**Laughing in the Face of Death: Xenophon’s Use of Humor in the *Anabasis* and Other Works**

1. Relevant Theoretical Approaches to Humor
	1. Incongruity Theory - sees humor as a response to an incongruity, a term broadly used to include ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness.
	2. Relief Theory - sees humor as fundamentally a way to release or save energy generated by repression.
	3. Superiority Theory – sees humor arising from a “sudden glory” felt when we recognize our supremacy over others.
2. Xenophon’s comments on the cavalry conundrum (*Anabasis* 3.2.18-20)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Εἰ δέ τις ὑμῶν ἀθυμεῖ ὅτι ἡμῖν μὲν οὐκ εἰσὶν ἱππεῖς, τοῖς δὲ πολεμίοις πολλοὶ πάρεισιν, ἐνθυμήθητε ὅτι οἱ μύριοι ἱππεῖς οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἢ μύριοί εἰσιν ἄνθρωποι· ὑπὸ μὲν γὰρ ἵππου ἐν μάχῃ οὐδεὶς πώποτε οὔτε δηχθεὶς οὔτε λακτισθεὶς ἀπέθανεν, οἱ δὲ ἄνδρες εἰσὶν οἱ ποιοῦντες ὅ τι ἂν ἐν ταῖς μάχαις γίγνηται. οὐκοῦν τῶν γε ἱππέων πολὺ ἡμεῖς ἐπ᾿ ἀσφαλεστέρου ὀχήματός ἐσμεν· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἐφ᾿ ἵππων κρέμανται φοβούμενοι οὐχ ἡμᾶς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ καταπεσεῖν· ἡμεῖς δ᾿ ἐπὶ γῆς βεβηκότες πολὺ μὲν ἰσχυρότερον παίσομεν, ἤν τις προσίῃ, πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον ὅτου ἂν βουλώμεθα τευξόμεθα.  ἑνὶ δὲ μόνῳ προέχουσιν οἱ ἱππεῖς· φεύγειν αὐτοῖς ἀσφαλέστερόν ἐστιν ἢ ἡμῖν.

But if anyone of you is disheartened because we lack horsemen while the enemy have many of them, let him reflect that the ten thousand horsemen are merely ten thousand men; for nobody ever died in battle because he was bitten or kicked by a horse, but it is the men who do whatever happens in battles. What is more, we are on a far surer foundation than the horsemen: they are hanging on their horses’ backs, fearing not only us, but also falling off their horses; but we, striding on the ground, will strike with much greater force if anyone comes upon us, and we will be far more likely to hit whomever we wish. In just one way point the horsemen have the advantage—fleeing is easier for them than us.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Xenophon mocks Apollonides (*Anabasis* 3.1.26-30)

ὁ μέντοι Ξενοφῶν μεταξὺ ὑπολαβὼν ἔλεξεν ὧδε. ὦ θαυμασιώτατε ἄνθρωπε, σύγε οὐδὲ ὁρῶν γιγνώσκεις οὐδὲ ἀκούων μέμνησαι. ἐν ταὐτῷ γε μέντοι ἦσθα τούτοις ὅτε βασιλεύς, ἐπεὶ Κῦρος ἀπέθανε, μέγα φρονήσας ἐπὶ τούτῳ πέμπων ἐκέλευε παραδιδόναι τὰ ὅπλα… ἐμοί, ὦ ἄνδρες, δοκεῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτον μήτε προσίεσθαι εἰς ταὐτὸ ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς ἀφελομένους τε τὴν λοχαγίαν σκεύη ἀναθέντας ὡς τοιούτῳ χρῆσθαι. οὗτος γὰρ καὶ τὴν πατρίδα καταισχύνει καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν Ἑλλάδα, ὅτι Ἕλλην ὢν τοιοῦτός ἐστιν.

Xenophon, however, cut him off, and said: “Oh most wondrous man, you have eyes but cannot see, and you have ears but still do not remember. You were present, indeed, with these officers when the King, after Cyrus died, was vaunting in his victory, and sent us the order to give up our arms… In my opinion, men, we should not simply refuse to admit this man to companionship with us, but should deprive him of his rank, lay packs on his back, and treat him as that sort of a creature. For he dishonors his fatherland and all of Greece, since, although he is Greek, he is still a man of this kind.”

1. Agasias piles on Apollonides (*Anabasis* 3.1.31)

ἐντεῦθεν ὑπολαβὼν Ἀγασίας Στυμφάλιος εἶπεν: ἀλλὰ τούτῳ γε οὔτε τῆς Βοιωτίας προσήκει οὐδὲν οὔτε τῆς Ἑλλάδος παντάπασιν, ἐπεὶ ἐγὼ αὐτὸν εἶδον ὥσπερ Λυδὸν ἀμφότερα τὰ ὦτα τετρυπημένον.

Then Agasias, a Stymphalian, interjected and said: “For that matter, this guy has nothing to do with Boeotia or any part of Greece at all, for I have noticed that both his ears have been pierced, like a Lydian's.”

1. Socrates refuses to name an alternative penalty (*Apology* 23)[[3]](#footnote-3)

τὸ δὲ μὴ ἀποθανεῖν οὐκ ᾤετο λιπαρητέον εἶναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ καιρὸν ἤδη ἐνόμιζεν ἑαυτῷ τελευτᾶν. ὅτι δὲ οὕτως ἐγίγνωσκε καταδηλότερον ἐγίγνετο ἐπειδὴ ἡ δίκη διεψηφίσθη. πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ κελευόμενος ὑποτιμᾶσθαι οὔτε αὐτὸς ὑπετιμήσατο οὔτε τοὺς φίλους εἴασεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔλεγεν ὅτι τὸ ὑποτιμᾶσθαι ὁμολογοῦντος εἴη ἀδικεῖν. ἔπειτα τῶν ἑταίρων ἐκκλέψαι βουλομένων αὐτὸν οὐκ ἐφείπετο, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπισκῶψαι ἐδόκει, ἐρόμενος εἴ που εἰδεῖέν τι χωρίον ἔξω τῆς Ἀττικῆς ἔνθα οὐ προσβατὸν θανάτῳ.

He did not think he should lobby the jury to spare him from death; instead, he believed that it was time for him to die. His conviction became rather more apparent after the verdict had been confirmed by vote. First of all, when he was instructed to name his penalty, he refused to name a lesser penalty and forbade his friends to name one too, since he insisted that naming a penalty was tantamount to acknowledging guilt. Then, when his comrades wished to bust him out of prison, he would not go along with them but even seemed to mock them, asking them whether they knew of anywhere outside of Attica that was not accessible to death.

1. Socrates teases Apollodorus before his death (*Apology* 28)

Παρὼν δέ τις Ἀπολλόδωρος, ἐπιθυμητὴς μὲν ὢν ἰσχυρῶς αὐτοῦ, ἄλλως δ᾿ εὐήθης, εἶπεν ἄρα· Ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἔγωγε, ὦ Σώκρατες, χαλεπώτατα φέρω ὅτι ὁρῶ σε ἀδίκως ἀποθνῄσκοντα. τὸν δὲ λέγεται καταψήσαντα αὐτοῦ τὴν κεφαλὴν εἰπεῖν· Σὺ δέ, ὦ φίλτατε Ἀπολλόδωρε, μᾶλλον ἂν ἐβούλου με ὁρᾶν δικαίως ἢ ἀδίκως ἀποθνῄσκοντα; καὶ ἅμα ἐπιγελάσαι.

With him was a man named Apollodorus, a diehard devotee of Socrates but otherwise simple, who said, “But Socrates, what I find hardest to bear is that I see you being put to death unjustly!” It is said that Socrates caressed Apollodorus’ head and said, “My dearest Apollodorus, would you prefer to see me put to death justly or unjustly?”, and he smiled as he asked him that question.

1. Xenophon reflects on Theramenes’ final comments and actions (*Hellenica* 2.3.56)[[4]](#footnote-4)

οἱ δ᾿ ἀπήγαγον τὸν ἄνδρα διὰ τῆς ἀγορᾶς μάλα μεγάλῃ τῇ φωνῇ δηλοῦντα οἷα ἔπασχε. λέγεται δὲ ἓν ῥῆμα καὶ τοῦτο αὐτοῦ. ὡς εἶπεν ὁ Σάτυρος ὅτι οἰμώξοιτο, εἰ μὴ σιωπήσειεν, ἐπήρετο· Ἂν δὲ σιωπῶ, οὐκ ἄρ᾿, ἔφη, οἰμώξομαι; καὶ ἐπεί γε ἀποθνῄσκειν ἀναγκαζόμενος τὸ κώνειον ἔπιε, τὸ λειπόμενον ἔφασαν ἀποκοτταβίσαντα εἰπεῖν αὐτόν· Κριτίᾳ τοῦτ᾿ ἔστω τῷ καλῷ. καὶ τοῦτο μὲν οὐκ ἀγνοῶ, ὅτι ταῦτα ἀποφθέγματα οὐκ ἀξιόλογα, ἐκεῖνο δὲ κρίνω τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἀγαστόν, τὸ τοῦ θανάτου παρεστηκότος μήτε τὸ φρόνιμον μήτε τὸ παιγνιῶδες ἀπολιπεῖν ἐκ τῆς ψυχῆς.

So they led the man away through the agora, while he proclaimed in a loud voice the wrongs he was suffering. One saying of his that is reported was this: when Satyrus told him that if he did not keep quiet, he would suffer for it, he asked: “Then if I do keep quiet, will I not suffer?” And when, being compelled to die, he had drunk the hemlock, they said that he threw out the last drops, like a man playing kottabos, and exclaimed: “Here’s to the health of my beloved Critias.” Now I am not unaware of this, that these are not sayings worthy of record; still, I deem it admirable in the man that when death was close at hand, neither self-possession nor the spirit of playfulness departed from his soul.

Appendix

Aristotle on Syllogisms and the Syllogistic Form[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. A syllogism is an argument (λόγος) in which, certain things being posited, something other than what was laid down results by necessity because these things are so.” (*Analytics* 24b19-20)
2. A textbook example of a syllogism:
	* 1. All men are mortal (the major premise and well-known state of affairs)
		2. Socrates is a man (an empirical observation and the minor premise)
		3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal (the conclusion proven to be correct via deduction)
3. Contradictory Syllogistic forms of comedy as exemplified by Xenophon.
	1. Cavalry is a major advantage in warfare
		1. The result of not having cavalry when your enemy does is defeat
		2. The Ten Thousand do not possess cavalry, but the Persians do
		3. The Ten Thousand are doomed to defeat
	2. Cavalry is a disadvantage in warfare (the second contradictory conclusion)
		1. Horses do not offer an advantage in warfare
		2. Nobody has died by horse bite or kick in warfare; horses distract their riders from warfare
		3. The Ten Thousand are better off without horses and will prevail in battle

Select Bibliography

Attardo, Salvatore. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 1994.

Baragwanath, Emily. “The Character and Function of Speeches in Xenophon.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon*, edited by Michael A. Flower, 279–98. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Buxton, Richard Fernando. “Xenophon on Leadership: Commanders as Friends.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon*, edited by Michael A. Flower, 323–37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Halliwell, Stephen. *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Halliwell, Stephen. “The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture.” *The Classical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1991): 279–96.

Huitink, Luuk, and Tim Rood, eds. *Xenophon: Anabasis Book III*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Huss, Bernhard. “The Dancing Sokrates and the Laughing Xenophon, or the Other ‘Symposium.’” *The American Journal of Philology* 120, no. 3 (1999): 381–409.



Marx, Nick, and Sienkiewicz, Matt, eds. *The Comedy Studies Reader*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018.

Perks, Lisa Glebatis. "The Ancient Roots of Humor Theory." *Humor* 25, no. 2 (2012): 119-132.

Rood, Tim. “Xenophon’s Narrative Style.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon*, edited by Michael A. Flower, 263–78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Shelley, Cameron. "Plato on the Psychology of Humor." *Humor* 16, no. 4 (2003): 351-367.

1. Text of the *Anabasis* was taken from Brownson’s Loeb (Rev. Dillery, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All translations are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Text of the *Apology* was taken from Marchant’s and Todd’s Loeb (Rev. Henderson, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Text of *Hellenica* taken from Brownson’s Loeb (1918). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. My layout and analysis of this section follows that of Marx and Sienkiewicz (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)