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Plato and the Art of Mockery

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1 • **Aelius Aristides**: "Although you condemn comedy, you yourself satirize (*komôdein*) Hippias, Prodicus, Protagoras, Gorgias, Euthydemus, Dionysodorus, Agathon, Cinesias, and everyone on earth. Satirizing these may not really matter, but when it comes to Aristophanes himself -- well, who is this who is satirizing him? Someone who himself has a rich vein of comedy (*komôdia*) in him, one might well say." (*Orations* 614, tr. M. Trapp mod.)

2 • **Athenaeus**: "The story goes that when Gorgias read the dialogue named after him, he said to his friends: 'Plato's quite talented at writing abuse-poetry (iambizein)'. Hermippus says in his *On Gorgias*: 'When Gorgias visited Athens after dedicating the gold statue of himself in Delphi, and Plato saw him and said: 'Our fine, gold Gorgias has arrived!', Gorgias responded: 'And this is a fine new Archilochus that Athens has produced!'" (505d-e; tr. Olson).

– Plato, *Symposium* (tr. Nehamas & Woodruff)
3 • When Pausanias finally came to a pause (I've learned this sort of fine figure from our clever rhetoricians), it was Aristophanes' turn, according to Aristodemus. But he had such a bad case of the hiccups—he'd probably stuffed himself again, though, of course, it could have been anything—that making a speech was totally out of the question. So he turned to the doctor, Eryximachus, who [185D] was next in line, and said to him:
"Eryximachus, it's up to you—as well it should be. Cure me or take my turn."
"As a matter of fact," Eryximachus replied, "I shall do both. I shall take your turn—you can speak in my place as soon as you feel better—and I shall also cure you. While I am giving my speech, you should hold your breath for as long as you possibly can. This may well eliminate your hiccups. If it fails, the best remedy is a thorough gargle. [185E] And if even this has no effect, then tickle your nose with a feather. A sneeze or two will cure even the most persistent case."
"The sooner you start speaking, the better," Aristophanes said. "I'll follow your instructions to the letter"

4 • Then Aristophanes took over (so Aristodemus said): "The hiccups have stopped all right—but not before I applied the Sneeze Treatment to them. Makes me wonder whether the 'orderly sort of Love' in the body calls for the sounds and itchings that constitute a sneeze, because the hiccups stopped immediately when I applied the Sneeze Treatment."
"You're good, Aristophanes," Eryximachus answered (Ὠγαθέ, φάναι, Ἀριστόφανες). "But watch what you're doing. You are making jokes before your speech, and you're forcing me to

prepare for you to say something funny, and to put up my guard against you, when [189B] otherwise you might speak at peace."
Then Aristophanes laughed. "Good point, Eryximachus. So let me 'unsay what I have said.' But don't put up your guard. I'm not worried about saying something funny in my coming oration. That would be pure profit, and it comes with the territory of my Muse. What I'm worried about is that I might say something ridiculous.

5 • Suppose two lovers are lying together and Hephaestus stands over them with his mending tools, asking, "What is it you human beings really want from each other?" And suppose they're perplexed, and he asks them again: "Is this your heart's desire, then—for the two of you to become parts of the same whole, as near as can be, and never to separate, day or night? Because if that's your desire, I'd like to weld you together and join you into something that is naturally whole, so that the two of you are made into one. [192E] Then the two of you would share one life, as long as you lived, because you would be one being, and by the same token, when you died, you would be one and not two in Hades, having died a single death. Look at your love, and see if this is what you desire: wouldn't this be all the good fortune you could want?"

// Homer, *Od.* 8.267-328.

– Plato, *Gorgias* 493d-94^{e} (tr. Zeyl mod.)

6 • SOCRATES: Come then, and let me give you another image, one from the same school as this one. Consider whether what you're saying about each life, the life of the self-controlled man and that of the undisciplined one, is like this: Suppose there are two men, each of whom has many jars. The jars belonging to one of them are sound and full, one with wine, another with honey, a third with milk, and many others with lots of other things. And suppose that the sources of each of these things are scarce and difficult to come by, procurable only with much toil and trouble. Now the one man, having filled up his jars, doesn't pour anything more into them and gives them no further thought. He can relax over them. As for the other one, he too has resources that can be procured, though with difficulty, but his containers are leaky and rotten. He's forced to keep on filling them, day and night, or else he [494] suffers extreme pain. Now since each life is the way I describe it, are you saying that the life of the undisciplined man is happier than that of the orderly man? When I say this, do I at all persuade you to concede that the orderly life is better than the undisciplined one, or do I not?
CALLICLES: You do not, Socrates. The man who has filled himself up has no pleasure any more, and when he's been filled up and experiences neither joy nor pain, that's living like a stone, as I was saying just now. Rather, living pleasantly consists in this: having as much as possible flow in.
SOCRATES: Isn't it necessary, then, that if there's a lot flowing in, there should also be a lot going out and that there should be big holes for what's passed out?
CALLICLES: Certainly.
SOCRATES: Now you're talking about <u>the life of a stone-curlew</u> instead of that of a corpse or a stone. Tell me, do you say that there is such a thing as hunger, and eating when one is hungry?

CALLICLES: Yes, there is.
SOCRATES: And thirst, and drinking when one is thirsty?
CALLICLES: Yes, and also having all other appetites and being able to fill them and enjoy it, and so live happily.
SOCRATES: Very good, my good man! Do carry on the way you've begun, and do not give in out of shame. And I shouldn't give in out of shame, either. Tell me now first whether a man who has an itch and scratches it and can scratch to his heart's content, scratching his whole life long, can also live happily.
CALLICLES: How odd you are, my dear Socrates! How vulgar like a crowd pleaser!
SOCRATES: That's just how, my dear Callicles, I shocked Polus and Gorgias and made them be ashamed. You certainly won't be shocked, however, or be ashamed, for you're a brave man. Just answer me, please.
CALLICLES: I say that even the man who scratches would have a pleasant life.
SOCRATES: And if a pleasant one, a happy one, too?
CALLICLES: Yes indeed.
SOCRATES: But is it only on the head that it is pleasant to scratch? Or what am I to ask you further? See what you'll answer if somebody asked you one after the other every question that comes next – with this one as the climax of all these questions: wouldn't the life of male sexual slaves (ὁ τῶν κιναίδων βίος) be a frightfully shameful and miserable one? Or will you have the nerve to say that these men are happy as long as they get in abundance what they want to be fulfilled with? (ἐὰν ἀφθόνως ἔχωσιν ὧν δέονται;)
CALLICLES: Aren't you ashamed, Socrates, to bring our discussion to such matters?
SOCRATES: Is it I who bring them there, my noble friend, or is it the man who claims, just like that, that those who enjoy themselves, however they may be doing it, are [495] happy, and doesn't discriminate between good kinds of pleasures and bad?

– Plato: *Laws*

7 • For fine bodies and noble minds, the question of the kind of dancing we have claimed was right for them has been fully dealt with. When it comes to ugly bodies and thoughts, and the people who go in for buffoonery for comic effect, whether in speech, music, dancing, or the representations employed by any of these buffoons, we are obliged to examine these and make a judgment about them, since it is not possible, for anyone planning to become someone wise in judgment, to study what is serious ne isolation from what is ludicrous, or anything which has an opposite in isolation from that opposite – though when it comes to action, it is not possible, for anyone with even modest aspirations to a share in human goodness, to perform both. Indeed, this is precisely why we need to study what is ludicrous as well, so that ignorance will not lead us into doing or saying things which are ridiculous – and uncalled for; we can get this kind of imitation done by slaves, or foreigners who can be hired to do it; it is never, in any way, to be taken seriously, nor is any free person ever always to be some touch of novelty making its appearance in their representations. -- So much for humorous entertainment – comedy, as we generally call it. (7, 816d-e)

8 • There are several kinds of madness, brought on by several causes. The cases we have just mentioned are the result of illness, but there are some people with an unfortunate natural

irritability, made worse by poor discipline, who in any trivial quarrel will shout their heads off in mutual abuse. Such a [e] thing is highly improper in a well-run state. So this single law should apply to all cases of defamation: no one is to defame anybody. If you are having an argument you should listen to your opponent's case, and put your own to him and the audience, without making any defamatory remarks at all. When men take to damning and cursing each other and to calling one another rude names in the shrill tones of women, these mere words, empty though they are, soon lead to real [935a] hatreds and quarrels of the most serious kind. In gratifying his ugly emotion, anger, and in thus disgracefully stoking the fires of his fury, the speaker drives back into primitive savagery a side of his character that was once civilized by education, and such a splenetic life makes him no better than a wild beast; bitter indeed, he finds, are the pleasures of anger. Besides, on such occasions all men are usually quick [b] to resort to ridicule of their opponents, and no one who has indulged that habit has ever acquired the slightest sense of responsibility or remained faithful to many of his principles. That is why no one must ever breathe a word of ridicule in a temple or at a public sacrifice or at the games or in the market-place or in court or in any public gathering, and the relevant official must always punish such offences. […] The view we are putting forward now is that when a man is [d] enbroiled in a slanging-match he is incapable of carrying on the dispute without trying to make funny remarks, and when such conduct is motivated by anger we censure it. Well then, what does this imply? That we are prepared to tolerate a comedian's eagerness to raise a laugh against people, provided that when he sets about ridiculing our citizens in his comedies, he is not inspired by anger? Or shall we divide comedy into two kinds, according to whether it is good-natured or not? Then we could allow the playful comedian to joke about [e] something, without anger, but forbid, as we've indicated, anyone whatever to do so if he is in deadly earnest and shows animosity. We must certainly insist on this stipulation about anger; but we still have to lay down by law who ought to receive permission for ridicule and who not. No composer of comedies, or of songs or iambic verse, must ever be allowed to ridicule either by description or by impersonation any citizen whatever, with or without rancour. […] Those who have earlier been licensed to compose verse against each other should be allowed to poke fun at people, not in savage earnest, but in a playful spirit and without rancour. The distinction between the two kinds must be left to the minister with overall responsibility for the education of the young; an author may put before the public anything the minister approves of, but if it is censored, the author must not perform it to anyone personally nor be found to have [b] trained someone else to do so, whether a free man or a slave. (11, 934d-35b)

9 • It is a fool who finds anything ridiculous except what is bad, or tries to raise a laugh at the sight of anything except what is stupid or bad, or—putting it the other way around—who takes seriously any standard of what is beautiful other than what is good" (*Rep.* 5, 452d-e; tr. Reeve)

10 • As to the man who laughs at the sight of naked women, when their athletic training is for the best, he is 'plucking the unripe fruit of the wisdom'… of laughter -- he knows nothing, it seems, about what he is laughing at or what he is doing" (457b; tr. Reeve mod. / Pindar (*Fr. 209* Bergk).