

UH 300-001:

Comedy & Democracy

Spring 2020 | W 1:45-2:45 pm

Classroom: Brewer Hall 228

Professor: Dr. Benjamin Gross

Office: Brewer Hall 220B

Office Hours: M 1-5 pm; T 4-5 pm; W 3-4 pm; R 9 am-noon & 4-5 pm;

and by appointment

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Further, [the guardians of the city] shouldn't be lovers of laughter either. For when a man lets himself go and laughs mightily, he also seeks a mighty change to accompany his condition.

- Plato, *The Republic*, 388e6-8

Course Rational:

A recent [comic strip](#) makes light of Plato's ideas concerning poetry. The comic focuses on his response to Homer, an epic poet. It seems, however, that Plato's greatest challenger to political philosophy is the comic poet. Indeed, it was Aristophanes' comic play, *The Clouds*, which Socrates identifies as poisoning his jury: "Besides, there are many of these accusers, and they have been accusing for a long time...And the most unreasonable thing of all is that it is not even possible to know and to say their names, unless a certain one happens to be a comic poet" (*Apology of Socrates*, 18c).

While comedy may endanger political philosophers, it could have a beneficial effect on democrats (i.e. those that support a democratic form of government). Many argue that [Aristophanes'](#) comedies allowed Athenian citizens to identify, expose, and remove practices that threatened their democracy. By exposing political problems through first laughing at them, Aristophanes seeks to change the condition of his audience safely.

We do not need to turn to ancient Greece, however, to see the relationship between comedy and democracy. In 1999, Jon Stewart took over [The Daily Show](#). He transformed a character-driven humor show into one focusing on politics and comedy. When Stewart inherited the show, it had a Nielsen Rating of 0.4. By his departure, the show rose to a rating of 1.3 – Americans have a taste for the comedic view of their democratic politics.

But what is the effect of consuming political comedy? Does it improve civic knowledge, political efficacy, and political participation? Or does it increase misinformation, cynicism, and apathy? Given the rise of this form of entertainment (e.g., [number of programs around the world](#)), social scientists from many disciplines are interested in investigating the questions.

While we are not scientists, these questions are still important for us. We are citizens of a democracy. Our leaders take [oaths](#) to protect this form of government; [comedians do not](#). Is the comedian an ally of democracy; an enemy of the state; both; neither; or something entirely else? Do we need to protect ourselves from their laughter, or is the laughter from comedy necessary for us to reflect on the injustices in our society (e.g., racism) without violence? By reading comedians, examining literature, exploring social science research, watching stand-up artists, analyzing comedic films, investigating political philosophy, and grappling with Aristophanes himself, we will educate ourselves in hopes of better answering these pressing questions.

Required Texts:

*Aristophanes. 1998. *Acharnians & Knights*. Ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ISBN: [9780674995673](#).

* Vonnegut, Kurt. 2010. *Welcome to the Monkey House*. New York, NY: Dial Press. ISBN: [9780385333504](#).

Course Goals:

By the end of the course, you will be able to...

- ...describe findings from social science about the effect of political comedy on democracy;
- ...explain how comedians understand their relationship to democratic politics;
- ...identify ways that comedy can question democracy that other art forms lack;
- ...detect how democracy can be a source for a comedian's act;
- ...clarify limitations facing comedians in a democracy;
- ...assess if comedians require censorship or not and, if so, from where;
- ...evaluate if comedy needs democracy and/or if democracy needs comedy;
- ...improve your abilities of critical thinking, communication (both verbally and through writing), and self-reflection.

Assignments and Grading:

Weekly Reading Quizzes	20%
Class Participation	30%
Professionalism	10%
Seminar Paper	20%
Final Exam	20%

Grading Scale:

A = 90-100
B = 80-89
C = 70-79
D = 60-69
F = <60

Assignment Details:

Attendance:

Students missing more than 25% of classes will automatically receive an F regardless of the final average.

Weekly Reading Quizzes:

To facilitate students with important parts of our readings, there are weekly reading quizzes. These quizzes are five multiple choice questions. They help guide your readings. They are not intended to be difficult, if you have read the assigned readings for the week. Quizzes are on Canvas and are untimed. Quizzes appear on Canvas by 5 pm on the Thursday prior to the weekly readings. Quizzes are due by 9 am of the Wednesday for that week's readings. Thus, the reading quiz for Week 5 goes live by 5 pm on the Thursday of Week 4 and is due by 9 am on the Wednesday of Week 5. All students will have their two lowest quiz grades dropped.

Class Participation:

We come to best understand each other through examination, questions, and conversations. As such, the course demands active participation from all students. We all have some insights regarding questions of what is just, funny, immoral, and more. Reading, analyzing, and interpreting comedy will not only show us how our authors understand these questions but also force us to confront our own opinions.

Participation consists of asking questions, responding to questions from your classmates and the professor, and engaging in discussions and friendly debates with classmates and/or the professor. In order to participate students need to complete the required reading for that day's class prior to the class session.

Professionalism:

All students begin the semester with 10% of their final grade completed. To keep this 10%, students must engage in professional behavior within the course. Students will lose points from their professionalism grade when they engage in unprofessional

activities. These include, but are not limited to, coming to class late; using phones, tablets, laptops, or other devices for non-class purposes; engaging in private conversations; reading books, magazines, newspapers, or other materials during class time; and other unprofessional actions. A professionalism rubric addendum explains this part of the course in detail and is on Canvas.

Students are being graded on professional actions in order to prepare them to act professionally in the future career.

Seminar Paper:

Students will complete a 1,000-1,500 word seminar paper. It is due Wednesday, April 1st (the calendar is in our favor). More information regarding the requirements of the paper and prompt is provided to the class in a hand-out on Wednesday, March 11th.

Final Exam:

The final exam consists of multiple choice, identifying who said what, short answers, and essay questions. The final exam is on Friday, April 24th at 1:30 pm.

Classroom Behavior:

Courtesy and regard for one another should guide classroom behavior. Since this is course concerning politics, discussion can be passionate at times. During class, we will always treat everyone with respect; especially during debates. This means listening and letting a classmate finish their thought before responding, debating ideas (not people), speaking to each other in a civil tone, and refusing to engage in personal attacks.

During these discussions, I ask you all to respect the ideas of your fellow students. This does not mean, however, that you must agree with these ideas. Political philosophy challenges ideas and ideals; thus, you are welcome to ask your classmates to explain their ideas, to ask them questions you see in their ideals, and so forth.

Students must be attentive during all aspects of class. Students who sleep, read the newspaper, persistently talk with other students, text, use their cell phones, surf the internet, use computers for any other use than note taking or are otherwise inattentive/disruptive in class will be asked to leave the class (as well as lose professionalism points). Students that engage in these behaviors repeatedly are subject to being dismissed from the course, at the professor's request.

Other Policies:

Late Work:

Only written the seminar paper will be accepted after its due date. Every day a written assignment is late, the assignment loses professionalism points (please see the professionalism rubric addendum). **One week after its due date, the professor will no longer accept late written assignments.** Any student, who does not submit their written assignments on time, or within one week after its due date, will receive a zero for that assignment.

Make-up Quizzes & Exams:

Since students are able to drop their two lowest quiz scores, there are no make-up quizzes available. Furthermore, there is only one test (i.e., the final exam) and it is on the last day of the course (final exam period). Thus, there is no make-up exam. If you are unable to attend the final exam period for a university approved reason, please inform the professor and he will arrange for you to take an exam at a different time.

Academic Integrity:

This course does not tolerate academic dishonesty. The professor adheres to and enforces JSU's policy on academic honesty (e.g. cheating, plagiarism, forgery, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, and sabotage). Violations of academic integrity in this course are addressed in compliance with the procedures laid out in JSU's [student handbook](#) (see pages 57 & 71-76).

Accommodations:

I am happy to accommodate any student with a documented disability. If you have a disability that affects your work in this class, and for which you may require adjustments or accommodations, please see a staff member in [Disability Support Services](#) (139 Doughty Hall, (256) 782.8380, dss@jsu.edu) so accommodations can be considered. Please speak with DSS and the professor, as early in the semester as possible. Students that receive accommodation letters or Individualized Post-Secondary Plans (IPP's) should meet with me to discuss the provisions of those accommodations as early in the semester as possible. All discussions will remain confidential.

Religious Observances:

If assigned work conflicts with your religious holidays, please tell me in advance so we can make alternative plans. Informing me of religious obligations after the fact, however, will not count as an excuse.

Title IX:

Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination based on sex in any educational institution that receives federal funding. Jacksonville State University does not tolerate sex discrimination of any kind including: sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, domestic violence, stalking or other conduct that is addressed in the university's "Title IX Gender-Based and Sexual Misconduct Policy." This type of conduct may interfere with or limit an individual's ability to benefit from or participate in JSU's educational programs or activities. Anyone with knowledge of this type of conduct are asked to immediately report such incidents to the University Police Department at (256) 782-5050 or the Title IX Coordinator at (256) 782-5769. These incidents may also be reported to an instructor, faculty or staff member, who are required to notify the Title IX Coordinator. If a student wishes to keep the information confidential, the student may speak with a counselor at the Counseling Services office at (256) 782-5475 or a medical provider at Student Health Services (256) 782-5310. For more information about Title IX, please visit the JSU Title IX webpage at www.jsu.edu/titleix.

Military-Connected Student Statement:

The Office of Veteran Services serves all active duty, guard, reserve, veteran, and dependent students at JSU. If you have any questions about Veteran Services please contact them at (256) 782-8838, veterans@jsu.edu, or the physical location in the basement of Doughty Hall. If you are a student currently serving in the military (Active Duty, Guard, or Reserves) with the potential of being called to military service or training during the course of the semester, you are encouraged to contact me no later than the first week of class to discuss the class attendance policy. The professor may make accommodations for this absence or suggest that you take the course at another time.

Questions About Your Grades:

I am happy to take questions about your grade in-person during my office hours/appointments. I do not, however, discuss grades over e-mail or phone due to FERPA regulations, which protects your privacy. See [here](#) for more information. At the end of the semester, your final grade will only change if there is a mathematical error.

Withdraws:

Please be advised, the last date to withdraw from the course without academic penalty is Friday, March 13th. There are other important dates regarding withdrawing from the course with regards to refunding your tuition and if you receive an academic penalty, which can be found [here](#). If you choose to stop attending the course it is your responsibility to withdraw from the course. If you do not withdraw from the course the professor will enter the grade you have earned as your final grade.

Student Notifications:

All notifications for the course will either be posted on the Canvas site and/or e-mailed to your JSU e-mail address. Be sure to check Canvas and your JSU e-mail for all notifications (or set your JSU e-mail to forward to another address).

E-mail Policy:

I will do my best to respond to all e-mails within 24 hours. In your first e-mail to me, please include a picture of “Alf”. This ensures that you have read the syllabus. If your first e-mail lacks “Alf,” you will receive a response saying: “Please refer to your syllabus.” Future questions answered by the syllabus will receive the same response.

In order to help response time, please include an appropriate subject line in your e-mail. Furthermore, please take the time to construct a formal e-mail with proper etiquette and language. I will not respond to e-mails constructed in a manner like, “Yo, Dr B i will b l8 4 clas 2day” or using emojis to represent words/ideas.

How to be Successful in this Class:

The best way to be successful in this class is to be prepared. Being prepared means you will need to read all of the assignment carefully and, most likely, reread the assignment at least once prior to class. These texts are full of carefully constructed arguments, which sometimes only become visible after multiple interactions with the text. By reading the assignments prior to class you will be able to fully participate and get the most out of our classroom experience.

Furthermore, good note taking is vital. Learn to listen carefully. I find students who write down the questions being asked, and then the responses to these questions, are the most successful. If you only write down the answer the note is meaningless, as it lacks the context of the question.

After class review your notes to see if they make sense. By reviewing them sooner than later you will be able to remember things from class to sort out any points of confusion in your notes.

Finally, get together with other students to form study groups. If you get together periodically and go over notes, you are more likely to have a complete set of notes. You will not only be able to go over your notes together to fill in the gaps, but by discussing with each other the topics of the class you might come to new insights.

Tentative Class Schedule:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Reading</u>
1/8	Introduction	NO READING
1/15	What role do comedians' think they have within a democracy?	Canvas
1/22	What questions does comedic literature bring forth about democracy?	Vonnegut pp. 7-14 & Canvas
1/29	Does social science find any relationships between comedy and democracy?	Canvas
2/5	What does comedy expose about the American Dream? (<i>Raising Arizona</i>)	Canvas
2/12	What does comedy expose about the American Dream? (<i>Raising Arizona</i>)	Canvas
2/19	Are there limitations on comedians within a democracy?	Canvas
2/26	Do democracies need to censor comedians?	Canvas
3/4	<i>The Knights</i>	pp. 227-249
3/11	<i>The Knights</i>	pp. 249-291
4/18	<i>The Knights</i>	pp. 291-321
4/1	<i>The Knights</i>	pp. 321-367
4/8	<i>The Knights</i>	pp. 368-405
4/15	Reflection on the Semester	NO READING
4/24	FINAL EXAM (1:30 pm – 3:30 pm)	NO READING