
Peter Amram
Roman risibility receives cautious treatment. Articles and papers concentrate on topics that are weighty, arcane, or both. Excessive enthusiasm for, say, Plautine mischief risks the appearance, in some scholarly circles, of a form of intellectual suttee. Most classicists aren’t in the game for laughs: *sunt lacrimae rerum.*

Enter (stage left, naturally, from the forum, where the snappy repartee is) venturesome and energetic Mary Beard, who used her year as Sather Professor in 2008–2009 to consider what made the Romans laugh and why. Robert Benchley once said, “There seems to be no lengths to which humorless people will not go to analyze humor. It seems to worry them.” Professor Beard is neither humorless nor worried. Her present publication is, first, a general and theoretical discussion of “the slippery phenomenon of laughter,” (p. x) and, second, a presentation of specific topics which originated in individual Sather lectures. Along the way we learn, *inter alia,* that a weak joke was termed *frigidus*; barbershops were a good place to pick up the latest wisecrack; unworldly professorial types and the citizens of Abdera, in Thrace, were frequent butts of jokes; and baldness was a reliable source of humor. The latter must have made *calvus* Julius Caesar extra grateful for the *corona civica* he won at Miletus and which he wore as often as possible.

Beard begins by considering a number of theories of laughter, ranging from Aristotle to the 20th-century Russian philosopher Bakhtin. Despite a dutiful survey, she finds little firm guidance and moves cheerfully forward on her own, with an almost affectionate skepticism for the earlier scholarship. Wry phrases like “optimistically attributed” (p. 30), “the text is the product of much hard work by modern scholars,” (p. 55), “overconfident assumptions” (p. 83), and “Scholars ... have massaged fragments to fit” (p. 203) are encountered *passim.*

A surprise is Beard’s reluctance make much reference to the Saturnalia, “one of the least understood but most confidently talked about of all Roman rituals” (p. 63). She states that as example of Roman role-reversal the Saturnalia is a “much flimsier construction than is generally allowed” (p. 64), and thus cannot support a close investigation into the societal inversions that produce humor by incongruity. Beard is always careful not to over-reach, given the paucity of evidence and the remove of time. Regarding the latter: “We always run two different and opposite risks: both of
exaggerating the strangeness of past laughter and of making it all too comfortably like our own.” (p. 54). There are other traps. Beard notes that the Romans admired “Attic salt,” the clever railly of the Athenians, but the term itself, wit as sal, seen clearly in Catullus, is a Roman and not Greek construct. The Greeks did not use their own word for salt, hales, in that fashion. However, later Greeks like Plutarch spoke of the hales of Aristophanes and Menander, having adopted the foreign term and perhaps the Roman and not Greek perspective.

For the non-specialist, the pace picks up considerably in Part Two, whose topics include Cicero and his de Oratore, verbal jousting between emperor and subjects, funny animals, and a late Roman joke book titled Philogelos. The Cicero whom Beard treats in Chapter 5 is not the hurler of grim involuted volleys at L. Sergius Catilina. School and university students, and perhaps some teachers, will benefit from meeting a witty man whose levity often made him appear frivolous to less jocose peers. Beard makes a point which gets to the pith of aristocratic dignitas, and perhaps by extension, Romanitas itself. An orator, by definition a competitive public figure in a competitive public society, had to be extremely careful that his humor was directed at others and could not somehow deflect back on himself, as the figure of fun. At the center of this dilemma is the dual nature of the term ridiculosus, one of those frequent and frequently puzzling Latin adjectives which has both an active and a passive interpretation. Is that fellow up on the Rostra or in the basilica pointing laughter at others or is he himself laughable for his efforts? Power rests with those who drive the response, not with the object of the laughter. Additionally, the origin of the humorous material was important. Besides skill of presentation, the orator’s status as a public performer rested on ownership of his own words. The mark of an independent, active aristocrat was his ability to create fresh material for the occasion, so to speak, while the very much lower-caste stage actor merely passively recited lines that had been written for him.

Laughter as power appears again in Chapter 6, From Emperor to Jester. Confident Caesar Augustus could appear to be joshing himself, slightly, when he asked a hesitant petitioner if the fellow thought he was offering a small coin to an elephant. Augustus, moreover, tolerated a more obvious joke, one which threatened the very legitimacy of his patriarchal power. Upon encountering a visitor to Rome who greatly resembled him, the emperor asked if the man’s mother had ever been in Rome. The man replied, no, but his father had. By contrast, the monster emperors (Beard’s term) used humor as a form of degradation. Caligula, to take an extreme example, forced a man to watch his own son’s execution and then invited the man to dinner that evening, during which Caligula impelled his guest to laugh during jok-
ing banter. The victim tolerated this treatment, apparently, because he had another son to protect.

The eighth and last chapter, The Laughter Lover, deals with the Philogelos, a collection of about 265 jokes dating to perhaps the fourth or fifth century CE. Beard argues that “the jokebook was characteristically, if not exclusively, Roman ... [and] ... the joke as we understand it was a Roman invention.” (p. 186). This requires explanation. Beard is of course not suggesting that the Romans were the first to tell jokes. Her proposal, perhaps intentionally more provocative than persuasive, is that by collecting jokes for the use by street-corner comedians, moochers hoping to exchange one-liners for a dinner invitation, unimaginative barristers, or simply someone with grandchildren to entertain for the afternoon, the Romans created the joke as a commodity, to be bought and sold in the marketplace. With that interesting thought, Beard leaves us pondering, if not exactly laughing.

Which reminds me. Did you hear the one about the Roman who, ignoring all improbabilities, wanted to invest $400? Why, he put it in a CD, of course.

*Ridete omnes.*

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