

THE HUMOR OF METATHEATER IN GREEK AND ROMAN COMEDY

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I. THE ORIGINS OF HUMOR THEORY (ABRIDGED)

1. Seeds of incongruity theory at Cicero *De oratore* 2.260:

Haec aut frigida sunt aut tum salsa, cum aliud est exspectatum. Natura enim nos, ut ante dixi, noster delectat error; ex quo, cum quasi decepti sumus exspectatione, ridemus.

These jokes are either dull or they are witty only when something else has been expected. For our mistake (as I said previously) by its nature/quality delights us; therefore, we laugh when we have been deceived, as it were, by/because of our expectation.

2. Seeds of superiority theory at Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1389b:

καὶ φιλογέλωτες, διὸ καὶ φιλευτράπελοι: ἡ γὰρ εὐτραπελία πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις ἐστίν.
And they are laughter-loving, and therefore also witty; for wit is educated insolence.

3. Seeds of relief theory at Cicero *Philippics* 2.39-40:

ne de iocis quidem respondebo quibus me in castris usum esse dixisti: erant quidem illa castra plena curae; verum tamen homines, quamvis in turbidis rebus sint, tamen, si modo homines sunt, interdum animis relaxantur
I won't respond, even about the jokes which you said that I used in the camp: indeed that camp was full of anxiety; but nevertheless men, although in disordered/troubled situations, nevertheless, if only they are men, sometimes they relax in respect to their minds.

II. ON-STAGE LAUGHTER AND HUMOR THEORY

1. Incongruity theory at Aristophanes *Peace* 1066:

Trygaeus: αἰβοιβοῖ!

Hierocles τὶ γελᾷς;

Trygaeus: ἤσθην χαροποῖσι πιθήκοις.

Trygaeus: Hahaha!

Hierocles: Why are you laughing?

Trygaeus: I enjoyed "the fierce monkeys" [referenced in line 1065].

2. Superiority theory at Aristophanes *Clouds* 820-1:

Pheidippides: τί δὲ τοῦτ' ἐγέλασας ἐτερόν;

Strepsiades: ἐνθυμούμενος

ὅτι παιδάριον εἶ καὶ φρονεῖς ἀρχαϊκά.

Pheidippides: Why indeed did you laugh at this?

Strepsiades: I'm noticing

that you're a mere child and you have old-fashioned beliefs.

3. Relief theory at Plautus *Truculentus* 209-10:

Astaphium: *hahaha! requievi,*
qui intro abit odium meum.

Hahaha! I'm relieved

because my annoyance has gone inside.

III. LAUGHTER AND AUDIENCE ADDRESS

1. Aristophanes *Wealth* 797-9:

Wealth: οὐ γὰρ πρεπῶδές ἐστι τῷ διδασκάλῳ
ισχάδια καὶ τρωγάλια τοῖς θεωμένοις
προβάλλοντ' ἐπὶ τούτοις εἶτ' ἀνανκάζειν γελᾶν.

“For it isn’t proper for a poet to compel the spectators to laugh by throwing figs and dainties at them.”

2. Plautus *Aulularia* 715-21a:

Euclio: *opsecro ego vos, mi auxilio,* 715
oro, optestor, sitis et hominem demonstratis, quis eam apstulerit.
quid ais tu? Tibi credere certum est, nam esse bonum ex voltu cognosco.
quid est? quid ridetis? Novi omnis, scio fures esse hic compluris,
qui vestitu et creta occultant sese atque sedent quasi sint frugi.
hem, nemo habet horum? occidisti. dic igitur, quis habet? nescis? 720
heu me miserum, misere perii,
male perditu’, pessime ornatus eo.

I beg, I pray, I implore you, be a source of help to me and point out the man who stole [the pot of gold]. What do you say? I’ve decided to trust you, for I recognize that you’re a good man from your face. What is it? Why are you all laughing? I’ve come to know everyone; I know that there are several thieves here who hide themselves with clothing and chalk and sit as if they’re good. Hey—none of these men has [the gold]? You’ve killed me. Then speak—who has it? You don’t know? Alas for miserable me, I’m wretchedly done for, here I go badly destroyed and terribly dressed.

3. Plautus *Captivi* 69-79:

Ergasilus: *iuentus nomen indidit “Scorto” mihi*
eo quia invocatus soleo esse in convivio. 70
scio absurde dictum hoc derisores dicere,
at ego aio recte. Nam scortum in convivio
sibi amator, talos quom iacit, scortum invocat.
estne invocatum <scortum> an non? Planissime;
verum hercle vero nos parasiti planius, 75
quos numquam quisquam neque vocat neque invocat.

The young men have given me the name “Prostitute” because I am usually uninvited at a dinner party. I know that the mockers say that this word [his nickname Scortum] is silly, but I say it’s right. For when a lover tosses the dice at a banquet, he invokes his prostitute. Has the prostitute been invoked or not? Very obviously she has; but by Hercules we parasites are rather clearly uninvited, whom no man either invites or invokes.

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