

## The Comic Spirit in Latin Literature

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Humor is not the predominating characteristic of Latin literature. But Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, came to Rome from Greek mythology along with her eight sister Muses, and she is present from the earliest literature on, sometimes in unexpected places.

The Comic Spirit is a temperamental *numen* anyhow. She is easy to recognize when she is filled with merry laughter. But in her gentler moods she merely wears a smile; on the other hand, in her more boisterous moments her laughter can border on a sneer. Sometimes she even shows a perfectly straight face, but has her tongue in her cheek. All this makes her extremely difficult to identify at times.

It is also true that Thalia is not always respectable. Especially when she appears in the dress of satire, her remarks can be vulgar and brutal. But before we raise our eyebrows too high over these uncouth ancients, we should recall that much modern humor is also "off color." As for the brutality, humor in the form of satire can hardly avoid some degree of cruelty since attack by its very nature is brutal. From Aristophanes to Rabelais to Swift, satire has used some nasty methods of attack.

Before we get into our basic subject, let's analyze what makes a person laugh. Many things that you found funny when you were eight years old seem silly to you now; and I hate to tell you this, but some of the things that you find very amusing now will seem just as silly to you when you are twenty-five.

This change in taste is equally applicable to whole groups of people. Some things that the Romans found very funny don't "send" us at all. For instance, they considered outwitting another person the highest kind of entertainment. When they refer to the "tricky" Ulysses, they are complimenting him. But we don't admire this characteristic as much as they did, and we therefore do not enjoy these tricks so much.

And these changes in what makes us laugh do not wait for centuries to develop. Styles in humor change as rapidly as styles in music or in cars. Perhaps the most difficult role in show business is that of the comedian, because what made an audience roar with laughter last year will often leave them simply bored this year. That's why comedy shows on TV generally have such a short life. Names like Danny Kay, Milton Berle, Red Skelton, and George Gobel not many years ago were considered masters in producing laughs. But they are rarely even mentioned any more. I suspect that some of you have never even heard their names. And Jonathan Winters, Carol Burnett, and the Smothers Brothers will inevitably travel the same road. In fact, by the time this is in print, they may already have done so.

No, the life of Thalia is not an easy one. She has to work seriously at this problem of being funny. And she has to wear different costumes for different age groups, different years, and different civilizations. There are, however, some things that seem to be considered funny by people of all times. And these things are found in Roman literature as well as in our own times.

The earliest manifestation of the comic spirit in Latin literature is found in the plays of Plautus and Terence, much of whose humor comes from the portrayal of character types that can be met in any age, and that are invariably ridiculous.

Plautus' *Gloriosus* (*The Braggart Soldier*) is the conceited, opinionated individual whom we all love to see "set down." He seems to survive from generation to generation. A few years ago we saw him in the Jackie Gleason character, Ralph Cramdon. I also knew him as the principal of a high school where I was a student. That was a long time ago, but I still recall the satisfaction I felt when somebody would get the best of him. I am sure that he had to be a direct descendant of Plautus' braggart soldier.

We also enjoy seeing pretentious people hoodwinked. In Latin comedy the ever-present clever slave was forever making a dupe of the blustering old man who thought that he had all the answers. Evidence that this still delights an audience is found in the immense success of the play *My Fair Lady*, where a girl from the slums is given a superficial coating of culture and succeeds in fooling not only English society but also a fake "authority."

Another character which Plautus developed became one of the favorite butts of comedy in Rome. He is that fat clown, the parasite. This figure, dressed in gray and padded to make him look ridiculous, strutted across the stage, wisecracking and being very practical. He has many traits in common with one of the most beloved of English literary clowns, Shakespeare's Falstaff. You may remember that when someone said that it would not be honorable to sneak away from the battlefield, Falstaff replied: "What's honor? You can't eat it. It won't set a broken leg." This could have been said by any one of many of Plautus' slaves.

In addition to humor which arises primarily from character types, situation comedy was developed in Rome, with mistaken identity as a frequent device. And don't tell me that you don't get a kick out of seeing somebody mistakenly identified as someone else. I never knew a pair of identical twins who did not pull the "exchanged personality" trick on their dates at least once -- just for laughs. Plautus adapted a play of mistaken identity from Menander in his *Menaechmi*, which Shakespeare later used as the basis of his *Comedy of Errors*. And just within the last few years another version of this plot has appeared on the New York stage under the name of *The Boys from Syracuse*.

Plautus also used some unconventional methods to get a laugh. He would pause and address his audience directly ["This is stage gold, not real money"] Shakespeare also borrowed this device in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*; the clown playing the lion in the Pyramus and Thisbe skit lifts the lion skin from his face and explains to the audience that it need not be afraid, for he is just Snug, the joiner, "playing" the lion. This technique has been used (rather unsuccessfully, I'm afraid) by such modern comedians as George Gobel.

Another TV device directly from the plays of Plautus is the carefully prepared "ad libs" of people like Dean Martin and the Smothers Brothers. Plautus knew the value of these irrelevant side remarks. He once had an actor step out of his role on stage and say to another actor: "Be brief. The audience wants a drink!"

Plautus' comedy was pretty earthy (perhaps a more accurate word would be slapstick). If they had had pies with whipped cream topping in his day, I am quite sure that many of his plays would contain scenes of pie throwing.

The other comedy writer, Terence, scorned Plautus' disjointed plots and his anachronisms; but their models were the same. Terence's plays have more polish, his puns are more subtle, but he uses the same stock characters and situations. He has his parasites and his clever slaves; and the hero's father is always incredibly naive.

But the Roman idea of what was entertaining can be seen from the fact that they preferred sports to plays any old day. In fact, once when a Terence play was being presented, a rumor spread through the audience that there was a bear-baiting going on next door, and the

theater quickly emptied completely. Somehow, I have the uneasy feeling that something similar could happen in 1988.

Plautus and Terence are the only two Roman playwrights with extant comedies, so we have to look for the comic spirit mostly in other forms of literature. One of these places is in Ovid's mock-serious handbook on how to win a girl, called *Ars Amatoria*. This is one of the most amusing books I have ever read – in “any” language. Here are a few of Ovid's suggestions:

1. When you find the right girl, how can you get acquainted?  
Why, begin with the usual banalities, the weather and such topics. Explain what is happening around you. If you don't know, speak confidently anyhow, as if you did.
2. Make up your mind that there is not a girl alive who cannot be won, and decide definitely that you are the boy to win her.
3. Not one girl in ten thousand will offer resistance; but whether she grants or withholds her favors, she will be flattered that you asked her.
4. Be a millionaire in promises only. After you give her something, she may throw you over. The art of giving is really the art of giving as little as possible. It is infinitely better to keep her thinking that you are to give her something.
5. Make her think that you pine for her. Try to grow pale and thin. (Staying up for the late-late show will help you look this way). If you have quarreled, let her see you cry. If you cannot cry at will, have the presence of mind to stick a finger in your eye.

Much of the humor in all languages depends on the clever manipulation of words. Long, ridiculous names have always been good for a laugh. Plautus knew this, and on the first page of his *Miles Gloriosus* we find this monster:

BUMBOMACHIDES CLYTOMESTORIDYSARCHIDES

This is a mixture of Greek terms suggesting something like son-of-a-noisy-battle son-of-a-famous-and-wise-misleader. And in his *Captivi* we find:

THENSAUROCHRYSONICOCHRYSIDES  
(son-of-Croesus-abounding-in-riches)

Examples of the same thing in English are abundant. In Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* we meet Dr. Kunastrokus and Slawkenbergius Trismegistus. And in Pogo we meet Mr. Tamany and Joseph Dzugashvili .

Another word device can be illustrated by Terence's *Andria*, where the always hungry parasite is talking of what towns he likes best, and he chooses cities that can be paraphrased into English as BAKERSfield and MILLERSburg.

This kind of humor is hard to translate, but even more difficult (and more prevalent) is the use of a word which has two meanings, or the use of words that sound similar but have different meanings. All languages lend themselves to this kind of fun, and Latin is no exception. In Terence's *Andria* Davos says of the lovers (who he thinks are behaving very foolishly) that their actions are those of *amentium* ("people out of their minds") rather than of *amantium* ("people in love"). The change in thought depends on the change of one little letter. My college Latin classes struggled for years to turn this line into a similar pun in English, but nothing effective was ever produced.

Closely related to these puns is the use of correct English words in inappropriate places, like saying, "Many allegations have been made, and I intend to find the alligators." This language flaw was developed into an art by Mrs. Malaprop, a character in an Eighteenth Century play, and her name was given to all such blunders. In our own century (but before your time) Fibber Magee did his part to perpetuate this form of humor. Norm Crosby on TV relied almost entirely on it for his laughs, and even Garfield in an ad said, "I resemble [instead of resent] that remark."

One step further takes us to the use of facts in inappropriate context. This is the kind of unintentional humor that the teacher finds on examination papers, where the student has memorized many facts and many names, but he has no idea where they belong in relation to each other. It is the amusing pitfall of anyone who has that dangerous thing -- a LITTLE learning. As a student once wrote on a test paper: "Hercules killed Medusa, the wife of Jason, and turned her into a spider because she could weave faster than Penelope." Obviously the student remembered that Hercules killed many people; therefore -- Also, Jason's wife's name began with MED; so it must have been Medusa. Also, somebody was turned into a spider because of her weaving, and Penelope was skilled in weaving, so --.

Petronius gives us a hilarious example of this sort of thing in his characterization of Trimalchio, the newly rich host who wants to display his culture and learning to his banquet guests:

The cook was rewarded with a drink, and was handed the cup on a Corinthian dish. A guest began to peer at the dish rather closely, and Trimalchio said, 'I am the sole owner of genuine Corinthian plate.' I thought that he would declare with his usual effrontery that he had cups imported direct from Corinth. But he went one better. 'You may perhaps inquire,' he said, 'how I come to be alone in having genuine Corinthian stuff: the obvious reason is that the name of my dealer is Corinthus. Who else could have genuine Corinthian, since he is "my" dealer? Do not imagine that I am an ignoramus. I know perfectly well how Corinthian plate was first brought to the world. At the fall of Troy, Hannibal collected all the sculptures, bronze, gold, and silver, into a single pile and set fire to it. They all melted into one blend -- bronze. The workmen took bits out of this lump and made plates and entree dishes and statuettes. That is how Corinthian metal was born...I also have a great passion for silver. I own about a hundred four-gallon cups, engraved with Cassandra killing her children, and they lying dead in a most lifelike way. I also have a thousand jugs and on them you see Daedalus shutting Niobe into the Trojan horse. And I have fights between Romulus and Achilles on my cups, and every one a heavy one.'

Repartee is another vehicle of humor. In Plautus' *Captivi* we have this battle of wits between Hegio and a slave foreman:

H: Watch the captives carefully. For a freed slave is like a wild bird. One opportunity and-swish-he has flown away.  
F: We would all rather be free than slave.  
H: You don't act like you would, with a smartaleck remark like that.  
F: If I have nothing to give for my freedom, should I give myself -- to flight?  
H: You do, and I know what I'll give you!  
F: But I'll be like the wild bird.  
H: Then I'll treat you like the wild bird, and put you behind bars.

Even in such a serious work as Cicero's *De Senectute*, this type of humor is found. Cicero quotes a conversation between Themistocles and a man from the barren island of Seriphus. The Seriphian says that Themistocles is famous only because he happened to live in Athens where the "opportunity" to become famous existed. And Themistocles replies: "It is true that I would not have been famous if I had lived on the island of Seriphus; but it is likewise true that "you" would not have been famous if you had lived in Athens."

As you perhaps know, the Romans brought satire to its maturity. Some of this satire, such as Juvenal's, is intense and bitter. But in Horace, much of whose charm lies in his ability to laugh at himself, we find examples of the light touch essential to genuine comedy. The beginning and the end of my modernized paraphrase of his famous satire on the bore goes like this:

As I was going down the street  
Enjoying life, I chanced to meet  
A man whom I could call by name;  
That's all the acquaintance we might claim.  
Like a long-lost pal he grabbed my hand,  
Inquiring, "How are you doing?" And  
To be polite I said, "Not too  
Bad, and I hope the same is true  
With you." I walked on; so did he.  
I asked, "Did you wish to see me?"  
"Only to talk, since you and I  
Are both great talkers." His look was sly.  
"That's good," I replied,  
And then I desperately tried  
To get away. I would walk fast,  
Then stop at store windows we passed.  
He did the same. And all the time  
He kept on talking, without rhyme  
Or reason -- about the weather,  
The new fall styles, the cost of leather  
Goods. I cursed my plight,  
And wished I weren't so darned polite...

Just then I saw my closest friend  
And thought my trouble now would end.  
I called him and with nods and signs  
So he could not miss my designs,  
I said, "I had almost forgot,  
We wished to talk about a lot  
Of private matters right away."  
He laughed and said, "Some other day  
Will do. I see you're busy now."  
I'll get even with him some day, somehow!...

That leaves one other writer whose works cannot be ignored in any discussion of Roman humor. The poet Martial almost perfected that little barbed word weapon known as the epigram. Here are a few of his less nasty ones in modern paraphrase:

You wish to marry Harry -- no fool, you!  
But he won't do it, will he? He's smart, too.

--

You say that you would like to know  
What makes my farm delight me so.  
You've asked me, so I'll tell you true --  
When I am there, I'm not near you!

--

Why do you wear on your neck a scarf  
When for speaking you appear?  
That protective covering would have more use  
If it covered your listener's ear.

I have made no attempt to mention all appearances of the Comic Spirit in Classical Rome. That would be like trying to enumerate how many hours in the year had been sunny. I have merely pointed out a few of the spots where I have run into Thalia in my wanderings through Latin literature. It's been fun.

Thank you.