

Abstracts for Seminar 35: Rethinking City Comedy
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“A thornier piece of ground” – The Hidden City Comedy in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*
Matt Carter, Clayton State University

It would be uncontroversial that Shakespeare’s dramatic art grew and changed over the course of his career. I would argue that, as he reached the end of his career after the ascension of James, Shakespeare’s dramatic oeuvre continued to innovate in terms of stylometrics, but that he slowed in the adoption of new dramatic forms. Unlike Ben Jonson, who quickly moved out of the cluttered field of historical drama that Shakespeare helped hoist up (*Sejanus*, of course, being most Shakespearean of Jonson’s dramas), Shakespeare seems almost willfully resistant to adopting the newer genres that characterized the late 16-aughts, especially the city comedy.

As I shall argue, Shakespeare did, in fact, dedicate a small portion of his play *Pericles*, to exploring the city comedy genre. *Pericles*, already characterized by some as one of his few romances, is generically diverse, taking place in the historical past like a history play, utilizing the conventions of literary romance to move characters about the Aegean, and – as I shall demonstrate – applying the generic concerns of city comedy to Marina’s experiences in Ephesus. While Shakespeare himself was not shy about the bawdiness of the drama, Marina seems scandalized by what she sees. Perhaps Marina’s culture shock serves as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the new genre, with its dual emphasis on sexual currency and emerging capitalism, or perhaps it is Shakespeare’s genuine way of expressing frustration at becoming increasingly old-fashioned and naïve while being surrounded by a newer, edgier crowd of upcoming writers. In this essay, I hope to explore not only whether or not Shakespeare was using the city comedy genre in the play, but also to theorize what Shakespeare might have been getting at by doing so.

City Comedy and the Public of Players
Ed Gieskes, University of South Carolina

Early modern drama had multiple audiences from the nobility to citizens, from the Inns of Court to the prentices, and so forth. One audience was comprised of the players, playwrights, and other theatre professionals who produced the work on London stages. I take only one example, Jonson’s *Poetaster* addresses his fellow playwrights as much as it does the London audience at the turn of the 17th century. In this essay, I intend to expand some preliminary work on what city comedy can contribute to a sense of what a public of theatre professionals might look like. References in plays to older plays, specific theatrical practices, and locations are a recurrent feature of plays of the period (especially comedy and I plan to think about why that might be) and those references offer a way to think about how playwrights and acting companies imagined the tastes of their fellow professionals. The essay will examine some of Jonson’s city comedies as well as the work of Middleton and Dekker (alone and together) as way to begin characterizing how city comedy addresses theatre professionals and what the effects of that address might be on the production and reception of plays.

Festivity and Exclusion in Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*

Gina Hausknecht, Coe College

This paper emerges from my experience returning to *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, a play slotted in my brain as one of my favorite Elizabethan comedies, which I had not engaged with for a long time. I was surprised to find a very different play than the one I remembered. What I recalled as a mad romp tracing the triumph of labor over the forces of power and capital and of joyfully anarchic language over rhetorical decorum unfolded to me now as the epitome of comedy as cutting, in both senses of the word: harmony achieved by shouldering out of the way the objects chosen for derision, scorn and exclusion. What in my memory was a minor subplot concerning shoemaker Ralph and his wife Jane, happily concluded in the general merriment of the play's ending, now appeared to me as the play's psychic center, the physical, social and emotional vulnerability of the couple disrupting the dominant movement of the play toward festive resolution and making evident the churning, unceasing competition that characterizes the play even in its final moments.

A number of reconsiderations of *The Shoemaker's Holiday's* "smiling countenance" (Seaver 89) and "carnavalesque conviviality" (Bartolovich 35) have followed in the wake of David Scott Kastan's characterization of the play as "a utopian compensation for the alienation and fragmentation of Dekker's London" (161) in which "social dislocations are rationalized and contained in a reassuring vision of coherence and community" (152). While some of these have attended to the play's gender dynamics and discourses, there has not been concentrated focus on how Jane's marginalization factors into the play's catalogue of social and economic tensions in late Elizabethan England. This paper will consider the consequences for the play's festivity narrative of Jane's expulsion from the rowdily fraternal shoemakers' workshop after Ralph's military conscription and her exclusion even from the resolution of her dilemma at the play's end.

The Merchant's Shape: Romance and the Rejection of City Comedy

Kimberly Huth, California State University, Dominguez Hills

This paper will explore the intersection of city comedy and romance through consideration of two plays, Fletcher's *The Island Princess* and Shakespeare's *Pericles*. Each of these plays includes scenes that share characteristics with city comedy—portrayals of middle- and lower-class characters, realistic urban linguistic discourse, bawdy humor, and, most significantly, mercantilism—despite their overall settings far from the customary city comedy location of London. The expansiveness of romance makes it apt for inclusion of multiple genres, and both city comedy and romance are responding to the same social changes in early seventeenth-century English culture. Yet these romances readily minimize, abandon, or demonize the city comedy worlds they evoke in order to reach what are ultimately socially and politically conservative conclusions that reinstate fantasies of control over potentially disruptive forces that could find expression through city comedy. This paper will investigate how these plays counteract the potential critique of their city comedy moments through what Frederic Jameson terms "allegoresis," a mode of interpretation that creates coherence from what might otherwise be the cacophonous, multi-voiced, unruly experience of the early modern city. In these plays, city comedy enters these plays in a merchant's shape, but it is a commercial figure there to be exploited and then left behind.

Centripetal and Centrifugal Ben: An Expanded City Comedy in *The Staple of News*

Bill Kerwin, University of Missouri

A goal of our seminar is to examine “aspects of the urban experience that have gone unexplored,” and I will be bringing that inquiry into Ben Jonson’s 1626 *The Staple of News*. Jonson’s plays stand at the center of traditional ideas of city comedy: his humours plays and his comedies, even when they are, like *Volpone*, set in places other than London, bring that English city and its personalities and its economies under intense and imaginative scrutiny. Recent criticism of *The Staple of News* has very fruitfully engaged with media studies and colonial discourse. My paper will look less at spatial representations than at temporal representations and evocations, and the forms of language that mark the “news” and the “now” in urban constellations. In addition to the new forms of the emerging news media culture and the game of “jeering” of its participants, the play evokes and represents literary forms, such as the moral play, the epigram, the ballad, the masque, Thomas Dekker’s prose of speaking places, and numerous other forms. Jonson’s plays, as well as his short poems of satire and praise, embody what Caroline Levine calls the “collisions” of culture. I will be tracing collisions, especially temporal collisions, in this play.

What Did *Epicoene* really say?

Linc Kesler, University of British Columbia

In my 2024 book *Time and Causality in Early Modern Drama* I argued that tragedy developed through a sequence of stages responding to the growing sophistication of audiences in understanding emerging representations of causal plots. Nietzsche had traced a similar set of developments in Greek tragedy, without seeing them as forming in themselves a causal sequence, but ascribing them to the descent from the ritual origins of tragedy into the depiction of the life of everyday—the “botched outlines of nature”—resulting in the tragedies of Euripides and finally, New Comedy. I argued that the “mystery doctrine of tragedy” lost its power through its very success and the accommodation of audiences to the conventions of the causal plot, and that the descent into New Comedy provided a kind of retrospective parody of the tragic plot in which clever characters prospered rather than perished. The foremost practitioner of this kind of New Comedy in England was not Shakespeare, but Jonson, and Jonson’s middle comedies themselves form a sequence in which the development of this form and its implications are fully explored. *Epicoene* was at the centre of this sequence, in which the clever New Comic plot was fully realized and within which the hallmarks of tragedy, monologue, singular action, and elevated status, were fully displaced by dialogue, collaborative actions, and less elevated characters. The result was a City Comedy *par excellence*. The banishment of Morose with which the play concluded was the final rejection of the central tragic figure, and the roles of the collegians and other female characters a further qualification of the patriarchal presumptions informing much of the tragic tradition. The identity revelation with which the plot and play concluded acknowledged the common practice of male actors and boys representing female characters, as many other plays had already done. It went, perhaps, a bit further, to exposing the underlying vulnerability of identity structures created, as they all ultimately are, in representation. Jonson was to go further in *Epicoene*’s successor *Bartholmew Fayre*. Where Shakespeare consistently pulled back from the full power of such

realizations into a reconstitution of naturalized notions of stable individual identity in the characters that close his plays, and for the audiences that watched them, Jonson was more relentless in exposing them. All of these processes of Early Modern English drama, from early tragedy through the end of Jonson's New Comedy, having mapped and effected the transition from the oral/aural order of medieval drama and social practice towards the emerging more internal, cerebral, and politically contested regimes of writing and print, suggested that drama had eclipsed its centrality—ending in exactly the conceptual death “by suicide” that Nietzsche had lamented.

1 Henry IV and/as Shakespearean City Comedy

Jordan Zajac, O.P., Providence College

Our seminar organizers observed that the label “city comedy” has been ascribed to various plays, including Heywood and Dekker's chronicle histories. It can and should, however, be applied to a Shakespearean history play as well. With this paper, I want to try to argue that *1 Henry IV* could be understood as the first city comedy produced on the early modern commercial stage.

Scholars have noted the peculiar anachronisms the drama contains: it is set in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, yet it also includes a robust comic plot very clearly set in a recognizably contemporary London taphouse. As Sarah Dustagheer argues, the tavern scenes “place characters in the [contemporary] city and ask audiences to recall the world outside the playhouse” ([2021], 7).

That move—beckoning audiences to recall the world of London beyond the playhouse—signals an important development in the emergence of city comedy. To my knowledge, *1 Henry IV* is the earliest extant play to ever stage the *inside* of a commercial drinking house (I would love to be corrected on this, though). I want to argue that, given the comic significance of the Eastcheap tavern scenes, *1 Henry IV* should be understood as the *terminus ad quo* of city comedy.

To situate the complex relationship between chronicle history and city comedy, I will appeal to Gérard Genette's theory of hypertextuality, arguing that later plays—such as the anonymous and understudied *Look About You* (1599) and Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599)—supply hypertexts to the “hypotext” that is *1 Henry IV*. These plays help usher in the age of “city comedy” as it is currently understood.