

## The Classics and Humor

Presented as guest speaker for a student colloquium, c.1965

One of the most difficult things in the world is to be humorous. For one thing, what was considered to be funny fifty years ago often seems very dull now. And right now, what a ten-year-old calls very funny, you find a bit silly. And many of the things you laugh at today, you will find very unfunny when you are twenty-five. But the problem becomes even more difficult when you realize that something that you find hilarious one day simply does not turn you on on another day. So -- a person trying to be funny is working against great odds. He may get a big laugh, or he may get nothing.

But what about the ancient Roman sense of humor? And goodness knows, they had to have one to go around talking Latin all the time!

We can probably get our best idea of what the Romans found funny by looking at the material and techniques they depended on to get laughs in their comic plays.

To these Romans, beyond any question, the most amusing thing in the world was to watch somebody outwit another person. I think that they all would have made excellent second-hand car salesmen. Therefore, two characters in every Roman comedy were the clever slave and the gullible old man (usually the hero's father). The chief function of the slave was to make a complete fool out of the old man; and the old man was always incredibly stupid and gullible. So, when the son wanted to get rid of his father for a while, the slave would tell the old man that somebody clear at the other end of town wanted to see him about something. The old man always was taken in and went off on a wild goose chase. By the time he found out that he had been hoodwinked, his son and the slave had accomplished whatever it was they had wanted to do.

Another standard comic character was the parasite, a fat clown who ran around trying to find someone from whom he could scrounge a free meal. His chief humor for the audience came from the fact that his talk was loaded with puns -- some of them pretty bad; but some of our modern puns are groaners too.

There was a lot of slapstick in Roman comedy. I'm sure that if they had had seltzer bottles and pie with whipped cream topping, these items would have been used frequently.

Arguments between husband and wife -- the eternal battle of the sexes -- have always been a part of comedy. In our early Biblical plays, Noah and his wife were constantly calling each other uncomplimentary names; and the best known couple in early puppet shows was Punch and Judy. On modern TV programs, I can mention Ralph and Alice Kramden on the Jackie Gleason show. Usually, in Roman comedy, the wife is socking it to the husband because she has found out that he has been playing around with another woman.

A fist fight between characters invariably holds the attention of an audience, and often delights them, especially if the right guy is winning. In modern entertainment this device was a regular comedy routine for the little dwarf who played the harmonica so well and got shoved around by normal-sized people in the act until he would get fed up and start biting their legs. And of course, professional boxing between the "good" guy and the "bad" one relies heavily on this kind of appeal. This sock-it-to-'em approach was also a standard routine in Roman comedy. I remember a scene in Terence's *Adelphi* where a young man says to his slave: "Stand near that man, and if I nod, hit him." The slave proceeds to hit the man immediately, and the young man says: "Hey, I didn't nod. But we'll overlook that."

Of course, other writers besides the playwrights also used a humorous approach to their subjects; and their works reflect every shade of laughter from a good old boisterous belly-laugh to a nasty sneer to a genial smile.

One of the rowdiest books in Roman literature was a novel by a man named Petronius, who lived and wrote in the times of Nero. His novel, called the *Satyricon*, tells the adventures of two young men who were just bumming around. They got into some real scrapes, but the best known scene from this book is the description of the big party thrown by Trimalchio, a man who has suddenly acquired wealth, but who is uncouth and ignorant. At one point he tries to impress his guests with his knowledge of mythology. They are impressed, all right -- just as your Latin teacher would be impressed if you said that the subject of a sentence should be in the ablative case, and the third principal part of a verb is the future infinitive. For Trimalchio's information is all like this; he knows a lot of terms, but he uses them "all" in the wrong places.

Ovid uses a totally different kind of humor in his *Art of Love* and his *Cure for Love*. His advice to a man trying to win a girl includes such items as:

1. If you have a quarrel, let her see you cry. If you can't make tears come at your will, have the presence of mind to stick a finger in your eye. Then they will come.
2. At the races tell her what's going on, whether you know or not. She won't know the difference, and it will make you seem smart.
3. Before you decide that you really want this girl, be sure to look at her in broad daylight. Candlelight and wine can make "any" woman look attractive.

He also has some advice for the girls who want to attract a boy, such as: For heaven's sake, learn how to walk gracefully. Don't trip along like a Pekingese, and don't waddle like a duck.

Among all the ancient writers, Horace is the man I would like most to have known. He people (including himself) very amusing, but his amusement was never insulting. He is the one who makes the point that the simple country life is more enjoyable than sophisticated city life by telling the fable of the city mouse and the country mouse -- how the city mouse came to visit the country mouse and turned up his nose at the simple ordinary food and shelter of his "poor" acquaintance. He took the country mouse back to the city with him where he could see what real living was. The country mouse was impressed with the caviar and the variety of cheeses on the rich man's table, but then the big pet dogs came storming into the room, and the little country mouse fled in terror to his simple but safe nest under the straw of a country barn.

Horace is also the one who laughingly tells us of his attempts to get away from a man who is an awful bore. Here we are as amused by Horace, as he breaks out in a sweat from his frustration in his futile attempts to get away, as we are by the dull and persistent bore -- whom we all know and have tried at times to escape.

Everybody thinks that he has a sense of humor. It's just that the other person does not appreciate his kind of humor. So even our most serious writers sometimes tried to inject humor into their writings. Cicero worked what he considered a joke into his essays now and then, but it rarely "came off." I recall two from his *De Senectute*:

1. A man from the insignificant island of Seriphus said to Themistocles, an Athenian, that he was famous because he lived in a place where people could become famous; and Themistocles' reply was: "You are right. If I had been a Seriphian, I would not have been famous; but even if you had been an Athenian, you would not have been famous."

2. After the Romans had lost the city of Tarentum and Quintus Fabius Maximus had recaptured it, an army officer who had fled when the city had been lost said to Fabius, "It was with my help that you retook Tarentum." "That's right," said Fabius, "for if you had not lost it, I could not have retaken it."

Even Vergil, who was dead serious most of the time, comes through with an unexpected flash of humor once in a while. There is no more beautifully written satire on women in any language than five words of one line in Book iv of the *Aeneid*: *Varium et mutabile semper femina*.

I have saved for the last of the Roman writers the poet from whom my classes get the most laughs. He is the only Roman writer I know whose works my students read to their roommates in the dorms. This man, of course, is Martial. Let me just give you a couple of my paraphrases of his nasty little epigrams. Others may be found in my paper on "Latin and the Epigram."

You'll always be poor if you start that way, my friend.  
The only way to make money is to have some money to spend.

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

Many of the best epigrams in English are simply paraphrases from this man Martial, as I have pointed out in my paper on "Latin and the Epigram." And Dr. Eberle's poems, although they are modern in their approach, show clearly the influence of this Roman. These two epigrams from him (as I paraphrased them) clearly show this:

The politician calls his opponent a liar,  
Who retorts, "That word rather fits "you•."  
Whom should you believe?  
Well, I won't deceive,  
The words of both men are true.

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The poet can say many things  
In words select and few;  
The politician's many words  
Speak gobbledegook to you.

In order to avoid falling into the class of gobbledegook-speakers, I think that it is time for me to conclude this discussion. I don't want you to feel that I have lost "my" sense of humor. Thank you.