Attardo, S. (ed.) Encyclopedia of Humor Studies

involves a kind of triumph over someone who is the butt of ridicule (*Philebus,* 49b). Here, Plato anticipated the modern superiority theory and the aggression theory of humor.

Of course, the example of Socrates suggests that humor is not merely a source of put-downs. The salutary use of humor is embodied in what may have been an aphorism in Plato's time, that "sometimes playfulness is a relief from seriousness" (*Philebus,* 30e). Socrates uses this expression to characterize a discussion in which he has been obliged to provide a circuitous explanation of an idea that he probably thought was straightforward. Here, *playfulness* refers to the childlike enjoyment of games, fun, or amusements that accompany and facilitate learning. Playful humor involves not knocking people down as opponents but cajoling them along into being receptive to new ideas, a practice appropriate for a philosopher. In this respect, Plato anticipated modern ideas about humor and well-being, although his focus is on *intellectual* well-being.

Although Plato did not theorize at length about humor, he did have a nuanced understanding of the subject. In many ways, his ideas about humor anticipate modern theories. However, Plato's ideas are best understood in their original context, that is, in his concern for the role of humor in intellectual and public life. This concern is one that remains valid for scholars of humor today.

Cameron Shelley

See also Ancient Greek Comedy; Humor Theories; Linguistic Theories of Humor; Philosophy of Humor; Psychology

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PLAUTUS

As is generally the case for Roman comedy, humor in the work of Plautus (d. 184 BCE) is generated by the theatrical spectacle, innovative treatment of the stereotypical plots and characters inherited from Greek New Comedy, opportunities for metacomedy, and the tensions inhering in the Roman family. Plautine verbal humor, however, stands out in the Roman tradition for its exuberance. This entry focuses on some of the characteristic marks of Plautine verbal fanfare.

Neologisms

Plautus is extraordinarily creative in comic word formations, especially significant names. Whereas Greek New Comedy employed stock names for its characters, Plautus, preferring Greek to Latin roots, amped up his source plays' character names, as was proved by the 1968 papyrus discovery of a section of Menander's *Double Deceiver,* Plautus's source play for *Two Bacchises.* In the Plautine adaptation, the stereotypically named slave Syrus becomes Chrysalus (Greek for "golden one"), a transformation that allows for various bilingual puns (e.g., "This golden [Latin *aurarium*] matter is my concern" (spoken by Chrysalus at 229) and this metacomic declaration: "I don't care for those . . . Syruses who rob their masters of small change" (649–650). Soldiers' names are especially creative, for example, Polymachaeroplagides ("son of many dagger blows," *Pseudolus,* 988), Bumbomachides-Clytomestoridysarchides ("son of roaring noise fighter-son of famous advisor ruling badly," *Miles Gloriosus,* 14); so, too, prostitutes' names, for example, Gymnasium ("nude exercise facility," *Casket Comedy*), Palaestra ("wrestling school," *Rope*). A fictitious wealthy man is improbably named *Thensaurochrysonicochrysides* ("golden son of treasures of gold," *Captives,* 285). Other types of neologisms can be found on almost any page of Plautus, including purely Latin ones such as *dentifrangibula* ("tooth-crackers" = "fists," *Two Bacchises,* 596), *Suauisauiatio* ("Erotikissia," a comic deity, *Two Bacchises,* 116), and portmanteau coinages such as *lumbifragium* ("prickwreck," based on *naufragium,* "shipwreck," *Amphitryon,* 454). These examples collectively show that audience members in Rome were assumed to know some Greek, ranging from the demotic (there is low-level code-switching at *Pseudolus,* 481–488) to extensive knowledge of Greek language, literature, and culture.

Wordplay

Instances of wordplay in the work of Plautus include many examples of parechesis (echoing of etymologically distinct words), for example, *Epidicus,* 119: "I'd prefer friends of that sort to be overwhelmed in a furnace (*forno*) rather than in the forum (*foro*)" (i.e., "burned rather than bankrupt") and mondegreens, for example, *Truculentus,* 262: Astaphium "Such anger (*eiram*)! Put a plug in it!" Truclentus "What's that about plugging [the verb *comprimere,* "control," can have a sexual sense]? You want me to bang her [he mishears *eram,* "mistress," for *eiram*]?" Puns requiring some knowledge of Greek are pervasive and range from simple hybrids such as Epidamnus, a real place that is dubbed "Loserville" (construed as the Greek preposition *epi* "for" + Latin *damnum* "financial loss," *Menaechami,* 263–264]. The name of the clever prostitute in *Truculentus,* Phronesium, perhaps recalled both the Greek word for "wisdom" (*phronesis*) and a diminutive of Phryne, a notorious courtesan of 4th-century Athens.

Typological Jokes

Several types of jokes are often found in Plautus's work. These include refrains (jokes turning on the repetition of words), for examples at *Rudens* 1212, the slave Trachalio responds to the commands of Daemones with the word *licet* ("okay") 13 times until, while departing, he gives Daemones an order. Daemones then expostulates to the audience: "OKAY! (*licet*) / And I hope Hercules renders him *un-okay* (*infelicet*) for all his *okay-itude* [imparting a new meaning to *licentia* ("lack of control"), 1224–1226]. Also common are parapraxes ("Freudian slips," often combined with epanorthosis ("correction," i.e., "I meant to say . . ."), for example, the aged lover Lysidamus's slipups at *Casina,* 365–367, 672–674, 701–703, wherein he reveals his plot to sleep with the 16-year-old girl whom he has arranged for his farm manager to marry. There are also *para prosdokian* (jokes ending in unexpected twists), for example, *Truclulentus,* 887: "Oh, I do love that soldier more than I do myself—while I get what I want from him" (spoken by the mercenary prostitute). There are legal jokes (i.e., jokes turning on technical points of Roman law); for example, as Mercury bullies the slave (Sosia) he impersonates in *Amphitryon,* he asks "Who owns you?" to which the overwhelmed Sosia responds, "You do. Your fists have claimed me by right of occupation" (375) [a reference to *usucapio* ("squatter's right")]. There are mythological jokes (dissonant comparisons between mythic and comic figures), as when at *Two Bacchises* 925 the triumphant slave Chrysalus declares himself both Odysseus, master planner in the Trojan war (940), and Agamemnon, the Greeks' commander-in-chief (947). Finally, there are jokes of identification, or those proposing incongruous equivalencies between persons and/or things), for example, *Epidicus,* 188–189: "I'll turn myself into a leech and suck the blood / Of those renowned pillars of the senate."

Engaging Contemporary Rome

But there is more than verbal fireworks in Plautus, whose comedies betray an anarchic and carnivalesque spirit. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Plautus was more engaged with contemporary politics and society than has been assumed. For example, Plautus's heyday corresponds with a period of enormous cultural transformation brought about by unprecedented military expansionism, in which Roman generals aggressively competed for public acclaim and the right to celebrate a triumph, the ultimate achievement in elite culture. Roman comedy inherited the stock figure of the braggart soldier, but characters such as the egotistical Pyrgopolynices in *Miles Gloriosus* must have resonated with Roman audiences as grotesque parodies of celebrity-seeking aristocratic generals. And when Plautine clever slaves appropriate the language and ideology of military conquest to celebrate their successful ruses, sometimes even claiming, as Pseudolus (581), that their victory is owed to the valor of their ancestors (Roman slaves by a legal fiction had no parents), it is hard not to see satire. Chrysalus in *Two Bacchises* declares his campaign of trickery against his master a complete success (1069–1071), but demurs from celebrating a Roman-style triumph: "Don't be surprised, spectators, / That I'm not holding a triumph: I don't care for that, they're too common" (1072–1073). Plautus's satirical engagement with contemporary society can be much more subtle, and much scholarly work remains to be done in this area. So, too, the fact that the humor of several Plautine plays rests on ontological confusions brought about by the presence of doubles is surely significant in a period marked by cultural revolution and the formation of identity.

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See also Ancient Greek Comedy; Ancient Roman Comedy; Comedy; Farce; Genres and Styles of Comedy; History of Humor: Renaissance Europe; Humorous Names; Inversion, Topsy-Turvy; Low Comedy; Masks; Menander; Puns; Rhetoric and Rhetorical Devices; Roman Visual Humor; Stereotypes; Verbal Humor

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PLAY AND HUMOR

Play is difficult to define, as it has multiple meanings. It can be useful to think of it as a spirit that encompasses theatrical presentation as improvisation, motion, and an ethos of action. "It is a mood, an activity, an eruption, of liberty," Richard Schechner (2002, p. 79) explains. But it is also paradoxical. Sometimes, play takes the shape of a formal commercial or competitive activity one participates in or enjoys; examples include a tennis match at the U.S. Open or an off-Broadway show. In its less formal incarnations, play can involve a pick-up soccer game in the park, or occur at social gatherings, in playgrounds, sidewalks, or streets. Yet, from time to time, it departs from the mundane, and through the use of subversive humor, expands into a status quo–threatening endeavor. After describing several conceptualizations of play, this entry examines the role of play and subversive humor in social movements and discusses other advantages of play.

Conceptualizations

Although there are countless ways to conceptualize the term *play*, it is useful to begin with Johan Huizinga's 1938 work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture.* His definition encompasses many of the threads already discussed:

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside the ordinary life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promises the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga, 1938/1950, p. 13)

Huizinga goes on to suggest it is accompanied by a "feeling of tension, joy and consciousness that it is different from ordinary life" (p. 28).

There are many forms of play. For Huizinga, play is anything but serious: It is a space for joy. For Schechner, play involves doing something that is not exactly "real." It is looser; it is "double edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously" (Schechner, 2002, p. 79). The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists pages and pages of definitions and meanings for play as both a noun and a verb. As a verb, it is used to describe the state of being "busily engaged," to "leap for joy, rejoice." It involves "living being[s]" that "move about swiftly with a lively, irregular, or capricious motion, spring, sly, or dart to and fro, gambol, frisk, or flutter." As a noun, play is understood as an "active bodily exercise, brisk and vigorous action of the body or limbs in fencing, dancing, or leaping." It can be thought of as "an action, activity, operation, working, esp[ecially] with rapid movement or change, or variety."

The verb *to play* is the operative function for expressions related to games. The multiple meanings of *play* help reimagine what is real, argues sociologist Peter Nardi. The term's uses encompass dramatic gestures, street theatrics, subversive forms of humor, and various other modes of communication and meaning creation. Play is best understood along a continuum from its meanings as a noun (a performance/means of communication) toward those as a verb (as a liberatory, sometimes subversive, form of action; a resource for group support).

In this respect then, play is considered in the context of social movement activity encompassing a range of affects and outcomes, including