

Laughter-loving gods from Plato to Lucian

As with many aspects of ancient Greek religion, the subject of laughter is far from straightforward within divine worship. On the one hand, as Halliwell has documented, ritual laughter played an important role within ancient Greek religion (Halliwell 2008: 161-191); on the other hand laughter is mentioned as a form of looking down or rejecting the gods in several religious inscriptions (e.g. Herzog 1931 no. 4; Gager 1992 no. 90).

From Greek narrative poetry and prose we receive well-known narratives where jesting at a god leads to (temporary) conflict resolution (*H. Cer.* 200-5; cf. Richardson 1974: 222; Foley 1994: 230; Rosen 2007: 53-5), or where a divinely mandated cure consists in laughter at a cult statue (Ath., 14.2 = 614a-b = *BNJ* 396 F 10; cf. Bertelli 2009; Kindt 2010; 2012: 36-54; Beard 2014: 174-6).

In this paper I trace the ancient conversation about laughing gods and laughter at or for the gods from Plato through Lucian. In relation to the gods laughter is never unproblematic and always significant. Ritual laughter is defended by both Plato (*Lg.* 637a-b) and Aristotle (*Pol.* 1336b), while later authors such as Plutarch (*De defect.* 14) and Aelius Aristides (*Or.* 29.8-14) condemn these practices, although Maximus of Tyre (*Or.* 32.10) is still positive. This diachronic philosophical debate establishes first and foremost how significant ritual laughter was within ancient Greek religion: it was something about which philosophers felt they needed to have an opinion.

Philosophical responses to humorous treatments of the gods in literature start with Plato as well, who condemns the unquenchable laughter of the Homeric gods in the *Iliad* (*Il.* 1.599-600 with *R.* 386a-b). Plato's Socrates censures Homer for depicting the gods as overcome by

laughter. Young men might follow their example, and forceful laughter can have a harmful, destabilizing effect on the body and the mind (cf. Rosen 2015: 98; Halliwell 2008: 4, 62).

Aristotle takes a pragmatic approach, writing that people will simply depict and imagine the gods in certain ways that may be inappropriate, but do not harm the gods (*Pol.* 1460b; cf. *EN* 1178b). Maximus of Tyre, again, is rather conciliatory, and defends Homeric depictions of the gods as laughing (*Or.* 18.5, 26.1).

Lucian of Samosata, the most prolific ancient author of comic pieces featuring the ancient gods, enters this debate in his dialogue *Piscator*. One of the interlocutors in this piece argues that writers of comedy have the license of the festival (*heortē*) because their work is performed during the Dionysia, and the god Dionysus, being a laughter-lover, ‘rejoices just as much’ (*Pisc.* 25). Another interlocutor stretches the definition of *heortē* to include Lucianic performance (*Pisc.* 14, 33), which gives the author license to make fun of the gods.

The significance of ritual laughter as a phenomenon within ancient philosophical discourse shows that in this regard ancient Greek religion was closer to modern polytheisms like Hinduism and Buddhism, which also take an inclusive approach to laughter, than to monotheisms which consider laughter to be *prima facie* desacralizing. This positive approach to laughter extended into the realms of literature and performance, where the laughter-loving nature of (some of) the gods was interpreted as providing license for mockery directed at the gods. In antiquity laughter and humor were complex but nonetheless integral elements of worshipping the gods.

Bibliography

Beard, M. 2014. *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*. Berkeley, CA.

Bertelli, L. 2009. 'Semos', *Brill New Jacoby Online*.

Herzog, R., 1931. *Die Wunderheilungen von Epidauros*, *Philologus Suppl.*, 22/3. Leipzig.

Foley, H.P. 1994. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: translation, commentary, and interpretive essays*. Princeton.

Gager, J.G. 1992. *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*. Oxford.

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

Kindt, J. 2010. 'Parmeniscus' Journey: Tracing Religious Visuality in Word and Wood', *CPh* 105.3, 252-64.

Richardson, N.J. 1974. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Oxford.

Rosen, R.M. 2007. *Making Mockery: The Poetics of Ancient Satire*. Oxford.

_____. 2015. 'Aischrology in Old Comedy and the Question of 'Ritual Obscenity'', in D. Dutsch; A. Suter (eds.), *Ancient Obscenities. Their Nature and Use in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds*. Ann Arbor, 72-90.