

# SENIOR SEMINAR: THE COMIC TRADITION

SPRING 2011

ENG 461-02, M 4:00-6:45

DR. CHIRICO

*"Life is a tragedy for those who feel, and a comedy for those who think." --Jean de la Bruyère*

In this guided seminar in Western stage comedy, students will understand the origins, foundations and proto-types of the contemporary comedy that we see in film and TV shows. In order to do so, we will engage in a detailed reading and analysis of traditional comedies by classical Greek and Roman writers, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, Machiavelli and Molière, before moving to modern playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw and Tom Stoppard.

Why Comedy? Comedy makes us laugh; it can release pent-up emotions. It also provides social correction, pointing out the flaws in society. Finally, it affirms the life impulse within us. Philosophers and literary critics, such as Sigmund Freud, Northrop Frye, and Susanne Langer, have proposed theories for the nature of comedy. We will learn about their ideas and more in our quest towards understanding "why comedy?" and how dramatic comedies work.



Our examination will consist of noting differences between the various genres of comedy such as satire, romance, black comedy, tragicomedy and farce. We will read a substantial number of plays, from classical origins to the twentieth century, as well as view plays on and off campus and discuss nonliterary forms of comedy (standup, vaudeville, *commedia dell'arte*) in order to wrestle with the basic questions of "what is a comedy?" and "what purpose does comedy serve?"

## COURSE EXPECTATIONS:

**Readings:** While a good sense of humor and an active imagination is necessary for studying comedy and for reading plays, please be prepared to read difficult literary texts from the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. You should feel comfortable reading Shakespeare and other writers like him.

**Research Paper:** Students will write original research papers comparing a contemporary comedy (film or TV series) to comic precedents. Therefore, in addition to being willing to talk about your favorite movie, you should be able to compare classical and contemporary reading material, to do independent research, and to synthesize literary criticism and philosophy.