

The Humor of Metatheater in Greek and Roman Comedy

This paper argues that the moments of scripted or on-stage laughter in the plays of Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence can help us understand how each poet understood the humor of overt metatheater to work. Greek and Roman comedy contain (in varying proportions) moments when characters overtly acknowledge the presence of the audience through direct address of or reference to the spectators. Such moments are often assumed to be humorous (see, e.g., Moore [1998: 3]; Ruffell [2011: 226]; Slater [2002: 6])—but little attention has been paid to the way in which we might describe the humor as working or the way that the Greek or Roman comic playwrights themselves might have conceived of it. Although none of the strands of modern humor theory can be considered to have directly influenced these comic poets, (nor indeed had Plato, the earliest critic of laughter that we know of, even started laying the foundations of superiority theory during Aristophanes' early career), nevertheless the three strands of modern humor theory (superiority, incongruity, and relief) can explain every moment of scripted or on-stage laughter in the work of these three poets. (Those moments are catalogued in Sommerstein 2009, Kidd 2011, and Beard 2014).

I start by summarizing the three branches of humor theory and their ancient origins. (Incongruity and superiority theories evolved from ideas put forth by Plato [*Philebus* 48-50], Aristotle [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1127b-1128b; *Rhetoric* 1389b, 1412a-b; *Poetics* 1449a], Cicero [*De oratore* 2.242, 255, 281], and Quintilian [*Institutio Oratoria* 6.3.6-112], among others, while Aristotle [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1127b] and Cicero [*Philippics* 2.39] may represent the earliest indications of the ideas that evolved into relief theory.) Next I analyze Aristophanes' and Plautus' acknowledgements that laughter is a likely—and to the poet, desirable—response to

comedy (*Clouds* 538-9, 560; *Ecclesiazousae* 1156; *Poenulus* 32). Then I adduce the references to laughter in the overtly metatheatrical speeches at *Frogs* 1-2, *Wealth* 796-9, *Aulularia* 715-21a, and *Captivi* 69-109 in order to clarify the way that Aristophanes and Plautus understand the humor of audience address to work. I also supplement the discussion with analysis of the scenes in which characters either audibly laugh—or are accused of laughing—on stage. These passages demonstrate that the overt acknowledgement of the spectators in Greek and Roman comedy produces laughter out of delight at the incongruity of the disruption of the stage world or by feelings of superiority to one's fellow spectators. On the other hand, the satirical *onomasti komoidein* of Aristophanes, the classic Plautine two-line jokes (Fraenkel 2007: 29), and Terence's gender stereotyping embedded even within these playwrights' overtly metatheatrical speeches (e.g., *Birds* 30-1, *Peace* 43-8; *Aulularia* 406-14, *Captivi* 69-109; *Andria* 231-2) also show that none of these poets considers the humor of overt metatheater to be sufficient on its own. (And Menander and Terence's plays in fact often demonstrate that humor is not always the primary goal of metatheatrical commentary, be it overt or latent.) I close by arguing that that the multiple theoretical explanations for these humorous metatheatrical moments underscore both the broad appeal of such humor—spectators might laugh for a range of reasons—and the benefits that might accrue to the comic poet who composes, and the character or actor who utters, a line that acknowledges the audience's presence.

Bibliography

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