, and killjoys who “cannot make a joke; they cannot take a joke; they cannot see the joke; they spoil the game” (1987: 38). The *agelast* or killjoy, Frye says, “is usually someone with a good deal of social prestige and power, who is able to force much of the play’s society into line with his obsession … The society emerging at the conclusion of comedy represents, by contrast, a kind of moral norm, or pragmatically free society” (1987: 169). For Frye, then, comedy has a socially cohesive function, not only punishing the immoral, but also delivering a more perfect society at its conclusion.

That Frye’s model works is undeniable, just as it is undeniable that it is a partial model. The extent of its success can be seen in the range of objections it has produced, objections that were almost inevitable from the moment of Frye’s opening paragraph in “The mythos of Spring,” when he makes a bold claim for a comic structure that has remained unchanged over 2,500 years, adding, with a rhetorical flourish, that “the audiences at vaudeville, comic strips, and television programs still laugh at the jokes that were declared to be outworn at the opening of *The Frogs*” (1957: 163). Even though in this case Frye places Aristophanes at the beginning of an unbroken comic arc, he largely ignored the fantastical and obscene elements of Attic comedy (see Hokenson 2006: 90). It is an entirely wholesome version of comedy that wants nothing to do with what Edith Kern, developing an idea of Baudelaire’s, has called “the absolute comic,” which is to say, comedy in its farcical and grotesque guises. So attached is he to harmony, Kern claims, that “[o]ne might say that Frye’s definition omits the comic” (1980: 24). As for the recurrent comic struggle between fathers and sons, playboys and killjoys, it is part of what Jan Hokenson calls a “a basso plain-chant around the theoretical figures of butts and heroes as exclusively masculine, as indisputably and rightly male as the gaze of the pure theorist” (2006: 132–3). In other words, by rooting comic “rhythms” in the supposed rhythms of nature, Frye at the same time naturalized social and gender relations that are anything but natural.

Bakhtin and after: carnival, the body, the comic hero

Cornford, Barber, and Frye were by no means identical in their outlooks, but as well as a joint interest in ritual, they were all firmly Aristotelian in their theorizing of comedy. This can be seen in their emphasis on structure and privileging of plot (*mythos* in Aristotle) over other aspects of the comic, and in their shared assumption that comedy is basically satirical, that it represents human weakness in characters inferior to its audience. The focus on plot meant that these theorists favored dramatic comedy as a genre, at the expense of other modes of comic performance, for example, modes that interrupted dramatic narrative or that were not narrative-based at all. Cornford argued that the endings of Aristophanes’ plays had been unjustly neglected, but it could be said that he and Barber and Frye drew far too many of their conclusions based on how comedies concluded. Barber’s “clarification of limits” and Frye’s establishment of a “moral norm” at the end of each comedy signal their endorsement of the dim view Aristotle takes of the more excessive actions of comic characters. For them, comedy remains potentially “corrective” in its aims.

The next major wave of twentieth-century theorists of the comic swung the balance in the other direction. At their head was the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose *Rabelais and His World* was first finished in 1940 as a doctoral thesis, but only published in 1965 in Russian, and in English translation in 1968, with an immediate impact and influence across a number of fields, including comic theory. The book is a study of the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais’ novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–4), which relates the adventures of the two eponymous giants, father and son. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais draws for his tales on an endlessly rich medieval folk culture of “humorous forms and manifestations opposed to the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture,” including “comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody” ([1965] 1968: 4). Bakhtin appears to start from the same sort of anthropological material as the Cambridge Ritualists and Barber and Frye, but where Cornford and his colleagues found a unitary culture, Bakhtin writes of a fundamentally fissured one, and where Frye and Barber emphasized redemption and reconciliation, Bakhtin focused on comic disruption and subversion.

Official medieval culture, according to Bakhtin, was petty and closed, hierarchical and rigid, serious and monological, while folk culture emerged from the public marketplace, was destructive of hierarchies, playful and dialogical, and above all marked by laughter. And not just any laughter, but “a laughter of all the people … directed at all and everyone” (Bakhtin [1965] 1968: 11). Not a laughter of one group at another, but a laughter that embraces everyone in its range: the laughter of *carnival*, in absolute opposition to the sobriety of official culture. At his doctoral defence, and ever since, the absoluteness of Bakhtin’s opposition of official and folk culture has been called into question (Pan’kov 2001: 47), while the abstraction of his idea of carnival “has annoyed social historians for decades” (Hirschkop 2001: 21). But this is almost beside the point. What matters is how Bakhtin opened to inspection medieval cultural forms that were generally derided or ignored, how he made visible the traces of carnival and folk culture in literature of later epochs, and in general how *productive* his ideas of carnival and the carnivalesque became for literary critics.

The dialogue between carnival and literary fiction in Rabelais was dubbed “grotesque realism” by Bakhtin. Of greatest interest to comic theory in grotesque realism is the place it gives to the body. While official culture would have us imagine the human body as dignified or restrained, or not have us think of it at all, in carnival the body is exuberantly expressive. It is a gluttonous body, a body of enormous appetites that consumes voraciously through indecorous and gaping jaws. It is a body that farts and shits and pisses, that is uncontrolled and uncontrollable in its emissions and secretions. In Rabelais, this body is not closed off, but abundantly open to other bodies and to the world, marked by its “convexities and orifices” (Bakhtin [1965] 1968: 317) an “ever unfinished … ever creating body” ([1965] 1968: 26). This grotesque body challenges the sobriety and formality of official culture by seeing the world from “the standpoint of the guts or genitals” (Eagleton 2001: 229).

Just as laughter in Bakhtin is collective, so the body in carnival does not belong to any one individual, but is the people’s body, “grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” ([1965] 1968: 19). Does this make it a comic body? Certainly, it has been argued that much postmodern fiction is comic and *carnivalesque*, and that its bodies challenge conventional corporeal standards. Take for example, the protagonist of Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), the giant “Dog Woman” who could have stepped straight out of Rabelais. Her mouth is large enough to hold a dozen oranges at once, she is covered in scars inhabited by fleas, and she has disgusting rotting teeth. She strides her way through this semi-historical novel, brushing aside the ideal of a tiny, perfected, feminine body. The same could be said of female bodies in the blood-spattered comic-gothic novels and short stories of Angela Carter, or of the desiring, incontinent ones in the fiction of Salman Rushdie or David Foster Wallace, all inheritors in one way or other of the Rabelaisian tradition.

As Matthew Bevis notes, comedy has always thrived on scatological and animal energies that show the human body “as a site of competing impulses” (2013: 24). However, we should not assume that just because comedy draws on stumbling, stuttering, and leaking bodies, that all comedy is carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense. As Stallybrass and White note about Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), the comedy may be set in the public square, but the representation is detached, with the author an “isolated judge standing in opposition to the vulgar throng” (1986: 67). Along the same lines, the American film genre of “gross-out” comedy might seem promisingly named from a Bakhtinian perspective, and without doubt much of its comic success derives from the bodily improprieties of its characters. But the body in “gross-out” is not the body of carnival, not a body whose workings and excesses are a source of communal delight. Instead, when genitals are trapped half in and half out of a zipper in *There’s Something About Mary* (Dir. Peter and Bobby Farrelly 1998), or when laxatives cause uncontrollable diarrhea in *American Pie* (Dir. Paul and Chris Weitz 1999), the comic effect is based on shame and humiliation, not delight. “Gross-out” is therefore on the side of the bourgeois propriety that Bakhtin precisely sought to contest. A rather different conclusion might be drawn about the earlier “bad taste” comedies of American director John Waters, whose gallery of grotesques are entirely unencumbered by shame.

Bakhtinian carnival resonated strongly with American theorists of comedy in the immediate aftermath of 1960s counterculture, when distrust of “official culture” was at its peak. Although critics such as Gurewitch, Charney, and Torrance were hardly fully signed up Bakhtinians, much of what Bakhtin proposed chimed with their desire to find in comedy something other than a corrective, and in the comic hero something other than a butt. They also detected a strong note of rebellion in comedy, a view that shared much with the irrepressible grotesque body in Bakhtin’s carnival. In *Comedy: The Irrational Vision*, Gurewitch rejected the “unitary, ritual, festive, resurrectional transcendental bias” (1975: 18–19) of Cornford and Frye, and as his book’s title indicates, argued that the main thrust of comedy is an out-and-out attack on reason. With echoes of Bakhtin, but filtered through Freud (or Wilhelm Reich’s Freud), he celebrates farce in particular,

[a]s the most lawless and lunatic of the arts—it unleashes into the drawing rooms of civilization the happy beasts of sexuality, aggression, scatology, cynicism, nonsense, and madness—farce, with incomparable outrageousness, helps man abjure social discipline … That is why the farceur, that natural enemy of the saint, the sobersides, and the good citizen, is the darling of the id and the thaumaturge of psychological primitivism. (Gurewitch 1975: 130)

The opponents of comedy—the saint, the sobersides, the good citizen—remind us of Bakhtin’s representatives of official culture, but for Gurewitch they are not dissolved in a collective laughter of the people so much as obliterated by a frenzied desublimation.

In *Comedy High and Low*, Charney echoes this view, saying that comedy is “an expression of irrational, unsocialized, chaotic, and wish-fulfilment impulses” (1978: x), and arguing that we cannot understand the workings of formal stage comedy (high) without examining the ways that it is in dialogue with the comedy of the street (low). Charney is wary of speaking on behalf of *all* comedy and is refreshingly candid about his preference for certain types of comedy (W.C. Fields features heavily, as does sexual innuendo), and from these preferences derives his conclusive chapter on comic characters, whom he unequivocally rescues from shame, humiliation, and any possibility of improvement or correction. Briskly dismissing comic traditions of “satiric ridicule,” he boldly claims that the comic hero of the sort he favors “engages in relentless guerilla warfare with society” (1978: 171). It is a logic that is enthusiastically extended in *The Comic Hero* by Robert M. Torrance. For Torrance, the comic hero’s “primordial values and elemental needs … continually smash the prevailing order to smithereens” (1978: 40), an insurrectionary drive he sees in the protagonists of Aristophanes, in Odysseus, in the Good Soldier Schweik, and in Charlie Chaplin among others. Like Gurewitch and Charney, Torrance refuses to see the comic character as the butt of ridicule, and instead paints him (almost always him) as protean, forever eluding capture by the killjoys:

Conclusion, like definition, is antithetical to the comic hero, whose fugitive nature will not abide formulation. Even so, we may reasonably affirm that his essence lies in being at once heroic and comic. Comic not primarily because he is laughed at but because—in the root sense of kômos—he celebrates life, of body and mind. He can never wholly relinquish the joy in living that is both his innate disposition and his final object, and he perpetually solemnizes existence by willfully refusing to see it as solemn. (1978: 274)

What is perhaps most striking about these American reworkings of the riotous energies of carnival is the way in which they re-individualize in the solitary comic hero what in Bakhtin is a force that precisely does away with the boundaries between bodies and individuals. In this manner, the ritual *kômos* is reinvigorated for the high-spirited *and* entrepreneurial.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. gives the comic hero another inflection in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). Gates traces the African-American tradition of monkey tales back to the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara. This trickster figure survived the Middle Passage to take a distinctly American form in tales in which a clever monkey, through what Gates calls “signifyin(g),” tricks a gullible lion into painful encounters with an elephant. The monkey has a skill with the ambiguities and doublings of language that escapes the lion and elephant, who are gulled into violence, a violence that eventually returns on the monkey, who is punished, but survives to signify another day. It is a principle that extends far beyond this series of comic tales, with the strategies of the Signifying Monkey—“ever punning, ever troping” (Gates 1988: 52)—saturating African-American vernacular discourse. The monkey “is a hero of black myth, a sign of the triumph of wit and reason” (1988: 77), and the tales are “versions of daydreams, the Daydream of the Black Other, chiastic fantasies of reversal of power relationships” (1988: 59). The practices and styles of this comic-heroic monkey make their way into the African-American literary tradition, represented as black vernacular speech in the writings of, for example, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Ishmael Reed, but also informing the “signifyin(g)” style of the writing itself.

COMIC POLITICS

Writing at the height of the Cold War, Robert Torrance suggested that “the dissident comic hero” is an endangered species, but more needed than ever in the face of the “collectivist twentieth century” (1978: 276). Representing the “collectivist” camp, Marxist critics Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer offered a rather less celebratory account of comic phenomena in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002), composed during a period of exile in California. In close proximity to Hollywood, they had plenty of opportunity to see first-hand the products of American mass culture and to experience the workings of what they came to call the “culture industry.” Film, magazines, and music under capitalism mutilate and standardize, manufacturing a false and inauthentic need in their consumers. Although the products of the culture industry promise amusement and entertainment, escape from daily troubles, what they in fact provide for their audiences is an image of their own oppression returned to them in an inverted form. Here is a typically acerbic passage about animated film from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The jollity dispels the joy supposedly conferred by the sight of an embrace and postpones satisfaction until the day of the pogrom. To the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs. (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 110)

Laughing at Donald Duck’s misfortunes, the spectators are unaware that they are laughing at their own impoverished experience under advanced capitalism. For Adorno and Horkheimer, laughter under these conditions cannot be anything but barbaric. They do not rule out the possibility of a carnivalesque communal laughter in the Bakhtinian vein, but it is not to be found in mass culture, nor does laughter in this setting possess the force Bergson attributed to it, a vitality that bursts through rigidity. Instead, laughter is a symptom of alienation and Donald Duck and his companions are an ideological sugar-coating of material conditions: “Fun is a medicinal bath,” Adorno and Horkheimer say, “which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness” ([1944] 2002: 112). One wonders what Adorno and Horkheimer would have made of *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Dir. Frank Capra 1944), the hit Hollywood comedy released the year their book was published, in which Abby and Martha Brewster administer a “medicine” of strychnine, arsenic, and cyanide to itinerant elderly bachelors in order to alleviate their “suffering.”

The German playwright Bertolt Brecht was less gloomy than his compatriots (and sometime acquaintances) Adorno and Horkheimer and proposed another outlet for laughter and the comic theatre. Perhaps more influential as a theorist than as a practitioner, Brecht called the dominant theatrical conventions of his day “illusionist” and critiqued them for their efforts to create empathy or identification between the audience and the characters on the stage. Empathy was toxic for political action because it left audiences accepting of what they saw rather than questioning and thinking. To counteract this passivity, he sought to generate *Verfremdungseffekts*, or “distancing-effects,” through a series of techniques that broke up the illusion of a play. These included direct address to the audience, interruptions of the narrative with jokes and song, and episodic, discontinuous plotting. Brecht did not invent any of these elements himself, but borrowed them from existing theatrical traditions, mainly popular comic forms such as vaudeville and music hall, but also Shakespeare and older comedy: for example, the direct address to the audience can be traced back to the *parabasis* in the Greek Old Comedy. This is not to say that Brecht was writing comedies. His theatre was “epic” theatre, which we might call comedy with a difference, or comedy inverted. Where most playwrights would consider success an audience laughing when characters laugh and crying when they cry, Brecht aimed for the opposite: in epic theatre “I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh” (1978: 71). Such a reaction is the genuine sign of an audience thinking rather than being caught up in the lures of identification or drawn into the satisfying and numbing medicinal bath of entertainment.

The tension in Marxist theory between critiquing comedy and finding new ways to deploy its techniques can also be seen in feminist thinking about the comic. The stakes were set out in two major books of the 1990s: Susan Carlson’s *Women and Comedy* (1991) and Frances Gray’s *Women and Laughter* (1994). Carlson and Gray both ask us to look again, from the perspective of women, at comic traditions and at comic theorizing. They prompt us to ask, for example, do the ritual plots of comedy as outlined by Cornford, Barber, and Frye operate in the same way for women as they do for men? Does the experience of the comic hero celebrated by Charney and Torrance look the same if the comic character is a woman? Have the most influential theorists of comedy asked themselves these questions when setting out their theories? The answer in each case is a resounding “no.” The redemptive and harmonious ritual ending of comedy in marriage may for women be a non-negotiable return to the status quo, rather than the inauguration of a new and freer society. Women take center-stage in comedy more than in other genres, but their place is usually strictly circumscribed, and they are consigned to being the butt of the joke: “the dumb blonde, the wisecracking tart, the naïve virgin, the dragon who doesn’t realize she is sexually past it” (Gray 1994: 9). As for the theorists, “misogyny is inscribed into some definitions, and where this is not so there is a bland assumption that the experience of both sexes is identical” (1994: 13–14). It is not that women have been absent from comedy as characters or writers or performers, but that another history exists and has rarely been told. Carlson and Gray place special emphasis on new developments in women’s and feminist comedy in the 1970s and 1980s, but only after they have shown the gendered conventions of laughter and comedy established over a long period. Carlson concentrates on British stage comedy stretching back to the Renaissance, while Gray focuses on television sitcom in the United States and Britain, and on women performers in vaudeville and stand-up in those two countries.

Carlson opens her book with four studies of strong and attractive women in comedies written by men: Rosalind in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Millamant in Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700), Julia in Shaw’s *The Philanderer* (1898), and Susan in Ayckbourn’s *Woman in Mind* (1985). Each of these plays, Carlson argues, is based structurally around a pattern of inversion ending in marriage, in which “women’s liberation in comedy’s middle is qualified and women’s joy in marriage is forced” (1991: 2). In the case of *The Way of the World*, Congreve has created in Millamant a “woman whose intellectual and moral allure outweighs her follies and faults” (1991: 69), a character who is the play’s “single most commanding presence” (1991: 75), and whose wit is a match for any man’s. The crowning of Millamant’s part is usually taken to be the tour-de-force “proviso” scene where she lays out her conditions for marriage with Mirabell, conditions that he concedes to entirely. However, Carlson reads the scene against the grain, seeing Millamant’s “temporary dominance as a prelude to more permanent subservience” (1991: 84), for what the proviso clearly shows is how much Millamant stands to lose in marriage, and Mirabell, after all, needs no such proviso to guarantee *his* liberties after marriage. What is more, Carlson notes another movement in the play, one that isolates Millamant from other women and undermines the possibility of a mode of social organization based on female friendship and solidarity. This possibility is openly referred to by Mirabell and Fainall at the start of the play as the “cabal” of women, from which they are excluded as men. The play ensures that the “cabal” comes to nought, and that women’s most important relationships are not with each other, but with men. When Carlson comes in the second half of her book to comedy written and produced by women, one of her main interests is the ways in which it represents and enacts the sort of community and solidarity that *The Way of the World* does not allow.

Gray opens her book by considering the commonly held view, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that women lack a sense of humor: “like barrenness,” she quips, “it’s assumed to be primarily a woman’s problem” (1994: 5). Humor, she goes on to show, is not a zero-sum game, but contingent and context-specific. The situations in which women are most often accused of being humorless are the occasions when they are the butt of the joke in which power relations are asymmetrical. That is, they are accused of failing to laugh at their own exploitation when it is joked about by the beneficiaries of that exploitation. At the same time, when women do joke about such matters, the dominant culture is often deaf to their humor. Gray gives as an example the feminist practice in the 1970s of bra-burning, so often taken as an example of humorlessness, when in fact it was a playful parodying of (masculine) political anger that resorts to burning the enemy in effigy.

In the rest of her book, Gray shows how women comics have skillfully negotiated a field in which they are often expected not to be funny. Two striking examples that she gives from the mid-twentieth century are Marilyn Monroe and Lucille Ball. Monroe was consistently constrained in the straight-jacket of roles constructed for her by the studios, limited to some combination of sexual, innocent, and vacuous. Yet in spite of this, Monroe as comic performer succeeded in ironizing and undercutting the stereotype she was obliged to embody, through inflections of speech and movements of the eyes. Gray does not use the term, but she implies that Monroe was the classical *eiron*: the knowing ironist who plays the fool. Unlike Monroe, Lucille Ball had much more control over the material she performed. The basic premise of her television series, *I Love Lucy*, was the mismatch between her idealized fantasy life and her incompetence in all things. In any given episode, this incompetence would thwart Lucy’s ambitions and her desires would be defeated. But as with Monroe, Lucy’s failures were the opportunity to demonstrate great skills in comic performance, working through the full array of vaudeville routines: the defeat of the character was the triumph of the performer.

In spite of this, Gray finishes on a cautious note: “Lucy isn’t her own woman; her triumphs are always partial, her power fragmented, her defeats always sanctioned by the narrative” (1994: 51). Lucille Ball’s most famous work pre-dates second-wave feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is this epoch and the decades that followed that take up the latter part of Gray’s book, in which she investigates the comic strategies of women in stand-up in the United States and Britain, tracing the threads that link Marie Lloyd and Gracie Fields to Victoria Wood and French and Saunders, and so establishing the longevity of traditions of women in comedy. Of this era she records the structural obstacles that still made stand-up an uneven playing field for the two genders, but also observes progress made, most notably the way on the alternative comedy scene “[s]ex ceased to be something that men did to women and became a complex area of experience yielding a rich variety of comic paradoxes” (1994: 156).

Philosophy and psychoanalysis

One of the great strengths of Gray and Carlson as well as some of the other theorists considered thus far is the close attention they pay to different kinds of comic text: plays, films, novels, and performances are all examined with great care in the theorizing of the comic. So far we have heard from anthropologists, literary critics and literary theorists, Marxists, and feminists, but in this section we come finally to proper philosophers of comedy. What is striking about these philosophers is how little interest they seem to show in studying in detail actual comic texts. It is almost as if the rich and heterogeneous variety of comic practice gets in the way of philosophizing and it is best not to be distracted by it. As Lichtenberg puts it in a joke cited by Freud, inverting a famous line from *Hamlet*, “there is much … in philosophy that is not to be found in heaven or earth” (Freud [1905] 1976: 111). A philosopher likes nothing more than an argument, and might respond as follows to such an accusation: the literary critic, the anthropologist, the feminist, each acts as if he or she already knows what comedy or the comic is in its essence, because he or she confidently proceeds to analyze examples that are assumed from the outset to be representatives of this thing called comedy or the comic. But on what basis is this assumption made? If this basis is not secure, then is not the rest of the argument thrown into doubt? This is why the philosopher returns to fundamental questions rather than getting immediately drawn into the minutiae of comic phenomena.

One of the most significant philosophical interventions in the second half of the twentieth century is Susanne Langer’s chapter on comedy in *Feeling and Form*. Langer overlaps with Frye and Barber in emphasizing comedy’s rootedness in “spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings or initiations” (1953: 331), but she sees no need to temper festivity with morality. Instead, she says the essence of comedy is *life*, pure and simple, and that the great comic dramatists “have literally, ‘no use’ for moral principles” (1953: 345). In one of her few concrete examples, she cites the resilience and exuberance of clowns and comic buffoons, saying of the German Hans Wurst figure, “He is personified *élan vital* … his whole improvised existence has the rhythm of primitive, savage, if not animalian life … genuinely amoral—now triumphant, now worsted and rueful, but in his ruefulness and dismay he is funny, because his energy is really unimpaired” (1953: 342). With this assessment of the clown, Langer abjures the supposedly corrective element in comedy, and with it suspends the superiority theory handed down generation to generation from Aristotle. She also employs Bergson’s vitalist language, but instead of the comic arising, as in Bergson, through a mechanical encrustation on life, the comic for Langer is life itself. Langer’s range of reference is very wide, taking in Greek Old and New Comedy, Molière, Dante, the Spanish Golden Age, and the “nataka” of the Indian subcontinent, but she only ever lightly sketches how her comic vitalism works in practice. This was left to writers such as Charney and Torrance, who also rejected the moral basis of comedy and embraced the irrepressible energies of the comic protagonist.

Like Langer, John Morreall’s concrete examples are relatively limited, but this has in no way impaired the influence of his philosophical studies, chief among them *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983) and *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (2009). Although, as his titles suggest, Morreall’s interest is in laughter and humor more generally, he needs to be addressed here, because like Freud, his insights have been widely adopted as theories of comedy and the comic. Morreall begins both these investigations by testing the validity of what he takes to be the three main positions in the definition of humor and the comic: superiority (linked with Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes), incongruity (Kant and Schopenhauer), and relief (Spencer and Freud). He carefully identifies the gaps in each position and concludes that no existing theory is “comprehensive enough” (1983: 39). He is especially dismissive of Freud, whose theory he reduces to the idea that a joke allows its teller and audience to overcome an inhibition, ignoring entirely Freud’s careful linguistic analysis of the condensation and displacement that constitutes the “joke-work.” Leaving aside whether or not it is necessary or desirable to have a “comprehensive” theory, it is striking how Morreall’s own comprehensive theory more or less recapitulates the theory of incongruity: he concludes that humor and the comic are defined by a pleasant psychological “shift” (1983: 39–48), a “sudden change of mental state … that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously” (2009: xii). This is important because it places Morreall in general agreement with other thinkers since the 1960s (Bakhtin, Langer, Charney, Gurewitch) in moving away from the foundational Aristotelian view. It is notable, however, that the concept of superiority makes a surreptitious return in the latter part of *Taking Laughter Seriously* in Morreall’s tribute to the intrinsic superiority of the humorous person. As has been noted above under feminist theory, such a blanket view overlooks the sociopolitical contingencies of comedy and humor. In *Comic Relief*, Morreall takes a more rounded view, but nevertheless makes the case for a “positive ethics of humor” (2009: 112) in which humor cultivates intellectual and moral virtues.

A very different approach is taken by Dimitri Nikulin in *Comedy, Seriously: A Philosophical Study* (2014). Nikulin notes that since Plato, philosophy has for the most part distrusted or ignored comedy, even though Plato’s dialogues are themselves “subtly comic” (2014: 6). He takes this fact as a cue to argue that comedy is actually “the very dramatization of philosophical reasoning” (2014: vii). Focusing on the domestic comedies of the Roman playwright Terence, Nikulin treats the clever slave as a philosopher figure, slyly playing the fool, like Socrates, but all along *thinking* in a way that his master cannot. The master is in fact a slave to the comedy, because he is bound up by the twists and turns of the action, while the slave, formally unfree, is free to think. Thinking, for Nikulin, is essentially dialogic, and this is what makes comedy more philosophical than tragedy, which is oriented toward death and finitude, and tends toward the monological. So, not only is Nikulin dependent on a fairly strict opposition between comedy and tragedy, but he favors a particular sort of sunny comedy when he claims that “Characters in comedy worked toward a good ending, even if they often lacked an understanding of their actions. By acting with others toward a good ending, comedy allowed for the individual’s realization of human being as comic co-being, that is, as being in dialogue with others” (2014: 95). Within relatively narrow definitions of comedy and of philosophy, then, Nikulin can conclude that comedy is philosophical, and philosophy comical.

Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai observe that many thinkers on comedy reserve the right to distinguish between “true” and “false” comedy, a “conflation of taste with ontology” (2017: 241) that allows them to put to one side examples that do not fit their theory. Susanne Langer, for instance, says that a “Real comedy” is one that “sets up in its audience a sense of general exhilaration”; John Morreall approves of Jackie Gleason and Art Carney in *The Honeymooners*, but thinks most TV sitcoms are “pitifully childish” (1983: 10); and Nikulin, like so many before him, excludes Aristophanes from the outset. One of the thinkers that Berlant and Ngai mention is Alenka Zupančič, whose *The Odd One In* (2008) is the first sustained attempt at a Lacanian theory of comedy. This is not to say that there were not attempts before Zupančič to bring psychoanalysis and comedy together, starting with Chapter 7 of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in which Freud admits, “[i]t is only with misgivings that I venture to approach the problem of the comic itself” ([1905] 1976: 248). After Freud, ego psychologist Ernst Kris (1964) found that in comedy the ego, in the shape of the protagonist, usually negotiates successfully the chastisements of the superego and the demands of the id; while literary critics such as Gurewitch and Eric Bentley lean more heavily toward comedy as a field in which the id runs rampant. Bentley in particular picks up this thread with great gusto, arguing that “Like dreams, farces show the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes … mainly, if not exclusively, desires to damage the family” (1958: x). The Oedipal dimensions of comedy were explored at greater length by Charles Mauron in his monograph *Psychocritique du genre comique* (1964).

Oedipus does not come into the picture for Zupančič, who extrapolates from a few fleeting and scattered references to comedy in the texts of Jacques Lacan. Her narrow range of dramatic examples reflects the comedies commented on by Lacan (mainly Plautus and Molière). From this restricted vantage point, Zupančič explores two themes that preoccupy many theorists we have already discussed: the status of the comic hero and the place of love in comedy. Like the ego, or “I”, in Lacan, the comic protagonist is fundamentally split: not just the humiliated and chastised figure of Aristotle, nor the triumphant one of Torrance, the comic hero, says Zupančič, suffers and enjoys simultaneously. When this translates into an enjoyment *of* suffering, then this simultaneous and paradoxical feeling is what is known as *jouissance* in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Something in the comic hero is indestructible, but also, Zupančič implies, perverse, for whatever pains they experience (and these are many), “they always rise from the chaos perfectly intact, and relentlessly go on pursuing their goals, chasing their dreams” (2008: 29). And at the same time the comic hero seems to know nothing about it, for he or she is comically unconscious of the back half of the plank on the shoulder, of the hole in the pavement, of the reason for a passionate love. For love, as Lacan said many times, “is a comic feeling” (2015: 109). It is a comic feeling because it “involves a dimension of an unexpected and surprising satisfaction, satisfaction of some other demand than we have already had the opportunity to formulate” (Zupančič 2008: 134). Zupančič is not a reader of Shakespeare, but if she were, she might find in Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599) excellent proof that a lover is precisely “an answer to *none* of our dreams and prayers” (2008: 135), but the bearer of something surprising and un/pleasant that we need to decide what to do with.

[A] FINALLY …

It is reported that Ludwig Wittgenstein once planned to write a serious philosophical text composed entirely of jokes (Malcolm 2001: 27–8). He never did, and perhaps no one has yet, although Bernard Suits (1978) has composed a highly playful book about playing. Such a writing would be distinctly impure: neither a writing about comedy, nor a comic writing, but some hybrid of the two. It would be a writing of great lightness, a writing threatening always to take flight, not as sublimity, but from throwing off weight and sobriety. One shorthand for this writing might be Dionysian, and examples of it could be found in the theorists and writers who followed in the path cut by Nietzsche in his “gay” philosophy. One could look, for example, to the work of Georges Bataille (1985), whose “The Solar Anus” reminds us of a Bakhtinian body of dangerous openings, or to “The Big Toe,” a profane hymn to the baseness of the human foot. Or, one could turn to the most playful and elusive of the texts of Jacques Derrida, the books which infuriate proper philosophers for their refusal to play by the rules, to observe the dialectic, to proceed with seriousness. Or, to “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Hélène Cixous, in which the laughter of the mythical female monster is frightening only for those who fear the breakdown of hierarchies, or who are troubled by the limits of meaning. It is a laughter that, as Andrew Stott says, “is not an expression of pleasure, superiority, or release,” but “a powerful recognition of the end of understanding in language and the comic recognition of the subject’s failure to grasp it” (2005: 141). Perhaps it is the laughter that erupts when we are faced with what Zupančič calls “the unexpected and surprising satisfaction of love.”

Is this writing comical; is it theoretical? Perhaps it is both and neither. As Jacques Lacan says, something in the comic always escapes, and as Stott among other commentators has observed, the comic is in no sense restricted to comedy, cannot be contained in the bounds of a genre. As I have shown in this chapter, in the past century many theorists have attempted to account for comedy in its entirety, or to give complete or comprehensive theories of the form. The completeness of these theories is almost always dependent on the incompleteness of the comic canon they address. At the same time, there are many other theorists who deliberately and explicitly limit their theoretical conclusions to a finite set of comic texts, making no claims for totality in their coverage of comedy. It is often these theorists whose arguments resonate with Lacan’s observation, as they insist that the comic is fleeting and mercurial, bound to frustrate those who would pin it down once and for all. Another set of thinkers, Bakhtin in the lead, cannot be held to account for an open or closed theorizing of comedy, because they never set out in the first place to define the genre: Bakhtin’s quarry was carnival, and theorists of the comic found in his texts fertile ground. Bataille, Cixous, Derrida, and other poststructuralists fall into this category as well. They may not set out to theorize the comic, but the lightness—the *jouissance*—of their writing means that in it something always escapes. They are tricksters, comic heroes, like comedy itself, resisting final definition.