

Are you all laughing at me because I am drunk? Humorous banter in Plato's *Symposium*

Are you laughing at me because I am drunk? Well, I am. But even if you laugh, I know well that I am telling the truth.¹

Introduction

Alcibiades' dramatic entrance into the assembled company at Agathon's in Plato's *Symposium* produces laughter, as the guests all laugh at his drunken exuberance. Alcibiades freely admits that he is inebriated, but he nevertheless insists that he is telling the truth, despite their laughter. Alcibiades here (as in so many ways) crystalizes an issue that has been at play throughout the dialogue, the relation between laughter and truth. What role does humor play in the practice of philosophy?

This dialogue is certainly one of the most humorous of all of Plato's works, not merely because of the presence of the comedian Aristophanes, but because of the playful banter in which all the participants of the symposium engage. The importance of humorous teasing appears right at the start, when the narrator, Apollodorus relates how an acquaintance, Glaucon, hailed him by joking off of his deme name.² The relation of all this banter to Plato's philosophical project has often been overlooked, however, by scholars who focus on excavating the authentic Platonic doctrines from Diotima's speech (and to a lesser extent the other speeches). The laughter in the symposium is seen as a hindrance to serious philosophizing, rather than an important part of the proper practice of philosophy. I argue that in the *Symposium*, the humorous banter of the symposium context appears as a significant indicator of the kind of community that is needed for the serious play of philosophy.³

The playful banter of the symposiasts includes several elements to which Plato calls attention repeatedly throughout the dialogue. The mockery of symposiastic laughter does constitute a form of attack on the character or ideas of another person, but it is coupled in the dialogue with self-mockery, which transforms the attack into a kind of play. Significantly, such self-mockery and attacks are presented with reminders of the context, the symposium community of friends and companions with whom such joking is not offensive. This kind of community that allows for such play enables truth-telling to be much more persuasive and effective than the harsh arguments of the *elenchos*.

Laughter in the Symposium

Scholars have had a problem with the unruliness of laughter ever since Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he defines mockery (*σῶμα*) as a form of abuse (*λοιδορημά τι*) and suggests that, just as some forms of abuse are forbidden by law, some kinds of mockery ought likewise be banned.⁴ In the *Rhetoric*, he more pithily defines wittiness (*εὐτραπεία*) as educated hubris

¹ Plato, *Symposium* 212e ἄρα καταγελάσσεθέ μου ὡς μεθύοντος; ἐγὼ δέ, κἄν ὑμεῖς γελάτε, ὅμως εἴ οἱδ' ὅτι ἀληθῆ λέγω.

² Of course, we don't get what the actual joke is supposed to be. (Bury 1932) ad loc lists a number of older alternatives, none of which is particularly convincing, but recent attempts to relate Φαληρεὺς to something phallic are no more convincing than relating it to a bald-headed coot. Cp. (Sansone 2017) with further discussions of other attempts.

³ Cp. (Desjardins 1988), with examples at Phaedrus 276cd or Laws 803bc, for serious play; cp. (Corrigan and Corrigan 2004)

⁴ Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 1128b τὸ γὰρ σῶμα λοιδορημά τι ἐστίν, οἱ δὲ νομοθεταὶ ἔνια λοιδορεῖν κωλύουσιν· ἔδει δ' ἴσως καὶ σῶπτειν. For raillery is a sort of vilification, and some forms of vilification are forbidden by law; perhaps some forms of raillery ought to be prohibited also.

(πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις).⁵ Even Plutarch, who has a much better sense of humor, warns that jokes can really hurt, like barbed arrows.⁶ Modern scholars have often shared this concern about the offensiveness of humor, which they see as an obstacle to practicing philosophy. Jazdzewska argues, “This derisive laughter is a potential stumbling block for the philosopher, who must overcome the fear of being ridiculed and not allow it to stop him from telling the truth.”⁷ All these thinkers rightly perceive the way that humor can be used as an attack, a way of putting another person down.

Plutarch, however, points out that a community of friends, like that found in the symposium, makes a difference in the offensiveness of such humorous attacks. “Among friends and comrades men laugh at remarks they take amiss if made to them in the presence of wife, father, or teacher.”⁸ The audience in front of whom this banter takes place is not merely incidental; it is essential to the effect. As an anonymous sympotic poem relates:

“Whenever we gather together as friends for such an occasion, | we should laugh and play
(while still upholding excellence) | and take pleasure in each other’s company, and send up
each other | with mockery of a kind that yields laughter.”⁹

Plutarch also relates the story of Socrates’ reaction to Aristophanes’ mockery of him in the *Clouds*; when asked if he was angry, he replied that, to the contrary, being mocked in the theater made him feel as if he was in a big symposium party.¹⁰ The symposium is the place where such attacks don’t create anger but amusement in return.

An important factor in the atmosphere of this context, however, is self-mockery. As Plutarch points out, “if it is done by those who are similar, the teasing seems to spring not from hubris but rather from a kind of playfulness.”¹¹ Hubris, as Fisher has shown, involves deliberately treating an equal as an inferior – a citizen as a slave, a man as a woman.¹² Self-mockery helps to dispel the feeling of dishonor, since the joker is putting himself on the same level (or lower!) than those whom he is also mocking. Plutarch again points to the significance, citing the example of a

⁵ Aristotle *Rhet.* 2.12. 16 ἡ γὰρ εὐτραπεία πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις ἐστίν.

⁶ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 631e Μᾶλλον οὖν τὰ σκώμματα δάκνει, καθάπερ τὰ παρηγμιστρωμένα βέλη πλείονα χρόνον ἐμμένοντα. καὶ λυπεῖ τοὺς σκωφθέντας ἢ τέρεσις τῇ κομψότητι καθ’ ὅσον ἡδύνει τοὺς παρόντας· ἡδόμενοι γὰρ ἐπὶ τῷ λεγομένῳ, πιστεύειν δοκοῦσι καὶ συνδιασύρειν τῷ λέγοντι. Thus jokes are more biting, for like barbed arrows they lie longer embedded. The delight in their cleverness distresses the victims in the degree it gives pleasure to the company, for by taking pleasure in what is said the company seem to believe the speaker and join in with his ridicule.

⁷ (Jazdzewska 2018): 200. Cp., “Socrates, who expresses anxiety at the prospect of being laughed at, though he is also aware that he cannot escape such laughter, as this is the cost he pays for being truthful to himself.” Jazdzewska 2018: 190

⁸ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 634a. ἃ γὰρ ἐν φίλοις καὶ συνήθεσιν ἀκούοντες γελῶσιν, ταῦτα δυσχεραίνουσιν, ἂν λέγηται πρὸς αὐτοὺς τῆς γαμετῆς παρούσης ἢ τοῦ πατρὸς ἢ τοῦ καθηγητοῦ.

⁹ Adesp. el. 27 IEG. χρῆ δ’, ὅταν εἰς τοιοῦτο συνέλθωμεν φίλοι ἄνδρες | πρᾶγμα, γελᾶν παίζειν χρησαμένους ἄρετῃ, | ἥδεσθαι τε συνόντας, ἐς ἀλλήλους τε φλυαρεῖν | καὶ σκώπτειν ποιαῦθ’ οἷα γέλωτα φέρειν. (text and trans. (Halliwell 2008): 114)

¹⁰ Plutarch *de lib. ed.* 10d. Ἀριστοφάνους δέ, ὅτε τὰς Νεφέλας ἐξέφερε, παντοίως πᾶσαν ὕβριν αὐτοῦ κατασκευαδανύνοντος, καὶ τινος τῶν παρόντων “κᾶτα τοιαῦτ’ ἀνακωμφοῦντος οὐκ ἀγανακτεῖς” εἰπόντος “ὦ Σώκρατες;” “μὰ Δι’ οὐκ ἔγωγ,” ἔφησεν· “ὥς γὰρ ἐν συμποσίῳ μεγάλῳ τῷ θεάτρῳ σκώπτομαι.” And when Aristophanes brought out the *Clouds*, and heaped all manner of abuse upon Socrates in every possible way, one of those who had been present said to Socrates, “Are you not indignant, Socrates, that he used you as he did in the play?” “No indeed,” he replied; “when they break a jest upon me in the theatre I feel as if I were at a big party of good friends.”

¹¹ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 634b δοκεῖ δ’ οὐχ ὕβρει παιδιᾶ δέ τι γίνεσθαι μᾶλλον ὑπὸ τῶν ὁμοίων·

¹² “It is essentially a deliberate activity, and the typical motive for such infliction of dishonour is the pleasure of expressing a sense of superiority.” (Fisher 1992): 1.

humorist who was able to reprove Philip for his misdeeds without creating offense, as well as the comic poets who often make fun of themselves.¹³

The humorous banter in Plato's *Symposium* combines frequent instances of this self-mockery with the playful mockery of others, usually with an explicit reminder of the convivial context of the symposium.¹⁴ These reminders of the context serve to create the atmosphere of playful laughter, the shared game of symposiastic discourse. As Halliwell says,

We might characterise playful laughter provisionally, then, as a cooperative, reciprocally pleasurable form of behaviour: one which requires all parties to accept the rules of the game, above all the psychological and social presupposition of self-contained, 'safe', non-antagonistic exchange.¹⁵

This non-antagonistic exchange provides a cooperative model of discourse that enables philosophic discussion. Participants can put forth differing ideas and even attack each other's positions without giving offense or sacrificing the pleasure of the game. When the stakes of the game are determining the truth of how best to live, then this game becomes the serious play that Plato characterizes as philosophy. And, of course, Alcibiades characterizes Socrates' words as apparently ridiculous, but actually containing everything that anyone intending to become noble and good needs to explore.¹⁶ Throughout the dialogue, then, the characters engage in humorous banter that includes self-mockery, attacks on others, and reminders of the convivial community of the symposium, the setting that enables the laughter to serve, not as an obstacle, but a aid to the practice of philosophy.

Socrates and Agathon

Socrates provides a clear model of this pattern of symposiastic banter in his interactions with the host, Agathon, which range from amiable flirtation to the one bit of serious philosophical dialectic in the dialogue. From his first entry to the banter around Agathon's speech, Socrates repeatedly couples self-mockery with a more or less veiled attack on Agathon, but the companionable atmosphere of the symposium allows him to make such attacks without truly causing offence to Agathon.

When Socrates first comes into the party after his time spent pondering on the neighbor's porch, Agathon calls him to sit next to him, so that he can, by 'touching' him, gain the wisdom he must have just acquired. Socrates responds to this flirtation with the sexually charged image of liquids flowing from one cup to another. Wouldn't it be great if the transmission of wisdom worked that way, he says; then I would be able to benefit from your great wisdom, Agathon.¹⁷ Socrates' response mocks his own wisdom as shadowy and insubstantial as a dream, in contrast to the shiny wisdom that Agathon displayed before all Athens in the tragic competition. Agathon shows that he clearly gets the irony of Socrates' response, which first reverses the flow of wisdom and then refers

¹³ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 634d. σκώπτειν γὰρ ἑαυτὸν δοκῶν, ἔκεινον ἀλύπως ἐνουθέτησεν. διὸ καὶ τῶν κωμικῶν ἔνιοι τὴν πικρίαν ἀφαιρῶν δοκοῦσι τῷ σκώπτειν ἑαυτοῦς. By seeming to ridicule himself he reproved Philip without offence. So some of the comic poets seem to take away bitterness by ridiculing themselves.

¹⁴ Halliwell 2008: 291-292 suggests that such self-mockery is peculiar to Socrates (and perhaps, by imitation, to some of his followers), but limiting it to Socrates neglects the role of self-mockery in playful convivial contexts more broadly.

¹⁵ Halliwell 2008: 21. Halliwell uses Adesp. el. 27 IEG to illustrate the context. "Because the guests are friends (3), they can afford to engage in a mixture of 'laughter' and 'play' (4), mutual pleasure (5), and even good-natured exchanges of ridicule (5-6)." (Halliwell 2008): 114-115.

¹⁶ 222a. ἐπὶ πᾶν ὅσον προσήκει σκοπεῖν τῷ μέλλοντι καλῶ καὶ γαθῶ ἔσεσθαι.

¹⁷ Scholars have (rightly) seen this as a critique of the 'educative pederasty' model espoused by Pausanias and taken (wrongly) by many scholars as the normative idea of pederasty in Classical Athens.

to Agathon's recent victory. "Υβριστῆς εἶ," he exclaims, marking the hubris or insult offered in the jest. Plato himself is playing various games here, since this claim foreshadows Alcibiades' joke about Socrates' hubris in *not* taking advantage of him sexually, playing off the sense of hubris as sexual assault. Agathon's reaction to the role-reversal that Socrates has just engineered mirrors that of Alcibiades to the erotic role-reversal in their relationship.¹⁸ Despite these resonances, however, Agathon is not accusing Socrates of assault; the convivial atmosphere of the symposium makes Socrates' insult – and Agathon's response – a joke. Agathon depicts their exchange as a contest to be decided later by Dionysos, evoking of course his own recent victory at the Dionysia, but also the idea of the drinking contests familiar in symposia (that this foreshadows Alcibiades coming in with Bacchic revelry to judge between them in wisdom is Plato's joke).

After supper their banter continues, as Agathon and Socrates prepare to be the last two speakers in the encomium contest. Socrates belittles his own skills after Eryximachus comments that he is looking forward to these final two speeches.¹⁹ To this ironic self-mockery, Agathon responds that Socrates must be trying to jinx him, putting on some sort of magical attack to make him anxious about the high expectations for his performance.²⁰ As Socrates begins to lure Agathon into a dialectical argument on the subject, Phaedrus reminds them that they are at a symposium and in the middle of a game. They must take thought for the others in the company and do their part in the company's activity, speeches for Eros.²¹

The same pattern of self-mockery, attack, and reminder of the symposiastic context recurs after Agathon's speech. Socrates jokes with Eryximachus that his apprehensions of being stuck at a loss after Agathon's speech have proved well-founded, but Eryximachus laughingly refuses to accept Socrates' prediction that he will be left in *aporia* (198a). Socrates claims that he was ridiculous (*καταγέλαστος*) to agree to take part in the contest, since in his naivete (*ἄβελτερία*) he thought he should just tell the truth. While Socrates continues to downplay his own ability to make an encomium, however, he also launches a few sharp attacks on Agathon.²² The end of the speech was filled with such beautiful words (even though the rest of it wasn't that great) that he feared he would be petrified by the Gorgian head – an allusion to Agathon's overblown Gorgianic style. But this method of piling up good things to attribute to the subject of the encomium is merely appearing to praise, not praising in truth, a tactic that would fool an ignorant audience but not a knowledgeable one. Socrates' own poor attempt to tell the truth would incur ridicule if judged by the same standards, but he is willing to go ahead if the company won't apply those standards. Socrates' companions bear with all his protestations in good humor, recognizing the ironic self-mockery for what it is, since they are all long familiar with his peculiar ways. They readily agree to let him give

¹⁸ See (Edmonds 2000) on the role-reversals at play here. (Destrée 2013): 549-551 rightly notes the sexually charged humor in the episode, and (Fisher 1992): 454 provides a better understanding of the humor than (Gagarin 1977).

¹⁹ 194a. Τὸν οὖν Σωκράτη εἰπεῖν Καλῶς γὰρ αὐτὸς ἡγῶνισαι, ὃ Ἑρυξίμαχε· εἰ δὲ γένοιτο οὗ νῦν ἐγὼ εἶμι, μᾶλλον δὲ ἴσως οὗ ἔσομαι ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἀγάθων εἴπη εὖ, καὶ μάλ' ἂν φοβόιο καὶ ἐν παντὶ εἴης ὥσπερ ἐγὼ νῦν. It is worth noting that the subject under discussion is what difference the audience makes if someone is doing or saying something shameful/ugly.

Agathon seems to claim that it would be more embarrassing to perform shamefully in front of a symposium of educated friends than in front of all of Athens at the theater, but Socrates points out that all of those at the symposium were part of the audience at the theater.

²⁰ 194a. Φαρμάττειν βούλει με, ὃ Σώκρατες, εἰπεῖν τὸν Ἀγάθωνα, ἵνα θορυβηθῶ διὰ τὸ οἴεσθαι τὸ θέατρον προσδοκίαν μεγάλην ἔχειν ὥς εὖ ἐροῦντος ἐμοῦ.

²¹ 194d. Καὶ τὸν Φαῖδρον ἔφη ὑπολαβόντα εἰπεῖν Ὡ φίλε Ἀγάθων, ἐὰν ἀποκρίνη Σωκράτει, οὐδὲν ἔτι διοίσει αὐτῷ ὀπρὸν τῶν ἐνθάδε ὁτιοῦν γίνεσθαι, ἐὰν μόνον ἔχη ὅτ' αὐτὸς διαλέγεται, ἄλλως τε καὶ καλῶ. ἐγὼ δὲ ἡδέως μὲν ἀκούω Σωκράτους διαλεγόμενον, ἀναγκαῖον δέ μοι ἐπιμεληθῆναι τοῦ ἐγκωμίου τῷ Ἑρωτι καὶ ἀποδέξασθαι παρ' ἐνός ἐκάστου ὑμῶν τὸν λόγον· ἀποδοὺς οὖν ἐκάτερος τῷ θεῷ οὕτως ἤδη διαλεγέσθω.

²² cp. this tactic with the opening of forensic speeches.

his own encomium however he wishes; strict adherence to the rules of the competition is less important – the show must go on!

In each of his interchanges with Agathon, then, Socrates couches his critiques of the poet in symposiastic banter, the familiar pattern of self-mockery and jesting attack with a reminder of their convivial context. It is interesting to note that, after forcing Agathon to confess that he didn't know what he was talking about in his speech, Socrates depicts himself going through the same humiliating *elenchos*. Diotima, he claims, refuted him in just the same way (when he was as young and ignorant as Agathon), a parallel that neatly serves simultaneously as self-mockery and a renewed attack.²³ Socrates repeatedly proves himself superior in his bantering exchanges with Agathon, winning the playful rivalries of the symposium even against the recently crowned poet. As Alcibiades says, when he takes some of Agathon's crown to give to him (213e), Socrates bests everyone in words everyday, not just in one competition like Agathon.

Eryximachus and Aristophanes

Other friendly rivalries appear in the dialogue, but the exchanges between Eryximachus and Aristophanes are perhaps the most notable. That Aristophanes the comedian would indulge in humorous banter is unsurprising, but scholars have for the most part failed to appreciate Eryximachus' role as a player in the games of symposiastic banter. Eryximachus the doctor is perhaps the most misunderstood character in the dialogue, since modern scholars have repeatedly questioned the way that he fits into the company at the symposium, portraying him as a humorless pedant whose discourse on eros and medicine is there only to be mocked by Aristophanes or mined for ideas that later appear in Socrates' speech. Even those who defend his presence by pointing to his important role in establishing the encomium game for the evening often see it as Plato's tribute to the significance of medical ideas for philosophy rather than an indication of his *social* status within the sympotic community.²⁴ For Eryximachus is not just a cipher for doctors or medicine; he is a prominent Athenian aristocrat, a regular participant in learned confabulations (cp. *Prot.* 315b), the friend (perhaps even *erastes*) of Phaedrus, and one of the conspirators exiled for the smashing of the Herms.²⁵ Both Eryximachus and Aristophanes engage in the usual pattern of self-mockery, jesting attack, and reminder of the symposium context, and Eryximachus is able to hold his own bantering with the comedian, even if his speech is of course not as humorous as Aristophanes'.

Aristophanes precipitates the exchange, when his hiccups prevent him from speaking and he asks the doctor to speak in his place. Eryximachus prescribes some hiccup remedies for him, so, while the doctor goes through his encomium, the comedian is first holding his breath, then gargling, and finally sneezing violently in the background.²⁶ This comic performance would naturally direct everyone's laughter to Aristophanes, who is, as Alcibiades characterizes him, "ridiculous and wants to be" (*γελοῖος ἔστι τε καὶ βούλεται* 213c). Aristophanes calls attention to his own ridiculousness with mock wonder that the orderly eros in his body needed the disorderly elements of gargling and

²³ 201e. Diotima, as scholars such as (Halliwell 2008): 292, with n. 68, have noted, is one of the few individuals said to laugh out loud in the dialogue (202c), and her put-downs of Socrates are indeed harsher than Socrates' treatment of Agathon (cp. 204b).

²⁴ Eryximachus as a "a rather humourless pedant" in (O'Mahoney 2011): 145; cp. (Dover 1980) ad loc. Edelstein's defense of Eryximachus in (Edelstein 1945) merely seems to argue that it is appropriate for a doctor to pride himself on his knowledge and lecture others; i.e., what's so bad about being a pedant?

²⁵ See (Nails 2002): 143-144.

²⁶ Cp. (Clay 1983): 188. "What all this means is that as Eryximachus is delivering himself of his pompous and profound description of Eros, his unfortunate neighbor is hiccupping, gasping, gargling, wheezing, snorting, and sneezing. If Aristophanes has any cue for these eruptions it must be Eryximachus' repetition of the word *kosmion* (cf. 189 C). This is rare comedy."

sneezing to control the hiccups (189a). Eryximachus rightly sees this as a reference to his own speech, which was much concerned with the 'orderly' elements in the cosmos, and he warns Aristophanes from attacking him with jokes when he is about to make his own speech. Aristophanes laughingly pleads, both before and after his speech, for Eryximachus to go easy on him. He just wants to say something funny (γελοῖα), not something laughable (καταγέλαστα); he wants to amuse the company, not be derided by angry critics (189b). He pretends (193bc) to prevent Eryximachus from interrupting him to make fun of the way his description of the double-males fits Agathon and Pausanias, a neat piece of comedy that enables him to throw in an extra dig at his host (who would never be called hyper-masculine) while appealing to the rules of the symposiastic game. At the end of his speech, he asks Eryximachus to hold off from mocking the speech, so that the symposiasts can all hear the remaining speeches in the game (193d). Again, the appeal to the symposium context serves to put all the banter, the self-mockery and the jesting attacks, in its place.

Eryximachus shows himself a willing participant in this symposiastic banter, despite the claims of scholars that he has no sense of humor. Like Aristophanes (and Socrates), Eryximachus engages in self-mockery, poking fun at his own medical expertise. The one thing he has learned, he says, from his medical training, is that excessive drinking is hard on the drinker, especially when he is still hung over from the day before – an astounding revelation of medical wisdom that certainly needs a doctor's expertise! The irony is compounded, of course, by the fact that Eryximachus is himself one of those drinkers still hung over from the night before, and, as he confesses, his capacity for drinking is never that high anyway, so it doesn't take much for him to reach excess. His self-mockery in this pronouncement continues in his own speech, where he deliberately uses references to his medical expertise to discuss matters that have little to do with medicine – like astronomy, prophecy, and music.²⁷ He wittily proclaims that the famously obscure Heraclitus failed to express his ideas clearly in words, providing a new interpretation of a Heraclitean paradox that neatly fits his argument.²⁸ As Hunter, one of the few scholars to acknowledge Eryximachus' humor, puts it,

Eryximachus' performance, however, is festive and self-knowing in its very overfullness (cf. 188e1-3); in this it resembles the deliberate over-the-topness of Agathon's verbal and rhythmical style, which wittily exaggerates and distorts what seem to have been genuine features of the real Agathon's poetic style.²⁹

Eryximachus likewise engages in the jesting attacks that other symposiasts make in their banter. When Aristophanes makes fun of his speech, he playfully threatens to act as an auditor – rather than audience – for Aristophanes' encomium, exacting his revenge with retaliatory strikes and not letting him attack and get off unharmed.

When Aristophanes at the end appeals to the symposiastic context, Eryximachus is a good enough sport to agree; he enjoyed Aristophanes' speech and he is looking forward to the encomia of the great speakers, Agathon and Socrates.³⁰ The most open conflict between two speakers in the whole dialogue is easily resolved through their mutual desire to continue the game.

²⁷ cp. 186a,

²⁸ For this sophistic game, cp. Socrates in the *Protagoras* 340-346 or the *Cratylus*, as well as the Derveni author. Scholars tend to assume that Eryximachus simply fails to understand Heraclitus and pompously imposes an absurd reading. E.g. "Eryximachus' pedantic criticism of Heraclitus conceals a skillfully contrived joke" [but] "Eryximachus himself, however, is almost entirely unaware of what he is doing." (Corrigan and Corrigan 2004): 63, 65.

²⁹ (Hunter 2004): 54

³⁰ Eryximachus' willingness to let Aristophanes off the hook is not due to any failure to get the jokes. *Pace* Bury ad loc, who also cites Rettig for the idea that Eryximachus simply failed to understand the speech.

Unsympotic banter in the frame

The importance of the sympotic community for this playful banter is highlighted by two examples in the frame of the dialogue where the pattern of self-mockery and abuse fails to amuse because of the different context. Apollodorus attempts to banter with both Glaucon and his unnamed interlocutor, but his efforts are dismissed as tiresome distractions from the information that these interlocutors really want to know.

Apollodorus characterizes himself, before he met Socrates, as someone simply wandering around haphazardly, wasting his life, coupling this self-critique with the jab at Glaucon, just as you are now. Glaucon, however, refuses to play the game. Don't joke, he says ("Μὴ σκῶπτ'," ἔφη); this isn't the time or place for such banter. Apollodorus hardly has better success with his unnamed interlocutor, with whom he also engages in the familiar pattern of self-mockery and attack.³¹ He acknowledges that his interlocutor probably thinks he is a miserable wretch (*κακοδαίμων*), and he admits that he is probably right. However, this self-mockery is coupled with the retort that Apollodorus doesn't just *think* that his interlocutor is *κακοδαίμων*, he *knows* it well.³² His interlocutor complains that Apollodorus is always attacking everyone savagely, despite his reputation as an effeminate pansy (*μαλακός*), and, to Apollodorus' attempt to continue bantering, he says that it is not worth contesting (*ἐριζειν*) now. Like Glaucon, he sees Apollodorus' banter as out of place; there is serious business to be discussed.³³

It is not simply that Apollodorus is inept at banter, an inferior imitator of his master, Socrates, whose skill at ironic banter is known to all. The same pattern of self-mockery and attack that creates playful laughter in the symposium falls flat without that community of friends and companions engaged together in friendly rivalry. The symposium itself is not needed for such interactions, as Apollodorus' first description of the interchange between Socrates and Aristodemus shows. When Aristodemus, surprised at seeing Socrates washed and shod, teases him about having made himself so beautiful, the notoriously ugly Socrates plays along, explaining that he has made himself beautiful to visit the beautiful Agathon (174a). As they play with the comic trope of coming uninvited to a party, Socrates (174b) introduces the idea of hubris to the dialogue, joking that Homer not only corrupts the proverb of the good coming uninvited to the feasts of the good, but he comes near to committing hubris upon it.³⁴ Their facetious attacks on Homer (and on the proverb) are coupled with self-mockery, as Aristodemus proclaims himself a worthless (*φαῦλος*) person coming uninvited to the party of the wise (174c). Indeed, Aristodemus finds himself in a ridiculous position (*τι αὐτόθι γελοῖον παθεῖν*) when he shows up at Agathon's door without Socrates, who has lagged behind, deep in thought. But he is among friends, and Agathon charmingly invites him in to join the party, rather than mocking or abusing him for being out of place.

³¹ Cp., (Sheffield 2006): 10, who sees only the attack, without the humor. "Apollodorus' harsh words to his anonymous friend urge him to reflect on the kind of person he will turn out to be as a result of his desires – and unsatisfied and wretched one, apparently – and on his chances for living a worthwhile and happy life. What Apollodorus' own chances are remains to be seen."

³² As Dover comments *ad loc*, "This is banter, not preaching, as the continuation shows." Dover, however, fails to explain why Apollodorus' banter falls flat here.

³³ (Nussbaum 1986) provides the best discussion of the urgency with which Apollodorus' interlocutors press for his account of the symposium. Even if her hypothesis that these conversations take place around the time of Alcibiades' assassination is unprovable, she calls attention to the significance of the political context.

³⁴ See the discussion of (Fisher 1992): 454, rightly correcting (Gagarin 1977): 25.

Alcibiades

The other uninvited guest at the symposium is, of course, Alcibiades, who shows up looking like an incarnation of the bacchic spirit of the revelry. He knows well how to play the games of self-mockery and attack in the symposiastic context. “Are you laughing at me because I am drunk? Well, I am.” He refers repeatedly to his inebriated condition, lapping up the laughter of the house, but he also acts with hubris, asserting his dominance over the others at the party.³⁵ He arrogantly appoints himself master of the revels (ἄρχων πόσεως), displacing not only the host, Agathon, but also Eryximachus and Phaedrus, who set up the encomium game in place of compulsive drinking games. When Eryximachus reminds him of the sympotic setting, Alcibiades responds mockingly with an extravagant address in iambic trimeter, “Eryximachus, most noble son of a most noble and wise father, greetings!”³⁶ Dover refers to this address as, “a touch of drunken magniloquence, to which Eryximachus replies primly”, but Eryximachus’ response is hardly prim. Καὶ γὰρ σὺ appears frequently in Plato as a response in eristic exchanges, such as Ctesippus’ response to Euthydemus, after the latter draws the conclusion that he must be the brother of the little fishies, puppies, and piglets - Καὶ γὰρ σὺ.³⁷ Eryximachus is in fact responding in kind to Alcibiades with the appropriate snappy reply for agonistic banter, and Alcibiades is reminded of the sympotic setting, yielding the direction of activities to Eryximachus with another witty verse.

Eryximachus suggests that, since he claims Socrates’ jealousy prevents him from praising anyone else, Alcibiades should praise Socrates. Although it is not fair, Alcibiades claims (214c), to pit a man as drunk as he is against sober speakers, he nevertheless relishes his chance to attack, “shall I charge at the man and take my revenge right in front of you all?”³⁸ During his speech Alcibiades repeatedly makes fun of his own drunken condition, first warning that he may not be able to keep his ideas in order (215a) and then apologizing for leaving something out at the beginning (221d) (cp. also 215d). As usual, however, this self-mockery accompanies playful and humorous attacks, the central joke of which is the charge of hubris he lays against Socrates. “You are all the jurors,” he proclaims, “of Socrates’ arrogance,” in the way that he dishonored me (219c). As scholars have noted, for a younger man to claim that an older has treated him with hubris and dishonored him, especially when they were alone together without witnesses, would naturally be taken as a claim of sexual assault, but Alcibiades’ claim is of course that Socrates treated him with hubris by *not* taking advantage of him sexually. Alcibiades’ attack on Socrates’ hubris, then, comically turns out to be self-mocking, as Alcibiades speaks freely of his own embarrassment, and the whole company responds with laughter (222c). Alcibiades indeed claims that he could never speak of such humiliations if he weren’t among friends who could understand.

³⁵ 212e; 214b This kind of game also appears when Alcibiades discovers that Socrates is sharing the couch with Agathon. He attacks Socrates as a cunning rival who always manages to sneak in ahead of him and sit next to the beauties, while he is cut out – a third wheel on the couch. He complains that Socrates should go sit with a clown like Aristophanes and give him a chance. Socrates, however, plays the same game back at him, pretending that he is the helpless victim of Alcibiades’ jealousy and that he fears Alcibiades might turn violent, like an erastes who discovers his paidika flirting with someone else. Socrates’ appeal to Agathon to take on the role of the big, strong, manly protector and save him from Alcibiades’ jealous wrath is yet another layer to the ironic exchange. Alcibiades concedes the contest by taking some ribbons from Agathon and crowning Socrates as the one who wins in the contest of words every day.

³⁶ As Bury notes ad loc, “Alcibiades—as if to show how ready he is ἄδειν τι— replies with an iambic trimeter—“A noble sire’s most noble, sober son!” The superlatives are not without irony.”

³⁷ *Euthydemus* 298d. Καὶ σὺ ἄρα ἀδελφὸς εἶ τῶν κωβίων καὶ κυναρίων καὶ χοιριδίων. — Καὶ γὰρ σὺ. Cp., Callicles in *Gorgias* 495b and Socrates in *Philebus* 28b, as well as the hetaira Metenaira in Athenaeus *Deipn.* 13 48.2 584f.

³⁸ 214e. ἐπιθῶμαι τῷ ἀνδρὶ καὶ τιμωρήσωμαι ὑμῶν ἐναντίον;

For you have all shared in this Bacchic frenzy and madness of philosophy, and therefore you will all hear. For you will pardon and sympathize with the things done then and the things said now. But house-slaves, and if there is anyone else here uninitiate and boorish, put totally huge doors on your ears!³⁹

The symposiasts are all part of a sympathetic community that will understand what Alcibiades has done, even if they do laugh at his frankness in relating it.

Not for mockery but for truth

When Socrates asks Alcibiades what he intends to do in his speech, he replies that he will tell the truth (214e), and in his speech he reiterates that his plan to praise Socrates through images is not for mockery, but for truth (215a). He certainly raises plenty of laughs in his descriptions of the odd behavior of Socrates, but, as he said when first he entered, “even if you laugh, I know that I am telling the truth.” Laughter is not opposed to truth here, but rather serves as a way for the truth to be communicated in this setting. As scholars have noted, Alcibiades’ description of Socrates provides Plato with a way to link the figure of Socrates to the daimonic Eros in Diotima’s speech, as well as to illustrate why Socrates was unable to turn Alcibiades from his infamous path of ruin.⁴⁰ Even as Alcibiades ironically fails to understand the nature of the man he is praising, the readers of the dialogue (if not the symposiastic audience of Alcibiades’ speech) gain true insights into the nature of Socrates and the practice of philosophy.

Alcibiades shows, among other things, that Socrates’ famous irony works in just this way, providing truth through laughter, creating a playful context where his self-mockery goes hand in hand with his attack on another.⁴¹ His words seem ridiculous at first, full of comically ordinary things, but the truth is inside, wrapped as though in the hide of a hubristic satyr (221e). An ignorant and inexperienced listener, the sort incapable of the witty banter of the symposium, would laugh derisively (*καταγέλᾳσειεν*) at them and completely fail to perceive the divine truth within (222a). Socrates’ characteristic manner is this blend of laughter and truth, as when he responds to

³⁹ 218b. πάντες γὰρ κεκοινωνήκατε τῆς φιλοσόφου μανίας τε καὶ βακχείας—διὸ πάντες ἀκούσεσθε· συγγνώσεσθε γὰρ τοῖς τε τότε πραχθεῖσι καὶ τοῖς νῦν λεγομένοις. οἱ δὲ οἰκείται, καὶ εἴ τις ἄλλος ἐστὶν βέβηλός τε καὶ ἄγροικος, πύλας πάνυ μεγάλας τοῖς ὦσιν ἐπιθεσθε. For Alcibiades’ use of the Orphic *sphragis* (the first extant), see (R. G. Edmonds 2017): 208.

⁴⁰ For the links between Socrates and Eros, see (Bury 1932): lx-lxii and she(Sheffield 2006): 187-189. For an analysis of how Alcibiades’ speech provides Plato with a defense against Socrates’ failure to teach Alcibiades, see (R. G. Edmonds 2017).

⁴¹ A large scholarly literature has developed on the topic of irony and *eirōneia* in response to the study of (Vlastos 1987). Various scholars (e.g., (Lane 2006)) have argued that the famous ‘Socratic irony’ is not really verbal irony in the modern sense, since *eirōneia* must be deliberately deceptive, rather than a falsehood which is intended to be perceived as such. “Verbal irony occurs when a speaker deliberately highlights the literal falsity of his or her utterance, typically for the sake of humor. For example, a tennis player mocks a lousy shot with ‘brilliant!’” ((Wolfsdorf 2007): 175) I would suggest, however, that *eirōneia*, like irony, depends on a kind of self-mockery, either praising someone else beyond their deserts in comparison to oneself or deprecating one’s own abilities. As Plutarch notes, such mockery can work either by extravagantly praising something bad or jokingly abusing something good. Such pretense may be intended to deceive the audience, or it may be deliberately transparent. The context is key; irony is a tactic in the competitive arena of personal interactions, where “pretending to be more modest and ignorant, and less a threat than one actually believes” (as (Opsomer 1998): 5 puts it) serves in the complex strategies of the game. The use of irony thus depends on an audience (even if internal or hypothetical) who perceives the competition and can appreciate the maneuver. Pace (Ferrari 2008), however, Socrates’ irony is far from solipsistic; he is playing this game constantly with his various interlocutors, most of whom can recognize the tactic, even if they may not be able to come up with an effective counter-move. Even if some interlocutors fail to catch the irony, most of the dialogues take place in front of an internal audience, not to mention the external audience of Plato’s reader.

Alcibiades' proposition to exchange sexual favors for his wisdom, "very ironically and exceedingly in his own accustomed manner."⁴² Socrates indeed goes through the customary pattern, laughingly questioning the value that Alcibiades has put on his wisdom and then accusing Alcibiades of greedy overreaching, for attempting, in the Homeric allusion, to exchange bronze for gold. Socrates concludes their exchange by saying that they should figure out cooperatively what will be best.⁴³

Socrates goes through his whole life playing this game, complains Alcibiades; he is always acting ironically and playing around (216e). Socrates jokes that he is completely overcome by beautiful youths and that he actually knows nothing, while at the same time he attacks the idea that money and power and honor and even beautiful bodies have the worth that their possessors attribute to them. Plato's irony is, of course, that Alcibiades fails to understand that Socrates' playful self-mockery and attacks are, like his own speech, ways of communicating truth even while others laugh.

The dialogue as a whole works in the same way. The humorous elements do not stand in opposition to the serious philosophy, nor are they merely window-dressing, empty ornamentation that contributes nothing to the practice of philosophy. Rather, the humorous tone of the dialogue, like the humorous banter of the symposiasts within it, enables Plato to make substantive attacks on a variety of ideas and to advance ideas that, without the humor and self-mockery with which they are put forth, might only antagonize his audience, just as Apollodorus merely annoys his interlocutors instead of convincing them to listen.

Plutarch comments on this important function of humor in the symposium context; "the height of sagacity," he says, "is to talk philosophy without seeming to do so, and in jesting to accomplish all that those in earnest could."⁴⁴ The dialogue in Plato's *Symposium* is indeed the supreme example of this art.

Men of breeding, then, even if they talk straightforward philosophy, manage the conversation at such times by the persuasiveness rather than the compulsion of their arguments. Indeed, you see that Plato in his *Symposium*, even when he talks about the final cause and the primary good,—in short, when he discourses upon divine matters,—does not labour his proof nor gird himself for a fight and get his customary tight and unbreakable hold, but with simple and easy premises, with examples, and with mythical legends he brings the company into agreement with him.⁴⁵

⁴² 218d. μάλα εἰρωνικῶς καὶ σφόδρα ἑαυτοῦ τε καὶ εἰωθότως ἔλεξεν.

⁴³ Alcibiades, who keeps thinking in terms of who can get the better of whom, imagines that he has won, but Socrates again foils his expectations – he truly sees their association as a joint-venture aimed at what is best. Just as their wrestling matches in the palaestra or drinking parties in the symposium are playful competitions in which sustaining the game is more significant than who wins, so too in their relationship, the playful competitions of philosophic discussion matter more for what they lead to than who wins the dispute. Cp. Socrates' insistence in the *Gorgias* (458ab) that he would rather lose the argument than be wrong.

⁴⁴ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 614a. συνέσεως ἄκρας φιλοσοφοῦντα μὴ δοκεῖν φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ παίζοντα διαπράττεσθαι τὰ τῶν σπουδαζόντων.

⁴⁵ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 614d. οἱ δὲ χαρίεντες, κἄν ἂπ' εὐθείας φιλοσοφῶσιν, τηνικαῦτα διὰ τοῦ πιθανοῦ μᾶλλον ἢ βιαστικοῦ τῶν ἀποδείξεων ἄγουσι τὸν λόγον. ὁρᾷς γὰρ ὅτι καὶ Πλάτων ἐν τῷ Συμποσίῳ περὶ τέλους διαλεγόμενος καὶ τοῦ πρώτου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ὅλως θεολογῶν οὐκ ἐντείνει τὴν ἀπόδειξιν οὐδ' ὑποκονίζεται, τὴν λαβὴν ὥσπερ εἴωθεν εὐτονον ποίων καὶ ἄφυκτον, ἀλλ' ὑγροτέροις λήμμασι καὶ παραδείγμασι καὶ μυθολογίαις προσάγεται τοὺς ἄνδρας. cp., Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, i. 1.3. For not only in the works of others who have described banquets, but especially in the great Symposium of Plato, the banqueters did not converse about some more serious subject but described Love in various witty ways: in that setting Socrates does not, in his usual way, press his opponent and tie him up in tight argumentative knots but—in a way more playful than combative—almost offers those in his grasp the chance to give him the slip and get away. *nam cum apud alios quibus sunt descripta convivia, tum in illo Platonis symposio non austeriore aliqua de re convivarum sermo, sed Cupidinis varia et lepida*

This kind of philosophical discourse works through playful persuasion, not through the harsh and violent force of the *elenchos*, which forces unwilling agreement through shameful loss.⁴⁶ Forced victory through the *elenchos* often leaves the interlocutor bitter and resentful, unwilling to act on the conclusions he has been forced to agree to. Callicles in the *Gorgias* provides perhaps the best example, but the dialogues are littered with interlocutors who have lost the dialectic contest with Socrates and yet remain unconvinced to change their ways.

Plutarch explains that playful humor heightens the effect of both praise and blame; ironic abuse conveys more admiration than insincere flattery.

Furthermore, those who jokingly apply abusive words to anything praiseworthy, if they do so with tact, give more pleasure than even men straightforward in their praise. And those who are fairspoken in their censure are actually more biting effective.⁴⁷

Jokes, he notes, are more effective precisely because they rely on their impact upon the audience, not just the target.

Thus jokes are more biting, for like barbed arrows they lie longer embedded. The delight in their cleverness distresses the victims in the degree it gives pleasure to the company, for by taking pleasure in what is said the company seem to believe the speaker and join in with his ridicule. The joke, as Theophrastus has it, is a disguised reproach for error; accordingly the listener of his own accord supplies in thought what is missing as though he knew it and believed it.⁴⁸

This effect comes not simply from pleasure, but from including the audience in the joke as members of the community, as in a symposium. A good joke doesn't spell out every piece explicitly but requires the audience to fill it in, to figure out what the reproach is that is hidden beneath the humor. This active engagement makes the reproach feel like something the audience has thought of for themselves, and it is therefore inherently more persuasive.

The dialogue of the *Symposium* calls for the same active engagement, as readers work out the philosophical truths within the humor. Truth and humor are not at odds here, and scholars who have dismissed the *Symposium* as containing little of philosophical interest outside of Diotima's speech fail to rise to that active engagement essential to the practice of philosophy. The humorous banter throughout the dialogue models the pattern of playful self-mockery and attack, the disguised reproach whose effectiveness lies in its appeal to the convivial context of the symposium, the drinking together. "Are you laughing at me because I am drunk? Well, I am. But even if you laugh," says Alcibiades, "I know well I am telling the truth."

descriptio est, in quo quidem Socrates non artioribus, ut solet, nodis urget atque implicat adversarium sed eludendi magis quam decertandi modo adprehensis dat elabendi prope atque effugiendi locum.

⁴⁶ On the humiliation of the *elenchos*, see (R. G. Edmonds 2012).

⁴⁷ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 632d. "Ἐτι τοίνυν οἱ τὰ χρηστὰ τῶν πραγμάτων τοῖς λοιδορουμένοις ὀνόμασι μετὰ παιδιᾶς καλοῦντες, ἂν ἐμμελῶς ποιῶσιν, αὐτῶν μᾶλλον εὐφραίνουσι τῶν ἀπ' εὐθείας ἐπαινούντων. καὶ γὰρ δάκνουσι μᾶλλον οἱ διὰ τῶν εὐφρήμων ὀνειδίζοντες.

⁴⁸ Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 631e. Μᾶλλον οὖν τὰ σκώμματα δάκνει, καθάπερ τὰ παρηγμιστρωμένα βέλη πλείονα χρόνον ἐμμένοντα. καὶ λυπεῖ τοὺς σκωφθέντας ἢ τέρψις τῇ κομπότῃ καθ' ὅσον ἡδύνει τοὺς παρόντας· ἡδόμενοι γὰρ ἐπὶ τῷ λεγομένῳ, πιστεύειν δοκοῦσι καὶ συνδιασύρειν τῷ λέγοντι. ὀνειδισμὸς γὰρ ἐστὶν τῆς ἀμαρτίας παρειαγματισμένος τὸ σκῶμμα κατὰ τὸν Θεόφραστον· ὅθεν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τῇ ὑπονοίᾳ προστίθῃσιν ὁ ἀκούσας τὸ ἐλλεῖπον ὡς εἰδὼς καὶ πιστεύων.

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