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HUMOUR IN PLUTARCH*

By

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When we glance at the G. SOYTER[1] edition of a short collection of texts that illustrate Greek humour from Homer up to the present time, we will observe that among the authors of the Hellenistic-Roman period we find, of course, Lucian, Aelian, Athenaeus and Diogenes Laertius, but we do not find Plutarch. Moreover, when we read in a standard text, W. SCHMIDT and O. STÄHLIN's *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, that "satirische oder humoristische Töne findet Plutarch nicht leicht"[2] we can conclude that those who enjoy humour need not keep Plutarch at hand. Even though the author of the latest monograph on Plutarch, K. ZIEGLER, responds ironically to the comment quoted above, concluding that "apparently, he [*scil.* W. SCHMIDT] did not read Plutarch very carefully"[3], neither he himself nor the other monographers of our author devote any space at all to this attribute of Plutarch's literary output. Perhaps, therefore, some words on this subject will not be amiss.

In the first place, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the concept of humour is in general a difficult and complicated one. If today's theory of literature has not yet worked out a satisfactory and universally accepted definition and theory of the comic and of humour, then it is not surprising that antiquity did not progress beyond a descriptive treatment of this phenomenon in literary criticism and that it struggled rather ineffectually with the classification of its distinct variants.

In one of the latest studies, the French monograph *L'humour* of R. ESCARPIT[4], we find the following definition which has the advantage of being somewhat humorous itself:

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* Originally published in Polish in "Eos" LIV 1964, fasc. 1, pp. 87–98.

[1] G. SOYTER, *Griechischer Humor von Homers Zeiten bis heute*, Berlin 1959.

[2] W. SCHMID, O. STÄHLIN, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, vol. V 2, 1, München 1920, p. 493.

[3] K. ZEIGLER, *Plutarchos*, *RE* XXI 1 (1951), col. 892.

[4] R. ESCARPIT, *L'humour*, Paris 1960.

> Humour is a complicated feeling, in which the comic backdrop which is created with the help of a voluntarily transposed presentation, and which is at the same time aware of our concepts and sentiments, is often modified and even blurred by an emotional, moral and philosophical reaction of very different hues, which arises from the overall suggestion influenced by the facts presented and the innumerable signs in which the interior stance of the humorist is revealed.

Very clear, concise and accurate, right?

If, therefore, we should begin to search for a precise definition of humour structured according to the classical schema *per genus et speciem*, we will not find it, neither in Th. Lipps, nor in J. Bystroń, nor in J. Kleiner, nor even in the extensive dissertation of A. Haury (who is constantly drawing on Bergson)[5]. It becomes very clear in all these authors that it is very difficult to differentiate that which we call humour from the other forms of the comic; that the concepts here are unclear, the boundaries shaky and the formulations subjective. Soyter, whom we previously mentioned, does not feel obliged to offer any sort of definition and does not involve himself at all in the theory of the concept. He states in his introduction that Greek literature exhibits over the span of many centuries rather little of a sunny and benevolent type of humour but instead displays a sharp critical sense which surfaces in shrewd jests. The examples given, however, do not fully prove this assertion, for obviously in first place we have Homer and epic in general, to which the editor himself ascribes a naive humour (much, however, depends on how we view Homer's attitude to the divine world – but this is a separate problem). But further on we find Aristophanes' parody of Sophocles, the humorous rivalry for beauty between Socrates and Critobulos (in Xenophon), Lucian's cutting satire on mythology and philosophy, an innocuous anacreontic about Eros stung by a bee and popular sayings. In short, we conclude once more that, into the category of "humour", Soyter draws everything which can be more broadly described as "humorous", such as all kinds of wit, jokes, comedy, irony, satire or anything that can evoke laughter or smile. For the moment, we will use this broad defintion and disregard those areas in which the theorists of literature fail.

It is perhaps advisable to start by looking at the efforts to investigate this complicated phenomenon which have been preserved from antiquity.

Quintilian says outright that he does not understand why laughter can be evoked by very different things (*Inst.* VI 3, 35: "unde autem concilietur risus et quibus ex locis peti soleat, difficillimum dicere"). Plutarch, in his *Table Talk* (*Quaest. conv.* II 1 = *Mor*. 629 E–634 F) puts before the banqueters the issue what Xenophon had in mind when he said that there exist things in respect to which it is more pleasant to be the butt of questions, jokes and taunts, than not to be. Here we would expect

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[5] Th. Lipps, *Komik und Humor*, Hamburg–Leipzig 1898; J. Bystroń, *Komizm*, Wrocław 1960; J. Kleiner, *Studia z zakresu teorii literatury*, Lublin 1956; A. Haury, *L'ironie et l'humour chez Cicéron*, Leiden 1955.

a discussion or lecture on the topic of a jest at someone's expense, σκῶμμα, for in the conclusion we read: ὅτι τοῦ πεπαιδευμένου καλῶς ἔργον ἐστὶ τὸ παίζειν ἐμμελῶς καὶ κεχαρισμένως ("a man needs to be educated and cultured in order to be able to joke tactfully and with grace"). In reality, however, this dialogue brings to mind rather Bystroń's *Komizm*. In both, instead of theory illustrated, so to speak, by examples, we find a rather rich collection of jokes barely grouped into some sort of categories. Moreover, Plutarch does not quite follow his introduction and begin by discussing those taunts which cause pleasure; he begins, instead, by discussing unpleasant ones, and explains that σκῶμμα is something that is more hurtful than normal λοιδορία, using a comparison to barbed arrows that remain in the wound longer and are more painful than ordinary sharp ones. But he does not attempt to explain why this is so. He indicates only why this causes pleasure for those present: because they partake in the taunt, so to speak, completing in their minds what the jest implies: συνδιασύρουσι καὶ συνυβρίζουσι. Here, Plutarch refers to Theophrastus. But even without this reference, by analyzing Plutarch's views on jests, it was easy to conclude that he shares and repeats the views of the Peripatetic school. But these conclusions did not answer the question completely. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle gives a definition of the comic: τὸ γὰρ γελοῖόν ἐστιν ἁμάρτημά τι καὶ αἶσχος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν· οἷον εὐθὺς τὸ γελοῖον πρόσωπον αἰσχρόν τι καὶ διεστραμμένον ἄνευ ὀδύνης ("funniness is a form of error and ugliness, but it is harmless and cannot hurt anyone, e.g., a comic mask is an ugly thing of caricature, but it does not distress anyone"). This definition is strangely inaccurate and one-sided, and it does not explain at all why this type of ugliness not only does not cause distress but actually evokes pleasure, often very pronounced. To this question also Plutarch does not give a theoretical answer; perhaps the ancient theory did not differentiate funniness from jest – τὸ γελοῖον denoted both the situational context that gave rise to jest as well as the jest itself. Overall, the theory itself lagged far behind practice. All the magnificent humour which characterized Greek literature from its inception (and which could, when appropriate, be in perfect harmony with the sublime) was very meagerly addressed in theoretical speculations, and only with respect to two literary genres: comedy, of course, which, as we know, Aristotle discussed in the *Poetics*, and oratory, of which the third book of the *Rhetorics* summarily disposes without really differentiating the vitality and crudeness of style from the joke itself, or an accurate metaphor or colourful antithesis from humour, describing all of these by the term ἀστεῖον. The views of Theophrastus and Demetrius of Phaleron, both of whom wrote Περὶ γελοίου and Περὶ χάριτος are known to us only through Cicero and Quintilian (Domitius Marsus' *De urbanitate* has also been lost), and they, too, addressed comedy and oratory, i.e. a very specific application of jest. In this, there is nothing strange. In antiquity, rhetoric served as the theory of prose and, although many of its conclusions and observations were applicable to other literary genres, whether letters, essays, diatribe or history, they are nevertheless characterized by

a clear specificity of their original and main application, i.e., from the point of view of their effectiveness, such as their direct influence on judges as they come to a vote or else on the members of a political assembly. That is why jest is discussed primarily from this point of view. Cicero (*De orat.* II 235 ff.) announces through Caesar Strabo's lips a very fundamental analysis of the phenomenon of laughter: "quid sit", "unde sit", "sitne oratoris risum velle movere", "quatenus", and finally, "quae sint genera ridiculi". He gives up at once on the first physiologically based question, passing it on to Democritus; the second question, the source of laughter, he describes as *turpitudo* and *deformitas* (following Aristotle), thus ignoring the whole possible range of non-malicious laughter. It becomes clear, of course, that the speaker can and should evoke laughter, because in this way he can create a mood favourable to himself, aptly strike at his opponent and lighten an atmosphere of severity and gloom, etc. As for its application, Cicero warns against laughter caused by inappropriate subjects or by means which do not behoove the gravity of a man of rank, e.g., great misfortunes or great crimes should not be derided, those who are near and dear should not be rediculed, jokes that are vulgar or obscene should absolutely never be used, and not every opponent can be mocked on every occasion. But all these are generalities. Cicero only enters into details when he provides a classification of jest, but at this he is not very successful. After the Peripatetics, he divides jests as being based on *res* and *dictum* and correctly emphasizes that not everything that is funny is also a jest: "non esse omnia ridicula faceta", giving as an example the jester *sannio* from the comic stage. He adds: "notissimum ridiculi genus cum aliud exspectamus, aliud dicitur", or ἀπροσδόκητον, but he does not realize that he has hit upon the principal source of the comic, for, noting only that we find such an error naturally funny, he passes on to other things. After giving a series of examples, he finally groups laughter-producing moments into several categories: disappointed expectation, caricature, irony, pretending that one does not understand what is going on, and the ridiculing of someone else's stupidity. In short, a rather random assortment, but one amply illustrated with jokes, taken primarily from the practice of law. We should not be surprised, because Cicero himself was known for his incisiveness and spiteful reason: we have proof of this in his biography by Plutarch.

Quintilian, another theorist of the comic, draws heavily upon Cicero and on other sources common to them both, but he also focuses exclusively on its application to rhetorical goals. Like Cicero, he asserts that the best application of jest is in a reply. The very same thing is said by Plutarch in *Πολιτικὰ παραγγέλματα* (*Mor*. 803 C ff.): μάλιστα δ' εὐδοκιμεῖ τὰ τοιαῦτα (*scil*. σκῶμμα καὶ γελοῖον) περὶ τὰς ἀμείψεις καὶ τὰς ἀπαντήσεις, because if someone does this intentionally, ἐκ παρασκευῆς, and accosts his opponent in this way, then such a reply earns for the speaker the opinion of a choleric man and a mocker, as had occurred with Cicero and Cato the Elder. But a sharp reply is very much appropriate, e.g., when Demades was shouting that Demosthenes wanted to rebuke him: ἡ ὗς τὴν

Ἀθηνᾶν, Demosthenes immediately countered, "Aha, this Athena was recently caught in fornication!" Plutarch also praises the jest of a general who, when the citizens were accusing him of fleeing from the field of battle when he was a *strategos*, shot back, "But in your company, my very dear ones!" In this section of his essay, Plutarch is most probably drawing on existing models without thinking them through, because he is not consistent. He criticizes those jests which place the speaker in a comic light but immediately afterwards, as an example of a convincing and accurate gibe, he cites Leo of Byzantium who, when he was dealing with the quarrelling parties in Athens and being ridiculed for his short stature, replied, "Ah, if only you could see my wife who barely reaches my knees!" which made the laughter increase even more. "But even though we're so small, all of Byzantium cannot contain us when we quarrel!" Other instructions for good jests given by Pluarch are often highly doubtful, e.g., in the previously mentioned *Table Talk*, he says that it is permissible to make bald men the butt of jokes, because people will not find this offensive, but not those with only one eye, and he gives separate but highly unconvincing examples. Or, when Plutarch cites an alleged taunt (but in reality a compliment), saying that a young man is pleased when he is taunted for being too thrifty when his father is present or too faithful and obedient to his wife when she is present, we may doubt this would be truly pleasing to the henpecked husband. In short, these theories in our author just "don't work". By the way, because the leading characteristsic of a philosopher (and Plutarch certainly is one) must, in his opinion, be self-control and moderation, it could be expected that he would not have any understanding of the brilliant, elemental *vis comica* of Aristophanes (although Plato did!): in the extant abbreviated comparison of Aristophanes with Menander, Plutarch has for the former only expressions of the sharpest condemnation, describing his humour as clownish, scandalous, boorish, slanderous, fitting only for debauchers and wantons and recapitulating insulting epithets in φλυαρία ναυτιώδης. He praises the moderate, discrete and modest Menander and his "Attic salt" – here is an author for a cultured gathering!

Without a doubt, Plutarch is correct when he asserts that tact and culture constitute the leading elements of jest that is social, accurate and full of charm. This, of course, is a truism, and neither great philosophy nor familiarity with literary criticism is necessary to draw a similar conclusion. But it comes to mind to ask whether Plutarch himself, who without any doubt embodied these virtues, and whom Eunapius (who in late antiquity wrote biographies of the philosophers) calls ἡ φιλοσοφίας ἁπάσης ἀφροδίτη καὶ λύρα ("the personification of grace and melodiousness in philosophy", *VS* 454) – was he himself lacking this ability to make a timely jest? For it is possible to do well in practice what one lacks in theory. How prominent in his own life was that which he calls παιδιά in *Table Talk*?

Now Plutarch's literary output, in the realm of biography in particular, is characterized by a rich vein of anecdote, notably the kind culminating in aphorism which ancient rhetoricians called χρεία. It frequently contains humour as we un-

derstand it; but it does not need to contain it in order to merit the term ἀστεῖον, which, as we discussed, has a quite general meaning of "successful, lively, deft, pleasing" or something of this sort. He draws the material for these anecdotes primarily from prepared collections of such χρεία which were in circulation in his time. A few collections of this nature have been preserved under his name: these are the co-called *Apophthegmata of Kings and Leaders*, *Laconian Apophthegmata* and *Apophthegmata of Laconian Women*. It has long been demonstrated, however, that these are not excerpts from Plutarch's works, but on the contrary, sources on which he drew and which for that reason cannot be considered.

In the biography of Alexander the Great, Plutarch states that a short response or even a jest is often more effective to characterize a hero than a detailed description of his deeds, and in this he is quite right. Moreover, this is in complete accord with the rhetorical nature of history as it was viewed by the ancients and with the Greek predilection for the gnome, a short, terse and blunt saying. Indeed, what can better illustrate the exceptional intelligence and alertness of Pericles than the following funny episode:

> At the very moment that the fleet was ready to sail and when Pericles embarked upon his trireme, an unexpected eclipse of the sun occurred. Suddenly it grew dark and everyone was terrified by this sight, reading into it some terrible omen. Pericles, however, when he noticed that the steersman of the ship was also overcome by great fear and total helplessness, covered his face with his cloak and asked, "And do you think that this is also something terrible or a bad omen?" When the steersman answered no, Pericles asked again, "In what way does the first phenomenon differ from what I did? Surely in no way whatsoever, except that the object causing the eclipse of the sun must be bigger than my coat."

Again, does the following anecdote not perfectly reflect Themistocles' awareness of his own merits?

> When one of the *strategoi* [...] was impudently boasting before Themistocles, and setting his own merits against his [...] Themistocles answered, "Once upon a time, the second day of the festival was quarrelling with the first day, saying that the main holy day is full of troublesome duties and chores, while during the second day everyone has time to rest and, at the festivities, can peacefully enjoy all that had been prepared. Then the first day answered, 'That's true. But without me, you don't exist'. And so", Themistsocles continued, "if I had not been there then, where would all of you be now?"

That these words were not uncritical self-aggrandisation but rather a sober assessment of chance and worth, can be shown by his blunt answer to an inhabitant of Seriphos, a small island, who was swearing at Themistocles, saying that he owed his fame to the greatness of his country, not to himself. To this, Themistocles answered that, indeed, just as he himself would not have accomplished anything had he been from Seriphos, his abuser would not have accomplished anything if he had been an Athenian.

As mentioned before, Plutarch is surely not the creator or these apophthegmata, but the aptness of their choice is proof of his sharpened sense of what Hirzel calls “die grösste der Musen, die Gelegenheit”, which in Plutarch’s time was called καιρός: the appropriate moment. Some of these sayings, owing to their accuracy and pertinence have certainly merited becoming κτῆμα εἰς ἀεί. Here we recall the reply of Cato the Elder who, when someone was asking him with great indignation why he did not yet have a statue in the forum as did so many other worthies, answered, “I’d rather that people asked why I don’t have a statue rather than why I do!” We met in Plutarch all the various types of jests which were catalogued in the theory of rhetoric, e.g., in Quintilian. Here, in the life of Fabius Maximus, is an example of the apparent acknowledgement of a fault instead of its denial:

> When Hannibal seized Tarentum, the leader of the defending Roman contingent was Marcus Livius. Although he had lost the town, he barricaded himself in the town’s citadel and kept it in his control until the town was won back by the Romans under the leadership of Fabius. Livius was later very envious of Fabius’ fame and once, driven by envy and ambition, he spoke in the senate, saying, “I, not Fabius, am responsible for the retaking of Tarentum”. At this, Fabius laughed and said, “You’re completely right, Livius. For had you not lost the town, I would have had nothing to retake!”

Pretending to misunderstand the speaker’s meaning is shown, e.g., in the life of Lysander, who, when the tyrant Dionysius sent him two expensive dresses and ordered him to choose whichever one he wished and take it to his daughter, answered that she would choose better herself and left taking both dresses with him. The ostensible support of an obvious falsehood by means of an even more glaring lie can be found in the life of Cato the Younger, who, in spite of his reputation for stern virtue, was reproached by a certain Memmius for spending all his nights in drunkenness. “But why don’t you add”, Cicero interjected, “that he spends all his days playing dice?” Or the kind-hearted reply found in the life of Alexander the Great. When the Indian herald Acuphis asked Alexander what they must do in order to be his friends, he answered, “They must choose you as their chief and send me a hundred of their best citizens”. At this, Acuphis laughed and said, “But, o king, I will be better able to govern if I send you a hundred of my worst, rather than best, citizens”. Scathing irony can be found, e.g., in the life of Phocion, who never catered to the crowd and, being an extraoridnarily forthright and uncompromising man of rank, did not enjoy much popularity. When it once happened that he received general applause, he anxiously turned to his friends and asked “Did I perhaps say something stupid?” Etc., etc.

In short, Plutarch’s biographies are a very rich source for various types of jests, and the ages that follow draw upon them so very frequently. In particular, the biographies of the orators, e.g., Demosthenes, Cato, Cicero and Phocion, are a veritable mother lode of such jests. Of course, not all since, e.g., the tragic life

of King Agis is completely devoid of a humorous element. Admittedly, these anecdotal insertions are usually kept in the direct discourse and have the character of quotations and therefore of sayings that do not come from the author himself. Doubtless the author's own comments and expressions that contain humour are rather rare. One example is the duplicity of Demosthenes, who wrote speeches for both sides in a lawsuit. Plutarch states that he sold knives from the same foundry to the opponents in the same duel. Or his slightly ironic reply about Nicias: that access to him was easy for evil men on account of his cowardice, but for good men on account of his obliging nature. In any case, we can never be completely sure whether such a comment was not already existing in the source from which other information had been drawn.

Plutarch's literary output is so rich, however, that if we turn from the *Lives* to the *Moralia*, we will find significantly more material in them.

Eunapius praises Plutarch's charm. In this domain, can charm be obtained without even a light note of humour? Let us take Plato's dialogues and consider how frequently in them we find a humorous atmopshere, e.g., in a dialogue such as the *Euthydemus*, in which both sophists maintain that they know everything, while Socrates shows them the absurdity of the sophistic art. Socrates, as is generally known, is an example of what antiquity called εἴρων, and a modern theorist (J. Moreau quoted by R. Escarpit) defines as "a man of irony is someone who in his arguments reduces or depresses reality, does not admit to his own merits, pretends ignorance and retreats to a purely questioning stance". Would such a definition fit Plutarch, who admired Plato and may have wanted to imitate him in his own dialogues? Certainly not. Plutarch is neither a man of irony nor a satiricist. It can even be said that he is a complete opposite of someone like Lucian. The dominant characteristic of his nature is not that sense of his own superiority which characterizes both the man of irony and the satirist, but rather an affection for people and life: that very συμπάθεια, fellow-feeling, the sense of an interior togetherness with human beings, all that he so neatly expresses by the verb συνανθρωπεῖν. Indeed, the modern theorists I have mentioned, despite all the inconsistencies already discussed and the lack of an accurate definition, all come to the conclusion that this is the plane in which humour arises. Haury asserts that

> humour, without having to be optimistic and cordial, aims at creating bonds of affection between the author and the reader or listener [...] In it there is no aristocratism, Platonic or otherwise. It places itself on equal ground with us.

Kleiner:

> humour, in its proper meaning, has a sympathetic attitude to phenomena; their funniness makes humour regard them with an increased sympathy which uncovers the attributes of that all that is little, slight and weak, and leads to the seeking of supplementary qualities in human beings and in manifestations that arouse laughter; in fact, it frequently greets such phenomena not with laughter, but a warm smile; it has a sense of superiority, but simultaneously grants to phenomena the

> characteristics of nearness and surrounds them with love [...] Serene, wise and great humour is an elevation of an ordinary world, ostensibly grey, to heights invigoratingly provisioned and illuminated by the warmth of the heart.

Finally, Escarpit:

> we have to take under consideration the intention of the humorist and the state of mind of the hearer or reader who is receiving his comments. It even seems that this is precisely what differentiates humour from other forms of the comic. Indeed, [...] our whole historical description indicates that one of the constant characteristics of humour is a sympathetic attitude, or at least a spirit of tolerance.

It is clear, of course, that a sympathetic attitude towards the world is not in itself sufficient to create an ambience of humour; a sensitivity to the funny side of reality is also necessary, and a certain general proclivity to laughter or, as Kleiner correctly distinguishes, to smiling (he also correctly asserts that the range of laughter exceeds the range of funniness because it is also a natural expression of a good mood). This sensitivity, as we have seen, cannot be denied to Plutarch as witnessed by his predilection for humorous anecdotes. In the *Moralia*, where there is much more of a personal element than in the *Lives*, the tone is more free and we can expect to see a smile more often. Let us take up once more the treatise *Πολιτικὰ παραγγέλματα* – at every step we come across a smile despite a definitely serious topic. Here also, as in the *Lives*, anecdotes will occur. In order to illustrate, e.g., the thesis that tolerance is necessary for a ruler, Plutarch tells the story that Alexander the Great, who, when his sister forgot herself somewhat with a handsome young man of his court, instead of getting angry is supposed to have said "Oh, let her also get something from this rule of mine!" It should be mentioned, however, that Plutarch weakens the humorous effect of these words by assuming a critical attitude towards them. In the same way he did not understand the reasons for the action of Onomademus, a man of rank on Chios, who opposed the exile of all political opponents because he understood the strengthening role of opposition and justified his stance by saying, "If we won't have enemies, we will start to quarrel with friends!" But the whole tone of his considerations in this essay is what the French call *enjoué*, and this is shown even by the quotation from Simonides: πάσαις κορυδαλλίσι χρὴ λόφον ἐγγενέσθαι (which can be expressed as "everyone has something to crow about"). What else if not humour full of resignation can we call Plutarch's manifestation of political lucidity, when he speaks of the high political offices of his time?

> Now we must recall not only the words that Pericles used to repeat to himself as he donned the chlamys of the *strategos*, "Be careful, Pericles, for you rule a free people, you rule Hellenes, you rule the citizens of Athens!", but we also have to repeat to ourselves, "You rule, but you yourself are ruled as a subordinate, because the city is subject to the proconsuls, the representatives of the emperor"; there is no more "spear on the field of honour" nor "the power of ancient Sardis or Lydia";

> you have to put on a humbler chlamys and gaze from the rostrum to the praetorium and not let the wreath you wear go to your head when you see Roman boots over it!

Further on, Plutarch counsels with the same wisdom and humour that, while trying to keep your country obedient to a foreign rule, you should not run to the conqueror with every detail and thus humiliate your country even more by emphasizing its slavery, saying "When your feet are in fetters, don't put your neck into chains as well!"

Also full of common sense and humour is Plutarch's essay on superstition, in which he warns his fellow countrymen against the savage eastern cults that are full of irrational and absurd elements, and primarily against imagining the gods as vengeful powers lying in wait for every unwary step made by a human being. Although in this work he also criticizes and condemns atheism, which he considers to be nonsense, he also says:

> You say that he who does not believe in the gods is an ungodly man. But the man who takes the gods to be what the superstitious imagine them to be, isn't he guilty of an even more ungodly belief? As to me, I would prefer that people said that Plutarch does not and did not exist, rather than they said that Plutarch is capricious, prone to anger, vengeful and irascible. If you omit him when inviting others to a banquet, and if, lacking time, you do not go to greet him, he will pounce on you and start to devour you or he will kidnap and torture your child to death, or set some monster loose on your crops and orchards!

The entire profound Hellenic culture is speaking through these jesting words, by which Plutarch is not as much deriding and ridiculing as he is wanting to correct: διδακτὸν ἡ ἀρετή.

The little essay *On Garrulousness* is a veritable mine of funny examples and stories, from which it is impossible not to cite at least the following accurate characteristics of a reply:

> There are three types of replies to a question, namely, the necessary, the polite and the excessive. For example, if someone asks if Socrates is at home, another person answers reluctantly and almost unwillingly, "He's not there". For an even more laconic response, the rest of the sentence can be omitted and only the negative used, "No". In just this way the Lacedaemonians answered Philip's letter asking whether they would let him into the city by writing a large NO on the sheet and sending it back. The polite person will reply, "He's not there, he went to the moneychangers". And if he wants to add something else he will say, "He's waiting there for some foreigners". But the excessive reply of a garrulous fellow, particularly if he's read Antimachus of Colophon, goes likes this: "He's not at home, he went to the moneychangers, is waiting there for some arrivals from Ionia, of whom Alcibiades had written to him. He is now in Miletus, having fun at the court of Tissaphernes, a satrap of the Persian king, who previously aided the Lacedaemonians, and now, at Alcibiades' bidding, is aiding the Athenians; for Alcibiades, who wants to return to his homeland, is influencing Tissaphernes in this fashion". And in this way, he will recite the entire eighth book of Thucydides and will engulf his interlocutor with speech, until Miletus have time to fall and Alcibiades go into exile a second time before he finishes!

Haury asserts that humour does not apply to quotations, but that we can perceive it only in the longer setting of the whole story. I think that his "only" is an exaggeration, but it is certainly emphasized by all the longer sections of, e.g., dialogues such as the *Ἐρωτικός*, which describes the funny amorous adventure of a young widow, Ismenodora, who, having fallen in love with the handsome Bacchon, kidnaps him with the help of her servants. The friends and acquaintances of both sides take this opportunity to discuss which love is better: for boys or for women. A certain Protogenes quotes a cynical (in our sense of the word) joke of Aristippus, who, responding to someone's mocking quip that the hetaera Lais surely does not love him, said, "I think that fish or wine also do not love me, but this does not prevent me from enjoying them very much!" Nothing can be further from Plutarch's personal views, but he has the ability to quote, at the proper time, a joke that is appropriate to the characterization of the speaker who wants to prove at all costs that a relationship with a woman does not of itself contain anything ideal. Zeuxippus retorts by citing the blindness of a person in love: at the banquet of Anytus, his beloved Alcibiades bursts in with a suite of revellers and snatches half of the expensive dinner service from the table. Anytus' guests are angry that the bold young man has treated him so badly, but Anytus says, "What do you mean, 'badly'? Rather 'graciously'! He left this much for me when he could have taken it all!"

Similarly, in Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, we have to read the whole engaging story in order to be drawn into its subtly humorous atmosphere. We could also exploit many other works this way and have a good laugh at the funny jokes we find.

In conclusion, it should again be emphasized that Plutarch evokes laughter primarily by means of anecdote and quotation. Where he speaks for himself we will find a smile instead. But even a smile has its boundaries, sometimes quite unexpected ones. In the already mentioned *Table Talk*, for example, we would expect that, particularly with wine at hand, παιδιά should outweigh σπουδή. Yet this does not happen: serious discussion predominates, even topics which today would be difficult to consider seriously, e.g., uninvited guests who arrive as a hangers-on of the invited ones or the reasons why women seemingly get drunk least easily while old men do so most easily. Already in the introduction we read that in amicable conversation as in all else, the voice of philosophy (which the author nicely describes as τέχνη περὶ βίον οὖσα) must in the end be heard, but it can be heard in jest as well.

Even more typical may be the dialogue *Beasts Are Rational*. In it, we find Odysseus, Circe and a certain Gryllus, whom Circe has changed into a pig. Here, the comparison with the *Dialogues of the Gods* of Lucian is inescapable. The beginning of the dialogue between Odysseus, who is demanding that Circe change his companions back into men, and Circe, who explains to him that they themselves would not wish it because it is much better to be an animal than

a human being, is purely "Lucianean" – the humorous tone is achieved solely by the contrast of mythological personalities and the highly realistic note of the conversation. For example, Odysseus bridles:

> Again, you're making a cup of poisoned magic for me, but this time in words. Obviously, you're still planning to change me into a beast, if I let you convince me that being changed from beast to man is a catastrophe!

To this, Circe replies:

> "As if you haven't committed the greatest stupidity all by yourself! You have given up the immortality and eternal youth you shared with me for the sake of a mortal woman who is, if truth be told, no longer young. And now you're rushing through innumerable toils and troubles in order to gain more fame than you already have. You're chasing after an imaginary good rather than a real one". – "So be it, Circe, why should we always be quarrelling about the same thing. But, please, change my comrades back into men and give them back to me!"

But when Gryllos, at Circe's request, begins to convince Odysseus that animals are more intelligent, more virtuous and more fortunate than human beings, the character of a humorous dialogue is immediately lost as it is transformed into a one-sided lecture. Although this part is punctuated with joking interpolations, it basically takes on a serious moralizing tone instead of exploiting and emphasizing the expected paradox. This is due to the fact that Plutarch really believes that animals possess some amount of intelligent consciousness (as can be seen from his other works as well). But the fact remains that the artistic and literary goals of his writing unconsciously give ground before the educational purposes which for him are undoubtedly of the utmost importance (and which we also can see clearly from, to take one example, the essay *On How the Young Man Should Listen to Poets*). Plutarch's work has rightly been called the "shepherding of souls", and the shepherd in him triumphs over the artist and perhaps this is what at times makes Eunapius' praise seem somewhat overdone.

However, the fact is that Plutarch's educational ideal is εὐθυμία, or tranquillity of spirit. In the essay Περὶ εὐθυμίας, he cautions us against making our lives ἀμειδής, without a smile, through our own fault. It is therefore likely that his own attitude to life was characterized by this smile, warm and filled with tolerant wit, a smile which, in his writings, to a very great degree counteracts the stamp of venerable boredom which the later title of *Moralia* unwittingly suggests.