

# Comedy

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Plato's employment of the techniques of Old Comedy in his philosophical dialogues has received more recognition by scholars in recent years (see e.g. Nightingale 1995). Much of our evidence for Old Comedy comes from Aristophanes, and Plato's particular engagement with, for example, the *Clouds* is well known (q.v. Aristophanes and intellectuals), but it is quite likely that the comedic techniques Plato employs were widely used in Old Comedy more generally. Plato did not merely appropriate comedy to inject humour into his dialogues, but because he saw in it a potential critical tool for targeting and undermining his intellectual opponents. In the *Philebus*, Socrates defines 'the laughable' (alternatively, 'the ridiculous') as self-ignorance with respect to one's goods, especially virtue and wisdom (*Phlb.* 48-50; cp. *R.* 452a-e), and we might profitably understand comedy's philosophical significance as aimed at exposing those who are genuinely laughable, that is, those who believe themselves to be wise and virtuous when they are not (cp. *Ap.* 21b-22e). Thus understood, Plato's use of comedy generally has a target, or a victim, and it generally has philosophical content in that it expresses a specific criticism. Audience laughter may be understood as an ethical response (see *Lg.* 816d-817a) that expresses (appropriate) disdain for the laughable target (see Trivigno 2019).

There are at least two techniques of Old Comedy—parody and satire—that Plato uses extensively, and understanding how they function is crucial for understanding the dialogues in which we find them. Parody generally involves a distorted imitation (of a text, methodology, or genre) that exaggerates or inverts some feature(s) of the original, often in order to undermine its claim to authority. Aristophanes' employment of parody is extensive—he parodies tragedy, Euripidean tragedy, sophistry, lyric poetry, etc.—and

understanding how the parody works requires familiarity with the parodic target, such that we can discern which aspects are (merely) imitation and which are the distortions that produce audience laughter. Plato's employment of parody is no different, except that, in Plato's case, we might add another layer of significance, if we assume that the parodic distortion has critical significance. The critical significance of the parody can often be best understood as the failure of the text, method or genre to live up to an implied ideal. Plato parodies funeral oration in the *Menexenus*, sophistic interpretation of poetry in the *Protagoras*, Lysianic rhetoric in *Phaedrus*, Hippocratic literature in the speech of Eryximachus in the *Symposium*. In each case, the parody articulates and exemplifies a criticism that we find also voiced elsewhere in the dialogue. For example, in the *Menexenus*, Socrates' speech both reproduces the genre's characteristic features, including its patriotic rhetoric, and exaggerates those features to tell an absurd and contradictory history of Athens, thereby exposing the deceptive and self-aggrandizing character of the genre in general (see Trivigno 2009). The speech thus exemplifies and gives content to Socrates' representation of funeral oratory as a genre of praise that lacks concern for the truth and bewitches its audience by making them feel good about themselves (*Mx.* 234b-235c). This praise plausibly harms its audience. Socrates' parodic criticism seems to rely on an ideal of political rhetoric that improves its audience by caring for the true state of their souls. Funeral orators seem like they are able to express deep and important truths about the community, when really they are not only self-ignorant but cause self-ignorance in others.

Personal satire, broadly speaking, involves a distorted representation of an individual or a type that uses irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to represent them as stupid or foolish, often in order to undermine their status. Satire in Old Comedy often plays on well-known or easily recognizable features of its target. Sometimes the satire plays out over the course of an entire play, as is the case with Cleon, Euripides and Socrates, in

*Knights*, *Archarnians*, and *Clouds*, whereas others are the victims of satirical one-liners.

Plato associates several sophists, for example, with well-known phrases, claims, or areas of expertise. For example, Hippias is known for being a polymath, Prodicus, for verbal precision, Protagoras, for his claim that ‘man is the measure of all things.’ In the *Protagoras*, for example, in a scene reminiscent of the *Clouds*, Prodicus, the expert in verbal precision, is depicted as lying under a pile of blankets with his deep voice causing an echo that makes his speech incomprehensible (*Prt.* 315d-316a). Later, the usefulness of Prodicus’ art (*Prt.* 341a-342a; cp. 337a-c) is explicitly questioned, and the implication seems to be that he is laughable, because he thinks that he possesses a powerful wisdom when he does not.

In addition to the satire of individuals—both in extensive portrayals and in one-liners—Plato employs techniques of comedic characterization. In Old Comedy, both prominent individuals, like Lamachus or Agathon, and professional types, like informers, cooks or poets, are presented as *imposters*, who want to enjoy the benefits that their status typically allows them, but which they really have done nothing to deserve. The imposters are ultimately exposed as ‘absurd pretenders’ (Cornford 2011:140). Plato adapts the imposter motif to present Socrates’ intellectual rivals as pretenders to wisdom; indeed, Old Comedy’s imposter motif is perfectly suited to the presentation of reputedly wise interlocutors as laughably self-ignorant. Think of the presentation of, for example, Ion, Euthyphro, and Hippias. Plato’s imposters generally profess wisdom or knowledge, gain fame, fortune and/or power from this wisdom, and are exposed as frauds by Socrates. To take one prominent example, in the *Hippias Major*, Hippias claims extensive and wide-ranging wisdom, is incredibly confident about his ability to say what the fine (alternatively, the beautiful) is, and boasts about his accumulated wealth and high reputation (see Trivigno 2016). In Old Comedy, the comic hero often takes on the guise of an *ironist*, ironically praising the imposter and pretending to be fooled by his

pretensions before openly mocking and beating him (see e.g. Aristophanes' *Birds* 862-1057; *Acharnians* 725-958). Since we find the same pattern in Plato, we may thus also understand Socratic irony (qv irony) as part of Plato's inheritance from Old Comedy. Consider the way that Socrates indulges Ion's pretension to knowledge, ironically praising and pretending to admire him, before handing him an intellectual beating, refuting him and exposing him as a self-ignorant fraud (see Trivigno 2020). In general, Plato's presentation of some figure as an imposter coincides with Socrates taking on the role of ironist.

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