

In several late dialogues Socrates' role is much smaller or even non-existent: he is replaced by dominant speakers with few individual character traits beyond an ability to hold forth authoritatively at considerable length. The interlocutors are also minimally characterized, and have little to do besides agree with the dominant speaker. As a result, the characterization in many of these dialogues often seems dull and lifeless compared to the Socratic works. This shift is often seen in terms of a Platonic literary decline; but it represents, rather, a different set of 'literary' choices, including a move towards the generic that reflects ancient ideals about both literary and ethical character (q.v. Character as a Topic).

## COMEDY

MATEO DUQUE

---

Now anyone who means to acquire a discerning judgment will find it impossible to understand the serious side of things in isolation from their comic aspect. (*Laws* 7.816d-e)

Socrates can be seen as a kind of comic hero (Tanner 2017), and Plato – following Socrates – uses various comic techniques and tropes in his dialogues, especially to expose others' pretensions to knowledge. In fact, an essential interpretive question both internal to characters (*Gorgias* 481b; *Theaetetus* 145c, 168c; *Symposium* 215b; *Phaedrus* 234d; *Euthydemus* 283b-c; *Republic* 1.349a; *Lg.* 3.688b) and external to the readers/listeners is to determine when someone speaks in earnest (*spoudazei*) or is just kidding (*paizei*). Readers must decipher if and when Plato is being serious and if and when he is joking, or perhaps it can be some combination of the two, the seriocomic (*spoudaiogeloion*; Hunter 2004: 9–13; Charalabopoulos 2012: 71–7; q.v. Play). For example, is the abstract exercise of the second half of *Parmenides* a joke or a serious dialectical demonstration? Is the funeral oration of *Menexenus* supposed to be taken seriously or is it a parody? Are the proposals of *Republic*, like the banishment of poetry and the sharing of spouses and children by the Guardians, meant seriously or are they meant to be absurd? If Plato is the very author he prophesizes (*Sym.* 223d), who can write both comedy and tragedy, then it falls on the interpreter to divine when Plato is being funny. After specifying types of comedy that Plato uses, I will discuss how Plato's comedy relates to his philosophy.

### *Punning and wordplay*

Plato's wordplay can range from simply playing with similar sounds, 'Pausianas' speech ended (*Pausaniou de pausamenou*)' (*Smp.* 185c4), to making a deeper

philosophical point about two related terms: ‘the body (*sōma*) is our tomb (*sēma*)’ (*Grg.* 492e); the harmony theory doesn’t ‘harmonize (*sunōdō*)’ with the theory of recollection (*Phaedo* 92c). Plato often puns with proper names; for example, Agathon (*Smp.* 174b), Gorgias (*Smp.* 198c), Meletus (*Apology* 25c) (Brock 1990: 44). He is perhaps at his most linguistically playful in the *Cratylus* where Socrates gives etymologies – often funny, sometimes far-fetched – for various words (Greene 1920: 86–8; Ewgen 2013). For the somewhat related topic of ‘jokes’ particularly in the so-called ‘early dialogues’ see Eckert (1911); there is a reference to an elaborate joke at *R.* 5.479b-c.

#### *Slapstick comedy*

Plato incorporates physical humour into the dialogues. Some examples are: Socrates and Hippocrates get the door slammed in their face by a eunuch doorman (*Protagoras* 314d-e). Everyone crowds around Charmides on a bench, which causes someone to fall down sideways (*Charmides* 155c). Stesilaus, a famed teacher of fighting-in-armour, gets his weapon caught in the rigging of a passing ship and everyone laughs at him (*Laches* 183d). Aristophanes gets the hiccups, and must ask the doctor to take his place and give him a cure (*Smp.* 185); Socrates out-drinks everyone at the party, and first Aristophanes and then Agathon fall asleep mid-discussion (*Smp.* 223d).

#### *Fantastical comedy*

Plato uses mythical elements for humorous effect. Some examples are: Aristophanes’ myth of humanity’s original nature as double-creatures with two heads and eight limbs, cartwheeling around, and then Zeus cutting us in half (*Smp.* 189d-193e); Socrates’ Aesopian image of pain and pleasure as a creature with two bodies that share one head (*Phd.* 60b-c); the myth of the age of Kronos where humans age backwards and converse with animals (*Statesman* 268e-274e).

#### *Satire and parody*

Plato satirizes both specific individuals and types of people. For example, he lampoons individual sophists in eponymous dialogues (*Grg.*; *Hippias Major* and *Minor*; *Prt.*, *Euthydemus*). He also pokes fun at character types, like the religious blowhard (*Euthyphro*); and in *Tht.* 172a-177c, Plato even makes fun of the philosopher-type, with their eyes to the heavens and oblivious to earthly matters. He also parodies genres of writing. Plato mocks the genre of funeral orations (*Mx.*); he parodies the counterintuitive display speech of sophists (*Phdr.* 230e-234c); and ancient doctors’ questionable use of early Greek philosophy for grand cosmological theorizing (*Smp.* 185e-189a). Plato’s use of satire and parody is more thoroughly covered in ‘Comedy’ (q.v.) in Plato’s life.

### *Dark humour*

There can be humour even in the most serious and dangerous of situations; Plato represents Socrates as engaging in gallows humour. We can see this in *Ap.* when the prosecution asks for the death penalty, and Socrates' counterproposal is free meals for the rest of his life (36d-e). One of the most surprising instances of black comedy is on the day of Socrates' death represented in *Phd.* (Halliwell 2008: 278–84). *Phd.* has nine references to laughter, and it is the only dialogue in which Socrates explicitly laughs – twice (62a; 115c)! There is also a tragicomic pall to Crito's inability to grasp the subject under discussion, the immortal soul.

### *Imitating comic characters and scenarios*

Plato often has Socrates reenact humorous situations (q.v. metatheatre; Charalabopoulos 2012: 56–103). He takes on the role of the larger-than-life 'Laws' (*Crito* 50a-54c), where he browbeats another character, 'Socrates', into staying in jail instead of escaping (Duque 2020). Socrates asks Hippias to help him defeat 'the annoying questioner' who asks him about 'the beautiful'. Later this man is described as Socrates' 'roommate', and then later revealed to be Sophriniscus' son (Socrates himself!) (*Hi. Ma.*286c-304e).

### *Self-deprecating humour*

In the dialogues, Plato often represents Socrates as modelling the Old Comic relationship between the stock characters of the braggart (*alazōn*) and the self-deprecator (*eirōn*). Socrates' irony (q.v.) is closely related to self-deprecating humour, he will often act excessively modest and treat interlocutors as experts and assume they know what they are talking about, but as he questions them, he exposes them as pretenders (see *Euthphr*; Futter 2013). Plato will also often use *historical* irony for tragicomic effect; for example, he has a young Critias, a future excessively violent tyrannical leader, discuss moderation in *Chrm.* (Griswold 2002b).

While interpreters can agree *that* Plato uses comic techniques, many have come to conflicting conclusions as to *why*, and they can also disagree as to which passages Plato intends in jest. One thing that can be agreed upon is that comedy can be a great tool for exposing pretensions (*Philebus* 48–50; Greene 1920: 67). One need not *only* meticulously analyse a philosophical opponent's position in order to criticize it, one can mock it and thus delegitimize it with humour. McCabe (2019) draws a parallel between Socrates' concern with the psychology of the audience (in, for example, *Ion* and *R.* 2.377 ff.) and how Plato employs comedy in his dialogues not only for a humorous effect on his readers but also in order to possibly induce greater self-reflection and self-

awareness in *his* audience. Ultimately, one needs a good sense of humour to read Plato well (Altman 2020: xi).

For recent work on Plato and Comedy, see Capra 2001, 2007a, b, c, Trivigno 2012, the collection edited by Destrée and Trivigno 2019, Tanner 2017, 2021a, c; and Marren 2020, 2021a, b.

## DRAMA

ANDREA NIGHTINGALE

---

Plato drew on the genres of tragedy and comedy in creating his dialogues. At times, Plato offers pure ‘dramatic representation’ (*mimēsis*, q.v.) in his dialogues; in other cases, he has a narrator describe the speech and action in the dialogue, thus using the combination of ‘simple narration’ (*haplē diēgēsis*) and ‘dramatic representation’ (*mimēsis*), categories that are outlined in *Republic* bk 3. In both cases, however, we find dramatic exchanges over issues central to human life. Of course, Plato attacks comedy and tragedy in *R.* bk 10 for fostering emotions at the expense of reason; he certainly did not want his own dialogues to evoke the audience responses that the Greek dramatists did. Even in the seemingly tragic case of Socrates’ execution in the *Phaedo*, Plato portrays Socrates as someone to be admired rather than pitied. Socrates is not a tragic figure but a heroic martyr.

Plato uses both comic and tragic discourses in his dialogues in part as a philosophic attack on Greek drama (q.v. Poetry topic). But Plato did not simply overturn comedy and tragedy: his own dramatic dialogues reveal Plato’s debt to these genres. In the *Symposium*, for example, the comic poet Aristophanes delivers a very humorous speech on love. And, in the same dialogue, Alcibiades’ claim that he chose ‘the crowd’ over Socrates – political power over philosophy – has a tragic resonance. Alcibiades will convince the Athenians to send the disastrous expedition to Sicily and he himself will turn traitor to Athens after being recalled to stand trial for profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries. Indeed, the very presence of Alcibiades in the *Smp.* reminds us that the Athenians suspected Socrates of teaching Alcibiades and other Athenian aristocrats the wrong political views – a suspicion that led, in part, to Socrates’ trial and execution. In the *Smp.*, then, we find a blend of comedy and tragedy. As Socrates says at the end of the dialogue, the ‘skilled’ playwright should be able to write both tragedies and comedies (in ancient Greece, tragedians only wrote tragedies and satyr plays and comedians only wrote comedies). Plato implicitly identifies himself as the one man who can write in both genres. In short, Plato created an entirely new kind of genre – a dialogue that was at once philosophical and dramatic. He thus creates urgent situations in which characters’ hopes rise and fall and which convince readers that the issues need to be resolved.