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Seattle Pacific University, Feb. 29, 1996

Greeks, Romans, Comedy and Other Human Foibles
by
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Humor is one of those intangible, uniquely human qualities that leaves no clear trails in the historical record. What makes something funny comes from a complex interconnection between an event, usually perceived as distant from the perceiver, and some rapid coalescence of associations in the brain that trigger a response of laughter in some form.

Since each of us perceives differently and from a very different set of experiences, the mental associations made will be unique to each of us: the variables are incalculable. The truly amazing part is that most societies do have commonly accepted notions of what constitutes humor and what is agreed to be “funny” at any given point in time. That common agreement within a society--the ability of a group of individuals to agree on what is funny--allows the dramatic form we call comedy to flourish.

By “comedy” I mean here a prepared performance which includes spoken lines, and which is offered to an audience in the expectation of provoking laughter. It has some connection to the realities of everyday life, and is sometimes organized around a clear plot line. In western European literary tradition the acceptable components of a comic performance have changed somewhat over the centuries, but our roots go back to patterns established in Greek and Roman theaters during the Classical period.

Theatrical drama of any kind depends upon actor and audience plus the circumstances of performance. These three form a set of interactions, and they all involve elements that have changed radically from what the Greek inventors of comedy knew. We need to identify these differences before we can ask what makes an individual play “funny.”

Let us start with Aristophanes, the only writer of Old Comedy whose works survive. He was an Athenian, a contemporary of Socrates and Plato, and lived in the late 5th c. BC. His first plays were presented while Athens was still at war with Sparta, his later ones during the difficult recovery from her defeat by Sparta.

The plays written by Aristophanes have a number of significant differences from modern comedies. Aristophanes used a chorus (a group of actors often speaking in unison), as well as individual actors, and all the lines in his plays are written in poetic metres. But there are far more differences between Greek comedy and modern when we consider the performance circumstances and audience expectations.

c. C. H. Roseman
1996

First: All dramatic performances, tragic and comic, were state religious events in honor of the god Dionysos. At Athens, the most important occasions for performance were the January festival called the Lenaia, a four day celebration at which one full day was devoted to the presentation of five comic plays, and the Great Festival of Dionysos held in late March.

The worship of Dionysos, from very early times, included a number of fertility rites and seems to have made use of masks and “dressing up” with animal tails and skins to dance. Since singing and antics were also involved, it is not difficult to imagine a process of development eventually leading to arranging such performances around skits which became plots. Dancing to welcome the return of Dionysos and celebrate the new wine remained an important part of the context for Greek comedy. Further, the rituals used for the worship of this god required ribald humor and jokes at the expense of on-lookers. Let me emphasize that this was not conceived as personal entertainment, in which individual responses were important. This was rather a bonding experience for the community, shared by all who were resident in the city-state, and held to be a vitally important religious experience.

Second: Everything about a performance was competitive, since it was an offering to the gods, and Greeks assumed that the appropriate way to get the finest offering was to hold a contest. There were several stages of competition for the plays themselves, and for the allotment of actors. Then there was the matter of assigning the chorus underwriter: this was a wealthy citizen who was required to spend his own money as a contribution to the glory of the state gods.

Third: Performances were day-long, outdoor events, presented in an open theater holding the whole urban population, with the brilliant Greek sky for stage backdrop, its vastness never allowing the audience to forget how puny humans are within the cosmos. Think for a moment of the last time you watched a drama. Were you at home alone, staring at a bright screen in your individual space? Or perhaps closed into a large hall, focused upon a bright stage set apart from the darkness in which you sat with strangers? The kind of dramatic reality created by the actors in Old Comedy must have been very different, and I suspect that the sense of shared experience had overtones we find it hard to grasp.

The three elements I have stressed--outdoor communally shared performance, fierce competition to determine the very best, and state religious ritual--by themselves help to illustrate how very different an experience Aristophanes' comedies would have offered his audience from what you and I expect when we attend a comic performance today. Comedy as religious ritual promoted by the political mechanisms of the state. Competitions for personal honor among playwrights, chorus underwriters and actors. Outdoor public performances in which your neighbors took part as chorus members, as actors or even author, and you sat with friends known to you since childhood: different indeed from our present context for a “funny” play.

But there are more differences to add. The goal for a playwright was never money. The actors were not professionals but talented amateurs, and all the actors were male. The costs were borne by private individuals eager to spend personal fortunes in exchange for public honors (not profit).

Most discouraging of all, more than half the impact of a comic performance is completely lost to us, for we lack all the music and the choreography and the stage

business--that is, the actor's contribution. The words spoken are all that survives: we lack the essential understanding, that common agreement on what is funny, as well as all the various circumstances of performance. It is so different a world that one suspects we miss most of the jokes.

We are puzzled by the use of humor at all, in a public religious festival, and when we turn to analyze the humor used in these comedies, we discover something that further magnifies the gap between ourselves and Aristophanes' audience.

Scurrilous, slanderous personal attacks on prominent individual citizens were not just condoned but expected in fifth century Athenian comedy. This practice developed in tandem with the Athenian democracy. It is possible that such pointed slander was not used in comedy played at other city-states which lacked the astonishing access to public decision-making enjoyed at Athens. No commentator remarks on this and we lack contemporary comedies from any other writer. It seems clear that Athens, at least, expected those men who emerged as leaders in her limited democracy to endure being laughed at and savagely lampooned.

True, politicians are lambasted and jokes are made about the prominent today, but it is the degree to which personal attacks are the stuff of Old Comedy that is really surprising today--that, and the blatant obscenity.

It is significant to note that when Athens' political experiment with democracy had been tamed, when it had dwindled into a compromise with the old aristocratic forms, Athenian comedy changed also, passing through a transitional Middle period before being transmitted, ultimately, to Rome. There seems, in other words, to be a relationship between the unique character of Athenian Old Comedy and the kind of participatory democracy her citizens created.

From hints in the surviving literature, it would seem that the Greeks believed laughter has a protective effect, and could ward off evil influences. It certainly offered diversion from grim reality, and occasionally insight. The fear of something is diminished when we can laugh at it, and this may indeed be why Old Comedy is so full of savage personal attacks on important people in the Athenian democracy. When everyone has the right to participate, no one can be allowed to think he is the sole wielder of power. If you were a contemporary of Aristophanes, and found yourself the butt of sharp jokes in a comedy during the festival of Dionysos, you knew you had truly arrived! It might also be a good thing to reconsider your next public moves.

So then: these were comedies performed during the religious ceremonies connected with worship of Dionysos at Athens while the city was at her most vigorous. What do we know about the actors, and were they able to improvise at all, or was this so carefully rehearsed a performance that our texts do provide an accurate guide? The main actors, although not professional in the modern sense, were still well enough known that the presiding magistrates assigned them to playwrights by lottery. Otherwise, it was felt that whoever could secure the most renowned performers would have an unfair advantage. Usually the playwright served as trainer (after all, he had the one written copy of the play), although the chorus underwriter probably kept a close eye on the proceedings, since he was paying the bills.

There were five plays presented in one day, so timing during the performance was probably of considerable concern. On the whole, improvisation on the part of the main actors seems unlikely, at least during Aristophanes' lifetime. When plays were

performed posthumously, perhaps the temptation to add sly current allusions was stronger.

As to the names of actors or much in the way of clues about delivery and stage business, our only evidence--and it is very ambiguous--is to be found in the vase paintings which appear to show scenes from comic drama. Illusive hints: nothing that will tell us what it was like to watch a performance in action.

Now, that use of personal slander and crude, cruel obscenity, along with puns and sophisticated wit in the dialogue and the outrageously absurd in the plot, all seem very foreign to our modern notions of appropriate religious behavior. The Greeks, however, had no doubt that the gods liked dirty jokes and a good belly laugh. Anyone who has noticed the humorous elements in either the Iliad or the Odyssey will see that the assumption goes back at least to Homer. The cult story of Demeter told at Eleusis, for example, emphasized that the goddess found ribald clowning and humor a source of real comfort in her grief over a lost daughter. Healing sanctuaries, even the most medically empirical ones in the Greek world, included theatres.

The Greeks knew that laughter is good for people. Their sense of humor found both the scurrilous and the scatological acceptable as part of the worship of Dionysos. Over time, however, their taste in the humor presented by staged comedy changed somewhat.

By the opening of the Third century BC Athens was no longer self-governing, but controlled by the Macedonian successors of Alexander the Great and the vibrant powerful city of Aristophanes was no more. The stuff comic playwrights worked with changed along with the city. The performances given at Athens were still religious rituals, the theater was the same and the competition still intense, but the meaning of citizenship had been drastically altered. Ordinary individuals no longer argued the political decisions basic to daily life and citizens no longer battled in defense of their city, but lived instead in a world controlled by powerful autocrats.

Barnyard buffoonery was still acceptable, and so were jokes about the foibles common to the human lot, but neither public figures nor policies were now safe subjects for humor. References to contemporary events and savage attacks on real individuals disappear completely from the comedies, and the chorus, which had accounted for the major expense of performance, is also gone. Instead, Greek Middle and New Comedy both focus upon the domestic concerns of "average folk."

Domestic concerns translate very easily across time and space. Those little tensions between spouses, the unsatisfactory nature of in-laws, the raging hormones of youth and the universal experience of needing more cash than you have still connect 2300 years later. With self-preservation eliminating politicians as the butt of a joke, playwrights invented a new subject for humor.

Enter situation comedy: wish-fulfillment, stock characters, disguises and sudden reversals drive the plots. The problems of daily living and family life provide the "everyday reality" which is juxtaposed with the fantastically absurd to provide humor. It is now Man the Domestic Animal, not Man the Political Animal that Athenians found funny.

The new form was enormously popular with spectators throughout the Mediterranean. Wherever Greek was spoken--along the coasts of north Africa and

France, in southern Italy, Sicily and Turkey, even into Albania and Ukraine--audiences enjoyed comic plays and the routines of talented actors.

By the Third century there was even a market for the texts of plays--books, if you will, though these were in scroll form--and the well educated could recite lines or sing patter songs in addition to declaiming passages from Homer. No proper Greek city was without its theatre and some had several. Neighboring peoples marveled at, envied or copied this form of entertainment, and when the Romans acquired Greek territories, they also acquired Greek comedy.

The Romans, a sober farming people over in Italy, had their own native traditions of buffoonery. They certainly used what any mother would instantly recognize as bathroom humor, and any athletic type can hear today in shower and locker rooms. (Frankly, I doubt that any human society has ever lacked its own brand of this). Dionysiac rituals struck Romans as excessive, however, and Dionysos was a god they viewed with suspicion. Their own fertility rites were not flamboyant public affairs, but appear more like the original rustic celebrations that predated the development of Greek Old Comedy: harvest times and revelry seem to go together.

Fortunately, Rome encountered Greek comedy when it had become New Comedy. The Romans didn't find state procedures or important figures appropriate for public humor: they would never have been amused by Old Comedy. New Comedy had recognizable stock characters and situation plots based upon (almost) plausible domestic circumstances. Plays still included lots of slapstick and interactive routines, song-and-dance interludes and the occasional patter-song, but with certain changes in costume and different performance requirements, the association with Dionysiac traditions disappeared.

New Comedy was an immediate hit at Rome, partly because native traditions had not developed anything quite like it. This attractive dramatic form was discovered by Roman soldiers serving in South Italy and Sicily during Rome's wars against Carthage. When the wars were over and the veterans came back home (with their smattering of Greek street vocabulary and their souvenirs of over-seas service and new appreciation for foreign cooking), it seemed natural to add a few Greek comedies to Roman festivals, as crowd pleasers.

At Rome, almost every aspect of living involved the gods and holidays always had a religious component, but the over-all atmosphere at many religious celebrations was rather like a carnival or county fair. Pure entertainment value was highly important to the Roman officials in charge of organizing such public festivals as the Secular Games and the various games in honor of Ceres and the Great Mother. They needed name familiarity as they sought the next rank of political office, and they got that by providing the best possible entertainment for voters. Chariot races and animal shows were always popular, and by the Second century, comedies were also expected.

The performance circumstances for Early Roman Comedy, compared to Greek Old Comedy, had some new twists. Plays were still offered out-of-doors, but not in a permanent theatre. Instead, they were in some ways similar to a side-show attraction in competition with bear-baiting and sword-swallowers and acrobats. The stage was a very portable structure, and the audience crowded around to watch. They might suddenly leave if something more interesting presented itself, so lots of visual action and jokes that didn't require very much set-up were necessary, as well plots that were easy to follow.

Frequently these plots turn upon deceptions and confusion and surprising changes of fortune.

There were, of course, conventions. One was that whatever was presented was really a Greek play that had been translated and only slightly adapted for Roman viewing. This allowed for exotic settings and rather more flippant activities on the part of the characters than would have been proper if the setting was supposed to be Rome and the characters good Roman citizens. The recognizable stock figures--the mother-in-law, the stingy old father, the romantic young aristocrat who is hopelessly in love with the wrong girl, the quick-thinking servant who is sure he can solve everyone's problems--these are all to be found in Roman comedy. The plots include themes like romantic love, the long-lost child, mistaken identity, money problems, unexpected return of a parent, the damsel in distress, and so on.

If these elements begin to sound rather familiar, that is no coincidence, for the comic entertainment we watch today developed straight out of what Roman playwrights made from Greek New Comedy. The Italian *comedia dell' arte*, Shakespeare, Moliere, Sheridan, Gilbert and Sullivan, and even the Broadway shows The Boys From Syracuse and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum all build upon and adapt for their own times the elements that Roman audiences roared over. Puns seen and heard, slapstick, exaggeration, irony, understatement, dead-pan, the outrageous, the absurd, deceptions and reversals are all to be found.

The first Roman playwrights, Plautus and Terence, worked with professional acting companies that probably did some touring, and in which women's roles were still taken by male actors. Masks seem to have been usually worn, and had features easy for the audience to recognize: the old nurse, the young hero, the smart-aleck slave. Vocal intonation and broad gestures would have been important, and the song and dance routines contributed as much to the over-all effect as they do in a Gilbert and Sullivan production or a Broadway musical. In fact, the elaborate "cantica" (a kind of aria) used by Plautus, accounts for as much as 40% of some plays, by one estimate, while another 20% of the lines were chanted in long verse to a flute accompaniment.

The chorus, so important originally in Dionysian rituals, had completely disappeared by the time Roman soldiers were enjoying comedies, and this role is taken over by the smart-alecky slave. Ordinary Roman slaves did not lay irreverent hands upon their masters, but the plays make it clear that comic slaves could. They carry Greek names--sometimes ridiculous Greek names--so the audience always knows that the fooling on stage is not to set any precedents! The adroit slave operates very freely in Roman comedy, but his mischief and sass are allowed by the convention that the scene is not Rome and the characters are all foreigners.

The scene, in a Roman comedy, is always understood to be a street in front of three doorways--usually leading into private houses. Doors slam, windows open and sometimes a balcony is indicated, but the action always takes place in the street. Other activities are reported to the audience by the actors.

One of my personal favorites from Roman comedy is the Mostellaria (or The Ghost) by Plautus. Now, here is a play that has everything! The head of household has taken an extended business trip, and in his absence his young heir has made very free with papa's resources. He knows there will be problems when his father returns, but is enjoying the company of an expensive young thing and his drinking buddies too much to

worry until (very unexpectedly) his father returns. The plot turns on an elaborate stalling device cooked up by the slave who has been abetting sonny's dissolute activities.

I referred at the beginning of this lecture to the fact that we are missing rather more than half of what the original performance included, since we haven't got the music, the dances, or the stage business. It's the stage business--the contribution of the actor--that is really the largest loss. The traditions would have been handed down from actor to actor, interpretations honed by generations of skilled performers. For Aristophanes' comedies, we are truly at a loss; for the plays of Plautus, we may be in somewhat better case, precisely because the acting traditions do continue through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to our own time.

SPU is fortunate to have a splendid Theater Department, and I am even more fortunate to have indulgent colleagues who have agreed to demonstrate just how important a component the stage business is for conveying the humor in a comedy. I hasten to assure you that no attempt at authentic Roman performance (whatever that may be) is intended. I simply asked them to present one of my favorite scenes with as large a component as possible of the business that fleshes out the skeleton left by the lines of text on a page, by way of illustration.

So--from Plautus' Mostellaria, the scene in which papa, returning exhausted, tries to enter his own house. You must imagine three doors, a road coming up from the harbor and one leading downtown. I provide the voice from inside the house.

Believe me, reading that scene from a two-dimensional page is truly flat by comparison!! In conclusion, I leave you to reflect upon how much of any time period can never be transmitted to other generations, how very humble we need to be when approaching cultures other than our own, and how grateful we should be for elements that do communicate across the centuries: like certain kinds of comic humor!