Jacques Lacan comes to the subject of comedy at a crucial moment in his thought in Seminar V, in which he famously reframes the Freudian Oedipus complex. The crucial stake in this ontogenetic moment of the subject’s ascension to the symbolic, Lacan argues here at length, is not the biological organ, the penis. It is the phallus, first as the fantasmatic object which the child supposes would satisfy the desire of the mother; then, with the resolution of the complex, as a repressed signifier of this forbidden desire. In order to frame his understanding of the phallus as signifier, though, Lacan refers his auditors to ancient sources from the West’s pagan past (specifically Herodotus and Aristophanes) wherein the phallus, precisely as a signifier, had a specific cultic signification, particularly in the mystery religions. What we learn if we look at what we know about these cults, Lacan comments, is that:

It [the phallus] is always employed in connection with a simulacrum, with an insiginiun, whatever the mode in which it is presented, whether it is a question of a raised staff from which the virile organs are appended, or the question of an imitation of the virile organ, whether it is a question of a piece of wood, of a piece of leather, or of a series of varieties in which it is presented, it is something which is a substitutive object [... it has all the characteristics of a real substitute.\(^1\)

As Lacan develops in the important, contemporary \textit{écrit}, “The Signification of the Phallus,” the phallic signifier had a series of senses. The phallus was pre-eminently in the cults of Demeter and Dionysus a signifier of natural potency or fertility, associated with nature’s seasonal bounty and “vital flow.”\(^2\) However, Lacan argues that the phallus also functioned in the cults as a signifier of such primordial \textit{Jouissance as lost to us} (or “struck by the signifier”) as speaking animals—a fact reflected in the mystery cults’ surrounding of the phallic signifier with a series of veils and

prohibitions. Finally, Lacan claims a status for the phallus as the signifier of the effects of the signifier on the field of the signified:

[...] the privileged signifier of that mark where the share of the logos is wedded to the advent of desire. One might say that this signifier is chosen as what stands out [...] in the real of sexual copulation, and also in the most symbolic [...] sense [...] since it is the equivalent of the relation of the (logical) copula. One might also say that by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the most vital flow as it is transmitted in generation.\footnote{3}

In the ancient comedies, Lacan however notes, the phallus that was usually veiled—indeed, surrounded at the heart of the mysteries by the ritual asceseis depicted in Pompeii’s Villa of the Mysteries\footnote{4}—was put on open display, worn in lewdly exaggerated forms by the comic actors. As Lacan would later observe in \textit{Seminar VII}:

The sphere of comedy is created by the presence at its centre of a hidden signifier [...] that in the Old Comedy is there in person: namely, the phallus.

Who cares if it is subsequently whisked away?\footnote{5}

For Lacan, an investigation of the nature and function of comedy as a literary art hence emerges as a fruitful source for understanding both, firstly, the signification of the phallus and secondly, because of the decisive place of this signifier in the symbolic constitution of the subject, the wider Freudian field. As we might say, it is not contingent for Lacan that the ancients thought it apposite to place in public display in the comic theatre this totemic signifier access to which itself was usually prohibited,\footnote{6} and which invoked the field of the \textit{Jouissance} prohibited to subjects as the price of acceding to symbolic Law. The literary and theatrical genre of comedy is for Lacan, as for other theorists of the form, not idle play set aside for any kind of senseless enjoyment, “just for laughs,” as we say. Comedy for Lacan is a cultural sublimation given over to the public revelation of what is usually repressed. It is a cultural form of the highest order, beneath whose surface of ribald and frivolous play we can glimpse the highest truths concerning our condition as parlêtres, speaking animals subject to the laws of the signifier.

In this context, it is not surprising that we find Lacan devoting several sessions of \textit{Seminar V} to Molière’s comedy \textit{The School for Wives} (the session of 18/12/1957) and Genet’s comedy, \textit{Le Balcon (The Balcony)} (5/3/1958), on top of a series of enticing remarks on the ancient comic Aristophanes’ \textit{oeuvre}. Comedy, Lacan specifically argues, traffics in revealing and making play with the subject’s most ancient wish which “in the last analysis every process of the elaboration of desire in language” evokes: “that after all this detour is made [though culture, law, language] in the

\footnote{6}{Lacan, Sem. V 23/4/58, 12.}
last analysis [we could] get back to *Jouissance* and its most elementary form.”⁷ In what follows, we aim to draw out what Lacan says concerning comedy in *Seminar V*, and how it relates there to his thinking at this stage of his oeuvre concerning the signification of the phallus. Lacan himself laments in *Seminar VII* the “little time” that his wider concerns have allowed him to devote to the manifold registers and phenomena of comedy. Alenka Zupančič’s extraordinary work *The Odd One In: On Comedy* shows the rich potential Lacan’s thought as a whole has as a means to theorise these phenomena in the dimensions of subjectivity, temporality, repetition and the drive.⁸ Here, focussing centrally on Lacan’s (itself quite hilarious) analysis of Genet’s *Le Balcon*, we will draw out four particular claims Lacan makes concerning comedy in *Seminar V*. Taken together, we will hope to show, they represent a typically remarkable contribution to the theory of comedy, its motives and nature, as “linked in the closest possible fashion to what can be called the connection between the self and language,” and hence to the Freudian field as reconfigured by Lacan.⁹

I. The comic hero and the desire to be the imaginary phallus

For Lacan, the figure of the comic hero is there to put on stage before us the single-minded pursuit of some desire with which we can all relate, but in an unconditional manner that we cannot pursue. At its base, indeed, Lacan discerns in the comic hero a figuring of the scoundrel or would-be tyrant in each of us to relate to language, law, political life as a “rational” instrument to attain *Jouissance* (power and illicit pleasure), and fulfil our most basic, “natural” needs. Lacan’s preeminent example to illustrate this first thought concerning the meaning of comedy, interestingly, is Aristophanes’ famous spoof on the philosopher Socrates in his comedy, *Clouds*. For how else is Socrates presented to us in the *Clouds*, Lacan asks us, if not as the subject who would “take advantage of language”—in Aristophanes’ artful terms, by learning to make the weaker or unjust argument appear the stronger, and by worshipping goddesses who teach rhetoric and can imitate all things? As Lacan comments:

Aristophanes shows Socrates to us in this form: that all that lovely dialectic will serve an old man to try to satisfy his desires by all sorts of tricks, to escape from his creditors, to arrange that he is given money; or for a young man to escape from his commitments, from all his duties, to complain about his ancestors, etc.¹⁰

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Yet the phenomenon of the comic hero single-mindedly devoted to pursuing his own Jouissance is not peculiar to Aristophanes—whose heroes nevertheless do include a man so committed to achieving peace that he breeds a giant dung-beetle to fly to Olympus to set the gods straight concerning the Greeks’ warring, and Athenian and Spartan women so devoted to the cause of peace that they withhold all sexual favours until their men return to sanity and make peace. In the new comedy of the later Greek and Roman worlds, Lacan observes—in a way Zupančič has brilliantly associated with Hegel’s comments on comedy in The Phenomenology of Geist—a series of characters are presented to us “committed in general in the most fascinated and stubborn fashion to some metonymical object,” an object which stands in for them for das Ding.

All of the human types of every kind are there. There are the lustful, the characters that one will later rediscover in Italian comedy, characters defined by a certain relationship to an object, and around whom pivot all the new comedy, that which goes from Menander to our own day, around something which is substituted for the eruption of sex which is love, then there is love named as such, the love that we will call naive love, ingenuous love, the love that unites two young people who are generally rather dim-witted, which forms the pivot of the plot; and when I say pivot, it is because love really plays this role, not of being comical in itself, but of being the axis around which turns all the comic of the situation, up to the époque that one can clearly characterise by the appearance of Romanticism.

What is at stake in the desire of comic characters like Strepsiades or Dikaiopolis, Lacan specifies, is “the return of need in its most elementary form.” And which needs in particular? There can be no question. Comedy involves:

[...] this emergence to the forefront of what originally entered into the dialectic of language, namely in a special way all sexual needs, precisely all the needs that are usually hidden. This is what you see being presented on stage in Aristophanes, and this goes very far, I would particularly recommend to your attention the plays concerning women and the way in which this return to the character of elementary need as underlying the whole process, [and] what special role is given in this to women.

In Aristophanes’ remarkable oeuvre, this function of the comic revelation of eros is closely related for Lacan to what is particularly evident in Aristophanes’ work, namely the political function of his comedies. We know that in Aristophanes an almost visceral outrage at the follies of the Peloponnesian war, matched only by

12. We are evoking, of course, Lacan’s definition of sublimation per se in Seminar VII (112, cf. 101-114) as an object raised to the dignity of the Thing.
his aristocratic disgust at the vulgarities of the Athenian democracy, represent the kind of constant centre around which the Acharnians, the Lysistrata, the Assembly of Women, and the Peace all turn. But war is a phenomenon of civilization. Far from the recursion to barbarism which as often depicted, it is pre-eminently in war that the full scope of the claims the symbolic order lays upon us as subjects of the signifier—so we can even be called upon to kill and to die—is fully displayed. One thinks in this connection of Joseph Heller’s comic masterpiece Catch 22, which is one hilarious complaint animated on every page by a kind of outraged wonder at the absurdity of asking men to risk their lives in far-away places by killing men they have never met, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. Just so, Lacan—here joining theorists of comedy from Francis Hutcheson to Agnes Heller—sees in comedy a kind of heightening and showing up of the minimally unnatural status of the symbolic order, and its “castration” of us from simple, animalic bliss:

Of course it is always in […] the supreme moment of distress for Athens […] because of a series of bad choices and by a submission to the laws of the city that seem literally to be leading it to destruction that Aristophanes sets off this alarm. It consists in saying that after all people are exhausting themselves in this pointless war and there is nothing like staying at home nice and warm in one’s own house and going back to one’s wife. This is not something which is properly speaking posed as a morality. It is a restatement of the essential relationship of man to his condition […] without our having to know, moreover, whether the consequences are more or less salutary.17

II. The Comedic “As if”, and Sovereign Enjoyment

Following on from this thought, a key element of comic dramas as Lacan reads them involve the playful presentation to us of individuals who, impossibly, would directly enjoy their social or “phallic” power, thereby living out an answer the all-too-human question: “what can it really mean to enjoy one’s state of being a bishop, a judge or a general?”18 This second claim is analytically separable from the first: here we are not concerned with how the base, usually repressed “natural” desires that undergird social intercourse are paraded on the comic stage, like the phalloi of the ancient comic actors. Instead, this Lacanian point speaks to the near-inescapable, and tendentially neurotic, fantasy of subjects of the signifier concerning the Others who wield symbolic or phallic power, beginning from the father. This is the

15. Aristophanes, thymotic friend to all that was old and venerable (“the generation of Marathon,” as it were), was several times sued for defamation because of his strident criticism of contemporary democratic politicians, including by the infamous demagogue Kleon.
fantasy, which becomes explicit in clinical paranoia and conspiracy theories, that these Others must enjoy, immediately, in and because of their being, the power and the *Jouissance* denied to us. What is implied is that all the *politesse* of civilized life is actually a front, a mere means for those bold or fortunate enough to attain this *Jouissance*. The real men and women can and do directly attain It.

It is to illustrate this second point that Lacan turns in *Seminar V* to his telling, and itself hilarious, analysis of Genet’s *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*). The play is set, _à la_ Aristophasenes, in a time of political upheaval and crisis: the French revolution. There is a bordello in Paris, our setting. We note straight away that this setting is itself one, like the comic stage, in which real elements of human life which are usually off-limits are given a kind of luminal public sanction. Certainly, the brothel provides Genet with a setting to directly ask the comic question concerning the supposed enjoyment or *Jouissance* of figures of symbolic, phallic authority. For the girls at the brothel report that many of the men who come to enjoy their services, regularly ask that they be dressed up as—what? Exactly figures of the most august symbolic authority: the bishop, the judge, the general, or the statesman. The chief of police, who is Genet’s comic hero, is charged with keeping the bordello safe in these times of crisis. However, the chief has a somewhat aberrant relationship to his symbolic role. Lacan hones in on his concern, when it comes to talking with the girls, not with the prosecution of his civic duties, but with asking specifically: whether any of their clients happens to have come in to the bordello asking to be dressed up in his role, as the Chief of Police? In Lacanian terms, that is, the hero of *Le Balcon* wants to know exactly whether he has or is It, the phallus, the font of sexual *Jouissance* and symbolic power—almost as if Genet must have read Lacan _avant la lettre_. In Lacan’s words, his Chief in *Le Balcon* represents “… simple desire, pure and simple desire, this need that man has to rejoin his own existence in a fashion that can be authenticated and directly assumed, [and so to give] his own thought, a value which is not purely distinct from his flesh […]”

Beneath the ridiculousness, there is some important conceptual work to do here to understand why the scenario is so paradigmatically comic, given the perspective Lacan is developing at this point. The police are, truly, a public authority. However, that said, they are also the point of last resort: a compelling force which operates in what Lacanian theory calls the Real of violence, not the symbolic. As we know, it is only when the order of symbolic authority and of subjects’ respect for the words of the powers-that-be have failed that the Police are called. This is why we should not be surprised that, for the larger part of the comedy, Genet has it that no one _has_ asked to be the Chief of Police, in order to illicitly enjoy as a real man. If real enjoyment, _per_ neurotic fantasy, is to directly, consciously _enjoy_ holding a position of symbolic authority, then playing the policeman (which speaks to a more per-

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20. See e.g. Slavoj Žižek, _For They Know Not What They Do_ (London: Verso, 2002), 250-252.
21. As, of course, _per_ the fantasy of the masculine subject-position, in the formulae of sexuation developed by Lacan in *Seminar XX*. 
verse bent) does not fit the bill. In Lacanian terms, the Policeman does not have the phallus, unlike the judge whose words by themselves can strike fear into people’s hearts; or the statesman, whose words can move a nation; or the bishop, whose blessing it is agreed can confer peace, grace, even the forgiveness of sins.

However, per impossible, and because The Balcony is a comedy, at the decisive peripeteia, everything seems to fall into place for Genet’s hero. What is usually off limits to human beings, as civilized subjects of language and law, falls in his lap. The revolutionary situation is so dire that the Chief of Police is asked to form a kind of paramilitary police state, tyranny, or dictatorship. The question thus emerges: what symbol would the regnant Chief like to have on his new uniform, to signify his new power for Public Safety? Here is Lacan’s own, comic gloss on what transpires:

[…] the chief of police consults his entourage on the subject of the suitability of a sort of uniform, and also the symbol which will be the symbol of his function. He does so not without shyness […]: indeed, he shocks the ears of his listeners a little: he proposes—a phallus. Would the church have any objection to it? [he asks]—and he in fact bows his head a little […] to the bishop who shows some hesitation. The bishop for his part suggests that after all if the phallus is changed into the dove of the Holy Spirit, it would be more acceptable. In the same way the general proposes that the figure in question should be painted in the national colours, and some other suggestions of this kind follow, which make us think that of course we are going to come pretty quickly to what is called on such occasions a concordat.22

If this happy issue were not enough, at this very moment Genet has one of the girls burst in and, in the coup de theatre, recount that one of her regular clients, albeit a lowly plumber, has in fact come in and asked to be dressed as the Chief of Police to prosecute his business at the bordello! Here, that is, we have the comic hero’s supreme apogee; and behind it, a kind of tellingly ridiculous staging of the impossible fulfilment of the neurotic fantasy to be or to have, in the real, the phallic Thing, crux and guarantor of all sexual enjoyment and political power. Culture has stooped to nature, or an exception has been made to the founding prohibition of culture: that no one man—as against a beast or a god—can usurp and command the primordially repressed, phallic Thing.

III. Falling in the Soup … (the impossibility of the direct possession of the Phallus)

Lacan’s further point, which stands over the entire analysis as we have seen, is however that the final, dreamt of union or harmony of civilised subjectivity with simple, animal-like, natural enjoyment is impossible. As beings of nomos and of logos, we can only dream of directly being or having the fully satisfying Thing,

or dwelling in the Isles of the blessed, in Plato’s image in the Republic. Thus, no sooner has the Chief in Genet’s Balcony attained his apogee, than he is made by the laws of comedy—and beneath them, per Lacan, the laws governing our being as parletres—to fall from grace. Lacan comically recounts the moment when the Chief is about to assume his phallic mandate as sovereign protector of the peace in these terms: “generalised emotion. Tightness of the throat. We are at the end of our troubles. We have everything, up to and including the wig of the chief of Police—which [however] falls off.” In other words, at that very moment when “the chief of police was just ready to reach the peak of his happiness,” what Lacanian theory calls his symbolic castration, his being a subject of the signifier and law, is comically displayed. “How did you know?” he asks the girls, who seem not to be surprised at this demeaning spectacle that the Chief is bald, and has all along been wearing a wig. And they answer: “you were the only one who believed that no one knew that you wore a wig.” To underline the metaphoric significance of the moment with which he is playing, Genet even has another prostitute simulate castrating the Chief, and throwing in his face “[…] that with which, as she says modestly, he will never de-flower anybody again.”

The Balcony’s end, that is, shows again the problematic situation of human subjectivity, torn between nomos and physis. In Lacan’s words, “comedy manifests by this kind of inner necessity this relationship of the subject, from the moment that he is signified, […] the fruit of the result of this relationship to the signifier […]” In this way, the Chief of Police in Genet can only return to his former symbolic legitimacy:

[…] when he has passed the test, on condition precisely that he is castrated, namely [in an action] which ensures that the phallus is once again promoted to the state of a signifier, to this something which can or cannot give or take away, confer or not confer authority.”

IV. A Feast in the Agora: the Ends of Comedy

What then is the end of comedy, and why should it set out to stage the rise and fall of comic hero’s ignoble erotas? In Seminar V, Lacan somewhat enigmatically suggests that we need to understand comedy as having a “ceremonial value” as a species of “imaginary communion.” It is a commonplace of theorists of comedy to point to the happy ending or resolution as decisive to the meaning of the genre, as Lacan concurs in his passing, but beautiful, remarks on comedy in Seminar VII:

One must remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate [comedy] in [its] full human dimension [...] is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including those that are the most essential [...] the phallus is nothing more than the signifier of this flight. Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens. If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives.30

The end of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for one instance, sees the rightful couples which the comedy had displaced restored to each other, and their marriages sanctioned by no less a symbolic authority than that of the throne itself, at a royal feast that ends the entire play. We are familiar with how many comedies end, if not at the altar, then with the kiss of the hero and heroine: sexual rapport or its semblance regained. In a similar vein, Lacan draws our attention in *Seminar V* to the place of ancient comedy in the Greek religious festivals like the Panathenaia, which was to come third, after the satyr play and the tragedy. Its ceremonial place, Lacan comments, is comparable to that of the mass in Catholic Europe. Indeed, in phenomena like the "*risus pascalis*"—ribald, sometimes ludicrous tales introduced into the Easter services in Christian Churches—Lacan claims that we can see the "trace and shadow" of comedy in Christendom, after the decline of the classical stage. Comedy itself, Lacan specifies:

[...] is something like the representation of the end of the communion meal by which the tragedy itself had been evoked. It is man, when all is said and done, who consumes what was made present there in terms of its common substance and flesh, and it is a question of knowing what will result from this.31

It can also be a question for the reader of *Seminar V* to know exactly what Lacan's full meaning is here, for the seminar's discussion quickly moves to his reading of the Genet comedy. Earlier, taking as his object Aristophanes’ *Assembly of Women*, which ends in a great feast in the agora to celebrate the comic, new order of absolute *égalité* between the sexes, Lacan proffers a comment which however anticipates what seems to be at stake here:

Aristophanes invites us [...] to perceive something that can only be perceived retroactively, that if the state exists, and the city, it is so that one can take advantage of it, it is in order that a feast, in which no one really believes, can be set up in the agora, it is so that one can come to be astonished at the contradictions to common sense brought out by the perverse emotions of the city which is subject to all the pulling and dragging of a dialectical process;

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in order that one should be brought back through the mediation of women, the only ones who really know what men need, [...] to common sense [...]32

Comedy per se, Lacan is claiming here, is akin in its religious signification to the festive staging and eating of a banquet. At such a ceremonial feast, the community—however divided by competing political, ethical, and religious demands in ways ancient tragedy dramatised—is brought back to a kind of lived, enjoyed sense of harmony. The position here then is very close to that of the Cambridge School of Anthropology’s views on the origin of the comedic genre: amongst these that the Dionysian, phallic parade associated with the great festivals in which the theatre came to be staged ended originally in a circular threshing floor, where a goat was sacrificed on an altar.33 Lacan himself comments that “[…] we are told [that comedy] came from a kind of orgy or banquet […] where man […] says “yes” to the same meal that is constituted by offerings to the gods.”34 However, Lacan of course interprets the meaning of this ritual origin of comedy in his own, psychoanalytic terms. In particular, what Lacan says here seem to link this collective aspiration to social harmony and peace operating in comedy as a dramatic genre, to the immoderate desire we have seen he thinks operates in comedic heroes like Genet’s police chief, or Aristophanes’ Strepsiades or Lysistrata. It is as if, Lacan is specifically suggesting, that the wish which the comic hero’s inevitable humbling shows to be impossible for any individual is given a kind of substitute satisfaction by the comic work as a whole—in the vicarious enjoyment it gives us, and in the kind of lived sense of reconciliation with others, with fate, and with our conditions comedies’ happy endings intimate.

It is significant in this connection that Lacan’s comments on the literary genre of comedy here immediately following on from his earlier comments on jokes and the Witz, and the source of the pleasure they afford us. From the earliest “peekaboo”-type games35 wherein young children are drawn to laugh, to the punch-lines in jokes,36 Lacan has argued that humour involves the building up an imaginary anticipation that a particular thing or sense will transpire—which anticipation is retroactively shattered in the final moment of pas-de-sens (nonsense or without-sense) or peu-de-sens (little sense) of the gag. “It is always through something that is a liberation from the image” that laughter explodes, Lacan comments. This is why Lacan even associates the advent of laughter with the first manifestations of the

35. See Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/57, 10
symbolic Other in the life of the infant.\textsuperscript{37} As in the literary genre of comedy, so Lacan claims that what is thus evoked in this work of witticisms:

\[\ldots\text{by a kind of forcing, by a sort of happy shadow of an astonishing success, conveyed purely by the signifier, of reflection of ancient satisfactions, [is] something [\ldots] that has very exactly as an effect the reproduction of the primary pleasure of the satisfied demand, or the same time as it [the joke] accedes to an original novelty. It is this something that the witticism essentially realises [\ldots]}\textsuperscript{38}

However, for the joke to be funny and to yield up its peculiarly human pleasure, Lacan notes, it must also be told to an Other: "I cannot even fully appreciate the pleasure of the joke, of the story, unless I have tried it out on another [\ldots]"; the witticism is only complete [\ldots] insofar as the Other takes it on board, responds to the witticism, authenticates it as a witticism, namely perceives what in it conveys as such the question of the \textit{peu-de-sense}.\textsuperscript{39} What is involved in the comic, then, is a peculiar "transmutation, transubstantiation, [or] subtle operation of communion," whereby what usual signification "leaves behind" or is consigned to the unconscious is nevertheless miraculously recognised and sanctioned by the Other.\textsuperscript{40} This is what, as we all know, jokes as jokes always can possible misfire. And when they do, this is exactly because the Other "does not see that amusing"—where that "that" in question is the usually more or less sexually, politically, or culturally transgressive \textit{pas-de-sens} of the joke's punch line. All comic phenomena are not simply intersubjective in this way, for Lacan. They are also, as it were, minimally "utopian," aiming at and momentarily bringing about both a symbolic redemption of the repressed, and a "kind of harmonising of desire and of judgment" between subjects which cannot but remind us directly of Kant's famous \textit{sensus communis} at play in aesthetic judgments,\textsuperscript{41} but which Lacan does not hesitate to situate on a continuum with the phenomenon of love\textsuperscript{42}:

Love, this is the point at which the summit of classical comedy is situated. There is love here, and it is very curious to see the degree to which we no longer perceive it except through all sorts of partitions that stifle it, romantic partitions. Love is an essentially comic motive.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{38} Lacan, Sem V. 4/12/57, 12.
\textsuperscript{39} Sem V 11/12/67, 2; 4/12/57, 14.
\textsuperscript{40} See Lacan, Sem. V 4/12/57, 2.
\textsuperscript{41} For celebrated accounts of the implicit politics in Kant’s aesthetics, turning around the sensus communis, cf. Terry Eagleton, \textit{The Ideology of the Aesthetic} (London: Blackwell, 1990), 93-98; also Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
\textsuperscript{43} See Lacan, Sem. V 18/12/57, 17.
But Lacan's developed reflections on the complex phenomena of love, which notably turn around his reading of Plato's great, comic dialogue *The Symposium*, are another story.

**Concluding Remarks**

Lacan's would himself in *Seminar VII* reflect, with evident regret, that he had been unable to fully draw out his thinking concerning comedy. Nevertheless, we have seen now here that what he did manage to say in *Seminar V* represents already a remarkable contribution to thought on this topic. What is so fascinating about Lacan's thought, here as elsewhere, is how he is able to enter into, engage with but always reshape a long-established field of cultural or philosophical reflection, on the basis of his peculiar, para-structuralist reconfiguration of Freudian teaching. Lacan comments on comedy at different times approach the “incongruity theory” of comedy, or Hegel’s fascinating account of comedy in the *Phenomenology of Geist*, as Zupančič has elaborated. They also skirt the anthropological work done on comedy, its religious origins and signification, at the beginning of the 20th century. Yet Lacan’s theory of the signifier, and the relation of the imaginary to the symbolic, is able to give him unique purchase into the retroactive working of jokes and the Witz. Then there is the work Lacan is able to do in this field on the basis of his re-configured conception of the Freudian Oedipus complex on the basis of his notion of desire as desire of the other, and thus of the phallus as signifier of this desire. In the context of attempts to understand comedy, Lacan’s situation of the phallic signifier as the pivotal stake in the decisive anthropogenetic episode in subjects’ lives allows him to cast light on the function of the phallus in ancient comedy, one which many commentators altogether pass over. Comedy becomes for Lacan not simply an exercise in what one 20th century commentator on Aristophanes has called “the publicisation of the essentially private.” It is at once a revelation of the ways our identities (public and private) are configured, decentred, and reconfigured by the symbolic order, and a kind of replaying of our fondest Oedipal wishes and their civilization—the whole all ending in our reconciliation and that of the hero with the big Other, albeit a reconciliation in which “no one really believes.”

This, as we might put it, is the unlikely, comic lens in which in Lacan’s fifth seminar the flipside of Genet’s bordello turns out to be the *risus pascalis*, if not the Holy Communion. It is also the extremely rich framework Lacan was able to bequeath to his audience to think the comedic in *Seminar V*, however little the time he was able to devote to it there.