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THE USES OF LAUGHTER IN GREEK CULTURE

Laughter ... is a reflex that characterizes man alone and has its own history .... We do not laugh now as people once laughed ...: a definition [of the comic and of laughter] can be only historical. (Vladimir Propp)

Men have been wise in many different modes, but they have always laughed in the same way. (Samuel Johnson)[1]

The proposition that man is the only animal capable of laughter is at least as old as Aristotle (*Parts of Animals* 673a8). In a strictly physical sense, this is probably false; but it is undoubtedly true that as a psychologically expressive and socially potent means of communication, laughter is a distinctively human phenomenon.[2] Any attempt to study sets of cultural attitudes towards laughter, or the particular types of personal conduct which these attitudes shape and influence, must certainly adopt a wider perspective than a narrowly physical definition of laughter will allow. Throughout this paper, which will attempt to establish part of the framework of such a cultural analysis for the Greek world of, broadly speaking, the archaic and classical periods, 'laughter' must be taken, by a convenient synecdoche, to encompass the many behavioural and affective patterns which are associated with, or which characteristically give scope for, uses of laughter in the literal sense of the word. My concern, then, is with a whole network of feelings, concepts and actions; and my argument will try to elucidate the practices within which laughter fulfils a recognizable function in Greek societies, as well as the dominant ideas and values which Greek thought brings to bear upon these practices. The results of the enquiry will, I believe, give us some reason to accept a *rapprochement* between the universalist assumption for which my epigraph from Johnson speaks (and which most grand theorists of laughter appear to have made) and the recognition of cultural specificity in laughter's uses for which many anthropologists would argue, as emphatically asserted, from a Marxizing point of view, in the quotation from Vladimir Propp.

Diagnosing the expressive significance of discrete instances of laughter may often be difficult and contentious, but in examining the activities and beliefs of a whole culture there are guiding questions to which we can seek potentially informative answers: whether, for example, there are certain sorts of context in which laughter is appropriate or even obligatory, as well as others in which it is inappropriate or forbidden; what kinds of ethical, social or 'aesthetic' reasons may be given for the encouragement or the restriction of laughter; what sorts of preference exist for laughter of a particular tone, strength or quality, and what justifications can be given for such preferences. We can study, therefore, the ways in which laughter is perceived as something to be encouraged and enjoyed, or inhibited and disapproved, according

[1] An embryonic version of this article was given to the Triennial Meeting of the Greek and Roman Societies, held in Oxford, July 1988: I am grateful to all participants, even those who were (wrongly) disappointed that I did not make them laugh. A later version was read to the Classics Department of Boston University in April 1991.

[2] For ethological evidence see C. Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London, 1872; rpr. Chicago, 1965), pp. 131–2, J. van Hooff in D. McFarland (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Animal Behaviour* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 171–3: this suggests some interesting links with human laughter – the element of surprise; release of tension; mock-seriousness; social communication. On the claim that man is the only laughing animal (cited anciently also at Lucian, *Vit. Auct.* 26, as Peripatetic) cf. M. Douglas, 'Do Dogs Laugh?', in *Implicit Meanings* (London, 1975), pp. 83–9.

to prevailing needs and standards in the habits of the society; and we can observe the values which inform the corresponding discriminations between acceptable and unacceptable occasions, kinds, objects and functions of laughter.

Greek attitudes to laughter involve an extensive, rich vocabulary of description and evaluation (at a conservative estimate, some sixty word-groups are directly pertinent), and they can be found in a wide range of sources, many of which will be cited in what follows. But behind the diversity of this material, which could be approached from many different angles,[3] we can trace a strong tendency for views and judgements of laughter to gravitate towards the poles of a fundamental contrast. It is my intention to illustrate the nature of the terms in which this polarity comes to be conceived or formulated, but also to argue that a perpetual tension can be perceived to exist between the poles of the contrast, manifesting itself in the frequently problematic nature of laughter for Greek thought and values. It will emerge, I believe, that the forces contained in or expressed by laughter were a recurrent subject of Greek moralizing. One incidental result of the enquiry will be to demonstrate just how pronounced an inclination to moralizing patterns of thought existed within Greek attitudes to personal and social behaviour. Thus it will prove consistently possible to cite alongside one another, as confirmative of the existence of certain habits of mentality, sources such as comedy, philosophy, oratory, tragedy, history, which in other respects are so disparate.

One pole of the essential contrast to which I am referring is archetypally represented in Greek sources by the notion of 'play'. The other lends itself less easily to a single formulation, but I shall regularly employ the phrase 'consequential laughter' to cover the various ways in which Greek texts recognize the capacity of laughter to become implicated in practical and 'serious' processes (the paradox here being only superficial). It must be noticed at once that this contrast overlaps with, but is not identical to, the more general antithesis of γελοῖα and σπουδαῖα. Playful laughter is ubiquitously indicated by the language of παίζειν, παιδιά, παίγνια, sometimes in direct contrast to σπουδαῖα, σεμνά, or the like.[4] But it is also possible and necessary to distinguish between the playful and the consequential *within* the sphere of laughter. Plato, for example, does this at *Laws* 11.935d–6a, where his discussion of what can be tolerated by the laws of the city rests on a separation of γελοῖα which involve παίζειν (and hence are ἄνευ θυμοῦ) from those which do not (and are correspondingly μετὰ θυμοῦ). Similarly, Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 5.2.18, discussing Persian habits but using Greek concepts, reports a distinction between pleasurable laughter which combines σκώπτειν with παίζειν, and the kind which entails ὕβρις (an association which will recur) and χαλεπαίνεσθαι πρὸς ἀλλήλους.[5]

[3] I have been unable to see either L. Woodbury, *Quomodo risu ridiculoque Graeci usi sint* (Harvard diss., 1944), or A. Plebe, *La nascita del comico* (Bari, 1956). M. A. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable* (Wisconsin, 1924), remains a useful survey of formal ancient discussions of the subject. An example of the study of laughter within a particular author (Herodotus) is D. Lateiner, 'No Laughing Matter', *TAPA* 107 (1977), 173–82.

[4] For various illustrations of the notion of playful laughter see Theog. 1211 (n.b. tension with δεννάζειν), Herod. 2.173–174.1 (Amasis, but Greek concepts), Ar. *Frogs* 375–6, 392, Isoc. 10.11, Xen. *Cyr.* 2.3.18, 5.2.18, Pl. *Laws* 816e10, Arist. *EN* 1108a13, 23, 1127b–8b, 1177a4, *Rhet.* 1371b33–1372a2, 1380b3, Antiphanes fr. 218.4 K.

[5] Other direct exemplifications of the playful/consequential contrast are Xen. *Cyr.* 2.2.12–16, Pl. *Ap.* 24c (the oxymoron, σπουδῇ χαριεντίζεται: for the latter term cf. n. 13 below), Arist. *EN* 1128a4–b4, *EE* 1234a4–23. Also pertinent is Aristotle's distinction between ψόγος and τὸ γελοῖον at *Poet.* 1448b27–38, 1449a32–7: cf. G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore, 1979), ch. 14. On the coalescence of the two poles in the notion of σπουδαιογέλοιον, see L. Giangrande, *The Use of Spoudaiogeloion in Greek and Roman Literature* (Mouton, 1972).

Before addressing the implications and applications of such categories in more detail, it will be worthwhile to examine what can be considered a paradigmatic exhibition of the relation between playful and consequential in the earliest dramatic images of laughter which we find in Greek literature. It is no accident that in the first two books of Homer's *Iliad* we hear laughter both on earth and on Olympus, for this belongs to the large but complex contrast between the societies of gods and men which we are shown in the early stages of the poem. The context of human laughter is that of Thersites' outburst against Agamemnon: the inveterate scoffer of his betters hopes, it would seem, to arouse laughter by his taunts against the general, but he becomes himself the object of derision from the troops when Odysseus lashes him (2.211–77). Divine laughter occurs in the scene where Hephaestus hobbles round the feast of the gods, playing the part of butler and thus dissolving the strain and hostility which had accumulated in the preceding encounter between Zeus and Hera (1.595–600).

The points of significant contrast between these scenes are multiple. It is important that Thersites' status, and his attempted arousal of laughter, manifest some ambiguity. His aim of providing what he thinks γελοίϊον (215) implies that he has, or aspires to, the function of a γελωτοποιός (as Plato shrewdly calls him at *Rep.* 10.620c3),[6] characteristically employed in entertaining the army – a function to which his eloquence, acknowledged by Odysseus at 246, is pertinent, and one which we are perhaps meant to discern in his mock-boasting at 231. Modern discussions of Thersites, in their understandable keenness to find deeper social and ethical implications in this scene, have tended to ignore the indications that Thersites is an habitual entertainer, and that this function is one which would find an acceptable place in other, less fraught circumstances. But Thersites is also marked both as an intrinsically deformed figure (itself perhaps symbolic of virulent laughter)[7] – the antithesis of the heroic in his gross ugliness – and as a poor judge of occasion and context: his berating of Agamemnon can consequently be felt only as harsh and shameful wrangling, as the crucial vocabulary of the scene (νεικείειν, ἐρίζειν, ὄνειδος, κερτομεῖν, λωβητήρ) indicates. Thersites' mockery is, on this occasion, out of place, and isolates him. His taunts are, ironically, too close to the bone, as their echoes of Achilles' polemic against Agamemnon in book 1 intimate. Laughing *with* Thersites could only, at this critical juncture, express solidarity with his sentiments. That Thersites fails, therefore, is crucial for the outcome of the whole scene: the laughter which his physical punishment itself elicits from the massed troops can be felt, by a sort of psychological displacement, as the laughter they had withheld from his speech, but might normally have allowed themselves in relaxed conditions; as such, it comes as an expression of anxiety released, and as a sign that control of the situation has been wrested back by Odysseus. Laughter here is inevitably caught up in the highly charged action of the entire crisis for the army and its leaders. A γελωτοποιός, like a parasite, would usually arouse essentially playful laughter, in a context recognized as suitable for it. But the misjudgement of the coarse Thersites means that such

[6] This term suggests the deliberate, habitual activity of a jester, parasite or the like: see my note on Pl. *Rep.* 10.606c7–9, and cf. below with n. 48.

[7] The idea of laughter as a disfiguring emotion (cf. the legend of Hipponax's ugliness, Pliny, *NH* 36.12), incompatible with dignity and idealization, may explain its rarity in Greek visual art: see H. Kenner, *Weinen und Lachen in der griechischen Kunst* (Vienna, 1960), pp. 62–91. Different views of the 'archaic smile' in Greek art are given by J. Boardman, *Greek Sculpture: the Archaic Period* (London, 1978), p. 66, and N. Yalouris, 'Das archaische "Lächeln" und die Geleontes', *Antike Kunst* 29 (1986), 3–5.

laughter is transformed into the highly 'consequential' scorn which the troops show for him.

The laughter of the gods in book 1 is the reverse of this in almost every way. Instead of occurring within and as a response to the context of angry wrangling, it follows and provides an escape from such animosity (compare κολωιός at 1.575 with the description of Thersites at 2.212, and νεικείειν at 1.579 with 2.221, 224 etc.). Laughter, first in the form of Hera's pacified smile and then in that of the communal mirth which follows (1.595–600), here belongs in the setting of a feast. Without this laughter, the feast, which the quarrel had threatened to spoil (579), could have proceeded only in name, not in essential spirit. Rather than arising from and expressing a conflict, this divine laughter dissipates one: as such it contrasts, of course, not only with the incident in book 2, but more immediately with the human quarrel earlier in book 1, where no appeasement could be achieved.

Divine laughter is, on this occasion, a paradigm of playful laughter. It is engendered by two things which have a recognizable place in a mood of symposiac relaxation: first, by an anecdote, which is surely meant to be humorously melodramatic (why else does Hera smile?), even if we associate it with 15.18–24; secondly, by a piece of deliberate or exaggerated play-acting.[8] The laughter of the gods represents the celebration of the pure pleasure of the moment, in a context which stands apart from, and temporarily suspends, the realm of serious action and its consequences. If this here seems indicative of a peculiarly divine plane of happiness, it nonetheless reflects, like much else about the gods, a possibility which is sometimes temporarily available to humans too. The behaviour of the Olympians exemplifies the conception of laughter as a mechanism of release or relaxation – the unstringing of the bow of serious tension, in the image used by Herodotus' Amasis (2.173–4) also in a setting of symposiac humour. Even the gods, it seems, confirm the proverbial wisdom, 'one plays in order to be serious [i.e. to refresh oneself for serious pursuits]', attributed to the sage Anacharsis and quoted commendingly by Aristotle, *EN* 1176b3, in a context where forms of laughter are very much in mind.

It is not insignificant that one could probably find Homeric illustrations of virtually every salient type of Greek judgement on laughter and its uses with which I shall be concerned.[9] But I turn now to some of the wider implications of the fundamental and recurrent contrast in Greek texts between playful and consequential laughter. These categories are, at root, interdependent and mutually clarifying. An essential factor in the notion of laughter as play, yet one which, as we shall see, makes it potentially unstable and problematic, is precisely an exemption from the sphere of practical effects and repercussions. Correlatively, laughter is judged or experienced to be consequential whenever it is perceived as impinging upon or likely to influence the processes of personal and social relations beyond the immediate context. Derivable

[8] Cf. G. S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 1: *bks. 1–4* (Cambridge, 1985), on 1.599–600.

[9] Three recent discussions of Thersites, on lines very different from mine, are: W. G. Thalmann, 'Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the *Iliad*', *TAPA* 118 (1988), 1–28, N. Postlethwaite, 'Thersites in the *Iliad*', *G & R* 35 (1988), 123–36, G. S. Meltzer, 'The Role of Comic Perspectives in Shaping Homer's Tragic Vision', *CW* 83 (1990), 265–84. Some light remarks on Homeric laughter are made by H. W. Clarke, 'The Humor of Homer', *CJ* 64 (1969), 246–52. The range of Homeric γέλως is distinguished by psychological subtlety: in addition to the references in nn. 11, 22, 25, 26, 40, 45, 50 below, see e.g. *Il.* 4.356 (appeasement), 6.404, 471, 484 (poignant affection), 514 (self-confidence), 7.212 (grim fierceness), 10.400, 565 (ironic sadism), 14.222–3 (satisfaction), 21.408, 434 (triumph), 23.784, 840 (?benign *Schadenfreude*); *Od.* 18.163 (?giddiness), 20.301–2 ('sardonic'), 345ff. (mania), 22.371 (reassurance), 23.1, 59 (hysterical relief).

from this basic polarity are the other factors which come easily to be associated with playful laughter and correspondingly absent from consequential laughter: lightness of tone; autonomous enjoyment; psychological relaxation; and a shared acceptance of the self-sufficient presuppositions or conventions of such laughter by all who participate in it. Consequential laughter, on the other hand, is marked by, first, its direction towards some definite result other than autonomous pleasure (e.g. causing embarrassment or shame, signalling hostility, damaging a reputation, contributing to the defeat of an opponent, delivering public chastisement); secondly, its deployment of an appropriate range of ridiculing tones, from mild derision to the vitriolic or outrageously offensive; finally, its arousal of feelings which may not be shared or enjoyed by all concerned, and which typically involve some degree of antagonism. This last point is critical: once the playful is exceeded, laughter is invariably regarded in Greek texts as having a human object or target, and it is the intended or likely effect of 'pain', 'shame' or 'harm' on this target (either in person or through his reputation and social standing) which is the primary determinant of its significance.[10]

Greek play, παιδιά, is of course etymologically cognate with παῖς, 'child', and the connection helps to delimit the significance of playful laughter as something ideally innocent (both ethically and in the sense of make-believe) as well as self-contained. Even so, it is a symptom of an ambivalence in the status of laughter, and one which will be important for my argument as a whole, that the association of laughter with the young is far from straightforward: it raises educational and moral problems of its own, on which I shall shortly have more to say. Moreover, in talking of 'playful' laughter some care is called for over the relation of ancient and modern categories, for it would be a mistake to equate Greek 'play', παιδιά, with 'sport': while *some* activities might fall under both these descriptions, a great deal of Greek sport, precisely because it comes within the rules of a 'contest', ἀγών, is not at all a matter of play in the sense applicable to playful laughter. Both patterns of behaviour have a framework of convention; but an ἀγών has a specific aim and conclusion whose consequences may well be taken very seriously indeed.

It is also worth recalling here the common association between παίζειν and dancing. Dancing is physically as well as in other ways distinct from the normal movements of life, an expressive activity which aims to create pleasing, patterned satisfaction (both for full participants and, where appropriate, for spectators). It is above all celebratory and joyful, and its principal setting is within some sort of festivity. All this is equally true of the conception of playful humour or laughter which emerges from many Greek sources, so that it is not surprising to find laughter and dancing sometimes conjoined as prime features of festivity.[11] These associations, both with play and with dancing, are pertinent to the understanding of a number of phenomena to which I shall be returning, including the socially admirable qualities of good-natured humour or agreeable wit, the strongly conventional role of laughter within such contexts as the symposium and *kômos*, and the various types of formal comic performance which find a place in organized festivals.

Two remarks on the distinctions I have so far sketched should be interposed at this point. First, we are faced by attempts to categorize and discriminate in matters which

[10] On the 'pain' caused by laughter see e.g. Pind. *P.* 2.53 (the 'bite' of defamation), Isoc. 1.31, Arist. *EN* 1128a7, 26, Alexis fr. 156.3 K; cf. the implications of Men. *Epitr.* fr. 10 G.–S.

[11] E.g. Hom. *Od.* 14.463–6, [Hes.] *Scut.* 278–85, Ar. *Birds* 732, *Frogs* 318–36, 384–93, Pl. *Euthyd.* 277d–e (ritual mockery?), Men. *Sam.* 41–6. Demodocus' comic tale of Ares and Aphrodite (on which see C. G. Brown, 'Ares, Aphrodite and the Laughter of the Gods', *Phoenix* 43 [1989], 238–93) is accompanied by dancers at *Od.* 8.256f. Very different conjunctions of dancing with laughter occur at e.g. Ar. *Clouds* 1078, *Wasps* 1305, and cf. n. 22 below.

may naturally, and in practice, prove resistant to clear-cut definition. Laughter, as moralists from Plato onwards have often observed, has an intrinsic capacity to breach limits imposed upon it, or to outrun a permitted field of play. But it is not only Plato who observes the tendency of some kinds of laughter to degenerate into more serious (i.e. consequential) forms of discord or antipathy: the idea that what starts as verbal badinage may end in physical blows becomes something of a Greek topos.[12] Secondly, however, for all its spontaneous force, laughter can acquire patterns of expression which in time take on the status of traditions or even of social ritual – patterns which accordingly can give a predictability, and hence a safety from practical repercussions, to what could otherwise be hard to control. It may be that the structure of such conventions, of which I shall later adduce some Greek instances, is one of the most effective means for containing laughter within acceptable bounds.

It is because of what Greek thought widely regards as an intrinsic ambiguity or, perhaps better, volatility in its nature, that laughter becomes a subject of significant social, ethical and aesthetic evaluations. One indication of this ambiguity lies in the nomenclature of laughter. At the simplest level, σκώπτειν and its cognates can mean both 'joke', 'jest', with reference to light and playful humour, and also 'mock' or 'deride' in a much more disturbing and potentially dangerous manner, and the difference sometimes appears a very delicate one; while even a word-group such as χάρις, χαρίεις, etc., though often used in approval of agreeable forms of wit, is sometimes found in deprecatory applications.[13] Ambiguous attitudes likewise surface in educational, moralizing and aesthetic responses to the affinity between laughter and the young. This affinity exists on one level as part of a generalized image of the positive, celebratory forces of life – 'youth, laughter, choruses, banquets', in the words of Aristophanes' bird-chorus (*Birds* 732). Laughter may appear generically appropriate to the young in a way in which it may not do to adults; this is something reflected, it seems, in the conventions of Greek visual art.[14] The young, according to Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1389b10–12, are φιλογέλωτες and therefore εὐτράπελοι, 'given to laughter' and therefore 'fond of wit'. Wit, he adds, is a form of 'educated/cultured hybris' – behaviour, that is, which would be offensive and insulting if it were not transmuted (by verbal form and social context) into an admissible strain of mutually pleasurable communication.

But the humour of the young may take more irreverent and uncontrolled forms, and this causes concern over both youthful buffoonery or ribaldry, βωμολοχεύεσθαι, and adolescent horseplay. Aristophanes makes the Just Argument in *Clouds* (969, cf. 983, 1073) typify and perhaps parody a conservative educational ethic by lamenting the demise of the practice of beating children for βωμολοχεύεσθαι, while Isocrates voices a similar attitude in his *Areopagiticus* (7.49, cf. 15.284): children used to avoid βωμολοχεύεσθαι, but these days they are actually praised for being εὐτράπελοι and addicted to jokes.[15] One implication of these uses of βωμολοχεύεσθαι, which has by

[12] Epicharmus fr. 148, Lys. 3.43, Dem. 54.19, Alexis fr. 156 K, Pl. *Laws* 934e–5d; cf. Ar. *Clouds* 1373–6, Arist. *Metaph.* 1023a30 f. For a modern legal parallel see J. Feinberg, *Offense to Others* (New York, 1985), pp. 224ff.

[13] Deprecatory uses of χάρις occur at e.g. Eur. fr. 492 N^2, Dem. 18.138; Eup. fr. 172 PCG (159 K) uses χαρίεντα of parasites' humour (cf. Ar. fr. 171 PCG [166 K], Diodorus fr. 2.33 PCG/K). At Arist. *EN* 1128a15 ff. χαρίεις is apparently a synonym of εὐτράπελος.

[14] Cf. Kenner (n. 7).

[15] Cf. Plut. *Lyc.* 12 on the teaching of Spartan boys παίζειν... καὶ σκώπτειν ἄνευ βωμολοχίας. This same passage refers to the need for boys to be trained to endure σκώμματα (cf. n. 28); cf. Ar. *Clouds* 992 (the young should blush when chaffed), Pl. *Rep.* 5.451a2 (sensitivity to laughter is παιδικόν). This all reflects a larger educational concern with σωφροσύνη: cf. Aeschin. 1.7–11.

this date lost its original reference to abuse that commits the special offence of marring a sacred context,[16] is a suggestion of unsophisticated, puerile laughter: this, at any rate, is one mark of youthful laughter which can easily be used in moralizing judgements, as when Aristophanes (however disingenuously) gibes at the sort of comic poets who cater for the immature and vulgar humour of boys among the theatre audience.[17] With adolescence and early manhood, the problems assume greater proportions, as potentially disturbing irreverence towards parents and other authorities now becomes a possibility, and one which Plato was led to see as especially characteristic of the democratic ethos.[18] νεανικός and cognates thus acquire a strong link with outrageously unconstrained laughter. The contumely and physical exuberance which Aristophanes' Philocleon displays at a dinner party is, by comic inversion, that of a boisterous young man (νεανικῶς, *Wasps* 1305–7), and his son's later reception of him with coarse insults, τωθάζειν, bears the same stamp (νεανικῶς, 1362). One dimension of the scurrilous tone of Aristophanes' *Knights* depends, I believe, on the suggestion that both the Sausage-seller and the horsemen are young and represent an extreme manifestation of youthful mockery towards those who are older and of greater social standing.[19] Plato calls Achilles' vituperative insults of Agamemnon in *Iliad* 1 νεανιεύματα (*Rep.* 3.390a2), and in *Rep.* 10 he deems the carefree enjoyment of laughter in the theatre, when moral scruples about its nature are suppressed, νεανικόν.[20] I shall shortly consider in more detail a specific instance of the mocking impudence of the young, from Demosthenes' speech *Against Conon*, where we can see how those troubled by such behaviour find in it a threat to the stability of the social order, while its defenders claim it to be no more than the typical 'play' of young men.

These remarks on laughter and the young should have helped to prepare the ground for certain general inferences which can be drawn from the antithesis of playful and consequential laughter. The notion of play is one which invites suitable occasions and forms for its expression. If playful laughter is regarded as either necessary or desirable (as in Anacharsis' proverb, quoted above), then we can expect to find cultural practices which make provision for its shared enjoyment. Laughter that is not so contained and culturally regulated, however, is an uncertain and dangerous force, because of its propensity to express, or produce, some degree of human opposition or antagonism. This is especially so in a society with a strong sense of shame and social position, for the laughter of denigration and scorn is a powerful means of conveying dishonour and of damaging the status inherent in a reputation. Insults and abuse are, in such a world, part of the business of blame and disgrace, which is the necessary corollary of praise and honour. The laughter of 'blame' can be seen, therefore, either as a positive weapon – a force of real social potency, capable of sustaining values and inducing conformity to them[21] – or alternatively as a

[16] See Nagy (n. 5), ch. 13, §3 n. 3. But Ar. *Frogs* 358 seems to recover a little of this original sense; cf. n. 41 below.

[17] Ar. *Clouds* 537; cf. Eup. fr. 261 (244 K) and Pl. *Laws* 2.658d2: for a different view of this context see Arist. *Pol.* 1336b20–1.

[18] *Rep.* 8.563a.

[19] The Sausage-seller is addressed as νεανικώτατε at 611 (the point could, of course, be clear from his mask); about the chorus there is no doubt (esp. 556, 731): the Knights' responses to the contest of abuse are regularly (if in a stylized manner) reminiscent of a jeering, encouraging crowd of onlookers at a slanging match: see e.g. 460, 616ff., 683ff., 756ff., 836ff., 941).

[20] *Rep.* 10.607c7; n.b. the ref. to βωμολοχία in the same context.

[21] [Dem.] 60.26 on ὄνειδος and βλασφημία in democratic cities is especially relevant here; cf. e.g. the fear of shaming taunts at Hom. *Il.* 3.242.

subversive and disruptive drive. Either way, laughter calls for means of control: but on the former view it is regulated or licit use which is required; on the latter, measures of outright prohibition.

When laughter is experienced as a medium expressive of hostility, it must be seen in relation to that great opposition of friends and enemies, φίλοι and ἐχθροί, which is so basic to Greek values of personal and social behaviour. If playful laughter is something one can only fully enjoy with friends, the use of laughter to express such feelings as triumph, superiority, or contempt, is regarded as a natural weapon in the pursuit of enmities. Derision from one's foes, making one καταγέλαστος, is a stock and powerful fear in this culture: the laughter of one's enemies is worse than death, in the words of Euripides' Megara (*HF* 285–6), though worst of all, in the imagination at least, is the fear of such mockery *after* one's death.[22] Such fears of dishonour inevitably arise and are voiced with a special intensity in heroic contexts: hence, for example, their frequent recurrence as a motif in Sophoclean drama.[23] But the dynamics of shame and reputation which underlie these fears had a wide currency in many Greek communities. Similar sentiments to those which Euripides gives to Heracles' wife can be offered by Aeschines to a fourth-century democratic jury, or voiced by a character in New Comedy, with obvious expectation of their common acceptability.[24] The speaker at Lysias 3.9 explains that for long he had preferred to endure in silence his rough treatment at the hands of Simon, his rival for the sexual favours of a Plataean boy, rather than be exposed to the shaming mockery which he was sure would be entailed by the publicity given to his homosexual adventures through a court case: we do not have to believe the circumstantial detail of what he says, but we need to recognize the plausibility of the power which he attributes to laughter in this context.

In many passages where either the use or the fear of hostile laughter is referred to, it is *open* and public vilification which is in question: it is the idea of looking into the face of a scoffing enemy which Aeschines conjures up in the passage cited above. Scope for public ridicule certainly existed in most Greek societies, and it is particularly associated in many sources with crowded and bustling settings of street or market place, settings which give a ready significance to the strongly social aspect of laughter. When Euripides' Dionysus indicates his intention to lead the transvestite Pentheus through the streets of the town, so as to display him for the laughter of the people, he is evoking a dimension of experience which is equally taken for granted as part of contemporary Athenian reality in the same period by Aristophanes.[25] Likewise, authors such as Aristophanes and Hypereides provide complementary vignettes of crowds gathering round in the agora to laugh at an individual's public discomfiture or to provide an audience for wrangling confrontations: when Plato expresses concern over exchanges of insults in such contexts, his attention is focused on a recognizable feature of the life of the polis.[26] Equally real and well attested is the

[22] See e.g. Hom. *Il.* 4.176–81 (the Trojans imagined dancing and mocking on Menelaus' tomb), Soph. *Aj.* 988–9, Eur. *HF* 731–3. The potency of such mockery is reflected in the traditional injunction against it: e.g. Hom. *Od.* 22.412, Archil. fr. 134 W, Chilon *apud* D. L. 1.70, Eur. *El.* 900–2. [23] E.g. *Ant.* 839, *Aj.* 79, 196–9, 367, 382, 958, *OT* 1422, *Phil.* 1125.

[24] Aeschin. 2.181–2, Men. *Epitr.* fr. 10 Sandbach.

[25] Eur. *Bacch.* 854–5, Ar. *Kn.* 319–21, *Wasps* 542, 1287, *Frogs* 1089ff. (with Pl. *Rep.* 10.613d7–8). Other refs. to public derision: Hom. *Il.* 23.784, 840, Archil. fr. 172 W, Semon. fr. 7.74 W, Ar. *Kn.* 319–20, Lys. 3.9?, Thphr. *Char.* 6.7; cf. Brown, op. cit. (n. 11).

[26] Ar. *Peace* 1015ff. (cf. *Ach.* 854), Hyp. 2.2 (with n. 48 below), 3.12, Pl. *Laws* 935b; cf. the scene of νεῖκος, with cheering crowds, at Hom. *Il.* 18.497–503.

use of public ridicule in official gatherings such as those of the assembly or court-room, but this phenomenon, as we know it from Athens at least, involves a special factor to which I shall have to return.

The accepted potency of laughter as a medium in which enmities may be publicly declared or pursued creates an emphatic Greek recognition of its dangers to the social fabric of the polis. This recognition is clearest in the extremely common equation, in every kind of source, between derision and ὕβρις:[27] to mock or insult a person is one way of challenging his identity and injuring his status; the recklessness of the man who can tolerate this easily – which must not be confused with the admirable quality of being able to 'take a joke' – is aberrant enough to earn a place among Theophrastus' *Characters*.[28] In a world where such attitudes prevail, it is readily intelligible that we should find Aristotle, at *EN* 1131a9 and *Pol.* 1262a27, including defamation and abuse in a list of acts of violence, together with assault, murder and robbery. The view may sound extreme, but it is not; a very similar passage occurs at Xenophon, *Cyr.* 1.2.6, and the essential point, that ridicule can function as an act of aggression and real harm, is the same one which underlies that common pairing of abusive laughter with hybris.

It will be instructive at this juncture to supplement, as well as test, the considerations put forward so far with the fuller details of a specific case. Demosthenes' speech *Against Conon* (54) belongs to the prosecution on a charge of physical assault, αἰκία, though the plaintiff, Ariston, claims that a graver charge of ὕβρις would have been entirely sustainable. It is doubly relevant to this point that the speaker alleges that Conon's behaviour, and that of his sons, has compounded physical injury with gratuitous offensiveness, ἀσέλγεια (2), a term which not only is regularly connected with hybris, but also has unmistakable links with mockery and insult.[29] Ariston's whole case, in fact, draws for its persuasive power on a telling sense of the dangers of what I have been calling consequential laughter. The friction of enmity between Ariston and Conon's family began, we are told, at a garrison camp in north west Attica, where Conon's sons allegedly led a life marked by drunkenness, quarrelsomeness, violence and mischievous taunts against Ariston and his companions: here, in actions for which the speaker uses a well-established range of terms for hostile laughter (παροινεῖν, κακῶς λέγειν, χλευάζειν: 4–6), lay the origins of that crucial combination of ὕβρις and ἀσέλγεια (4) on which the prosecution case is built. Such behaviour led, it is claimed, to severe disruption of the peace of the camp, and it engendered lasting 'anger and hatred' (6).

From what we hear about the subsequent pursuit of this enmity in the streets of Athens, I want to pick out two further details which are of striking pertinence to the whole polarity of consequential and playful laughter. In a remarkable account of what he maintains was a brutal mugging by his enemies (8–9), Ariston describes how, after he had been stripped, battered and kicked into the mud, he heard his assailants

[27] E.g. Soph. *Aj.* 196–9, 955–60, *El.* 794, Eur. *El.* 901–2, Ar. *Ach.* 479, 631, *Wasps* 1319–20, Xen. *Cyr.* 5.2.18, 8.1.33, Dem. 9.60, 19.46, 22.63, Aeschin. 2.181, Pl. *Prt.* 355c8, Arist. *Top.* 144a5–8, *Rhet.* 1379a29–30.

[28] Thphr. *Char.* 6.2, where the text is, however, contentious; cf. ibid. 7.8 (a milder form), Men. fr. 614 (Kock), Arist. *EN* 1126a7–8. For the distinct ethic of being able to take a joke, see e.g. Pl. *Rep.* 451a1–2, Aeschin. 1.126, Philemon fr. 23 K, Arist. *Rhet.* 1381a34–6, *EE* 1234a15–16.

[29] ἀσέλγεια and ὕβρις: Lys. 24.15, Dem. 21.1, 31, 24.143. Other applications of the ἀσελγ- group to lewd, vulgar or unseemly laughter: e.g. Eup. frr. 172.15 (159 K), 261 (244 K), Ar. *Wasps* 61 (ἀναισελγ-), Dem. 2.19, Isaeus 3.13. On Ariston's preference for a charge of αἰκία rather than ὕβρις see D. MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens* (London, 1978), pp. 131–2.

uttering a stream of foul insults against him, too foul indeed for anyone with a sense of *αἰσχρολογία* (see below) to repeat in public. What is more, these taunts were delivered in a cruelly mocking dance of triumph derived from Greek familiarity with fighting cocks, as Conon, encouraged by his jeering accomplices, imitated the crowing of a victorious cock:[30] the sons' *ὕβρις καὶ ἀσέλγεια* was thus crowned, we are led to believe, by that of the father (13). Here, from an encounter in the night streets of Athens some time around 340 B.C., is a picture of the laughter of triumphant hostility which brings startlingly to life all those stock remarks, to which I have recently referred, about the fear of derision from one's enemies: and it is a picture whose features are tellingly drawn by Demosthenes, whatever the reliability of its factual basis may have been.

The facts will, of course, have been disputed, and Ariston revealingly anticipates one of the ways in which he expects the defendant to rebut his charges. 'I have heard', he says, 'that [Conon] will try to present the whole affair as one of innocent jesting and pranks (*γέλωτα καὶ σκώμματα*) and will say that there are many sons of rich and respectable families (*καλῶν κἀγαθῶν*) who, in the playful way of the young, have given themselves special names, and call one of their groups the *ἰθύφαλλοι*, another the *αὐτολήκυθοι*...'[31] What one party alleges to be a serious case of hybris, assault and vicious contumely, will be explained away by the other as the capers of clubs of young men, whose activities, with their strongly sexual overtones and an element of mock-ritual (17), are ultimately to be deemed innocuous, late-adolescent 'play' (*παίζειν*). This diametrical and exclusive opposition of views perfectly exemplifies the polarity around which my argument is constructed. The Attic judges who heard the speeches both of Ariston and of Conon had to bring to bear, among much else, the categories and values which underlay their attitudes to laughter and its uses: they had to decide, in effect, whether this was a case of contemptuous aggression arising from the pursuit of shameful and socially dangerous enmity, or merely an instance of exuberant and innocent horseplay. In the process they must have been challenged by what I have already contended was an intrinsically ambivalent association between laughter and the young.[32]

The forensic conflict to which *Against Conon* belonged, as well as much of the other material earlier cited, points us to the issue of measures for the control and containment of laughter. Such measures can take two chief forms – either that of prevalent mores which deprecate such public indulgence in derisive laughter, at least when carried beyond certain limits; or that of definite legal restrictions. Legally imposed curbs are clearly attested for Athenian society, which possessed at least one law of slander and abuse (*κακηγορία* and *λοιδορία*) from the time of Solon, and may have added others in the classical period.[33] There is some suggestion in our sources that other Greek states too possessed similar legislation, though the evidence is not detailed.[34] The idea of legal restraints on freedom of speech was clearly enough

[30] Some such behaviour is presumably the sense of *περικοκκάζειν* (or *-ύζειν*?) at Ar. *Kn.* 697; cf. id. *Thesm.* 1059, with J. Taillardat, *Les Images d'Aristophane*[2] (Paris, 1965), §§331–2.

[31] Dem. 54.13–14. On the sexual connotations of the clubs' names see J. G. Griffith, '*ΛΗΚΥΘΙΟΝ ΑΠΩΛΕΣΕΝ*: A Postscript', *HSCP* 74 (1970), 43–4 [rpr. in H.-J. Newiger (ed.), *Aristophanes und die alte Komödie* (Darmstadt, 1975), pp. 380–2].

[32] Note Ariston's further attempt, at §23, to suggest that the behaviour of Conon and his sons threatens order and subordination within the *family*.

[33] A brief account: MacDowell (n. 29), pp. 126–9. Some details are discussed in my forthcoming article, 'Comic Satire and Freedom of Speech in Classical Athens', *JHS* 111 (1991).

[34] Arist. *EN* 1128a31–2 evidently refers to more than one city; the evidence for a Zaleucan law of slander in 7th cent. Locri is late: Stob. 44.19.

established, at any rate, for both Plato and Aristotle to build such provisions into their political philosophies, without any sense of advancing novel ideas on the subject.[35]

We know that the law of slander was active in classical Athens, despite the city's pride in its democratic freedom (*παρρησία*). We also know that it could not be applied or invoked sufficiently stringently to eliminate a large element of *κακηγορία*, *λοιδορία* and *διαβολή* from public life (see below). But the law rested in part on the basis of attitudes and mores whose force was anyway more diffusely applicable. The emotional content of scornful or insulting laughter was sometimes identified in terms of malevolent *φθόνος* or *ἐπιχαιρεκακία* (*Schadenfreude*),[36] and we have seen more generally that abuse and ridicule, because of their potential to cause shame or loss of face, could be regarded not only as painful but also as acts of harm, even *ὕβρις*, against one's fellow citizens: one interesting detail in this connection is the use of the verb *βασκαίνειν*, whose connotations are of quasi-magical efficacy, to refer to the power of contumely to blight its object.[37] Such behaviour could hardly be suppressed; but it could be inhibited by the pressure of prevailing standards of feeling concerning its public practice. One aspect of this inhibition is involved with the notion of *αἰσχρολογία*, whose kernel is the belief that euphemism is socially, ethically and therefore linguistically necessary. The berating of a character for foul language (*αἰσχροεπεῖν*) in Ephippus fr. 23 (Kock) compares his social offence to that of dressing badly, and applies the term *ἄγροικος*, whose evaluative force implies a canon of urbane decency. In the same way, Aristophanes' Philocleon lowered the tone of a dinner party by the 'rustic' manner of his humour (*σκώπτων ἀγροίκως*).[38] When Athenian orators claim that certain matters are too shameful, *αἰσχρόν*, to name or discuss explicitly, we should not automatically explain this away as a rhetorical ploy: though sometimes manipulated as that, it is also a reflection of a genuinely restrictive sensitivity to *αἰσχρολογία*, and it is because of the social currency of this attitude that it becomes incorporated into rhetorical theory.[39]

Reticence concerning *αἰσχρολογία* is, however, only one facet of the matter. There are other social pressures too which bear on laughter and insult, and which take us into realms of behavioural 'taste' and 'style' where, for example, public raillery can be represented, albeit in an image that becomes a traditional stereotype, as something fit only for 'fish wives', inn-keepers and other similarly 'low' women.[40] Traces of a feeling that strong and indiscriminate laughter is a mark of vulgarity can be found in

[35] Pl. *Laws* 934d–936b, Arist. *Pol.* 1336b3–23 (cf. *EN* 1128a31–2).

[36] *φθόνος*: Pind. *P.* 11.28–9, Herod. 7.237.2–3, Lys. 3.9, Dem. 9.54, Pl. *Phlb.* 48a–50b; cf. M. Mader, *Das Problem des Lachens und der Komödie bei Platon* (Stuttgart, 1977), pp. 13–28, Nagy (n. 5), pp. 223–32. *ἐπιχαιρεκακία*: Theog. 1041–2, Soph. *Aj.* 961, Lys. 3.9 (with *φθονεῖν*), Xen. *Mem.* 3.9.8, Arist. *EN* 1108b1–6, *Rhet.* 1386b34 ff.

[37] *βασκαίνειν*: LSJ s.v.; cf. the link with *φθόνος* and demagogic *διαβολή* at Ar. *Kn.* 103. *βασκαίνειν* obviously represents a link with belief in verbal magic: cf. e.g. B. Johnson, *The Lost Art of Profanity* (New York, 1948), R. C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire* (Princeton, 1960).

[38] *Wasps* 1320; cf. *ἀγροικία* and *λοιδορία* at Arist. *Rhet.* 1418b26; *ἀγροικία* as humourlessness, Arist. *EE* 1234a5–10, is distinct.

[39] Orators and *αἰσχρολογία*: e.g. Lys. fr. 53 Thalheim, Dem. 2.19, 54.9, 17, Aeschin. 1.37–8, 45, 52, 55, 70, 76, Arist. *Rhet.* 1408a17–18, *Rhet. Alex.* 1441b20–3. For the concept of *αἰσχρολογία* cf. Arist. *Rhet.* 1384b19–20, 1405b8 ff., with Soph. *OT* 1409, Isoc. 1.15; ps. Longin. *Subl.* 43.3 and 5 gives a clear statement of the link between actual and verbal *αἶσχος*.

[40] Hom. *Il.* 20.251–5, Chilon *apud* D.L. 1.70, Ar. *Kn.* 1400, 1403, *Wasps* 496–9, 1388ff., *Frogs* 549ff., 857–8, *Wealth* 426–8, 435–6, Pl. *Rep.* 395d6–7, *Laws* 935a1. The kind of evaluation involved here has been dubbed 'charientic' (cf. n. 13 above) by P. Glassen, 'Charientic Judgments', *Philosophy* 33 (1958), 138–46, though I would not accept his sharp separation from moral and aesthetic categories.

a variety of sources. One highly paradoxical testimony to this attitude is its occurrence within comic drama itself: above all, though not exclusively, in Aristophanes' use of evaluative language such as φορτικός, ἀγοραῖος and the βωμολοχ- word-group in criticism of his rivals and in self-justification for producing a style of comedy allegedly marked by refined virtues of ἀστειότης and δεξιότης.[41] We do not need to overlook the marked factor of irony in such special (and indeed comic) pleading, in order to acknowledge that it depends on the ready intelligibility to ordinary Athenians, and not simply to a social elite, of the values concerned. Similarly, when Demosthenes denigrates Philip by suggesting that he has a crude taste for mime-artists and composers of coarse lampoons, he must be able to depend on at least a general recognition of the standards he employs. Naturally, these standards belonged in part to conceptions of dignity and decorum which not everyone would see equal reason to uphold; it is interesting that Demosthenes hints at this when he says, 'even if one thinks these are small matters, still they are important indications of Philip's character'.[42] Demosthenes is referring here to a level or type of popular entertainment (the world of travelling singers, puppeteers, jugglers and the like) to which many in his audience may have been drawn, but he is nonetheless able to put to them for public approval the judgement that there is something irredeemably cheap and uncouth about the amusement derived from such things.

But the standards of acceptable laughter have their positive as well as their negative side. They do not simply inhibit or deprecate undesirable manifestations of laughter, but also encourage and value, with a vocabulary we have already glimpsed (ἀστεῖος, [ἐπι]δέξιος, εὐτραπελία, χάρις),[43] forms of humour which are esteemed as personally and socially admirable. They also justify occasions on which laughter is expected to find a prominent place or function, and to which a conventionalized predictability, allowing for agreed or shared perceptions of the 'playful', accordingly comes to be attached. The occasions within Greek culture which possess such a framework of convention are paradigmatically those of conviviality and festivity: the symposium, the *kômos*, and the civic festival (whether at a local or a state level). These contexts have in common a distance or detachment from normal, everyday affairs, and, in certain areas, a suspension of usual standards of behaviour. Some major festivals in particular provide, in this respect, opportunities for a politically and socially endorsed relaxation of inhibitions and 'censorship'; they give an established and organized place to laughter, creating the space in which its indulgence can be recognized as legitimate and playful. The remark attributed to Socrates at Plutarch, *Mor.* 10c–d – that the theatrical context of his mockery in *Clouds* was that of a symposium writ large (ὡς γὰρ ἐν συμποσίωι μεγάλωι ...) – is, if nothing else, *ben trovato* by virtue of its sense of the special character of laughter in festive contexts.[44] Symposium, *kômos* and festival contain, of course, many other elements than opportunities for laughter

[41] Ar. *Clouds* 537–62, *Peace* 739–51, *Wasps* 57–66, *Frogs* 1–18; cf. Eup. frr. 172.15 (159 K), 261 (244 K). βωμολοχία is always pejorative, even in Aristophanes: e.g. *Kn.* 1358, *Clouds* 910 (where the sense is 'nothing sacred'? cf. n. 15 above); cf. Isoc. 7.49, 15.284, Pl. *Rep.* 606c (with my note), Arist. *EE* 1234a5–10. ἀγοραῖος and abuse: see esp. Ar. *Kn.* 218, 636–8, 1258, Thphr. *Char.* 6.2. Other disapproval of vulgar laughter: e.g. Eur. fr. 492 N², Isoc. 1.15, Arist. *EN* 1128a2 ff., *Rhet.* 1419b6–8.

[42] Dem. 2.20; cf. Athen. 260a–c, 614e.

[43] The lability of values and evaluative vocabulary in this area is itself an important symptom of tension: see Isoc. 15.284, Arist. *EN* 1128a15.

[44] M. Heath, *Political Comedy in Aristophanes* (*Hypomnemata* 87, Göttingen, 1987), 26, offers a somewhat different interpretation: I cannot agree that Socrates' reaction need be 'extraordinary'; it need only have an agreeable aptness or well-turned wit to make it suitable for an anecdote.

(though some of these elements – song, dance, drinking – are commonly aligned with it in Greek attitudes), but a specific spirit of laughter is certainly identified as a salient feature of them in many texts.[45]

The legitimacy of laughter in these settings can be marked in various ways: by occurring at particular, predetermined and correspondingly *anticipated* moments in a festival, such as during/at a certain juncture of a procession (hence the special senses of πομπεύειν and cognates);[46] by the employment of customary 'props', such as performers on platform waggons (a well-known feature of the Dionysia and other festivals at Athens) or the wearing of masks;[47] or by the presence of an individual expected to create laughter, such as the parasite or entertainer (γελωτοποιός) at a symposium.[48] Much festive or celebratory laughter is therefore dependent on explicitly observable traditions or conventions, which encourage but also contain and enclose the pleasures which they legitimate: hence the dissonant effect of, for instance, a γελωτοποιός *out of* context, as with the Iliadic Thersites (see above). The operation of controlling convention may even manifest itself in the particular forms by which laughter is aroused. One thinks here especially of various routines and exchanges of verbal wit or badinage, which possess something of the stylized, predictable shape of a game. Some kind of contest in symposiac 'flyting' is attested as early as the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (55–6), where the practice is attributed, we should not be surprised to find, to κοῦροι ἡβηταί; subsequently, it is the game of 'likenesses' (εἰκάζειν, later εἰκασμός), regularly indulged at Athenian parties, for which we have most evidence.[49] But laughter carries the perpetual possibility that the 'rules' of such games will be broken, and the bounds of acceptable behaviour consequently transgressed. Aristophanes illustrates this in his image of the drunken, exuberant Philocleon engaging in εἰκασμός at a dinner-party (1299–1323), where the old man's ridicule rapidly degenerates into indiscriminate and disruptive hybris, thereby creating a comic model of what is a frequent topic of moralizing anxiety in more serious writers.[50]

Such anxiety helps in part to explain the existence of cultural variations within the Greek world in attitudes towards the phenomena of festive laughter. One striking

[45] Festivity and laughter: e.g. Ar. *Ach.* 241–79, *Clouds* 623, *Peace* 339–45, *Birds* 732, *Frogs* 375–6, Pl. *Laws* 657d, Arist. *Rhet.* 1380b3, Men. *Sam.* 38–46, Demetr. *Eloc.* 170. Laughter and symposia, *kōmoi*, drink, etc.: Hom. *Il.* 1.595ff. (see above), *Od.* 14.463–6, Theog. 309–11, Herod. 2.173–4, Eur. *Alc.* 804, *Bacch.* 376–86, Pl. *Laws* 637a–b, Alexis fr. 156, 1–3 K. For the dangers of laughter and drink cf. n. 50 below.

[46] πομπεύειν: Dem. 18.11, 124, Men. *Perinth.* fr. 9 Sandbach.

[47] Waggons: Pl. *Laws* 1.637b, Dem. 18.122, Philemon fr. 43 K, Men. *Perinth.* fr. 9 Sandbach. Masks: Dem. 19.287, Thphr. *Char.* 6.3 (where we need a negative), both referring to κῶμοι.

[48] Parasites/γελωτοποιοί: Epicharmus fr. 35.3–4, Eup. fr. 172 (159 K), Xen. *Symp.* 1.11–16, Anaxandr. fr. 10 K, Athen. 614c–e (where, with 260b, we have a strange ?club of jesters: cf. Ar. *Ach.* 605, with Rennie's note). Cf. also Ar. *Ach.* 854–9, with my note at *LCM* 7 (1982), 153: I would now add that I take Hyp. 2.2 to be suggesting a kind of perverted parasitism – mockery of the city in the agora, followed by dining in the prytaneum – against Democrates.

[49] *Hom. Hymn Hermes* 55–6 cannot refer to ordinary abuse; the simile implies an element of spontaneous wit in a celebratory context: cf. M. L. West, *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* (Berlin, 1974), p. 16; T. W. Allen, W. R. Halliday and E. E. Sykes, *The Homeric Hymns* (Oxford, 1963), *ad loc.*, cite irrelevant passages from Pindar and Herodotus. But the spirit of such badinage could be perverted; this is what Homer gives us, I suggest, in the suitors' mockery of Telemachus at *Od.* 2.323–36. εἰκασμός: e.g. Ar. *Wasps* 1308–13 (with MacDowell). Comic drama often draws on the character of stylized badinage (cf. Pl. *Phdr.* 236c): *Clouds* 908ff. is a striking instance, and much of the mutual abuse in *Knights* reflects the same point (see the amoebean features at e.g. 284–302, 367–81, 694–711).

[50] Laughter, drink and unbridled behaviour, παροινία etc.: cf. Hom. *Od.* 14.463–6, Xen. *Lac.* 5.6, Ar. *Wasps* 1253–5, *Ec.* 142–3, Pl. *Rep.* 395e, *Phdr.* 240e, Dem. 2.19, 54.3–4, Hyp. 2.3.

instance of such variation is remarked in Plato's *Laws* (1.637a–b), where Megillus the Spartan observes that *his* state forbids the indulgent festivity of the symposium, the *kômos* and the Dionysiac festival; apropos of the latter, he specifies the ribald custom of men on waggons which I mentioned a moment ago. Megillus contrasts Sparta not only with Athens, but also with a Dorian colony like Tarentum, where he claims that such festivities can also be witnessed. We may wish to make some allowance for an idealization of Spartan puritanism by Plato's speaker (Plato, in fact, pokes some gentle fun at Megillus: 637c2), but cultural variation of this sort clearly did exist, and our evidence indeed suggests that the uses of laughter were, or were thought to be, a subject of keen interest to the Spartan mentality. The apophthegms attributed to Chilon by Diogenes Laertius, 1.69–70, contain several warnings against κακολογεῖν, γελᾶν, loose talk and abuse; and Xenophon, *Lac.* 5.6, agrees with Plato's *Laws* in commenting on the absence of hybris, παροινία and αἰσχρολογία from Spartan dinners. On the other hand, Plutarch's *Lycurgus* refers several times to the place of good-natured jesting in Spartan messes, claiming that the ability to take banter without rancour was a particular characteristic of the culture, but also suggesting that laughter had a place in the complementary practices of blame and praise which sustained the mores of the society.[51]

To return to the association of laughter with the spirit of festive celebration, we can notice that two defining or 'structural' features of festivity are of critical importance here: first, the shared or collective nature of the occasion; second, the exemption of festive behaviour, to a greater or lesser degree, from the usual conditions of communal affairs, and especially from formal modes of social control and censorship. The shared context marks laughter as, in principle, an expression of a common pleasure, to which we might note the corollary that the solitary life is one without any place for laughter.[52] The release from normality allows the setting to assume a self-contained form, like that of a rule-bound game, and means that certain actions within the festive frame lack the consequences which they could be expected to have outside it. Neither of these factors, of course, is automatically self-sustaining; there remains the possibility that, as contexts for laughter, they will be subjected to strain, or even breached outright. This is easy enough to see where the celebrating group is small: the activities of a *kômos*, for example, may readily bring it into conflict with those outside the party, which is why we find such revelling equated, by writers laying claim to respectable values, with anti-social indecency and aggression.[53] Even where the festivity officially embraces a whole community, the nature of laughter is such that it may retain its capacity to shame or wound, notwithstanding the purportedly special and 'licensed' nature of its circumstances. One thinks here again of the implications of Aristotle's shrewd oxymoron in describing even agreeable wit as a form of 'cultured/educated hubris' (see above).

The two poles around which Greek views of laughter tend to be concentrated represent, therefore, a kind of perpetual tension between the spirit of celebratory, playful release and the forces of derisive antagonism, a tension which was handled by the shaping and constraining functions of both ethical attitudes and specific social practices. In this connection I would like to say something about a form of ostensibly consequential and hostile laughter which was pursued on specific public occasions: namely, rhetorical διαβολή and λοιδορία, the denigration and ridicule of one's

[51] Plut. *Lyc.* 12, 14, 17, 25.

[52] Note the ἀγέλαστος βίος of the Timon-like misanthrope in Phryn. Com. fr. 18 K.

[53] See esp. Lys. 14.25, Isaeus 3.13–14, [Dem.] 59.33, Aeschin. 1.65, Pl. *Rep.* 500b3–4 (metaphor); cf. the image of War as a disruptive comast at Ar. *Ach.* 979–87.

opponents before forensic or political audiences. The degree of vituperation permitted in public oratory was no doubt historically and culturally variable. The remarkably vitriolic vocabulary and manner of abuse deployed by Homeric characters in such settings, though not to be taken straightforwardly as evidence for known practice, are nonetheless suggestive of an old conception of the potency of this weapon in the rhetorical arsenal. In the society for which we have most evidence, classical Athens, διαβολή seems to have reached some kind of extreme in the fourth century, though this impression may be due simply to the preponderance of surviving material from this period. Yet even here freedom was not unbounded. I earlier mentioned the common sense of αἰσχρολογία, which still had some restraining force on oratory; and the law(s) of slander too applied, if erratically, to courts, assemblies and other public meetings. What remains striking, even so, is the degree of outspokenness, coarseness and vilification (often involving fictitious or distorted material) which *was* tolerated, and it is this which makes it tempting to suppose that we have here a field in which the consequential laughter of rancour and enmity was able to vent itself virtually unchecked. However, an important qualification on this view is called for.

It is essential, in the first place, to realize that διαβολή and λοιδορία were indeed frequently laughing matters in a literal sense, and formed part of a larger oratorical repertoire of humour. We should not imagine that rhetorical exchanges of recrimination were received in an atmosphere of solemn hush, for our evidence shows that heckling, clamour and other noise was common in Athenian public meetings. Demosthenes refers, as to a culturally established fact, to the overt delight of Athenian juries in forensic vituperation – ἡ ἐπὶ ταῖς λοιδορίαις ἡδονὴ καὶ χάρις (18.138, cf. §3). Numerous other passages, referring to the assembly as well as the courts, confirm that such delight was regularly expressed in outright and even noisy γέλως.[54] Perhaps most telling is Aeschines' description of how, both in the council and in the assembly, the crowd regularly roared with laughter at Timarchus' unintended sexual *double entendres*, and how they had similarly been moved to mirth by a recent meeting at which Autolycus had unwittingly perpetrated ribald puns against Timarchus. On the latter occasion, the people were rebuked for laughing in the presence of the Areopagus (we glimpse the reflection of a familiar moral attitude here), but a sense of decorum had been overriden by the intensity of their enjoyment.

All this strongly suggests that rhetorical mockery and humour were experienced and understood, at least on occasions, expressly as entertainment. A similar inference is prompted by the way in which the arousal of laughter in contexts of oratorical antagonism was codified in rhetorical theory at least as early as Gorgias, whose principle that one should destroy one's opponents' seriousness with laughter, and their laughter with seriousness, is reported approvingly by Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1419b2–5): the formulation strongly points to the use of rhetorically induced laughter not so much for a direct expression of animosity, as in order to win one's audience's amused approval and thus to manipulate the mood of a public gathering in one's own favour. Similar implications seem to be carried by remarks made in particular cases: a client of Lysias', for instance, complains that the prosecution's allegations have been a tissue of playful pretence and comedy (παίζειν, κωμωιδεῖν), while elsewhere a plaintiff claims that defendants get themselves acquitted by offering the jury humorous diversions (ἀστεῖα).[55]

[54] Ar. *Ach.* 680, *Wasps* 567, 1287, *Ec.* 399–407, Thuc. 4.28.5, Pl. *Euthph.* 3c–e, *Prt.* 319c, *Tht.* 174c, Xen. *Mem.* 3.6.1, 3.7.7–8, Dem. 9.54, 19.23, 45–6, 54.13, 20, 60.26, Aeschin. 1.135, 175.

[55] Lys. 24.18, Dem. 23.206; cf. Ar. *Wasps* 567.

Laughter, then, became an important element in the response of Athenian public audiences to rhetorical performances, and expectations were pitched accordingly: we seem here to glimpse something like an occasional atmosphere of *theatricality* in public meetings. The point is doubly attested by Plato's observation that the gauche philosopher, finding himself in court, will not know how to engage in the usual λοιδορία of his opponent, and will be mocked by his audience for his lack of experience.[56] Against this background, it is reasonable to suppose that even coarse διαβολή and λοιδορία acquired a function that was conditioned by institutional convention: there are certainly instances in our extant speeches where the techniques of defamation employed are unmistakably those of a quasi-comic scurrility, far removed from anything that could be taken as solemnly or soberly accurate.[57] The aim of such mockery and vilification most certainly merits the description of consequential laughter, since it was intended to play some part in achieving practical victory in rhetorical contests. But by being contained within the regularized requirements of the contest – the ἀγών of assembly-debate or court-room – and by offering its auditors, as we have seen, an explicit form of entertainment, the ridicule and vituperation of public rhetoric, as we know it from the Athenian context at any rate, was effectively controlled as well as elicited by the formal framework of a debate or trial, and thus can be seen to bear a degree of 'structural' resemblance to some of the occasions of playful laughter.

If even rhetorical διαβολή came to reflect something of the potential ambiguity of laughter and its uses, I want to conclude by offering some brief remarks on two phenomena – comic drama, and ritual abuse of the γεφυρισμός type – which seem positively to embrace and relish this ambiguity; this conjunction of phenomena will also return us to the large issue which I broached at the outset. Comic drama may seem to us so familiar a form as to make the historical understanding of it in principle unproblematic; in approaching it, we may feel content with a Johnsonian sense of the universal dynamics of laughter. The occurrence of coarse ridicule at the heart of a religious ritual, however, as attested at several Athenian festivals (Eleusinia, Stenia, Thesmophoria, Haloa, and more than one Dionysia), as well as in other parts of the Greek world (Aegina, Epidaurus, Pellene, Anaphe, Lindos, Sicily), strikes us as culturally alien, especially when combined, as it often was, with obscenity: here, then, we seem to be confronted by uses of laughter that are no longer our own, and we may consequently feel the need for an anthropologically tempered sense of cultural difference and relativity, inclining in particular, as many have done, towards the identification of ritual laughter as a species of primitive fertility magic.

The contrast just drawn becomes somewhat blurred, however, if we reflect that in the salient features of Old Comedy we encounter something not wholly dissimilar from ritual abuse – a combination of extreme αἰσχρολογία and obscenity within the framework of a religious festival. Yet modern interpreters, at least, have seen comedy as an essentially secular phenomenon, while usually taking γεφυρισμός, τωθασμός, and similar practices as deeply if strangely religious in nature. Two further and

[56] Pl. *Tht.* 174c. Not all philosophers, of course, were as innocent as this suggests; indeed, the profession developed its own trade in abusive polemics: some consequences of this fact are discussed by G. E. L. Owen, 'Philosophical Invective', in *Logic, Science and Dialectic* (London, 1986), ch. 20.

[57] For evidently, even self-consciously, comic elements of διαβολή see e.g. Andoc. 1.124, 131, Aeschin. 1.26, 33, Dem. 18.130 (Empousa), Hyp. 2.2, 7. A thorough enquiry into rhetorical *diabolé*, which I hope to undertake elsewhere, would need to discriminate carefully between different kinds and tones of abusiveness: for some pertinent distinctions cf. Feinberg (n. 12 above), ch. 14.

alternative possibilities suggest themselves: either the ritual phenomenon may not be as alien as it looks at first, and perhaps can even be partially assimilated to comic drama itself; on the other hand, maybe comic drama, in this phase of its history at least, is not as readily comprehensible as we assume: could Old Comedy contain, as has sometimes been maintained, traces of ritual practices, and require a much more complex cultural interpretation than we would give to dramatic comedy in later periods?

These questions would of course merit a full discussion in relation to concepts of the religious and the secular, as well as to ideas of cultural specificity and universality in the uses of laughter. But the one suggestion which I wish to make is that such polarities may come to seem much less significant if we concentrate on the key Greek factor of festivity. What matters for festivity is above all the creation of a sharp contrast between what is permissible or even called for within the bounds of the festival, and the norms which are commonly adhered to outside this special 'space': this is the essential structural factor common to both the strong humour of Old Comedy and the αἰσχρολογία indulged during certain fertility cults. Without this exceptional festive status, which carries determinate and recognized conventions with it, neither of these sets of practices would have been possible, let alone supported by the polis-organization, for the simple reason that they flouted otherwise prevailing standards of social behaviour. Once we focus on the occasions and spirit of laughter within Greek festivity, moreover, we can perceive how a spectrum of conventions connects comedy and ritual abuse: thus, comedy's affinities point us towards the *kômos* and the masked Dionysiac procession; the latter itself seems easily to shade into the practice of γεφυρισμός, which carries us close to, if not into, the sphere of ritual abuse.

The traditions and the mood of festivity will take us some way in understanding the striking and 'transgressive' forms of ritual abuse, though this is not to deny the residually distinctive and problematic character of the phenomenon, not least in respect of its origins.[58] In the case of Old Comedy, at any rate, we can see clearly enough that in the cause of Dionysiac celebration the thresholds of political and social control were lowered perhaps further, and in a more conspicuous fashion, than in any other public context known to us from antiquity. Out of this circumstance arises a paradox which makes a fitting conclusion to the argument of this article: namely, that Old Comedy was able to incorporate, within a civic framework of celebratory 'play', uses of laughter which have the ostensible marks of hostile and antagonistic derision. This combination, which lies at the root of so much interpretative disagreement about the genre, must be principally understood, I contend, *within* the distinct conventions of festivity itself. A number of classical Athenian sources attest a sense that only within the privileged licence of the festival could comic poets be allowed to say things which were strongly inhibited by the

[58] Healthy scepticism about the fertility-magic view is shown by A. B. Chandor, *The Attic Festivals of Demeter* (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1980), pp. 122–6, J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New Haven, 1975), pp. 13–18, W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Eng. tr. (Oxford, 1985), p. 105. J. J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire* (New York, 1990), ch. 7, explores ritual ribaldry within women-only festivals, arguing that it belongs to a distinctively female view of sex; but this would not account for ritual abuse between the sexes, as e.g. at Pellene (Paus. 7.27.9–10) or Anaphe (Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.9.26). The larger interpretation of ritual abuse obviously calls for discrimination between origins and developed (or debased) use. It is certainly possible to argue for a degree of secularization of the practice by the classical period in Athens: pertinent passages here, in various ways, are Ar. *Ach.* 247–79, *Wasps* 1361ff. (with J. Rusten, *HSCP* 81 [1977], 157–61), the parodos of *Frogs*, and Arist. *Rhet.* 1336b16.

normal mores of social life.[59] We know of occasions on which the exercise of this privilege came under strain, but these were mostly, so I believe, related to the presence of non-Athenians at the greater Dionysia, a presence which in itself, by contaminating the composition of the celebrating group, represented a potential fissure in the frame of the festivity. At a deeper level, indeed, the licence allowed to Old Comedy may always have been precarious, for it presupposed in the city as a whole a climate which could accept the mockery of almost everything which the city itself took seriously. Old Comedy, we can say, tested the limits of festivity – and thus the limits of the experience of laughter as a force for communal release and play – by constantly and irreverently toying with subjects on which life outside the festival depended. As such, it appears to have compounded uses of laughter which Greek culture, as I have tried to show, was customarily anxious to keep separate.

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[59] See Lys. fr. 53 Thalheim, Isoc. 8.14, Pl. *Laws* 934d–6b, Arist. *Pol.* 1336b3–23: I discuss these passages in the last part of the article cited in n. 33 above.