

Politics and Literature: Comedy

The plot of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* turns on the question of comedy—its purpose, its effect on mores and virtue, and its place within a Christian polity. After we read this captivating mystery, we will turn to examine works by three comic writers: an ancient (Aristophanes), a medieval (Boccaccio), and a modern (Mark Twain). All three seem quite shocking and even outrageous. In Aristophanes' *Peace* and *Birds* we are given two successful attempts to defy and even overthrow the Olympic gods. In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, women driven from a city to escape the plague entertain themselves by telling comic tales that appear to exalt cleverness over virtue. And in Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, we see a send-up of pre-modern Christian life by a thoroughly modern man. Yet the dark conclusion of *A Connecticut Yankee* takes us the other way, calling into question the wisdom of modernity. Do we find something similar in the works of Aristophanes and Boccaccio? Do they, too, have serious and unexpected teachings about political life behind their wickedly funny stories? This course examines this question, in an effort to understand the purpose and place of comedy in the political /moral lives of human beings.