Comedic Devices
HUMOROUS LITERARY DEVICES
About Comedic Devices

- We have all heard of literary devices in literature. Since elementary school, we have studied things like plot, setting, denouement, and conflict.

- We have even studied literary devices that fall specifically under the umbrella of figurative language: metaphor, simile, allegory, allusion.

- Did you know that there are certain literary devices whose purpose is to enhance the comedic aspects of literature?

- We will be looking at several of these devices and evaluating our text, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for both examples of comedic devices and to explore how these devices enhance the comedy of Shakespeare’s play.
Repetition

Repetition in comedic writing is a bit different than repetition in poetry or prose. In comedy, repetition can also be referred to as a callback. It occurs when a statement or a theme is recalled as the punch line to a joke or at the close of a scene. Repetition is also considered a “classic example of the tension and release ... where repetition is used to set up a modus operandi and build tension before [a solution] provides the resolving juxtaposition.” (Comedic Device)

Example: Picture a comedic scene in which a wife and husband are getting ready to go to work. The wife judiciously reminds the husband that “It’s cold outside, so grab a sweater.” Throughout their morning routine, the wife keeps reminding the husband to grab a sweater. When the wife drives by her husband on his bicycle (on his way to work) we see the icicles hanging from his nose and his face and ears red with cold. The wife honks her horn, rolls down her window, and yells, “I told you to grab a sweater!!!”
Hyperbole, also called an overstatement, is a figure of speech in which statements are exaggerated or extravagant. It may be used to reflect or affect strong feelings or a strong impression. (Comedic Device)

EX: “You look madder than a wet hen”, or “It's raining cats and dogs”
Understatement

- An understatement is a figure of speech in which statements are purposely understated. It may be used to indicate the speaker's nonchalance (or obliviousness) regarding an often important or otherwise remarkable situation. It often results in irony where, for instance, the speaker's response to an event does not match how the viewer expects the speaker to react. (Comedic Device)

- Example: Picture a comedic scene in which the key character witnesses a dramatic bank robbery with gunshots firing, women screaming, and sinister looking men in masks running around with their weapons brandished for all to see. Rather than freak out, scream, or call for help, our comedian sits down on a park bench and enjoys coffee and a doughnut while watching the scene unfold.
Double Entendre

- A **double entendre** is a spoken phrase that can be understood in either of two ways. The first, literal meaning is an innocent one, while the second, figurative meaning is often ironic or risqué and requires the hearer to have some additional knowledge to understand the joke. (Comedic Device)

- Many double entendre have a secondary meaning that is sexual in nature (and thus why you only have two mildly insulting examples listed below!!!)

  - Mercutio's line from William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: *Tis no less [a good day], I tell you; for the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon.*

  - The name of the Belamy Brother's song "If I Said You Had a Beautiful Body, Would You Hold It Against Me." Would you hold it against me is an expression asking if you would be offended, but in this case, it can also be read as asking the person with the nice body to physically hold it against him. (Double Entendre Examples)
More about Double Entendre

- Some humorous faux pas are also considered double entendre. Check out these funny headlines:
  - Panda mating fails: veterinarian takes over
  - Miners refuse to work after death
  - New obesity study looks for larger test group
  - Children make nutritious snacks
  - Criminals get nine months in violin case (Double Entendre Examples)
A **pun** consists of a deliberate confusion of similar words or phrases for humorous effect, whether humorous or serious. A pun can rely on the assumed equivalency of multiple similar words, of different shades of meaning of one word or of a literal meaning with a metaphor. (Comedic Device)

Basically, a pun is a statement in which a particular word or phrase has more than one meaning. Within the pun, both meanings of the word or phrase are true at the same time.

Examples:
- Corduroy pillows are making headlines.
- Did you hear about the optometrist who fell into a lens grinder and made a spectacle of himself? (Examples of Funny Puns)

We also see examples of Puns throughout Shakespeare. Think about the character of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*
Juxtaposition is a literary technique which causes the audience to compare two elements simply because they are placed next to each other. When the comparison is unexpected, it creates irony. In some cases, this can be created through grammatical ambiguity. For example "My wife.. it's the same every night. 'when are you going to paint the kitchen?' 'When are you going to paint the kitchen?', every bloody night. 'When are you going to paint the kitchen?'. I've told her about 10 times now, and she still hasn't done it". In this case, until the punch-line, the audience generally assumes that the woman is giving the orders to the man. (Comedic Devices)
The mistaken identity (often of one twin for another) is a centuries old comedic device used by Shakespeare in several of his works. The mistake can be either an intended act of deception or an accident. Modern examples include The Parent Trap, The Truth about Cats and Dogs, Sister Sister, and the films of Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. (Comedic Devices)

Shakespeare adds his own unique twist to mistake identity in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. How might the four lovers fight be a case of mistaken identity?
Taboo

- Sometimes people say something that is taboo in order to get a rise out of someone else. A taboo statement is one that is socially unacceptable because of the moral standards it calls into question. To put it bluntly, taboo statements are often things that people say that “you just aren’t supposed to talk about.”

- For example, a taboo statement would be if someone made a joke about a member of religious clergy that was arrested for child pornography.
“Slapstick is a type of comedy involving exaggerated physical violence.” (Comedic Devices)

Think about all the goofy movies we see where Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly are fighting with each other (such as Stepbrother), or Jim Carrey is doing a lot of physical comedy (as in The Mask or Liar, Liar.)

You also see a lot of slapstick comedy in cartoons such as Roadrunner or Tom and Jerry.
Verbal Irony

What is said/written is the opposite of the meaning. When caustic or harsh, can be sarcasm. (Gadbois)

Example: You look out the window and there is a hailstorm on top of a tornado happening. You mutter to yourself, “Boy, it sure is a beautiful day!”

Function: Obviously the day is crap-tastic outside. You utter this statement to express how terrible the day is by saying the exact opposite of what the truth is.
Situational Irony

- What happens is the opposite of what is expected. It’s not a coincidence.

Example: "...when you require assistance there is never anyone around." *Shopping Madness*, Bill Bryson, page 2, line 83.

Function: Most of the time, when in a store, the employees are offering help finding items or showing new sales. But the times that you need help, the author says, it seems like the employees are all gone. If the employees really wanted to help you, you would expect that they would be around when you wanted help. (Gadbois)
Dramatic Irony

- A character is unaware of the context in which they are speaking. The audience, however, understands the circumstances and situation. (Gadbois)

Example: In *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience knows of Juliet’s plans to fake her own death so that the star-crossed lovers can be together. However, the Romeo is unaware of her plans, and therefore kills himself when he perceives her to be dead. It is ironic because Juliet fakes death in order to have a life with Romeo, and Romeo kills himself just as Juliet is coming ‘back to life’.
Parody

- Known by also as a spin-off or spoof, a parody is an imitation of another’s work, usually in a humorous way to poke fun at the original work. This can be done in television, music, posters, writing, and other media. Usually, for a better effect, a parody makes fun of a famous or well-known piece of work, so the audience has a better chance of recognizing the original. (Gadbois)

Examples: Perhaps one of the best known parody’s is of the movie Star Wars. It was parodied by the movie Spaceballs nearly a decade after it’s release. (consider, for a moment the profound wisdom of the character Yoghurt while saying “May the Schwarz be with you!”)

- The Scary Movie series are also parodies of popular scary movies of the day.
Often in a list, absurdity is the wrong or improper use of examples. They stand out immediately as not in the right place or situation.

Example: "...we don’t know whether the ants are killed, or will mutate again and become agents, or what." High-tech Twinkie War Will Be No Picnic, Dave Barry, page 2, line 24.

Function: The list starts with reasonable examples, and quickly changes to absurdity. It’s possible that the ants will be killed, but that will mutate into agents has nothing to do with any part of the article. The possibilities start logical and feasible, but then there is an absurd example to catch the reader’s attention. (Gadbois)
Incongruity

- When something happens out of place or it is not in its normal environment. This can also be a person acting out of character.

Example: These Lines are from the movie Ghostbusters:

- **Dr. Peter Venkman**: This city is headed for a disaster of biblical proportions.  
  **Mayor**: What do you mean, “biblical”?  
- **Dr Ray Stantz**: What he means is Old Testament, Mr. Mayor, real wrath-of-God type stuff.  
  **Dr. Peter Venkman**: Exactly.  
- **Dr Ray Stantz**: Fire and brimstone coming down from the skies. Rivers and seas boiling.  
  **Dr. Egon Spengler**: Forty years of darkness. Earthquakes, volcanoes…  
  **Winston Zeddemore**: The dead rising from the grave.  
  **Dr. Peter Venkman**: Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together – mass hysteria

(13 Great Quotes from Ghostbusters)

Function: What starts out as a clear list of “a disaster of biblical proportions” quickly turns into something absurd, such as “dogs and cats living together”. This is incongruous with the rest of the list.
Oxymoron

- A short phrase that is contradictory in itself. One part has an opposite meaning from the other.

Example: There is an article entitled "Spontaneity and How to Plan for It!" The Editor’s Tale, John Kenney, page 1, line 23.

Function: The oxymoron is in the title, "Spontaneity and How to Plan for It!" The definition of spontaneity is impulsiveness and sudden, often irrational. To plan spontaneity defeats its purpose and meaning. (Gadbois)
Sources


