Dear Student of Comedy:

Hello! Join your fellow students in a year-long intensive study of comedy. What is comedy? Contrary to popular opinion, comedy is not just what makes us laugh. It turns out to be a very complicated field of literature with many twists and turns to explore.

Aristotle, in his treatise, Poetics, determined what made tragedy powerful, but his explanation of comedy is lost to us; his students didn’t keep good notes! So, in this guided seminar in Western stage comedy, we will try to fill in this gap in literary studies by determining a definition of comedy by reading three key comic dramatists of the western stage: Shakespeare, Molière, and G. B. Shaw.

We will read various plays closely for tricks, mischief, and nonsense, to see how wily servants outsmart their masters, how men and women plot for their own advantage, and how fools proffer a philosophy of life. Also, theorists and literary critics alike have proposed ways to think about comedy, such as Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Northrop Frye, and Susanne Langer. We will examine their ideas and apply them to the study of various dramatic texts in our quest towards understanding the essence of comedy.

As we delve into the roots of comedy, we will consider the present context as well –

“ What sit-coms and romantic comedies do we find funny today?
“ What tricks do we play on others and what masks do we wear?
“ What is the modern-day equivalent of the fool or the zany?
“ Does comedy reinforce stereotypes or challenge the status quo?

Finally, your instructor is interested in a particular pattern within comedy — the “trope of lost identity.” Thus, we will look for moments where a central character worries about losing his or her identity and wonders aloud “who am I?” In other words, the instructor is doing research for a book and will depend upon you for your creativity, hard work, and ideas.

Please join us! On with the Show!

“Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type — not however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To make an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain.” — The Poetics, Aristotle