

FREN 3030.301

Humor and Comedy in French and Francophone Culture

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:00-1:30 PM

Instructors

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This course will trace the prominent role played by humor and comedy in French and Francophone literature and culture from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era in a variety of genres and media, including theater, novels, cartoons, comics, films, and stand-up comedy. Through our exploration of this broad sampling, we will learn how humorous and comedic works reflect their historical circumstances, and we will also arrive at a deeper theoretical understanding of different kinds of humor and comedy and how they function. In particular, we will try to answer the following questions:

- Do humor and comedy inherently depend upon a sense of superiority? In other words, if we laugh, is it always at someone else's expense?
- Do comedy and humor simply reinforce established social hierarchies based on race, gender, and class, or can it provide a way to challenge them?
- What makes French and Francophone humor culturally specific? For example, how is a French comedy different from an American one, and how can we trace the evolution of comedic tropes from the earliest known French comedic works to contemporary ones?
- Why do scatology and body humor play such a prominent role in French comedic works?
- What are some of the different modes of satire, and are they meant to change society or keep it static?
- What can comedic works tell us about French republican universalism and its potential shortcomings?

All primary readings, discussions, and assignments will be in French. Some secondary readings will be in English.

Course Materials

Readings available at Penn Bookstore

- Bessora, *Les Taches d'encre* (Le Serpent à Plumes, 2000, ISBN 9782842612153)
- Molière, *Le Malade imaginaire* (Larousse, 2020, ISBN 9782035989895)
- François Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, ed. and trans. Guy Demerson (Seuil, 1996, ISBN 9782020300339)
- Jules Romains, *Knock ou le triomphe de la médecine* (Gallimard, 2022, ISBN 9782070386550)
- Voltaire, *Candide*, ed. Yves Bomati (Larousse, 2007, 9782035866011)

Readings available on Canvas

- Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (selections)
- Aristotle, *Poetics* (selections)
- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (selections)
- Charles Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*
- Henri Bergson, *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (selections)
- Pascal Debailly, "Poétique de la satire"
- Jody Enders, "Seriously Funny"
- *Fabliaux érotiques*, ed. Luciano Rossi (selections)
- *Farces du Moyen Âge*, ed. André Tissier (selections)
- Carla Freccero, "Damning Haughty Dames: Panurge and the Haulte Dame de Paris"
- Sigmund Freud, "Le mot d'esprit et ses rapports avec l'inconscient"
- Simon Gaunt, "Genitals, Gender, and Mobility: the *fabliaux*"
- Hope Glidden, "Rabelais, Panurge, and the anti-courtly body"
- E. Bruce Hayes, *Rabelais's Radical Farce* (selections)
- René Ménil, "L'humour: introduction à 1945"
- Jeffery Persels, "'Straitened in the Bowels,' or Concerning the Rabelaisian Trope of Defecation"

Films

- *Les Visiteurs* (1993)
- *Le dîner de cons* (1998)
- *Dinner for Schmucks* (2010)
- *Case départ* (2011)
- *Tout simplement noir* (2020)

All media and films will be made available through Canvas if possible. If not, they will be made available through streaming services that may require a subscription or a one-time purchase or rental fee.

Grades

Attendance and participation: 25%
Discussion posts: 20%
Laughter reports: 15%
Annotations: 15%
Essay: 25%

Attendance and participation

Students are expected to attend and participate in all class meetings, which will be devoted to discussion of the assigned reading for that day. These discussions, which will take the discussion threads and students' responses as a point of departure, will be recorded on a collaborative Google Doc that will be projected onscreen, and to which students can later refer.

To receive full credit for participation, you must make at least one relevant contribution to the verbal discussion and/or the Google Doc. If you are unable to attend a meeting for any reason, please contact the instructor ASAP so that the absence can be excused.

There are 28 class meetings for a total of 28 possible points:

- Participation = 1 point
- Unexcused absence = 0 points
- In attendance, but no contribution to the discussion or Google Doc = ½ point

Students who join the class late during Course Selection Period will not be penalized for classes they miss prior to joining.

Discussion posts

Starting in Week 2, students must post a contribution to a discussion thread on Canvas no later than 9:00 PM the day before each class meeting. Contributions must be in French, and 300-400 words in length. You will be provided with a selection of questions, and you may either respond to one of them or discuss something else that interests you and is relevant to that week's readings. Posts are graded on effort and completion: as long as your post is on time, within the word limit, and addresses the question in some way, you'll receive full credit.

There is a total of 26 available points:

- Discussion posted, complete and on time = 1 point.
- Failure to post discussion post and response = 0 points
- Late or deficient discussion post = ½ point

Laughter reports

Throughout the semester, you will be required to fill out two of these Google forms *en français*. They are a relatively informal, self-reflective exercise. You will be asked to describe an event, situation, person, meme, etc., that made you laugh and use some of the concepts we have worked with to analyze the cause of your laughter.

Points will be awarded as follows:

- Report is clear, on-time, and makes use of at least one theory: 5
- Report is well thought out but late OR makes no mention of theory: 3
- No report submitted: 0 points

Annotations

You will be asked to annotate the secondary sources we will read together. To get full credit for the assignment, you have two options:

- You can generate your own comment (question, clarification, or appraisal, such as wow! or omg! or absolutely not! *with* a thoughtful explanation for your reaction, etc.) and react to a peer's comment (agree, disagree, expand, support, etc.).
 - Or you can react to TWO of your peers' comments (agree, disagree, expand, support, etc.).
- Feel free to make more than two annotations. Comments or reactions should be at least a couple of sentences long; for example, "wow!" is not enough.

Essay

Students will write one essay, 6-10 pages long (double-spaced, Times New Roman 12). This will be an analytical essay on a work studied in the course; you will be given a list of possible topics for analysis for both compositions, but you may write on a topic of your choosing, as well. Students will first submit a draft of the essay that will be reviewed by the professor and by a fellow student in a guided peer review exercise. They will then revise the essay accordingly and submit the final version to be graded. Satisfactory performance in the peer review of a fellow student's paper will factor into the final grade.

Plagiarism and academic integrity

Students are expected to be familiar with the University of Pennsylvania's Code of Academic Integrity, a clearly defined set of rules governing student conduct in terms of crediting the work of others, collaborating with others on coursework, and completing assignments in a proper fashion. The instructor will hold students to the Code, and any and all violations of it will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct.

Online version: <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>.

General set of guidelines on how to cite sources properly and avoid plagiarism: <https://guides.library.upenn.edu/copyright/citation>.

Students are encouraged to discuss course materials or lessons with one another. They may NOT, however, complete all or part of any assignment for other students or share their work with other students for exercises or essays.

Wellness

Your mental wellbeing is our collective priority. If you, or someone you know, are struggling call Student Health and Counseling for 24/7 support at 215-746-WELL (9355). For more information on wellness at Penn: <https://wellness.upenn.edu/counseling/caring-yourself-and-others-stress-distress-and-crisis>.