

DARK HUMOR IN IMPERIAL LATIN LITERATURE

by

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A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Classics

2015

*This thesis entitled:
Dark Humor in Imperial Latin Literature
written by Mitchell Reece Pentzer
has been approved for the Department of Classics*

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Date July 6, 2015

*The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.*

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Dark Humor in Imperial Latin Literature

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Jackie Elliott

This project analyzes the functions of dark humor in Latin literature of the Flavian period and immediately thereafter. This dark humor, the humorous exploitation of taboos like sexual immorality, cannibalism, and especially death, appears across a variety of genres of the era, from the “high” epic and tragedy, to prose historiography, to the “low” epigram. In order to overcome difficulties in interpreting humor across millennia and cultural differences, the first chapter traces the roots of modern humor theories back to Greek and Roman sources and illustrates these theories with ancient examples. It then uses their methods and vocabularies to guide the distillation of a Roman humor theory. The excurses on wit from Cicero’s *De Oratore* and Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* reveal a combination of superiority theory and incongruity theories. This enables the confident assessment of the humorous potential of given language in a variety of Latin texts of the Flavian era, the literature of which period this dissertation will argue is characterized by dark humor.

The second chapter examines selections from Martial’s epigrams, which exploits the genre’s traditional affinity with obscenity and death in order to wield dark humor in an assault on epic and tragedy. Statius’ *Thebaid*, subject of the third chapter, lies at the opposite end of the generic spectrum from epigrams. Otherwise serious and bleak, the martial and mythological epic published in the early 90s confronts the reader on rare occasions with humor which, by violating generic boundaries, reinforces the horror of the *nefas*, the unspeakable wrong, which constitutes the epic’s material. The fourth chapter shows how the *Annals* of Tacitus problematize humor as a mode of communication, particularly in and around the persons of the emperors, yet participate in humor in their commentary upon the narrative. This constitutes another example of Tacitus’ style as mirror of content.

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INTRODUCTION

ILLUMINATING THE DARK

This study will examine the functions of humor – its mechanisms, its effects – in the works of Martial, Statius, and Tacitus, all roughly contemporary authors of Latin literature in the late first and early second centuries, all working in different genres, none of them comedy. In particular, I will focus on dark humor; that is, the exploitation of subjects such as death, cannibalism, obscenity, and other taboos for humorous effect. While this phenomenon is not peculiar to the Flavian and post-Flavian authors on which this study focuses, and in fact can be witnessed in preceding and subsequent works of Classical antiquity,¹ I see dark humor as especially characteristic of this period, evidence of a literary *zeitgeist*. Its presence may be a reaction to social and political frustration, even fatalism, stemming from dissatisfaction with the Julio-Claudians and especially Nero's reign; discouragement and horror at the subsequent year of four emperors; and disillusionment with the Flavian successors, foremost Domitian.² Establishing a historical cause, however, is not among the aims of this study, which are wholly literary. I will show how each author uses dark humor not merely for comic relief in dire circumstances, but in the service of the larger poetic program of a given work: as Cicero said, *nos cum causa dicimus, non ut ridiculi videamur, sed ut proficiamus aliquid* (2.247, "We speak

¹ These will be introduced briefly in the section discussing previous work done on dark humor in Classical literature.

² Dominik 1994a: 178-80 introduces the idea of a *zeitgeist* reflecting political realities in his interpretation of Statius' presentation of the gods and Jupiter especially: "The *Thebaid* reflects not only the heart of the poet's pessimistic cosmic vision but also his concern and that of his contemporaries about the harsh and oppressive atmosphere and terrible political uncertainties of his age."

with good reason, not just to seem funny, but to accomplish something”³). In this introduction I will define dark humor and locate it within its larger critical tradition; sketch out the challenges which attend any study of humor; review the Classical scholarship which has more generally informed this study or approached my subject; and explain my subjects and the limits of my scope.

DEFINING DARK HUMOR

I must explain my choice of the term itself: by humor, I refer to that which is amusing and has the potential to make an audience laugh.⁴ This is admittedly unsatisfactory, encompassing as it does a large portion of human experience; but critics of humor generally are unable to get much further than excluding tickling.⁵ Handbooks of humor often fall back to the same maxim used when attempts to define pornography are made: “I know it when I see it.” As for the qualifier, I prefer “dark humor” rather than “black humor,” arguably a more popular term, for two reasons. The first is that I wish to avoid any confusion resulting from racial connotations. The second is to remain distinct from the phenomenon identified and explored in the 20th century which typically goes by that name.⁶ Critics interested in black humor or black comedy treat it

³ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Whether or not one actually laughs of course depends on a variety of reasons; I confess that I myself have laughed very little at the objects of my study. People are less likely to laugh when alone, however, and my telic work state would also prohibit laughter, per Apter’s theory (see Chapter I of this study).

⁵ Though we should recognize that tickling itself has also been incorporated by certain humor theorists; Koestler 1964: 80-1, for example, argues that tickling is a mock attack, and a person’s anxieties about an impending attack are belied by the reality of the harmless fingertip or feather contact. This suggests itself to be an incongruity theory, but Koestler explains the resulting laughter as “a discharge of apprehensions,” an idea more aligned with relief theory. The interrelations will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. McGraw’s benign violation theory explains tickling in much the same way, while avoiding any mention of discharge (McGraw and Warner 2014: 11).

⁶ Davis 1967: 14 re-associates the two reasons I avoid the term: “We call this quality in the novel ‘Black Humor,’ and in our settling upon that label rather than any of the others available during the early 1960’s – like Yankee Existentialism or the American Absurd Novel – we reveal our uneasy stance toward it. We do not particularly care for the color black, but we enjoy, enjoy [sic] ‘humor.’ We seized upon the term ‘Black Power’ with much the same fascinated horror, much the same ambience of joy and hate. There are further analogies between ‘Black Power’ and ‘Black Humor.’ Black humor in its specifically satirical moments was and is savage, brooking no compromise with

more often as a genre unto itself or at least a loose coalition of “absurdist theater, postmodernist fiction, un-, anti-, and ir-realistic literature,” especially that which emerged after the second World War.⁷ Yet for the creator of the term, André Breton, black humor, or rather *humour noir*, was not a genre but an attitude or perspective which assaulted sentimentality and conventions, both social and literary, in an absurd world.⁸ This attitude produces a tone in art and literature which “combines horror and fun, the unsettling and the amusing, or . . . pleasure and guilt.”⁹ This tone, rather than direct connections to the generic characteristics of modern black humor, is what I will expose in my study. Though the majority of critics bemoan the difficulty of defining dark or black humor past this point,¹⁰ they can nevertheless agree that it involves the grotesque, the morbid, the terrifying, or more generally the pain, fear, and disgust which those things cause,¹¹

its subject.” Davis argues for a special affinity between America and black humor, in part because America is more optimistic and thus perpetually more disappointed than Europe.

⁷ Winston 1993: 251. Pratt 1993: xix enumerates the labels used to avoid the term “black humor,” among them apocalyptic comedy, dark comedy, pathologic comedy, nihilistic humor, tragic farce, the comedy of the absurd, entropic comedy, and the novel of disintegration. These may be more precise than “black humor,” but perhaps unnecessarily specific and consequently would hinder any larger discussion of the phenomenon.

Davis 1967: 14-5 discusses the emergence of the “new mood” and how critics of the 1960s thought it had “come out of nowhere.”

⁸ The term is reported to have been coined in 1939. See Winston 1972: 270. Black humor per Breton conducted these attacks by “verbally yoking disparate concepts without attempting to reconcile them.” The juxtaposition of different concepts naturally connects Breton’s idea of black humor with incongruity theory (see Chapter I of the present study), and the avoidance of reconciliation is also significant.

⁹ Winston 1993: 251, who builds on Gerd Henniger’s thoughts on *schwarzer Humor*.

¹⁰ See e.g. Bloom 2010: xv: “Defining dark humor is virtually impossible because its manifestation in great literature necessarily involves irony, the trope in which you say one thing and mean another, sometimes the opposite of what is said.” He perhaps overstates the virtual impossibility of dealing with irony. But Pratt 1993: xix also apologizes for the inability of critics to reach a consensus. O’Neill 1993: 61 fingers the lack of consensus about humor itself for the problems in defining the black or dark version; I will discuss this issue later in this introduction.

¹¹ cf. O’Neill 1993: 62, “Different writers use the term to mean humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these.” Aillaud and Piolat conducted an empirical study on the influence of gender on the perception and judgment of dark humor and worked with this definition: “Dark humor relies on the deviation from values and the transgression of social norms and moral systems and as such relates closely to both sick and aggressive or hostile humor. On one hand, sick humor is content-defined and includes topics such as disease, deformity, death and handicap. On the other hand, aggressive or hostile humor is function-defined used as a form of criticism and expressed when socially inappropriate. Both of these types of humor can be perceived as antisocial and transgressive. Because dark humor concerns a broad negative content and can indeed serve negative interpersonal purposes it appears to provoke mixed valenced emotions such as amusement and shame or disgust. Overall, dark differs from nondark humor in the nature

and treats these with the same tools of non-dark humor, such as exaggeration, understatement, parody, wordplay, or the *non sequitur*.¹² That is, dark humor does not differ from other humor mechanically; rather, it is applied in different contexts – gallows humor is a prime example – and with a different sensibility, that is, without respect for decorum, and to different ends.

Critics disagree about these ends, or their effects on an audience. Those more optimistic see dark humor as a defense or coping mechanism, one providing one sort of relief or another from the oppressive or fatalistic contexts surrounding the audience or characters within a narrative, be it distancing the self from problems or wresting a small victory in freedom away from defeat.¹³ Other critics emphasize the dark side of this special brand of humor and contrast it with other humor which may achieve some kind of superiority:¹⁴ dark humor may challenge and ridicule conventions or traditions as well as circumstances, but some critics insist it offers no suggestions for improving any of them.¹⁵ The fatal state is mocked but inescapable.

A more nuanced view combines these two sides: on the one hand, dark humor threatens or horrifies an audience, then undercuts that action with something funny; this is a liberating

of incongruity involved (i.e., social norm transgression) and consequently the extent of surprise experienced as well as the level of comprehension of a situation as humorous” (2012: 212).

¹² See Pratt 1993: xix-xxiv. cf. O’Neill 1993: 74, which identifies five “basic modes of articulation of entropic or black humor”: satiric, ironic, grotesque, absurd, and parodic.

¹³ For the former, see e.g. Pratt 1993: xxiv: “The incongruency between form and content transforms the emotional energy of fear and pity into cathartic laughter. Others contend that there is, indeed, value in laughing at what is otherwise horrifying because this defends the personality from disturbing truths. . . . Laughing at the anarchy of a disintegrating world steels one against the otherwise debilitating anguish of existential meaninglessness. The psychological benefits of black humor, then, include deeper insight and strengthened coping mechanisms.” Duckworth 2006: 235-6 corroborates.

For the latter, see Kayser 1966: 187-8, who locates the origins of laughter in the “fringe of the grotesque”: “In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged.” Regarding the grotesque, John Ruskin, art critic, identified it as consisting of two elements, “one ludicrous, the other fearful” (Winston 1972: 281).

¹⁴ e.g. Schulz 1993: 159, “In the marriage of the young hero, in his triumph over the old pursuer (*senex*), in the freeing of the slave, New Comedy rehearsed the victory over death. . . . Black humor stops short of any such victory. It enacts no individual release or social reconciliation; it often moves toward, but ordinarily fails to reach, that goal.”

¹⁵ Pratt 1993: xix. This point touches a vital and enduring question about satire.

move, one which allows to audience to confront pain and fear but nevertheless transcend them.¹⁶ On the other hand, “[t]he violent combination of opposing extremes unsettles us so that we do not know how to respond. Our emotional and intellectual reactions become confused; this in turn disturbs our certainty of moral and social values and challenges our sense of a secure norm.”¹⁷ Dark humor thus challenges both object and audience, destabilizing our grasp on material and ideas from two different angles.

As one might expect, the recognition of dark humor if not the term itself predates Breton.¹⁸ I will tease out approximate articulations of the idea from Roman sources in the next chapter and review those popular among modern humor theorists now, as for instance this general formulation of humor from Mark Twain himself, noted humorist of the 19th and early 20th centuries: “Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.”¹⁹ Here the eminently quotable Twain put his finger on two central tenets of dark humor theory: first, that human life is grotesque, pitiful, futile, and absurd; and secondly, that this state can be exploited humorously (I will avoid the polemical disjunction excluding joy).

¹⁶ See Winston 1972: 270 for a more developed explanation.

¹⁷ Winston 1972: 273. See also Winston 1978: 42: “Black humor, like all comedy, deals with disorder. The most traditional comedy, going back to the New Comedy of Menander, Plautus, and Terence, acknowledges and incorporates the mistakes, aberrations, and incongruities of life; but it contains them within a form where all mysteries and confusions – of class, gender, mistaken identity, and deliberate hypocrisy – are finally resolved. The authors of black humor have the problem of creating form while not trusting the stability of the ‘real’ world and not being willing or able to ignore that instability.” This recalls Breton’s insistence that the disparate concepts brought together for humor’s generation not be reconciled.

¹⁸ See Davis 1967: 15 for a few examples from a wide swath of Western literature which feature a sense of the absurd which often characterizes dark humor. Among the authors: Aristophanes, Erasmus, Marlowe, Johnson, Crashaw, Wordsworth, Thompson, Dostoevski, and Melville. “The least we can conclude, in fact, is that Western Literature regularly offers us a view of man, his affairs, and his cosmos as nightmarish and unreasonable.”

¹⁹ Twain 1897: 119, the epigraph for chapter 10, attributed to *Pudd’nhead Wilson’s New Calendar*. This quote was brought to my attention by Richlin 1983: 77.

As I noted, for Twain all humor is either dark or akin to it. Of specifically dark humor Jonathan Swift is habitually identified as the originator with his 1729 *A Modest Proposal*.²⁰ This startling satire begins as a pleasant discussion about alleviating the distress of the poor Irish Catholic populace. It transitions smoothly and demurely (“I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection”) into a horrific proposal, all the more appalling for its rational construction: “I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nurs’d, is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boyled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragoust.”²¹ Swift continues, defending at length the solution which cannibalism provides and explaining its merits and unique logistics.²² The piece moves a reader to both amusement and revulsion, and perhaps even revulsion at one’s own amusement, due to “the comic incongruity of blending the rationality of satire and the understatement of irony on the one hand with the irrationality and exaggeration of the grotesque on the other, the reformer’s care for suffering humanity on the one hand with the guilty and perverse glee of savagely debasing that same humanity on the other.”²³ Outside of Swift, black humor or comedy theorists of the 20th century tend to present their subject as one restricted in historical time, but readers of Tacitus can see there much the same anxieties, absurdities, and pessimism as exist within *Catch-22* or even T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*. My dissertation will endeavor to show that dark humor is vital to the presentation of these same concepts in Flavian Latin literature.

²⁰ Swift is named the father of black humor by Breton himself; O’Neill 1993: 66-7.

²¹ Swift 1730: 9-10, the second quote in fact immediately following the first. I have here standardized the capitalization and script, though not the spelling.

²² In the 1730 edition I use, the satire continues for thirteen more pages, but the margins are admittedly large and the script large.

²³ See O’Neill 1993: 66-7.

THE SERIO-COMIC

Not perfectly analogous to dark humor but relevant to our conception of it in Classical terms is the idea of the serio-comic or *spoudogeloion*. This is a rhetorical strategy which presents serious, but not necessarily taboo, material in an amusing way, often explicitly to make it more palatable or to provide some kind of relief from it.²⁴ Dark humor combines humor and serious matters as well, but violates some sense of decorum in the production of that humor; most serio-comic tends to avoid this. From the serio-comic we can learn about possible functions of humor in non-comedic texts, which are the focus of this study. We see early vestiges of the serio-comic in Plato's *Symposium*, after Agathon's discourse on love: τὰ μὲν παιδιᾶς, τὰ δὲ σπουδῆς μετρίας, καθ' ὅσον ἐγὼ δύναμαι, μετέχων (197e, ". . . as much as I was able, I mixed play and moderate gravity.").²⁵ We may bring into the conversation a different aspect of the *spoudogeloion* from the *Apology*: καὶ ἴσως μὲν δόξω τισὶν ὑμῶν παίζειν· εὖ μέντοι ἴστε, πᾶσαν ὑμῖν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐρῶ (20d, "And perhaps I will seem to some of you to be playing around; rest assured, however, that I am telling you the whole truth."). Here the truth, a serious defense of Socrates' habitual behavior and one conducted on the stage of a fatal trial, is potentially indistinguishable from childish nonsense or amusement. The ambiguity may be unintentional on Socrates' part, but the satirist Horace wants to exploit the possibility of blending humor and edification:

²⁴ See e.g. (pseudo-)Demetrius' *On Style* 134: Πολλάκις δὲ καὶ τὰ μὲν πράγματα ἀτερπῆ ἐστὶ φύσει καὶ στυγνά, ὑπὸ δὲ τοῦ λέγοντος γίνεται ἱλαρά. τοῦτο δὲ παρὰ Ξενοφῶντι δοκεῖ πρώτῳ εὐρηθῆσαι· λαβὼν γὰρ ἀγέλαστον πρόσωπον καὶ στυγνόν, τὸν Αἰγλαΐταδαν, τὸν Πέρσην, γέλωτα εὗρεν ἐξ αὐτοῦ χαρίεντα, ὅτι ῥᾶόν ἐστι πῦρ ἐκτριψαὶ ἀπὸ σοῦ ἢ γέλωτα ("On the other hand, matters which are unpleasant by nature, even abhorrent, often are cheered up by the speaker. This seems to have been discovered first by Xenophon: he takes that unamusing and sullen character, the Persian Aglaitadas, and makes him the source of charming laughter when he says that it is easier for fire to be rubbed out of him than laughter.") Demetrius goes on to explain that this combination of amusing and serious is the most powerful kind of wit (αὕτη δὲ ἐστὶ καὶ ἡ δυνατωτάτη χάρις, 135), though it depends largely on the execution of the author. He admits that this is counterintuitive, since that which is στυγνόν is opposed (πολέμιον) to χάρις, whether that is translated as "charm" or "wit" or "elegance," and successful execution in the face of this is like warming with cold or cooling with heat (ὥσπερ καὶ ὑπὸ θερμοῦ ψύχεσθαι, θερμαίνεσθαι δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν ψυχρῶν). Dates for *On Style* range from the 3rd century BC to the 1st AD (Grube 1961: v). While the work is less influential than Aristotle, it nevertheless provides a useful witness for rhetorical practice.

²⁵ The poetic mode famously acts in the place of humor as sweetener for Lucretius, *DRN* 1.931-50, 4.8-25.

*praeterea, ne sic ut qui iocularia ridens
percurram: quamquam ridentem dicere verum
quid vetat? ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi 25
doctores, elementa velint ut discere prima.
sed tamen amoto quaeramus seria ludo. (Sermones 1.23-7)*

Anyway, I shouldn't pass over the matter laughing like a comedian; although what's to stop one who laughs from speaking the truth? Like coaxing teachers who give cookies to students so that they learn their ABCs. But with play put aside, let's look into serious matters.

To Horace's speaker here, humor and the straight truth are incongruous, but not mutually exclusive. The simile explains that humor can be an incentive to pay attention and learn. But humor's interaction with the serious may not be merely ancillary. It may be a catalyst, enabling an alternate understanding of the text: humor may soften or couch a statement and hence cast doubt as to the author's commitment to it; in an ironic or sarcastic mode, it may reverse the meaning altogether.²⁶ Bakhtin, when discussing the *spoudogeloion*, recounts the unique abilities of laughter to affect and even effect understanding:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides . . . Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically.²⁷

Humor may also be self-referential, asking the audience to account for its presence and implications and may thus become the object of focus equal to or greater than the serious. This is the line taken up by Branham's monograph on the Greek author Lucian,²⁸ a satirist himself of the

²⁶ So Plaza 2006: 1-2 introduces the versatility of humor in *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire*.

²⁷ See Bakhtin 1981: 21-3 in "Epic and Novel."

²⁸ Branham 1989: 17-63. Branham explores this in a study of Lucian's prologues (Branham 1985, esp. 243).

late 2nd century,²⁹ and so subsequent to the period on which this study focuses. Branham inquires about the concept of the serio-comic or *spoudogeloion* which Lucian was said to have inherited from Menippus.³⁰ He finds in Lucian's comic introductions especially that the serio-comic element "reveal[s] to the audience as problematic the appropriateness of laughter or seriousness in a given context."³¹ This can highlight just how grave a subject is or bring out an underlying absurdity, which can *per se* be baffling and unsettling on a more abstract level, a macrocosmic effect within a microcosm.

OBSTACLES FOR SCHOLARSHIP

In the next section I will appraise the Classical scholarship on dark humor which precedes my work, along with some relevant, more general, recent studies on humor in the field. Apposite to this is a preceding explanation of the reasons why scholarship on dark humor in the Classics has not at all flourished and, consequently, why this study proceeds relatively unaided by the theories, methods, and commentaries traditionally employed by Classical studies. I hold responsible a number of factors. First there is the disagreement about what humor really is and what prompts it; this was appreciated by a Roman theorist of rhetoric, Quintilian, who is contemporary with the other objects of our study:

Adfert autem rei summam difficultatem primum quod ridiculum dictum plerumque falsum est, saepe ex industria depravatum, praeterea numquam honorificum: tum varia hominum iudicia in eo quod non ratione aliqua sed motu animi quodam nescio an enarrabili iudicatur.
(Inst. 6.3.6)

²⁹ A satirist by a modern definition. By contrast, the satire of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal qualifies as such in part because of its metrical form. Lucian, writing in Greek and primarily prose, lays claim to a different breed of satire.

³⁰ For a thorough introduction to the relationship between Lucian and Menippus, see not Helm's 1906 *Lucian und Menipp*, which overstates the dependency of Lucian on Menippus by reconstructing Menippus mostly by means of Lucian, but Hall 1981: 64-149. Menippus was labeled as σπουδογέλοιος by Strabo, 16.2.29.8.

³¹ Branham 1989: 56.

Moreover, it is a great difficulty that, first, a funny saying is commonly false, often deliberately misleading, and never complimentary. In addition, people's judgements differ regarding something which is judged not by any rational method but by some kind of feeling which cannot be put into words.

The absence of a unified theory even today should not limit academic inquiry,³² but I speculate that this makes getting into humor studies more intimidating or time-consuming for Classicists. Secondly and apparent from that first point, scholars taking on the convergence of humor and Classical literature must marshal not only all that Latin and Greek literature ask of us, with philology, history, and culture, but the whole field of humor research as well, the vast majority of which is not aimed specifically at literature.³³ Third, those inquiring into humor typically appreciate it, and thus may be deterred by the seemingly inevitable fate of any analysis of humor, that it is doomed to be unfunny. This is illustrated by such quotes as the variously attributed "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process,"³⁴ or from George Bernard Shaw: "There is no more dangerous literary symptom than a temptation to write about wit and humor. It indicates a total loss of both."³⁵ The problem existed in Cicero's day, as Caesar Strabo, primary interlocutor for the so-called excursus on wit from the *De Oratore*, reports:

Ego vero, inquit Caesar, omni de re facetius puto posse ab homine non inurbano, quam de ipsis facetiis disputari. itaque cum quosdam Graecos inscriptos libros esse vidissem 'De Ridiculis' nonnullam in spem veneram posse me ex eis aliquid discere; inveni autem ridicula et salsa multa Graecorum, nam et Siculi in eo genere et Rhodii et Byzantii et praeter ceteros Attici excellunt. sed qui eius rei rationem quandam conati sunt artemque tradere sic insulsi exstiterunt ut nihil aliud eorum nisi ipsa insulsitas rideatur.
(*De Oratore* 2.217)

³² The major contenders will be introduced in Chapter I.

³³ For the demands which the study of literary humor, not Classical literary humor specifically, makes, see Nilsen 2008: 246.

³⁴ This is popularly assigned to Mark Twain, but E. B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, is credited by McGraw and Warner 2014: 207 and most quote-dedicated websites. The original form includes more about "innards."

³⁵ Relayed by Nilsen 2008: 243.

“To be sure,” answered Caesar, “I think that a man who isn’t dull can discuss anything more wittily than wit itself. And so, when I saw certain Greek books entitled ‘On the Laughable,’ I entertained some hope of being able to learn something from them; I did find much from the Greeks that was laughable and amusing, for the Sicilians and the Rhodians and the Byzantines and especially the Athenians shine at this sort of thing. But each one who tried to teach anything like a theory or science of this matter showed themselves to be so boring that their dullness is the only thing they offer to laugh at.”

The last and perhaps the most insidious and influential reason that humor studies are few and far between in Classical scholarship is the amount of prestige – rather the lack thereof – traditionally associated with humor and its study. In literary criticism, this finds its roots in Aristotle’s hierarchy of genres witnessed in the *Poetics* when describing the evolution of literature:

διεσπᾶσθη δὲ κατὰ τὰ οἰκεῖα ἥθη ἢ ποιήσεις· οἱ μὲν γὰρ σεμνότεροι τὰς καλὰς ἐμιμοῦντο πράξεις καὶ τὰς τῶν τοιούτων, οἱ δὲ εὐτελέστεροι τὰς τῶν φαύλων, πρῶτον ψόγους ποιοῦντες, ὥσπερ ἕτεροι ὕμνους καὶ ἐγκώμια. (Poetics 1448b24f.)

[Poetry,] then, was split according to the personal nature of the poet; the more serious poets would represent noble deeds and noble men, but the less worthy³⁶ represented those of trivial people, first composing lampoons³⁷ as the others did hymns and encomia.

Genres in which humor is frequently an ingredient are consistently contrasted in the *Poetics* with “more serious” literature – epic and tragedy – which is produced by “more serious” men, and consequently draws the interest of “more serious” scholars. Were the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics* to have survived and contained a lengthier discussion of the laughable, as is the common

³⁶ εὐτελέστεροι may be translated as ‘paltry,’ ‘cheap,’ or ‘mean,’ none of which is easily applied to people, but the combination of which all make clear enough the value judgement made.

³⁷ ψόγος, a fault or flaw, then extends to mean ‘blame,’ and from that to something like ‘satire’ or some kind of literary reproach. I choose lampoon to capture the sense of humor and to avoid conflation with Roman satire.

assumption, we would at least have a lengthier scholarly discussion of the phenomenon.³⁸ It is highly unlikely, however, that Aristotle in the second book would have substantially revised the hierarchy and its baggage of esteem laid out in the first book.

Aristotle, influential as he is, predates modern scholars by millennia. Nevertheless, during the modern period as well there has been a cultural bias against humor, particularly when appreciated through laughter and as a peculiar quality of the lower classes. Given that humor is a natural part of the human experience and thus difficult to excise entirely, we see upper-class personalities of the 18th century distinguish between wit and humor as a way to distance themselves from the latter. Lord Chesterfield to his son in 1748, for instance:

Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy, at silly things; and they call it being merry. In my mind, there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter. True wit, or sense, never yet made anybody laugh; they are above it: they please the mind, and give a cheerfulness to the countenance. But it is low buffoonery, or silly accidents, that always excite laughter; and that is what people of sense and breeding should show themselves above. . . I am neither of a melancholy nor a cynical disposition, and am as willing and apt to be pleased as anybody; but I am sure that, since I had full use of my reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh.³⁹

With markedly less condemnation but similar categorical discrimination, Morris in his 1744 *An Essay towards fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule, Etc.*

defines wit as “the lustre resulting from the quick elucidation of one subject, by a just and unexpected arrangement of it with another subject,”⁴⁰ whereas “Humour is any whimsical oddity

³⁸ The *Tractatus Coislinianus* has been argued to be an epitome of the second book of the *Poetics*; this is brought up in Chapter I of the present study.

³⁹ See Sayle 1909: 68-9 for context. The letter is number 31. Beard 2014: 66 reminds us that Lord Chesterfield is not perfectly representative of his time and class, but his attitudes are far from unparalleled; see also 237, n. 58.

⁴⁰ Morris 1744: 1. Following Chapter I’s discussion of humor theories, it will be clear that Morris’ definition of wit is related to incongruity theories of humor which developed in the 20th century.

or foible, appearing in the temper or conduct of a person in real life.”⁴¹ Thus “It is easy to be perceived, that humour, and wit are extremely different.”⁴² This qualification of wit as intellectually oriented by contrast with humor is grounded etymologically, but critics have taken that as license to read wit alone where humor can be just as easily understood. Morris’ definition of humor is overly restrictive by comparison with its modern usage and that of this study.

The last century saw this attitude persist and evolve, e.g. in Rapp’s 1951 *The Origins of Wit and Humor*. Rapp, like Morris above, takes what I determine to be an overly prescriptive and artificial line on humor. For him, humor is always affectionate in some way as well as spontaneous,⁴³ whereas wit is characterized not by affection but by a display of intellect and is more often artificial and deliberate.⁴⁴ Small wonder, then, if the amusing material in Roman satire or the wry condemnations in Tacitus’ historiography are labeled by 20th century critics as ‘witty,’ not ‘humorous;’ but as we have seen, ‘wit’ has been used to avoid inconvenient associations with laughter and the lower class while accentuating intellectual horsepower and, in literature especially, stylistic dynamism.⁴⁵ That is, if I label an instance of humor as wit, I can sidestep questions about how appropriate that expected laughter would be (problems in which the serio-comic is interested, as above), I can escape the need to explain what work it is doing for

⁴¹ Morris 1744: 12.

⁴² Morris 1744: 13.

⁴³ Rapp 1951: 54: “Humor pities what it smiles at; it loves what it taunts.” 57: “For humor is always *ridicule plus love* [sic].” See his Chapter 4, ‘Affectionate Ridicule,’ *passim*, as well as pages 152-3.

⁴⁴ Rapp 1951: 152-3. See also 150, regarding the difference between wit and humor: “Nearly every writer on wit and humor in the last one hundred years has thrown a friendly tackle at this elusive broken field runner. Some few of these, for a brief instant, have laid eager fingers on some palpable area. But it always finally escaped them; and today it is commonly agreed that the question has not been answered.” And while Rapp also admits shortly thereafter (152) that the answer to “What is the difference between wit and humor?” is difficult because it “involves a comparison of highly unstable items,” the categorical list of five items which distinguish wit and humor following that concession seems stable enough. For this reason Rapp’s dichotomy strikes me as too artificial to be wholly trusted in practice, however convenient it may be.

⁴⁵ Rapp 1951: 70 locates the key to solving the problem of humor vs. wit in the phrase “a duel of wits,” a phrase which bears no necessary relationship to humor, laughter, or amusement, but rather denotes only attempts to outthink one another. This alternate meaning of wit as intellect should not overly sway our understanding of humorous material, particularly when the label of ‘wit’ is tendentious in the first place.

text, and pass it off merely as the author showing off for rhetorical reasons, an attempt to win over an audience with his smarts. We must be even more careful with humor found in Latin literature, the relevant terms of which cannot be sorted neatly into a comparable dichotomy.⁴⁶

All of this, from Aristotle through critics of the 20th century, combines to produce in Classical scholarship an unease with humor, such that the entry for “humor” within the index of May and Wisse’s edition and translation of Cicero’s *De Oratore*, an important text for this study, simply refers one to wit; the forty-two page introduction all but ignores the substantial portion of the work devoted to humor’s place in rhetoric;⁴⁷ and the heading above that section’s translation reads “excursus on wit.” In more recent scholarship the adherence to wit over humor appears less strict,⁴⁸ but it will take more time, as recent scholarship supplants the old on this topic, for humor to be fully rehabilitated. In the meantime, one last factor still inhibits the analysis of specifically dark humor: our own discomfort with it. We may be genuinely disgusted with an instance of dark humor in Latin literature and avoid it for personal reasons, or we may fear that if we find the grotesque or repulsive funny, or even a subject worthy of investigation, we may be judged as

⁴⁶ The most obvious candidate to be an analog for this sort of ‘wit’ in Latin may be *urbanitas*, given its connotation of sophistication, but even this was frequently used in relation to humor; see Ramage 1973: 56 and e.g. Cicero’s *Pro Caelio* 6. In the Neronian period, *urbanitas* lost its sense of taste (Ramage 1973: 113), and Quintilian’s usage of it is concerned much more with speech than general refinement (Ramage 1973: 126-8).

The next most obvious candidate would be *facetia*, but this too is quite comfortable with laughter (*De Oratore* 2.248, e.g.). It is, on the other hand, not perfectly congruent with *ridicula*, as we see in *De Oratore* 2.251: *non esse omnia ridicula faceta* (“Not everything ridiculous/laughable/absurd is funny/witty/amusing”). Cicero there distinguishes between the humor of an actor in a farcical mime and that of an orator, the implication being that the *mimus* is *ridiculus* but not *facetus* as an orator should be. Both, however, can be *salsus*, though Quintilian (*Inst.* 6.3.18) tells us that *salsus* was habitually used in place of *ridiculus*; however, that which is *salsus* need not be *ridiculus* but anything *ridiculus* ought to be *salsus*. And, to complicate matters, *facetus* need not refer only to the *ridiculus* (though it can), per *Inst.* 6.3.20, but can instead describe *decor* (‘grace’ or ‘charm’) and *elegantia*.

⁴⁷ May and Wisse 2001; one reference is made to 2.216-90, when introducing the speaker responsible for the ‘excursus,’ Caesar Strabo (May and Wisse 2001: 16).

⁴⁸ e.g. Russell’s introduction to Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* Book 6, another text important to this study, is more welcoming to humor (Russell 2001: 4-7). Rabbie 2007, which examines both Cicero’s and Quintilian’s takes on humor, uses the terms ‘wit’ and ‘humor’ with no caveat or discrimination.

sick or twisted ourselves.⁴⁹ Our evolving sense of decorum seems now to admit more dark humor,⁵⁰ which the next section will demonstrate, but as with humor in general it will take time for newer perspectives to supersede older attitudes.

THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE

The first few studies to blaze trail on the topic of dark humor in specific texts appropriately concern perhaps the most important works of dark humor to consider in advance of the Flavian period: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *Thyestes* of Seneca the Younger.⁵¹ The humor of the former, an epic unique in its narrative techniques and mode and preceding the objects of our study by nearly a century, has been acknowledged as central to its interpretation,⁵² though consensus about whether the dark episodes are or are not potentially funny has not been reached.⁵³ Philip Peek published two articles arguing that at the core of the problem is dark humor, "which by its very nature is easily misunderstood or missed, especially by those inclined to see the tragic in things, disinclined to see comedy mixed into a scene of death or rape, inclined to think the tragic, serious and universal more worthy, profound and significant than the comic,

⁴⁹ See Peek 2001: 128-9: "... scholars who write on the *Metamorphoses* generally make one or more of the following three mistakes: (1) They miss the black humour altogether. (2) They see the black humour in some passages but miss it in others. (3) They see the black humour in a given passage and reject Ovid as cruel and sadistic or attribute it to a Roman delight in grotesquerie." Peek goes on to explain "the mistaken logic" of (3).

Meltzer 1988: 309-10 sums up the negative critics of Seneca's humor in tragedies.

⁵⁰ This is witnessed by Gournelos and Greene 2011, *A Decade of Dark Humor*, which assesses the proliferation of dark humor generally, not in Classical studies, since the September 11, 2001 attacks.

⁵¹ A third work deserves mention: Charles Boer's 1967 dissertation, *The Language of Tragic Humor*. Boer there defends his reading of Euripides' *Bacchae* as the first masterpiece of "tragic humor," a phenomenon which "does not necessarily spoil the tragic effect but in fact often amplifies it" (Boer 1967: iv). One scene especially characterized by "tragic humor" is the transformation of Pentheus worked by Dionysus. The absurdity of that scene blends with the grotesquerie of Pentheus' destruction, inducing "feelings of estrangement, stupefying bafflement, strained laughter and gruesome fright and anguish all at the same time" (Boer 1967: 96).

⁵² Quintilian (*Inst.* 10.1.88) and the two Senecas (*Contr.* 9.5.17; *Nat. Quaest.* 3.27.13-5) all criticized Ovid for the *Metamorphoses*' "inappropriate tone" (Peek 2001: 128).

⁵³ Peek 2003: 32-3 surveys the pundits.

base and particular.”⁵⁴ It is dark humor which can convey simultaneously the pathetic and bathetic, the horrible and the hilarious. Peek convincingly exposes the humorous elements in episodes like that of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus,⁵⁵ and outlines the characteristic tools of this humor: parodic undercutting, incongruity, and grotesquerie.⁵⁶ Dark humor’s role in the poem is explained as a unifying force in an otherwise varied work,⁵⁷ a “swipe” at the traditional epic genre,⁵⁸ and the reflection of Ovid’s “desire to express more than disgust and anguish when faced with the horrors of the world.”⁵⁹ Of these three, the second is the most intriguing; the first asks for no capability unique to dark humor, and the third suggests that the humor is present solely because Ovid wanted to exercise his freedom of interpretation and personal reaction. Transgressive generic play, however, will be a feature of dark humor as explored in the subsequent chapters of this study.

The second investigation of dark humor looks to Seneca’s *Thyestes*, a tragedy dating to the early 60s and thus a generation or more earlier than our period.⁶⁰ The darkness of the play in which the titular character unwittingly eats his own children, served to him by his brother, is apparent enough, and Tarrant put his finger on it well:

Its vision of life is even by tragic standards painfully bleak. It portrays a world where belief in a benign providence seems a

⁵⁴ Peek 2001: 128. Peek’s definition, though he uses the term ‘black humor,’ differs not at all from my own: “black humor may include the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, terrifying, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, ironic, satirical, absurd; and may include detachment, irony, a mocking, apocalyptic tone, parodic undercutting of all systems, one-dimensional characters, wasteland settings, disjunctive structure, self-conscious delight in artistry – a refusal to treat what one might regard as tragic materials tragically. It is the enemy of melodrama and sentimentality.”

⁵⁵ See Peek 2003 on *Met.* 6.424-674.

⁵⁶ Peek 2001: 130, expanded and illustrated in 130-45.

⁵⁷ Peek 2001: 146: “Metamorphosis, verbal echoes and thematic concerns help keep it together. But above all it is my contention that it is Ovid’s seriocomic treatment of the epic genre, his consistent exploitation of the comic and satiric, that gives his work unity, providing us with a consistent tone and worldview.”

⁵⁸ Peek 2001: 145.

⁵⁹ Peek 2003: 50.

⁶⁰ See Tarrant 1985: 13 n. 68. Ahl 2015: 261-2, on the other hand, argues for the elder Seneca’s authorship of the tragedies, which would put the tragedies at least another thirty years earlier.

delusion and ambition merely another form of folly, where the highest aspirations possible are a life of peaceful obscurity or, failing that, a freely chosen death, and where even this modest degree of control is rarely attained.⁶¹

To Tarrant, the revulsion of the most graphic scenes served Seneca's Stoic philosophical agenda as "the stimulus to moral awareness and growth."⁶² Meltzer, in spite of Tarrant's own judgement of a significant moment of humor in the *Thyestes* as a "dreadful specimen of misplaced cleverness,"⁶³ argues in a subsequent article that the humor can serve much the same purpose, motivating readers to examine themselves, by means of its verbal and moral paradoxes, devices also favored by the Stoic school.⁶⁴ Furthermore, for Meltzer the humor of the *Thyestes*, much like the serio-comic of Lucian, asks the reader to consider more consciously his reaction to the events of the narrative.⁶⁵ Meltzer concludes that humor in the *Thyestes* amplifies its disturbing, tragic effect;⁶⁶ we will witness this same capability in our later texts.

Not involving explicitly dark humor but examining one of our texts and one of the few monographs to conduct a full investigation of the function of humor in Classical literature, Paul Plass' 1988 *Wit and the Writing of History* focuses on the historiography of Suetonius, Cassius Dio, and especially Tacitus.⁶⁷ Plass finds Tacitus' text saturated with wit that penetrates "a

⁶¹ Tarrant 1985: 48. The introduction to the commentary also highlights Seneca's "strong predilection for the deviant" in his choice of characters, and his fascination with "the dark corners of the psyche" in both philosophical works and elsewhere.

⁶² See Tarrant 1985: 24-5.

⁶³ Tarrant 1985: 235, re: lines 1046-7, when Thyestes is reluctant to beat his chest in lamentation because he would be striking his children whom he just consumed.

⁶⁴ Meltzer 1988: 310, 320, and *passim*. Meltzer, in a move similar to Rapp and other critics of humor, distinguishes unnecessarily between "dark wit" and "black humor." According to him, the former relies on words and phrases, the latter on the visual and physical (311).

⁶⁵ Meltzer 1988: 311-2.

⁶⁶ As did Boer 1967: iv for Euripides' *Bacchae*.

⁶⁷ We notice Plass prefers wit rather than humor for his title, as he does throughout the book. He understands wit to consist in the quip combined with the epigram (1988: 6), one of Tacitus' characteristic expressive techniques, or in general a violation of expectations (26). This does not fall in line with the traditional definition of wit vs. humor. Likewise, he is comfortable with involving laughter and other terms of humor theory, particularly incongruity, in his

political and moral reality that is often irrational if not idiotic. The tone is at once amusing and dismaying.”⁶⁸ This is strongly reminiscent of other definitions of and examples of dark humor, but while he briefly invokes black comedy,⁶⁹ Plass is not interested in the tradition of dark humor. For him the primary role of wit in the historiography produced by Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio is the “exposure of the moral and political absurdity to which the Principate could lead.” I will engage with this more fully in Chapter IV on Tacitus.

Over the last decade a number of books have come out on humor in the Classics. Plaza’s 2006 *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire* makes strides toward enriching our understanding of humor in satire beyond merely its value for entertainment and stresses the ambiguity inherent to humor.⁷⁰ *Looking and Laughter* (Clarke, 2007) and *Greek Vase-painting and the Origins of Visual Humour* (Mitchell, 2009) both recognize humor in the visual arts; they offer catalogs, but little interpretation and are less useful for this study.⁷¹ Not directly relevant to my dissertation for reasons explained later, but nevertheless worthy of mention is Fontaine’s 2010 *Funny Words in Plautine Comedy*. His work re-energizes Plautus’ comedies by rediscovering and rescuing instances of humor which had either gone unnoticed by modern readers or had been passed off as scribal errors. In effect, Fontaine’s efforts force us to take the humor in Plautus, and consequently his works as wholes, more seriously: we can no longer pass off the oddities which we could not recognize as funny words as simply a consequence of the

general discussion of wit found in historiography. I suspect he favors the word ‘wit’ because of its historical reputation as being more intellectually lofty than humor.

⁶⁸ Plass 1988: 5. Also 11: “jokes are not simply amusing but may also be grim, bitter, black, sick, sharp, and cruel – all words often apt for the period [of the early Principate] and its historiography.”

⁶⁹ Plass 1988: 82: “When absurdity of this kind intrudes into history, events themselves degenerate into black comedy carrying with it an acute problem of credibility frequently posed by the historiography of the Principate.”

⁷⁰ See Plaza 2006: 1-3.

⁷¹ Clarke 2007: 23-4 does incorporate Tacitus and Martial in a discussion of visuality in Roman humor, particularly their accounts of graphic executions.

nonsensical buffoonery which was felt to characterize the genre.⁷² Likewise, the intention of the present study is to ensure that present-day readers do not pass over instances of humor about dark subjects or in genres which traditionally do not allow it simply because it is, sometimes for that very reason, not readily apparent to us or not to our taste.

The most recent and noteworthy work on Classical humor comes from Mary Beard. Her 2014 *Laughter in Ancient Rome* draws out primarily abstract or anthropological observations from Latin and Greek literature; some of them are immensely helpful for this study. For example, Beard warns us against distinguishing too strictly between compounds of *ridere*, a verb denoting laughter but often interpreted as smiling. This latter meaning she likewise shuns for *ridere*, arguing that Romans seemed not to conceive of smiling as we do, though they most probably still smiled.⁷³ Rather than translate forms of *ridere* as ‘to smile’ when convenient, Beard argues for the value of making an effort to understand how laughter might be present and appropriate in the context.⁷⁴ This will be important to my interpretation of Statius’ *Thebaid* (Chapter III). Beard also stresses the varied capabilities of humor, among them the fostering of goodwill and the relief of austerity, which have been left out of studies such as Corbeill’s on political humor of the late Roman Republic, *Controlling Laughter*.⁷⁵ Corbeill focuses on the humorous bent of political invective, but his approach, in its focus on the aggressive elements, leaves out what is funny about humor. Yet Beard takes the same line in her analysis of laughter in the relationships of gods and mortals;⁷⁶ as a result, laughter as she treats it loses its distinct powers and acts only as a signal for readers to notice “power differentials.” I suggest that this

⁷² See Fontaine 2010: 250-1.

⁷³ *Renidens*, ‘beaming,’ is the closest candidate; Romans seemed to think of the action involving the whole face, *os*, which could also mean ‘mouth,’ where we focus on the lips and teeth. Beard 2014: 73-4.

⁷⁴ Beard 2014: 75.

⁷⁵ Beard 2014: 106-16 on Corbeill 1996; she hopes to nuance or supplement his approach, but as I note above I believe she falls short.

⁷⁶ Beard 2014: 135-7.

pattern is a consequence of the surviving unease or dissatisfaction, however unconscious, with humor as the primary object of serious inquiry. My hope is that this study, with its sights set on literature rather than the social, historical, cultural, or political conclusions to be drawn from it, will be able to focus more directly on the humor itself and may thus preserve some sense of humor. If not, perhaps the frog will once more have to die.

SCOPE AND SUBJECTS

As said above, I take for my subjects select works of Martial, Statius, and Tacitus, coevals though not all three publishing at the same time. I will explain the chapters on their works shortly; first I will explain the limits of my project. The fact that I will be searching for a Roman humor theory may suggest that I should include Roman comedy at least for comparanda; but the active period of my authors, the 80s through perhaps the 120s,⁷⁷ dates some two to three hundred years after the appearance of the extant Roman comedies by Plautus and Terence. This considerable remove is diminished by the lengthy legacy their works enjoyed,⁷⁸ yet I would exclude comedy anyway on the grounds that we are missing so much of the experience of Roman comedy, the gestures, pauses, intonations, costumes, staging, etc.⁷⁹ Instead I will be drawing on the rhetorical theories expounded by Cicero and Quintilian, meant primarily for oratory but applicable in more facets of Roman public life and particularly the literature of the period in question. My first chapter will explain the most enduring modern theories and their roots in the Classics, illustrate them with examples from ancient literature, and then explicate the

⁷⁷ For dating Tacitus' *Annales*, see Syme 1958(II): 465-73.

⁷⁸ See Conte 1996: 62 for Plautus; 100 for Terence. Quintilian praises Terence's elegance at *Inst.* 10.1.99, just after relaying Varro's quote of Aelius Stilo (144-70 BC) that the Muses would sound like Plautus if they wanted to speak in Latin.

⁷⁹ See Fontaine 2010: 7 for reasons why dry or ironic humor, of which sort dark humor often is, is even more difficult to us to access.

theories from Cicero's *De Oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, using their terms. What I find corroborates the conviction that Mary Beard acquired after her survey of Roman laughter, that despite the intervening millennia and vast cultural differences it is nevertheless possible for us to understand Roman humor "because it is from them that – in part at least – we have learned how to laugh and what to laugh at."⁸⁰

Regarding the question of temporal scope, Hutchinson's *Latin Literature from Seneca to Juvenal* makes a strong case for the shared character of the works of the latter half of the first century and early portion of the second. He identifies wit consisting of "smartness and surprise" as central to the period and to high poetry especially,⁸¹ as well as extravagance,⁸² which I see triggering humor by extending through hyperbole into absurdity and finding expression in the grotesque.⁸³ I am comfortable narrowing the scope and taking the period of Flavian literature – and I include Tacitus despite Domitian's death and the end of the dynasty in 96, given his experiences during the last Flavian's reign⁸⁴ – as a discrete one; while recognizing how much it owes to Republican and earlier Imperial literature, and recognizing how involved Ovid and Seneca are in the development of dark humor in Latin literature, I must for practical purposes

⁸⁰ See Beard 2014: 212, italics original.

⁸¹ See Hutchinson 1993: 77 and all of his Chapter 3: 'Wit.' Hutchinson recognizes the likeness of his understanding of wit to humor, and warns against "applying familiar categories of the comic too simply for this literature." I find in this nonsensical distinction another example of scholarly disdain for humor. His justification for investigating the subject further, however, I admire: "If we largely ignored this element, we would make the works more accessible and straightforward, but we would be false to the whole texture and feel of the writing. If we treated it with amused contempt, we would merely create an obstacle to enjoying properly this unusual and brilliant literature. It will become apparent that often wit, even in high genres, plainly modifies or disrupts seriousness and elevation. When this happens regularly in an author obviously in command of his technique, we cannot plausibly suppose him oblivious to the effect; nor can we ascribe that effect to a lower order of intention, as if his real purpose to write straightforwardly moving literature were constantly thwarted by the obtrusion of a base but unresisted urge to be clever. If we suppose in him a unitary intention to produce a complicated sort of writing, we could still deplore it, and indict the perversity of the age; but it would be humbler and more interesting to discover whether we might not ourselves widen our literary experience and pleasure by attempting (however provisionally) a more sympathetic understanding."

⁸² Hutchinson 1993: 111-143, Chapter 4: 'Extravagance.'

⁸³ For illustrations, see Hutchinson 1993: 288-325, Chapter 9: 'Death in High Poetry.'

⁸⁴ See e.g. *Agr.* 2. He describes the advancing of his career under the Flavians at *Hist.* 1.1.

limit the range of this study. Moreover, the *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Thyestes* have received scholarly attention in this regard previously, though Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Petronius' *Satyricon* may prove fruitful objects of future research. For now, I am content to hypothesize that the humor found in this period makes sense in a post-Vergilian, post-Ovidian, post-Lucanian, post-Senecan world: it responds to and builds upon those texts and authors most, but an investigation of the evolution of the phenomenon must belong to a different study. Likewise Juvenal may be incorporated in the future, but his claim to the tradition of Roman satire and its conspicuous history of humor again sets him outside of the present limits of this study.

Marcus Valerius Martialis, our most prolific author of Latin epigrams, produced fifteen books in all: the *Liber de Spectaculis* was published in 80 AD, the unique *Xenia* and *Apophoreta* sometime around 83 or 84, and then his more celebrated twelve books of epigrams were released roughly one every one or two years starting in 86 and extending through possibly 101.⁸⁵ Across these fifteen years and over a thousand poems, Martial establishes an agonistic relationship between the high genres of epic and tragedy and his 'low' epigram. In my second chapter I reconcile this with his penchant for incorporating mythological figures and scenes from those genres by showing how dark humor enables him to subvert and subsume that material and assert the superiority of epigram.

In my third chapter I take on Statius' *Thebaid*. Publius Papinius Statius composed this epic in twelve books on the mythological story of the Seven against Thebes over twelve years and published it in the year 92.⁸⁶ The epic is arguably the darkest we have from antiquity – only Lucan's *Bellum Civile* could contend – and yet it contains the most laughter within the narrative. Extended humor is not among the traditional tones of epic, but I see this as a response to and

⁸⁵ See Watson and Watson 2003: 2-4 and Howell 1980: 2-6.

⁸⁶ For the claim of twelve years' work, see *Thebaid* 12.811; revision is recounted at *Silvae* 4.7.26.

symptom of the hyperbolic darkness and excess of the poem. Statius doubles down on the generic impropriety with outright jokes to further accentuate the ineptitude of the characters, the futility of war, and the recurrence of familial crime, and as a metapoetic illustration of the *nefas*, unspeakable wrong, central to the epic's themes.

The final chapter concerns the historiography, primarily the *Annales*, of Cornelius Tacitus, senator and author of the *Agricola*, *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, *Germania*, and *Historiae* as well. I investigate how Tacitus wields humor in the *Annales*, his history of the Julio-Claudian emperors which was written around the 110s. Tacitus is well known for wry, epigrammatic expressions, humorously charged at times, and his juxtaposition of grim narrative context and surprising verbal and intellectual play jars and titillates readers. I argue that Tacitus' external humor and that within the narrative heighten the paranoia, opacity, and absurdity enjoyed under the Principate, with the added wrinkle that Tacitus is participating in activities similar to those with which he negatively characterizes the emperor Tiberius. This places emphasis on the destabilizing, ambiguous nature of humor and augments the role that miscommunication, deliberate or otherwise, plays in the dysfunction of Roman politics, while providing another example of how Tacitus' style is unified with his content.

But first, we must be confident that what we analyze actually qualifies as humorous for the original audience.

CHAPTER I

FINDING A ROMAN HUMOR THEORY

I will begin by introducing and illustrating each of the three major modern humor theories: superiority, incongruity, and relief. Their vocabularies will be useful in teasing out a coherent theory from Cicero and Quintilian's lengthy explorations of wit and humor, but the theories themselves will be of varying applicability. I will attempt to illustrate the theories using examples of ancient humor where possible. At or near the head of the histories of all three theories stand Plato and Aristotle. Though the theories supplement rather than contradict each other and in fact are more closely related than many modern proponents of individual theories have admitted,¹ for the sake of clarity and to acquaint the reader with the current lay of the academic land I will separate the introductions of each theory. Following a treatment of each theory, I will develop a Roman humor theory from our best witnesses.

SUPERIORITY THEORY

Superiority theory, also called hostility theory and categorized together with aggression, triumph, derision, and disparagement theories by prominent linguistic humor theorists,² is typically cited as the oldest humor theory, with a tradition spanning from Plato to Hobbes and beyond. While Plato does have something to say about the nature of this kind of humor, his

¹ See Raskin 1985: 40 and later in this chapter.

² Raskin 1985: 36; Attardo 2008: 103.

theory is limited and he should not, in my opinion, be cited without qualifications. In *Philebus* 48-50, Plato's Socrates defines τὸ γελοῖον, the laughable or the ridiculous:

ἐκ δὴ τούτων ἰδὲ τὸ γελοῖον ἦντινα φύσιν ἔχει . . . ἔστιν δὴ
 πονηρία μὲν τις τὸ κεφάλαιον, ἔξεώς τινος ἐπὶ κλην λεγομένη· τῆς
 δ' αὖ πάσης πονηρίας ἐστὶ τοῦναντίον πάθος ἔχον ἢ τὸ λεγόμενον
 ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν Δελφοῖς γραμμάτων.

Πρώταρχος: τὸ 'γνῶθι σαυτὸν' λέγεις, ὦ Σώκρατες;

Σωκράτης: ἔγωγε. τοῦναντίον μὴν ἐκείνῳ δῆλον ὅτι τὸ μηδαμῇ
 γινώσκειν αὐτὸν λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ γράμματος ἂν εἴη.

(*Philebus* 48c-d)

Soc.: Next, from [the premise that ignorance is an evil], consider the nature of the ridiculous . . . it is a certain kind of vice, chiefly, taking its name from a certain state: that is, having the quality which is opposite to that mentioned in the inscription at Delphi.

Prot.: You mean "Know thyself," Socrates?

Soc.: I sure do. And the opposite of that, clearly, would seem to be not to know oneself at all, to use the language of the inscription.

In a comedy, then, an audience enjoys seeing a buffoon who does not know he is ugly, stupid, etc., and feels superior to him both because he is ugly and stupid and the audience is ideally not, and because they recognize his ignorance of this condition while the fool does not. This is presumably the mechanism at work in the passage of the *Iliad* featuring the notorious Thersites, the bow-legged, bent-shouldered, pointy-headed, shabby-bearded critic of the Greek army's leadership. After mouthing off, he is rebuked and clobbered by Odysseus, and the Greeks, although beleaguered by the war, have a good time laughing at him (*Iliad* 2.211-70). Thersites, Plato's Socrates might say, goes about ignoring his inferiority and sees fit to speak out of place as a result of this; this would be amusing to a Greek audience which accepts Socrates' definition of the laughable.³ One problem with this application of the Platonic version of the theory is that

³ Any suggestion that the laughter of the Greeks here has nothing to do with humor, but rather demonstrates social cohesion in the face of dissent, ignores the potential for humor identified by both ancient and modern theories. It is another example of the scholarly aversion to treating humor and especially to recognizing its rare presence in more serious genres; see Chapters II and III of this study for more on the relationship between humor and epic.

the punishment of Thersites and his subsequent pitiful reaction seems to be the more direct prompt to the laughter; his ignorance is present throughout, but the laughter comes after the punishment.⁴

Potentially worth contrasting with this is an example from the previous book of the *Iliad*, after Hephaestus makes an impassioned plea for marital harmony between Zeus and Hera and fills the gods' cups:

ἄσβεστος δ' ἄρ' ἐνῶρτο γέλως μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν
ὥς ἴδον Ἥφαιστον διὰ δώματα ποιπνύοντα.
(*Iliad* 1.599-600)

And unquenchable laughter arose amongst the blessed gods
as they watched Hephaestus bustle through the hall.

Here the implicit humor lies in Hephaestus' busy action in spite of his disability. Following Plato's theory strictly, the gods laugh because they perceive a specific ignorance in Hephaestus: presumably he would not bustle about if he were demonstrating awareness of his lame legs.⁵ Modern superiority theory, however, does not ask for ignorance as a necessary element for the generation of humor. In the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes explained that laughter comes from a "sudden glory" experienced by viewers, caused "by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."⁶ Hephaestus in the *Iliad* is

⁴ In this way the situation somewhat resembles modern slapstick.

⁵ Mitchell 2009: 14 suggests an implied incongruity is present in this passage, between hairy Hephaistos and the young, handsome, and undoubtedly more graceful Ganymede, the traditional cupbearer.

⁶ *Leviathan* 1.6. Hobbes' definition is explored more fully in his 1640 *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* 1.9.13: "Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison of which their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh at jests, the wit whereof always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity or another. And in this case also the passion of laughter proceedeth from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminence; for what is else the recommending ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmities or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never laugh thereat. I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour."

deformed; the other gods are not, therefore they consider themselves superior and congratulate themselves with their laughter.

Plato, it should be said, elsewhere demonstrates mistrust of comedy and spiteful jest. Famously in the *Republic* he would ban all poetry from the ideal city except hymns to the gods and praises of good men, lest emotion rule the city (607a). In the *Laws*, jesting would only be allowed in the ideal state if it is not earnest and a license has been obtained (935-6); elsewhere, he indicates that the laughable should be learned in order that it may be avoided, and only slaves and foreigners should act it out (*Laws* 7.816d-e). The specific humor which Plato had Socrates define in the *Philebus* – ignorance about the self – is likewise not desirable; yet Plato himself did use puns and wordplay in his works.⁷ For this sort of play he offers no theory, from which we may infer that he sharply divided between the scurrilous humor of comedy on one hand and literary wit on the other; or again that wordplay, for Plato at least, does not lead to laughter as τὸ γελοῖον. We will leave the latter supposition aside for now; I would propose that the former implicit distinction paved the way for future scholars to avoid treating wit as humor or treating the two in conjunction.

While Plato cannot be taken as representative of all Greek culture, he nevertheless stands as an important figure in classical rhetorical tradition, as does Aristotle, who is cited perhaps more frequently than Plato as an originator of superiority theory. One relevant passage is *Poetics* 1449a32-7, and explicitly revolves around the genre of comedy:

ἡ δὲ κωμῳδία ἐστὶν ὥσπερ εἵπομεν μίμησις φαυλοτέρων μὲν, οὐ μέντοι κατὰ πᾶσαν κακίαν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ αἰσχροῦ ἐστὶ τὸ γελοῖον μόριον. τὸ γὰρ γελοῖον ἐστὶν ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ αἴσχος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν, οἷον εὐθὺς τὸ γελοῖον πρόσωπον αἰσχρόν τι καὶ διεστραμμένον ἄνευ ὁδύνης.

⁷ Brock 1990: 44-48. See e.g. *Euthydemus* 301d for an amusing bit of facetiousness and absurdity verging on dark humor.

Comedy is, as I have said, a representation of inferior people; not, however, according to badness in its full sense, but the ridiculous is a portion of the shameful. For the laughable is some error and ugliness which brings no pain and is not destructive.

According to this, the original description of Thersites is fit for comedy, and both the description and the punishment at which the Greeks laugh qualify as τὸ γελοῖον if the descriptors “not destructive” and “without pain” are meant to apply to the audience, i.e. the other Greeks and the audience of the *Iliad*. While no joke is uttered in either passage of the *Iliad* which we have discussed, we can imagine in each an elided σκῶμμα, a gibe, which Aristotle defines as a sort of abuse, λοιδορήμα τι, at *Eth. Nic.* 4.8 (1128a30).

Aristotle elaborates minimally on the agonistic type of humor in *Rhetoric* 2.12.16, when discussing the character of youth. Young men are typically fond of laughter and consequently of wit (καὶ φιλογέλωτες, διὸ καὶ φιλευτράπελοι), “for wit is educated insolence” (ἡ γὰρ εὐτραπελία πεπαιδευμένη ὕβρις ἐστίν, 2.12.16). This indicates quite clearly that εὐτραπελία produces or constitutes humor, linked as it is with laughter, in Aristotle’s presentation; modern scholars tend to separate the two. The relationship of the explanatory γάρ clause to the previous statement is not clear but may recall 2.12.6: καὶ φιλότιμοι μὲν εἰσιν, μᾶλλον δὲ φιλόνικοι (ὑπεροχῆς γὰρ ἐπιθυμεῖ ἡ νεότης, ἡ δὲ νίκη ὑπεροχὴ τις. (“[Young men] love honor, but they love victory more; for youth desires superiority (ὑπεροχή), and victory is a sort of superiority”). Expressions of ὕβρις, in a cultured form, may then be attempts at asserting superiority.

Some epigrams of Martial, far removed in genre and time from Homer’s *Iliad*, fit the bill as “educated insolence” quite well, and are readily interpretable using superiority theory. From the many possible examples of derisive poems by Martial, I take 3.32, coincidentally sharing a few names in common with the ancient epic:

*Non possum vetulam. quereris, Matrinia? possum
et vetulam, sed tu mortua, non vetula es:
possum Hecubam, possum Niobam, Matrinia, sed si
nondum erit illa canis, nondum erit illa lapis.*⁸

I cannot do an old woman. You complain, Matrinia?
Well, I can too do an old woman, but you aren't decrepit,
you're deceased. I can do Hecuba, I can do Niobe,
Matrinia, but only if the one's not yet a bitch and the other
not yet a rock.

A superiority theorist would locate the humor in the hyperbolic demeaning of the would-be-sexually active old woman (a common butt of jokes in Martial's epigrams, as we shall see); we join the author of the epigram in his ridicule of her, so old she is dead, and in fact less practicable than truly ancient matrons of myth. But at the same time we may laugh at the author as well, willing as he is (one might rather expect the subjunctive here) to bed incredibly old women so long as they have not reached their terminal state, as Matrinia, according to the speaker, has. I will return to this epigram in Chapter II; its iconoclasm and frank sexuality are features of dark humor.

The unique collection of jokes surviving from antiquity known as the *Philogelos*, "The Laughter-Lover," of disputed authorship and dating but originating sometime in Late Antiquity,⁹ seems to rely frequently on superiority for its laughs. A substantial portion of the jokes (over 100 of the 265, though some are repeated) mock the σχολαστικός, a figure loosely comparable to our own 'nerd,' though the term 'nerd' has experienced something of a rehabilitation in the last

⁸ Alternatively preserved in line 1 is *an possim vetulam quaeris*; the overall effect is identical either way. See Fusi 2006: 276-80 for a lengthier discussion of the text.

⁹ See Baldwin 1983: iv-v and Beard 2014: 185. Beard's eighth chapter, "The Laughter Lover," is appropriately devoted to the *Philogelos*.

generation.¹⁰ Much like American jokes about Polish people or blondes over the last few decades, jokes about the σχολαστικός focus on how bereft he is of practical sense.

Σχολαστικοὶ δύο [πατραλοῖαι] ἔδυσφόρουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐπὶ τῷ
τοῦ πατέρας αὐτῶν ζῆν. τοῦ δὲ ἐνὸς εἰπόντος· Θέλεις οὖν
ἀποπνίξει ἕκαστος ἡμῶν τὸν ἴδιον; Μὴ γένοιτο, εἶπεν ὁ ἄλλος, ἵνα
μὴ πατραλοῖαι ἀκούσωμεν. ἀλλ’ εἰ βούλει, σὺ τὸν ἐμὸν σφάξον,
κἀγὼ τὸν σόν.
(*Philogelos* 13)

Two [parricidal] nerds were venting to each other about the fact that their fathers were still alive. One said, “Well, should we each strangle our own?” “Oh no,” said the other, “then we’d be branded parricides. But if you like, you kill mine and I’ll kill yours.”

The humor here lies in the σχολαστικοί failing to appreciate that being guilty of premeditated homicide and acquiescence in one’s father’s death is hardly more bearable than the stigma of direct parricide.¹¹ That patent ignorance fosters a feeling of superiority in the reader, whence the humor, according to the present theory, arises.

Hobbes’ “apprehension of some deformed thing in another” and concomitant inflation of the self remains at the core of versions of superiority theory from the early 19th century through contemporary assessments like Gruner’s “Game of Humor,” wherein each instance of humor creates a winner and a loser.¹² All theories of humor could be divided, according to Gruner, into those which agree with Hobbes’ and those which do not; the latter could be thrown out as insufficient or inaccurate and hence not valid as applicable theories.¹³ Gruner claims no instance of humor was ever without a winner or a loser (even if he cannot identify each role), and

¹⁰ I reject Baldwin’s preferred translation ‘egghead’ as out of date, but he is right to avoid previous translations of ‘pedant’ and ‘professor.’ See Baldwin 1983: 52 for a discussion of the term σχολαστικός. ‘Nerd’ in common parlance now connotes some sense of pride in the possession of less mainstream recreational interests.

¹¹ Beard 2014: 197 identifies about fifteen percent of the jokes in the *Philogelos* collection as dealing with death in some fashion, be it by discussing inheritances, coffins, or suicide.

¹² Gruner 1997. See also Gruner 1978, which sees his larger views on humor, before the winner-loser theory seems to have been fully-developed. For a short docket of superiority theory luminaries, see Raskin 1985: 36-8.

¹³ Gruner 1978: 29.

dismisses other authors' examples of so-called "innocent jokes."¹⁴ Some instances are clear: in the above epigram of Martial, the author is the clearest winner, Matrinia the loser; in *Philogelos* 13, the readers are triumphant. In other examples, however, just who wins and who loses is less clear, and it is hence difficult to explain humor as resulting from any superiority. Something else must spark the humor.

INCONGRUITY THEORY

Aristotle is also cited as the originator of incongruity theory, also called contrast theory, on which incongruity-resolution theory is also based.¹⁵ This second of the three major theories finds humor within the difference between what is expected and what is perceived. Plato's *Philebus*, however, actually contains a seed of this theory: in the passage above (48c-d) it locates humor in the feeling of superiority when viewing someone ignorant about himself; that is, a certain incongruity between expectations – he should know himself and his place – and reality is perceived and generates humor.¹⁶ The same can be said for Hobbes' famous quote: that "sudden glory" is a surprise, the perception of an incongruous situation; that is, of a concrete incongruity or a situation which does not match expectations. An ugly individual struts about proudly; the superiority theorist finds a thrill in the fact that he knows something that the ugly person does not or is much better-looking, while the incongruity theorist may laugh because he expects the ugly person to act like an ugly person, to be ashamed and not ostentatious, and is thus surprised when his expectations fail to be fulfilled. Aristotle describes a similar surprise employed literarily in a discussion on metaphors in his *Rhetoric*:

¹⁴ Gruner 1997: 11-2. An inability to identify roles does not lend confidence to the theory's validity.

¹⁵ Morreall 2008: 215; Attardo 2008: 103.

¹⁶ For the complexity of Aristotle's and Plato's understanding of humor, see Perks 2012: 120, which points out that the view of Plato and Aristotle solely as superiority theorists is reductive.

ἔστιν δὲ καὶ τὰ ἀστεῖα τὰ πλεῖστα διὰ μεταφορᾶς καὶ ἐκ τοῦ
προσεξαπατᾶν· μᾶλλον γὰρ γίγνεται δῆλον ὅτι ἔμαθε παρὰ τὸ
ἐναντίως ἔχειν, καὶ ἔοικεν λέγειν ἢ ψυχή· ὥς ἀληθῶς, ἐγὼ δὲ
ἤμαρτον. (3.11.6)

The majority of urbane sayings¹⁷ come from metaphors or from misleading [a listener or reader]: for it becomes more clear that he learned something contrary to his expectation, and it is as though his mind says, “Of course, and I missed it.”

And closely following:

καὶ ὁ λέγει Θεόδωρος τὸ καινὰ λέγειν γίγνεται δὲ ὅταν παράδοξον
ᾖ, καὶ μὴ, ὥς ἐκεῖνος λέγει, πρὸς τὴν ἔμπροσθεν δόξαν, ἀλλ’
ὥσπερ ἐν τοῖς γελοίοις τὰ παραπεποιημένα (ὅπερ δύναται καὶ τὰ
παρὰ γράμμα σκώμματα, ἐξαπατᾷ γάρ) καὶ ἐν τοῖς μέτροις· οὐ γὰρ
ὥσπερ ὁ ἀκούων ὑπέλαβεν· ἔστειχε δ’ ἔχων ὑπὸ ποσσὶ χίμεθλα· ὁ
δ’ ὤρετο πέδιλα ἐρεῖν. (3.11.6)

And what Theodorus calls “novel expressions” occur whenever there is a paradox, and it does not, as he says, go according to one’s previous expectation, but just like the twists in jokes¹⁸ (and the same thing can happen with puns based on letters, for they deceive) and in poetry; for example, someone listening would not imagine the following: “And he marched on, having under his feet chilblains;” a listener would expect to hear “sandals.”

Aristotle makes descriptive observations here about the popular use of incongruity for the deliberate frustration of expectations, not only in rhetoric but in other venues or poetry as well: see the parallelism of τὰ γέλοια and τὰ μέτρα. This pointed, considered deception of sorts is linked with humor, but in general the unexpected is desirable as a pleasant feature of one’s work and speech:

διὸ δεῖ ποιεῖν ξένην τὴν διάλεκτον· θαυμάσται γὰρ τῶν ἀπόντων
εἰσίν, ἡδὺ δὲ τὸ θαυμαστόν ἐστιν. (3.2.3)

On account of this is it necessary to make one’s speech strange: for people admire what is foreign, and what is admirable is pleasant.

¹⁷ We may later compare τὰ ἀστεῖα with the Roman *urbanitas*, given their analogous roots.

¹⁸ This in the nominative may be not τὰ γέλοια, “funny things,” but οἱ γελοῖοι, “the humorists.” The difference for our purposes is minimal; laughter and incongruity go hand in hand either way.

The word θαυμαστόν here, translated as ‘admirable,’ also conveys senses more appropriate for our work: extraordinary or surprising, unexpected in a non-mundane and often appreciated way.¹⁹ Aristotle here is speaking most specifically about elevating speech into a higher register, but the same principle applies, as shown in the previous passages, to the generation of humor: the same twists which articulate jokes are a charming feature of poetry.

The *Rhetoric* links this incongruity of verbal register and content explicitly to comedy:

τὸ δὲ πρέπον ἔξει ἢ λέξις, ἐὰν ᾗ παθητικὴ τε καὶ ἠθικὴ καὶ τοῖς
 ὑποκειμένοις πράγμασιν ἀνάλογον. τὸ δ’ ἀνάλογόν ἐστιν ἐὰν μήτε
 περὶ εὐόγκων αὐτοκαβδάλως λέγεται μήτε περὶ εὐτελῶν σεμνῶς,
 μηδ’ ἐπὶ τῷ εὐτελεῖ ὀνόματι ἐπὶ κόσμος· εἰ δὲ μή, κωμωδία
 φαίνεται, οἷον ποιεῖ Κλεοφῶν· ὁμοίως γὰρ ἔνια ἔλεγε καὶ εἰ εἴπειεν
 ἂν ‘πότνια συκῇ.’ (3.7.1-2)

The style will be appropriate if it expresses both emotions and moral character and is in proportion to the subject matter. And it is proportionate if weighty matters are not discussed in a careless manner, nor paltry matters in a solemn manner, and decoration does not sit upon a cheap word. Otherwise it seems like comedy, like the poetry of Cleophon; for he said some things like this, and, if one may say it, “Mistress Fig.”

We must be careful of conflating the genre of comedy and the broader concept of humor, of course, but Aristotle here hints at a theory of verbal humor, one depending on incongruity.

Examples of clearly incongruity-based humor are not rare in classical literature. Martial supplies a poetic take on the classic “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

*Senos Charinus omnibus digitis gerit
 nec nocte ponit anulos*

¹⁹ The adjective ἡδύ, translated as ‘pleasant’ here, is also used to adverbially describe laughter in our example passage about the embarrassment of Thersites from the *Iliad*: ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ἡδὺ γέλασαν, “They laughed merrily at him” (*Iliad* 2.270). The use of the same adjective by Aristotle is likely coincidence rather than a deliberate reference to the *Iliad*, as it is a common word, but the Thersites passage is one of the earliest examples of humor appreciation in Greek literature, and the fact that ἡδύ conveys something about laughter as well as the unexpected further links the two concepts.

*nec cum lavatur. Causa quae sit quaeritis?
dactyliothecam non habet.* (11.59)

On every finger Charinus wears six rings
and takes them off for neither bed nor bath.
You ask why he would do such a thing?
He doesn't have a ring case.

The joke's punch-line catches the reader off-guard because we do not expect such a simple explanation; the set-up casts Charinus as a foppish or pretentious man, likely a freedman if one judges by the name and thus all the more disdainful for his ostentation.²⁰ Consequently we anticipate a similarly pretentious explanation for his behavior. The resulting sensible, yet absurd, explanation is thus incongruous and presumably funny to some extent. Superiority theorists, on the other hand, would posit that the riddle teller feels superior to the audience when they cannot answer the question and then, upon hearing the simplistic answer, the audience would feel superior to their ignorant past selves of only a moment ago and laugh.²¹ Alternatively, it can be understood as a shoot at Charinus, who, for the sake of ostentation, will never take his rings off. Present this idea without the punchline, however, and the amusing effect is lost.²²

Though a sizable quantity of the *Philogelos*' items revolve around nerds (σχολαστικοί), ill-tempered folk (δύσκολοι), or citizens of Abdera or Kyme as the butts of jokes, and are thus easily approached with the superiority theory, some are more difficult to treat so, and incongruity rules the day.

Δυσκόλῳ ἰατρῷ προσελθὼν τις εἶπε· Σοφιστά, ἀνακεῖσθαι οὐ
δύναμαι οὔτε ἐστάναι, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ καθῆσθαι. καὶ ὁ ἰατρὸς εἶπεν·
Οὐδέν σοι λείπει ἢ κρεμασθῆναι. (183)

²⁰ See Kay 1985: 201 for the name Charinus, its implications and frequency in Martial's corpus.

²¹ As above in footnote 5, Hobbes' *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* 1.9.13.

²² See Kay 1985: 200 for a small catalog of strained interpretations.

Someone went to an ill-tempered doctor and said, “Doc, I can’t lie down or stand up or even sit down.” And the doctor said, “There’s nothing left for you but to hang yourself.”

This joke relies on an interplay between logic and absurdity. Hanging does provide an alternative to the three more natural positions for a human to take, but the punchline’s recommendation of suicide is wholly unexpected coming from a doctor; the initial qualification of the doctor as δύσκολος finds its expression there, but the absurdity remains. Superiority theorists may posit that we are meant to feel superior to the poor patient or the ill-tempered doctor, but take away the punchline and there is no humor left at all. Again:

Εὐτράπελος ἰδὼν πορνοβοσκὸν μισθοῦντα μέλαιναν ἑταιρίδα εἶπε·
Πόσου τὴν νύκτα μισθοῖς; (151a)

A witty fellow, upon seeing a pimp letting out a black hooker, said:
“How much do you charge for the night?”

While the pimp and witty fellow are observably higher in social station than the prostitute, the locus of humor resides not on the realization or indication that anyone is inferior or superior. Also, one need not hypothesize a scenario in which the joker boasts of his cleverness in making the pun, however tacitly, and demeans a listener who did not see it coming; nobody is inferior unless someone does not get the joke, and given the great lengths people go to explain jokes, the purpose is typically not to stump the listener. The humor instead depends on the interplay between μέλαινα and νύξ and the idea of charging for a duration of time with the prostitute. Using one term, τὴν νύκτα, to refer both to the prostitute and to the period of time spent with her generates ambiguity which is unexpected in common discourse. Again:

Σχολαστικὸς συνδειπνῶν τῷ πατρὶ παρακειμένης θριδακίνης
μεγάλης καὶ ἐχούσης πολλοὺς θύρσους καλοῦς· Σὺ, πάτερ, ἔφη,
φάγε τὰ τέκνα, καὶ ἡμεῖς τὴν μητέρα. (53)

A nerd was eating dinner with his father. When a large lettuce with many fine leaves was served, he said, “You, father, eat the children, and I’ll eat the mother.”

This joke seems to rely upon the shock of the expressed cannibalism and its incongruity with the salad of reality. One may also find amusing the chiastic and Oedipal familial arrangement of son eating mother and father children, rather than a parallel arrangement. The joke itself does not see the father insulted in any way; in Grunerian terms, there is no obvious loser. The only candidates may be those who do not get the joke, a case similar to Martial’s ring box epigram above; and again, we may wonder how a textual joke, one without a live audience, fosters feelings of superiority in anybody. It has, however, been suggested that a feeling of superiority can be fostered by the understanding reader relative to his previously ignorant self, existing only for the instant between reading and comprehension. Ultimately this explanation is more tenuous than that promoted by incongruity theory.

Sometimes, however, incongruity and superiority theories may be applied to the same joke:

Σχολαστικοῦ ἐρωτηθέντος πόσους ξέστας ὁ ἀμφορεὺς ἔχει,
ἀπεκρίνατο· Οἴνου λέγεις ἢ ὕδατος; (265)

A nerd was asked how many pints were in a gallon, and he answered: “Do you mean of wine or of water?”²³

Incongruity theory explains this joke as funny because the nerd has either over- or under-thought the question and asked absurdly for clarification: pints of water and wine are of course identical in volume. This response is wholly unexpected. Superiority theory takes a different tack and locates the humor in the realization that the listener recognizes the nerd’s response as absurd and understands himself to be more intelligent. In Gruner’s formulation, a third-party listener comes

²³ I translate ἀμφορεὺς as ‘gallon’ not as an equal liquid measurement, but to get across the elementary nature of the question. An ἀμφορεὺς was about nine gallons.

out as the winner. The effect is similar to that of the schoolyard riddle, “Which weighs more, a ton of lead or a ton of feathers?” If the bait is taken and one chooses lead, the riddler and any other listeners may laugh, feeling superior; this may be the motivation behind telling it. For the purposes of our study, riddles are problematic: they require answers for their effect, and potentially an incorrect answer and subsequent correction. We may conceive of riddles as jokes inflicted upon and requiring explicit interaction from others; textual jokes taking on riddle form initially, e.g. Martial’s 11.59 above, typically answer the question themselves if at all. With no response from the reader necessitated or received, a text is less able to exercise superiority and thus that theory is less effectual.

Over the centuries incongruity theory has found many proponents, among them the German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer who produced two of the most popular quotes for incongruity theorists’ introductions. Kant’s 1790 *Kritik der Urteilskraft* defined laughter as “ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts” (“an emotion [arising] from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”).²⁴ That difference between expectation and reality, that incongruity, prompts laughter and can be understood as humorous. Just less than thirty years later Schopenhauer expanded this to define laughter as the response to an incongruity suddenly perceived between a concept and reality.²⁵ Kant and Schopenhauer share one notable element with Hobbes’ formulation: the perception must be sudden.

Within the last few generations, incongruity theory has received the most devoted scholarly interest. Arthur Koestler’s theory of bisociation posited that humor arises from the

²⁴ Kant 1922: §54.

²⁵ Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818) §13: “Das Lachen entsteht jedesmal aus nichts Anderm, als aus der plötzlich wahrgenommenen Inkongruenz zwischen einem Begriff und den realen Objekten, die durch ihn, in irgend einer Beziehung, gedacht worden waren, und es ist selbst eben nur der Ausdruck dieser Inkongruenz.”

perception of an idea simultaneously from two different frames of reference.²⁶ A pun is a simple example.

*Vis futui gratis, cum sis deformis anusque.
Res perridicula est: uis dare nec dare uis.*
(Martial 7.75)

You want to be fucked for free, even though you are an
ugly old hag. What a hilarious matter: you want to give and
not to give.

The paradoxical pun revolves around the double-meaning of *dare*, to “put out” in modern (though not especially current) parlance and to pay. The reader perceives that the word is said twice, but understands that there must be another sense there in order for it not to be contradictory. A single idea, in our example the verb *dare*, “is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths,”²⁷ much like *νόκτα* in *Philogelos* 151a, another joke which is in fact more comfortably explained by Koestler’s bisociation theory than by Gruner’s game theory, for example. Both *dare* and *νόκτα* are simultaneously alive and operating in two different senses: the ambiguity and dual validity result in conflict, as though one string of a guitar were vibrating at two frequencies, and is perceived as humorous when a reconciliation of the senses is realized.²⁸

Morreall in 1983 recognized that each of the three theories describes a change of psychological state: a cognitive change in the case of incongruity, an affective change in the

²⁶ Koestler 1964: 35. Martin 2007: 7 offers a classic joke as illustration: “Two cannibals are eating a clown. One says to the other, ‘Does this taste funny to you?’” The evolution of a bisociative event into laughter will be discussed in the next section. McGraw presents his theory of benign violation, in which something is funny if it is simultaneously perceived as harmless and threatening, as new and distinct from other incongruity theories (McGraw and Warner 2014: 206), but it is fundamentally another incongruity theory. Koestler’s bisociation, Apter’s synergy (see below), and Berger’s code violation (Berger 1993: 57-8) have all anticipated McGraw, whose theory merely specifies that the conflicting ideas must qualified as benign and violating. It has thus sacrificed flexibility for specificity.

²⁷ Koestler 1964: 35.

²⁸ See Koestler 1964: 51. Koestler’s theory of bisociation can be classified as an incongruity-resolution theory and shares much with relief theory, to be introduced at greater length below. Michael Apter, known in the psychological community for his reversal theory, dubbed the same phenomenon synergy, which in a paratelic, relaxed state is pleasurable, but in a telic or goal-focused state is irritating. See Apter 1982: 177-94 or for a smaller summary Martin 2007: 7.

situations of superiority and relief (the last to be discussed below).²⁹ This led him to propose a new theory, one which suggests humor arises from sudden psychological shifts.³⁰ Pleasant shifts are perceived as humorous; unpleasant shifts bring anxieties. Morreall's theory is unique in that it also attempts to explain laughter which arises not from any verbal humor, but from embarrassment or an escape from danger. This theory is, however, still fundamentally one of incongruity, of unexpected changes and responses to them, though at one step removed from traditional incongruity theory when applied to an instance of superiority.

Victor Raskin's "Semantic Script Theory of Humor" (SSTH)³¹ and the subsequent "General Theory of Verbal Humor" (GTVH) from Salvatore Attardo and Raskin³² operate on the premise that we process language using mental scripts, and humor comes from the conflict of scripts. To illustrate:

Μισογύναιος, τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ ἀποθανούσης, ἐπὶ τῷ θάψαι
ἐκίδηε. τινὸς δὲ ἐρωτήσαντος· Τίς ἀνεπαύσατο; ἔφη· Ἐγὼ ὁ
ταύτης στερηθεὶς. (Philogelos 247)

A misogynist whose wife died was taking care of her burial.
Someone asked, "Who has been given rest?" And he answered,
"Me, the one who's rid of her."

When the question is asked in the funerary setting, our mental script expects an answer about the wife, using the euphemism ἀνεπαύσατο for being laid to rest, buried. But then the script of the misogynist plays out and asks us to understand the verb in a different sense. The two scripts clash, thus generating humor.

²⁹ Morreall 1983: 38.

³⁰ Morreall 1983: 39, 41-9. That a shift must be abrupt recalls Kant and Schopenhauer.

³¹ See Raskin 1985.

³² See Attardo 1994 and 2001.

RELIEF THEORY

Often called release theory, or in slightly different guises sublimation, liberation, or economy theory, relief theory takes more varied forms than either of the previous two arch-theories. Again, we may find some beginning in Plato: *Philebus* 31ff. treats the nature and origin of pleasure. Socrates leads Protarchus to the idea that destruction of natural states is a pain, and returning to a natural state is pleasure (ταύτην δὲ αὖ πάλιν τὴν ἀναχώρησιν πάντων ἡδονήν, 32b).³³ We may at first immediately couple this with the theory above, and in particular the incongruity-resolution version: we have a pleasurable reaction when we are met with some incongruity, feel perplexed as a result, and then ‘solve’ the problem. This resolution returns us to our natural state, free of confusion. It is not explicitly linked to humor by Plato, who, as we have seen, is not entirely interested in the phenomenon as a positive part of the human experience.

Where Plato did not incorporate humor into this theory, Aristotle may have. As we understand it, the lost second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics* contained a discussion of genre of comedy corresponding with that of tragedy and catharsis. The schematic *Tractatus Coislinianus*, which has been identified as an epitome of the now-fragmentary *Poetics* II,³⁴ consists of lists of phenomena from which humor can arise: most of them, especially those involving humor from speech, are terms typically connected to incongruity theory.³⁵ Two sentences, at least, suggest something of a relief theory associated with comedy:

³³ See also Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.11 for a similar definition of pleasure.

³⁴ See Janko 1984: 43-87 for a full exploration and conclusion regarding its relationship to *Poetics* II. For the opposition to Janko, cf. Rabbie 2007: 213 for brief remarks on Nesselrath 1990; Beard 2014: 31 for a succinct summary of the current majority view on the *Tractatus Coislinianus*: “the *Tractatus* is a muddled, mediocre confection, possibly Byzantine, which preserves at most a few traces of thirdhand Aristotelian reflection.” Cooper 1922 takes an appreciable, more cautious approach. At any rate, its authorship or origin is of no material concern to this study.

³⁵ Sections 5 and 6 of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* in Janko 1984: from speech: homonymns, synonyms, repetition, paronyms, diminutives, alteration, parody, transference, manner of speaking; from action: deception, assimilation,

κωμωδία ἐστὶ μίμησις πράξεως γελοίας . . . δι' ἡδονῆς καὶ γέλωτος
περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. ἔχει δὲ
μητέρα τὸν γέλωτα. (4)

Comedy is an imitation of amusing action . . . achieving through
pleasure and laughter a cleansing of such emotions. It has laughter
for its mother.

This most obviously is modeled after *Poetics* 1449b on tragedy:

ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας . . . δι' ἐλέου καὶ
φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν.

So tragedy is an imitation of earnest action . . . achieving through
pity and fear a cleansing of such emotions.

These in conjunction suggest that audiences viewed ridiculous actions and released some kind of
pent-up laughter, just as audiences of tragedies would release fears and other anxieties.³⁶

Just what force was pent-up and then released as laughter was theorized by Herbert
Spencer in his 1870 chapter on “The Physiology of Laughter.” Spencer posits that laughter is the
discharge of nervous energy: the same force which motivates us to absent-mindedly stroke our
beards, tap our foot or play with a ring, the same force which generates all muscular activities.³⁷
In the case of humor in a narrative, an audience invests energy as it moves along: each
successive idea causes responses in a viewer or reader which lead to more emotional or mental
energy, flowing into the next idea. When this sequence is interrupted, there is now an excess of

the impossible, the possible and inconsequential, things contrary to expectation, making characters base, dancing
vulgarly, giving up the best and taking the worse, disjointed reasoning and non sequiturs.

³⁶ *Tractatus Coislinianus* 9 reinforces the analogous roles of laughter and fear: συμμετρία τοῦ φόβου θέλει εἶναι ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις καὶ τοῦ γελοίου ἐν ταῖς κωμωδίαις, (“A due proportion of fear needs to be in tragedies, of the ridiculous in comedies”). Cooper 1922: 70 suggests that “By comedy, then, we should be cured of a desire to laugh at the wrong time, and at the wrong things, through being made to laugh at the proper time by the right means.” Cooper is interested in the catharsis as the purpose of comedy (and of tragedy, presumably), but these short passages do not imply a final relationship; taken alone, this could simply describe what comedy and tragedy do, not why they do it.

³⁷ Spencer 1870: 196-7, 207-8. See Koestler 1964: 55 and Morreall 2008: 223 for other summaries of Spencer’s theory.

tension which must find an outlet.³⁸ Laughter is one of the ways in which this energy is discharged. Spencer did, however, observe that laughter is not the sole and necessary avenue; the interruption must be one constituting a transition from great to small, e.g. a tremendous sneeze in the middle of a sermon may lead to laughter, but a gunshot, something much more serious, would not, though it would be more effective as an interruption. This, Spencer recognizes, depends on humor explained by the common incongruity theory, which he understood to be the usual explanation of laughter in his day, but he is explicitly treating the phenomenon of laughter, not that of humor.³⁹ Incongruity is the trigger; laughter is the expressed reaction, and we typically regard the link between those two as humor.

Yet Spencer's theory is succeeded by Freud's, whose *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* of the early 20th century outlines a theory of humor based on economy and surplus, but in place of Spencer's nervous energy are more specific mental and emotional expenditures.⁴⁰ For example, the so-called gallows humor (*Galgenhumor*) erupts out of a situation asking for pity or sympathy from us, the audience – someone about to be executed, Freud offered – where the protagonist behaves in a way that renders our pity or sympathy inappropriate, such as by uttering a phrase like “Well, this week is beginning nicely.”⁴¹ Our superfluous pity is discharged, much like Spencer's nervous energy, as laughter, but Freud explains the whole sequence as an example of humor and the triggering statement as a joke. Likewise, we may understand Martial's ring case joke (11.59) as leading to a surplus of energy which was devoted to critical thought, as we attempt to deduce (from no evidence) just why Charinus wears so many rings. The simple

³⁸ Spencer 1870: 204.

³⁹ Spencer 1870: 194.

⁴⁰ Freud's considerable dependency on Spencer is offered by Morreall 1983: 36 as the reason why Freud's section on humor stemming from economy of emotion (called 'humor,' as opposed to 'comic' or 'jokes') receives less attention than jokes.

⁴¹ Freud 1960: 288. The original publication was in 1905.

answer is given and the surplus needs an outlet; this finds its expression as pleasurable amusement.⁴²

Explanations of relief theory typically reference a particular angle of Freud's theory, that of inhibitions and jokes.⁴³ To Freud, so-called tendentious jokes are motivated by and appreciated on account of inhibitions: restraints upon our behavior either self-imposed or imposed by society or our parents and which generate anxieties. We joke about death, violence, and sex because these subjects are taboo, and from that joking both joker and audience, if they enjoy it, gain pleasure in proportion to the magnitude of their inhibitions.⁴⁴ One may regard this transaction as a release of or relief from sexual or aggressive urges or the anxieties resulting from their repression.⁴⁵ Of course these urges and the anxieties stemming from their repression were originally held to be unconscious in classic Freudian fashion, though not every relief theory stipulates this, as discussed shortly.

Freudian relief theory can be a productive tool in the interpretation into ancient humor, though the immediate results are predictably of a more psychological bent. It would suggest, for example, that people who tell and enjoy the joke about two parricidal nerds (*Philogelos* 13) harbor unconscious Oedipal urges of their own, or that the jokes about the misogynists (e.g. *Philogelos* 247) are most appealing to people who resent women themselves. Martial's numerous

⁴² Freud 1960: 293. This economy of thought would perhaps define the type of humor as "comic" in Freud's categorical system, which is overly artificial and rather unnecessary as a result.

⁴³ E.g. Morreall 1983: 28-9, 2008: 224; Martin 2007: 35-40.

⁴⁴ See Freud 1960: 145. Morreall 1983: 30-2 points out a problem with this extension of the theory: people who more commonly express sexual or aggressive urges enjoy sexual or aggressive humor to a greater degree.

⁴⁵ Martin 2007: 39-40. A 1967 experiment supports the proposition that people whose sexual and aggressive drives have been activated enjoy jokes about sex and violence more than those who have not been previously aroused in either way.

epigrams about an *os impurum* have led to speculation about irrational anxieties on his part regarding the ubiquity of oral sex.⁴⁶ For example:

*esse quid hoc dicam quod olent tua basia murrum
quodque tibi est numquam non alienus odor?
hoc mihi suspectum est, quod oles bene, Postume, semper:
Postume, non bene olet qui bene semper olet. (2.12)*

What should I say about the fact that your kisses smell of myrrh and that you are never without some foreign smell? It is suspicious to me that you always smell good, Postumus: Postumus, he who always smells good does not smell good.

Here the apparent oxymoron of the last line constitutes a minor incongruity, but the bulk of the humor seems to lie in the subtle implication that Postumus participates in activities not befitting the dignity of a Roman gentleman. Martial flouts social norms in flirting with an open discussion of this taboo. In Freudian terms, the psychical energy that went toward his inhibitions and our own as readers, now not spent on repression, is released; we might also imagine that, in Platonic terms, we experience a return to our natural, restraint-free state: this is pleasurable, and hence the enjoyable amusement.

Opportunities for developing our understanding of socio-cultural history through the application of relief theory to literature are rich but not the concern of this study, which will henceforth avoid any treatment of psychical energy and its economy. A strict Freudian approach would relegate the discovered desires and anxieties to the unconscious, which would no doubt exert considerable influence over an author's literary agenda and style; sufficient explorations of literary moves, however, can be made without reference to the subconscious, and perhaps more

⁴⁶ See Sullivan 1991: 202-3 for a limited discussion and citations of some relevant poems. Watson and Watson comment on the theme in epigrams numbered 45-8 (2.89, 9.67, 3.75, and 6.26 in order, pages 239-49). Sapsford 2009: 16, concerned with oral sex and the *os impurum* as metaphor for orality, identifies within Watson's and Watson's collection several dozen poems in Martial's corpus treating the theme.

confidently and more fruitfully at that. For example, we may infer that Martial's anxieties about oral sex may stem from a repressed desire to try it himself, but this does little to move our literary analysis forward. A more general approach to relief theory without reference made to the libido and other unconscious desires will be more readily productive:⁴⁷ for example, we will consider the ramifications of pieces of 'comic relief' in the generally serious genres participated in by Tacitus and Statius.⁴⁸

Thus ends our survey of modern humor theories and their ancient roots. These categories should not be understood as incompatible and utterly distinct, as we saw previously with the relationship between incongruity and relief especially. Victor Raskin, father of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (1985) and co-founder of the Semantic Script Theory of Humor along with Salvatore Attardo (1991), hence a luminary for incongruity theory,⁴⁹ reconciles the three theories as in fact coming at humor from three different angles: "In our terms, the incongruity-based theories make a statement about the stimulus; the superiority theories characterize the relations or attitudes between the speaker and the hearer; and the release/relief theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the hearer only."⁵⁰ Thus they are in his opinion not incompatible. Understanding the theories to be not mutually exclusive is useful for us in that it maximizes the potential avenues for interpretation of any given instance of humor. The interrelationships of the three theories may be yet more nuanced and complex than Raskin's

⁴⁷ For example, Segal 1968: 14, *passim* explains the laughter of Roman comedy as a relief from social restrictions, responsibilities, and general *gravitas*. Comedy as a genre is outside of the bounds of this study.

⁴⁸ Morreall 1983: 20 points us to Lord Shaftesbury's 1711 essay, "The Freedom of Wit and Humour," for an early example of the mechanisms expanded upon by modern relief theories: "The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers" (1790: 59).

⁴⁹ Though Attardo 2008: 108 identifies SSTH as a version of incongruity-resolution theory, which we have seen is akin to relief theory.

⁵⁰ Raskin 1985: 40, just after he generously characterizes the problem: "much feuding and animosity in the field has often been based on the mutual misunderstanding of each other's goals, premises and, of course, terminology."

division, however, especially for our literary purposes. Superiority may be a frequent motivation for the humorist, incongruity a frequent mechanism or means, and relief a frequent result for the audience, but, if we leave aside the lattermost's technical psychology, these theories are able to inform us more about the agenda and strategies of an author who deliberately wields humor for its positive effects. Subordinating relief theory or yoking it to the others is also methodologically appropriate for our distant historical contexts, where the mental states of the audience and immediate reception of a work are sometimes unknown. For this reason, arguments beginning from an understanding of humor as a deliberate artistic move on the part of a text or author, and the beginning of a dialogue with the reader, will be more fundamentally sound than those predicated upon any specificities regarding the audience.⁵¹ In any case, working with a combination of the three seems necessary because we can trace something resembling each of these theories in the works of Cicero and Quintilian, our principal Roman humor theorists, even if they would likely not claim such an honor.

INTRODUCING OUR WITNESSES: CICERO AND QUINTILIAN

A fruitful academic investigation into ancient humor, one that goes beyond appreciating humor on modern terms, must proceed from an ancient understanding. We cannot take for granted that senses of humor are the same between two different cultures, much less two cultures separated by millennia, and so we must turn to classical sources to inform us, while using the modern theories outlined previously and their terminology to help guide our assessment of Roman notions of humor's functions. The genre of comedy would at first glance seem useful here, but, as explained in the introduction, too much is missing for us from the original

⁵¹ I draw on Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981: 280-4 especially, in "Discourse in the Novel") for some terms of methodology here, though I elsewhere find his generalizations regarding classical poetry and prose simplistic to a curious degree (15-6, e.g.).

presentation of comedies – staging, voices, costumes, gestures – to presume that the surviving comedic texts present a complete picture of Roman humor. Rather, we must turn to a genre less distant from epic, epigram, historiography, and satire than drama is: that of rhetoric.⁵² Cicero and Quintilian have left us the best abstract treatments of Roman humor. In Cicero's *De Oratore*, the interlocutors Antonius, Crassus, and Caesar Strabo periodically discuss wit,⁵³ a subject which includes both Roman and modern conceptions of humor. The most sustained and pertinent discussion comes at *De or.* 2.216-290, the so-called excursus on wit in the mouth of (primarily) Caesar Strabo.⁵⁴ About a century and a half later, Martial's contemporary Quintilian, in his textbook of rhetoric, the *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.3, explored the use and effects of humor, laughter, and wit more systematically than Cicero had done.⁵⁵ Between these two authors and their substantial commentaries on the subject, we may distill a Roman humor theory of sorts.

A number of objections may arise here, but can be addressed quickly. First, one may question whether Cicero's observations and precepts can be suitably applied to later, Flavian literature, given the intervening amount of time and change in culture. Quintilian himself defends and demonstrates Cicero's enduring influence as the ideal model of rhetoric and its instruction,⁵⁶

⁵² Not only is the ostensibly monologic form of rhetoric more akin to these genres than comedy is, but by the Flavian period rhetoric had become wedded to literature to a greater degree than previously existed. For rhetoric and epic, see Farrell 1997: 136-42. For rhetoric and Tacitean historiography, see Syme 1958: 100-20. For a general approach to the relationship between rhetoric and literature, a distinction perhaps alien to the Roman world, see Fox 2007: 370-80.

⁵³ Pun intended.

⁵⁴ Kelsey 1907: 5 sees no issue with seeing Strabo's opinions as identical with Cicero's.

⁵⁵ See Rabbie 2007: 215 for a comparison of the two. Conspicuously, both discussions of wit come after the authors' respective treatments on pathos.

⁵⁶ For Quintilian as a disciple of Cicero, see among many examples *Inst.* 3.1.20: *Praecipuum vero lumen sicut eloquentiae, ita praeceptis quoque eius dedit unicum apud nos specimen orandi docendique oratorias artes M. Tullius, post quem tacere modestissimum foret.* . . ("But it was Marcus Tullius Cicero who provided the singular model for us Romans in both oratory itself and teaching the arts of oratory; he shed the greatest light on both eloquence and its precepts. Following him, perhaps it would be most modest to remain silent. . .") And 10.1.110: *Nam quis docere diligentius, movere vehementius potest, cui tanta umquam iucunditas adfuit?* ("For who is able to instruct more thoroughly [than Cicero], to stir us more vigorously? Who ever had such great charm?")

but examples of Ciceronian humor too can be found in the *Institutio*. Among other references,⁵⁷

Quintilian quotes the joke recounted by Caesar Strabo in *De Oratore* 2.278:

*salsa sunt etiam, quae habent suspicionem ridiculi absconditam,
quo in genere est Siculi illud, cui cum familiaris quidam
quereretur quod diceret uxorem suam suspendisse se de ficu,
“amabo te,” inquit “da mihi ex ista arbore quos seram surculos.”*

Those things too are amusing which have a hint of the laughable hidden in them, like that one told by the Sicilian. When one of his friends complained to him that his wife had hung herself from a fig tree, he said “Please, give me cuttings from that tree that I could plant.”

Quintilian, in relaying this as an example, attributes it directly to Cicero himself.⁵⁸

*Ei confine est quod dicitur per suspicionem, quale illud apud
Ciceronem querenti quod uxor sua ex fico se suspendisset: “rogo
des mihi surculum ex illa arbore ut inseram;” intellegitur enim
quod non dicitur.* (Inst. 6.3.88)

Akin to [turning the meaning around] is that which depends on insinuation, like when a man complained to Cicero that his wife had hung herself from a fig tree, and Cicero answered with “I’d like you to give me a cutting from that tree so I could plant it.” For what is left unsaid is still understood.

The misattribution from *Siculus* to Cicero, whether Quintilian’s or already apocryphal before his day, suggests more strongly that Cicero’s sense of humor is apparently alive and well in the late Flavian period. Even later, Tacitus seems to have borrowed Cicero’s material when characterizing Poppaea Sabina: compare *huic mulieri cuncta alia fuere praeter honestum animum* (Ann. 13.45.1, “This lady had everything except good character”) and *rientur etiam discrepantia: “quid huic abest nisi res et virtus?”* (De or. 2.281, “Discrepancies are also

⁵⁷ For references to Cicero’s treatment of humor in Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* 6.3: 2, 3, 4, 8, 47, 84, 88.

⁵⁸ Inst. 6.3.88: *Ei confine est quod dicitur per suspicionem, quale illud apud Ciceronem querenti quod uxor sua ex fico se suspendisset: “rogo des mihi surculum ex illa arbore ut inseram;” intellegitur enim quod non dicitur.* (“Bordering on this is that which is said through insinuation, like when someone complained to Cicero that his wife had hung herself from a fig tree, and Cicero answered “I’d like you to give me a cutting from that tree to graft.” For something is understood which is not said.”)

laughable, for example ‘What did he lack except a fortune and moral worth?’”). The similar use of the dative of possession is perhaps unremarkable, but even if Tacitus is not drawing directly from the *De Oratore* here – for instance, perhaps this was a not uncommon jab for upper-class Romans to make – the sense of humor is the same and speaks to Cicero’s continued applicability.

The second objection is that Cicero and Quintilian are quite obviously speaking primarily about rhetoric; would their descriptions and prescriptions apply to other genres? Both Cicero and Quintilian extrapolate their respective takes on humor in rhetoric to humor in other genres or arenas of life. Cicero, through Caesar Strabo in *De Oratore*, is more liberal with his use: *et hercule omnia haec, quae a me de facetiis disputantur, non maiora forensium actionum quam omnium sermonum condimenta sunt* (*De or.* 2.271, “And really, all of these things which I bring up about humor are seasonings no more for legal actions than for all sorts of speech.”).⁵⁹

Quintilian notes that oratory hardly has a monopoly on the uses and types of humor he will explore and the discussion thereof is thus more difficult,

quod eius rei nulla exercitatio est, nulli praeceptores. itaque in conviviis et sermonibus multi dicaces, quia in hoc usu cotidiano proficimus: oratoria urbanitas rara, nec ex arte propria sed ab hac consuetudine commodata. (Inst. 6.3.14)

because there is no training in this art and there are no teachers of it. And so many people are witty at parties and in their conversations, because we get better through this sort of everyday practice. A wit peculiar to oratory is uncommon; it is provided not by any unique theory but by borrowing from common usage.

⁵⁹ See also *De or.* 270, regarding Socrates’ irony and dissembling: *Genus est perelegans et cum gravitate salsum cumque oratoriis dictionibus tum urbanis sermonibus accommodatum*. Lest we think Caesar Strabo’s uncontested monologue does not actually contain Cicero’s own opinions, Quintilian, near the beginning of his own discussion of humor, confirms Cicero’s proclivity for wit. He brings up the popular assessment that his predecessor lacked restraint in his use of it, *Inst.* 6.3.2: *nam plerique Demostheni facultatem defuisse huius rei credunt, Ciceroni modum* (“for most think that Demosthenes lacked skill with it, but Cicero moderation.”). Quintilian more favorably colors this immoderation by explaining that in his view Cicero possessed a prodigious and prolific wit: *Inst.* 6.3.4, *nam et in sermone cotidiano multa et in altercationibus et interrogandis testibus plura quam quisquam dixit facete* (“For both in his everyday conversations and in his debates and examinations of witnesses he spoke wittily more than anyone.”).

This indicates that what is witty in oratory is witty elsewhere. The use of *urbanitas* here should not give pause; though some scholars today like to speak of urbanity solely as wit, as if uncomfortable with treating humor, any solid distinctions between the concepts are simply overstated.⁶⁰ A look at the beginning of Quintilian's conclusion, which sums up his exploration of *urbanitas*, *ironia*, *ioci*, *ambiguitas*, and more all in conjunction, confirms this:

*has aut accepi species aut inveni frequentissimas ex quibus
ridicula ducerentur; sed repetam necesse est infinitas esse tam
salse dicendi quam severe, quas praestat persona locus tempus,
 casus denique, qui est maxime varius. itaque haec ne omisisse
 viderer attigi: illa autem quae de usu ipso et modo **iocandi**
 complexus sum adfirmarim <esse> plane necessaria.*
 (Inst. 6.3.101)

These are the kinds of things I either learned or found myself to be the most common sources of amusement. But I should repeat that the number of types of humorous speech is as boundless as serious speech, since they depend on personalities, time and place, and finally chance, which is the most variable. And so I touched on these matters lest I seem to have disregarded them; but what I included about the uses and limits of jesting I would insist is clearly vital.

Knowing that what Cicero and Quintilian have to say regarding humor is reliable enough to help us identify and discuss humor in later periods and other genres, let us return to their understanding of Roman humor.

Whenever Cicero and Quintilian are brought up in discussions of historical views of humor, they are regularly linked to superiority theory, and for good reason.⁶¹ Both authors

⁶⁰ See the introduction to the present study.

⁶¹ See e.g. Carrell 2008: 306; Koestler 1964: 53; Morreall 1983: 16; Viljamaa 1994: 87. Roeckelein 2002: 98 quotes modern scholars summarizing Cicero and Quintilian and in doing so regrettably loses all nuance. Plaza 2006: 7-8 categorically states that "All humour theories which have come down to us from antiquity belong to the Superiority category," but I have shown above with Plato and Aristotle and will show below with Cicero and Quintilian that this does not convey the whole picture.

explicitly state that humor, or something approximating our understanding of it, stems from something inferior: Cicero seems to be following Aristotle's definition in the *Poetics*.⁶²

locus autem et regio quasi ridiculi . . . turpitudine et deformitate quadam continetur; haec enim ridentur vel sola vel maxime, quae notant et designant turpitudinem aliquam non turpiter.
(*De. or.* 2.236)

Then the territory and region, so to speak, of the laughable . . . lies in ugliness and some sort of deformity. For either only or chiefly those things are laughed at which point out and mark something shameful, but not in a shameful way.

Then, after outlining the restraint which an orator must practice with his jesting:

. . . materies omnis ridiculorum est in eis vitiis, quae sunt in vita hominum neque carorum neque calamitosorum neque eorum, qui ob facinus ad supplicium rapiendi videntur; eaque belle agitata ridentur.
(*De or.* 2.238)

. . . the entire subject matter of the laughable lies in those defects found in the lives of people who are neither dear nor wretched nor who are evidently doomed for punishment for some crime; these things, if presented well, are laughed at.

Shortly thereafter Cicero reiterates that *deformitas* and *corporis vitia* are fine material for joking (*De or.* 2.239), and further on repeats that jokes are about *turpicula et quasi deformes* (*De or.* 2.248). These terms are those used by Quintilian as well, though in abstract form and reversed order, when he cites Cicero: *habet enim, ut Cicero dicit, sedem in deformitate aliqua et turpitudine* ("For it resides, as Cicero says, in some deformity and shamefulness." *Inst.* 6.3.8). Quintilian also observes a little earlier (*Inst.* 6.3.6) that a *ridiculum dictum* ("funny statement" or

⁶² cf. Beard 2014: 34-5, who points out the flaw in linking Cicero and the Romans directly to Aristotle when we have virtually nothing left from the intervening Peripatetics. While Cicero could have had a different source in mind here, the likeness of his own definition here and elsewhere to Aristotle's is pronounced. For a consistent conception of humor and superiority in Cicero, see also *Pro Caelio* 6: *sed aliud est male dicere, aliud accusare. accusatio crimen desiderat, rem ut definiat, hominem ut notet, argumento probet, teste confirmet; maledictio autem nihil habet propositi praeter contumeliam; quae si petulantius iactatur, convicium, si facetius, urbanitas nominatur.*

just “joke”) is *numquam honorificum* (“never complimentary”), though we observe that this does not mean it is always disparaging.

Throughout both works our Roman rhetoricians relay examples of humor that would be at home in any modern handbook on superiority theory, for example:

*valde autem ridentur etiam imagines, quae fere in deformitatem,
aut in aliquod vitium corporis ducuntur cum similitudine turpioris.*
(*De or.* 2.266)

But then caricatures also are laughed at loudly, since they generally are aimed at ugliness or some bodily flaw using a likeness of something even uglier.

Or from Quintilian:

*stulta reprehendere facillimum est, nam per se sunt ridicula; sed
rem urbanam facit aliqua ex nobis adiectio. stulte interrogaverat
exeuntem de theatro Campatium Titius Maximus an spectasset.
fecit Campatius dubitationem eius stultiorem dicendo: ‘<non>,
sed in orchestra pila lusi.’* (Inst. 6.3.71)

It is very easy to scold folly, for folly is laughable in itself; but some addition of our own makes the matter witty. Titius Maximus once foolishly asked Campatius as he left the theater whether he had seen the show. Campatius made his question even stupider by replying with “<No,> I was playing ball in front of the stage.”

But this latter example actually illustrates humor from incongruity more than from superiority, despite the emphasis on folly and foolish questions: Campatius’ answer is so unexpected, and that surprise highlights the foolishness of Titius’ question. That is, the context is one of disparagement, but the execution is one of incongruity. A response of “No, that is a stupid question, I am exiting the theater” would more straightforwardly disparage Titius, but it would not have the same humorous effect.

And in fact, both Cicero and Quintilian present a vast amount of material to which incongruity theory may conveniently be applied, especially in sections discussing humor from

words.⁶³ Cicero seems to be inspired by Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 3.11.6, see above) when identifying the most familiar category of the laughable as *cum aliud exspectamus, aliud dicitur. Hic nobismet ipsis noster error risum movet* (*De or.* 2.255, “when we expect something and something different is said. Here our own mistake causes us to laugh.”). This can be read as a basic definition of incongruity theory. We will now survey the other incongruity-based devices or methods of humor which Cicero and Quintilian introduce.

Ambiguity (*amphiboliae, ambigua, ambiguitas*) receives considerable attention from Cicero (*De or.* 2.250, 253-5), and we see an example of a quip that does mention a physical and/or moral fault, but relies for its humor on a double-meaning:

ut in illum Titium, qui, cum studiose pila luderet, et idem signa sacra noctu frangere putaretur, gregalesque, cum in campum non venisset, requirerent, excusavit Vespa Terentius, quod eum ‘bracchium fregisse,’ diceret. (De or. 2.253)

Like the one about Titius, who was devoted to playing ball and was also under suspicion of shattering the sacred statues at night; once when he didn’t show up at the field, people asked about him, and Vespa Terentius explained that he had broken an arm.

Quintilian links ambiguity to similitude, good for a laugh especially when comparing people to animals or objects, as boundaries between distinct categories become blurred:

P. Blessius Iulium, hominem nigrum et macrum et pandum, ‘fibulam ferream’ dixit. quod nunc risus petendi genus frequentissimum est. (Inst. 6.3.58)

Publius Blessius called Julius, a dark, thin, and bent fellow, “the iron brooch.”⁶⁴ This is now a very common way to look for a laugh.

⁶³ See *De or.* 2.248 for the distinction between *in re* and *in verbo*, a division of humor found in content or its expression.

⁶⁴ I cannot find a way to capture in English the neat alliteration and parallel syllable count exhibited in the original phrase.

This reversal of personification combines incongruity, an inept label for a person, with disparagement. This combination that will appear repeatedly.

Tralatio, a transference of characteristics from one thing to another which blurs definitions and distinctions between those things, accomplishes much the same thing as *similitudo*: *Pedo de myrmillone qui retiarium consequatur nec feriebat* ‘vivum’ inquit ‘capere vult.’ (Inst. 6.3.61, “Pedo said about the swordsman who was chasing the net-fighter but not striking him, “He wants to capture him alive.”) Pedo here leaps between two frames of reference for one idea, one involving humans and specifically gladiators, and another involving animals and particularly fish. Not only that, but his quip recognizes another incongruity: typically the *retiarus* does the catching.⁶⁵

A more literal and localized form of ambiguity, that of wordplay and puns, appears in Cicero’s excursus as well, and like the example of *similitudo* above combine incongruity with disparagement. One exemplary wit supposedly said *subridicule* (“facetiously”)⁶⁶ to a foul-smelling man ‘*video me a te hircumveniri*’ (De or. 2.249, “I see you’ve got me surrounded”) which plays on a pun between *circum* and *hircum*, a goat and the archetypal stinking animal.⁶⁷ Cato produced such mordent puns as referring to Fulvius Nobilior as *Mobilior* instead, perhaps to comment on his flip-flopping political habits (De or. 2.256). On another occasion Cato reportedly took umbrage at a criticism of his use of language and retorted with *paronomasia*:

... *idem, cum cuidam dixisset: ‘eamus deambulatum’: et ille:*
‘Quid opus fuit de?’ ‘Immo vero,’ inquit, ‘quid opus fuit te?’
 (De or. 2.256)

⁶⁵ See Russell 2001: III.95, the *myrmillo*’s helmet typically featured a fish, which marked him as the natural prey of the *retiarus*.

⁶⁶ “Facetiously” captures the more tame sense of *subridicule* rather well as we use it today, as a less harmful, less aggressive alternative to “sarcastic” and implying humor for the sake of humor rather than insult.

⁶⁷ Again, I can neither find nor supply any sufficient translation. Perhaps “I’ve got a stinking feeling that you’ve got me surrounded”?

[Cato], when he said to someone, “Let us go for a walk-aroo.”
 “What need of the –aroo?” And Cato responded, “Really, what
 need of you?”⁶⁸

For Cato, the wordplay is a vehicle for disparagement, his means to assert superiority; our distinction between motivation and mechanism can apply.

Cicero and Quintilian both discuss species of humor belonging to a genus *decipiendi opinionem* (“of disappointing expectation”) or *dicta aliter intellegendi* (“of understanding words differently”); or, to sum up both their contributions altogether, deliberately saying or acting differently from what one means or thinks.⁶⁹ These devices, which necessitate no disparagement, are for Cicero the funniest of all: *sed ex his omnibus nihil magis ridetur quam quod est praeter expectationem* (2.284, “But out of all these nothing is laughed at more than that which is unexpected.”). This returns to the same idea we saw previously, that the most familiar (*notissimum*) type of humor is when we expect one thing and something else is said (*De or.* 2.255). Likewise, the disappointment of expectation and the *inopinatum* (“the unforeseen”) is regarded by Quintilian as *in omni hac materia vel venustissima* (*Inst.* 6.3.84, “indeed the most charming of all these means”); the scope of *hac materia*, is unfortunately unclear, but Quintilian obviously admires its elegance.⁷⁰ One neat example comes from Afer (likely Domitius) via Quintilian, about *homo in agendis causis optime vestitus* (*Inst.* 6.3.84, “a man who, for pleading

⁶⁸ I have attempted to translate the *deambulatum* in such a way as to preserve its colloquial nature and to provide the assonance necessary, but I cannot imagine Cato ever saying anything like “walk-aroo.” I considered “walkies” and “What need of ‘we’?” to get across the same sense of indignation, but “walkies” sounds like something one would say to a pet.

⁶⁹ These titles come from *Inst.* 6.3.84.

⁷⁰ Lest anyone suspect the label of *venustissima* removes the means from candidacy as humor-generators and simply refers to some pleasing quality, this follows a paragraph, 6.3.83, on foul or unrefined language, which may be *ridiculum* but does not befit a free man. The section which follows this dubs *simulatio* and *dissimulatio* the greatest sources of laughter (*Inst.* 6.3.85). Other authors also associate *venustas* and humor: Catullus 13, e.g., indicates Fabullus should bring the laughs (l. 5, *cachinnis*), and then addresses him as *venuste* (l. 6).

cases, is eminently well-dressed”).⁷¹ This turns on the expectation, now frustrated, of a different adjective from that of *vestitus*, perhaps *peritus* (“skilled”) or, for the further-deceiving initial assonance, *vetus* (“veteran, experienced”).⁷² Not only does this illustrate the *inopinatum*, but verges on absurdity as well, and the relationship between these is not accidental. A common thread of incongruity runs through the following devices introduced by Cicero and Quintilian: irony, simulation and dissimulation, and absurdity. In many of their examples appears some form of disparagement, but in all of them is something *inopinatum*.

Disappointing expectations may most immediately recall irony, but that is only one type among the lot, which includes, in rough order: under- and over-statements (*De or.* 2.267);⁷³ insinuation (*De or.* 2.278 and the joke about the tree quoted above; cf. *Inst.* 6.3.88, again as quoted above); its kin irony or dissimulation, which requires a solemn act and inconsistent thoughts (*De or.* 2.269), or which misapplies honorifics or deliberately misinterprets another’s speech (*De or.* 2.270-5; *Inst.* 6.3.85), both of which work handily with superiority theory and the ambiguity discussed above.⁷⁴ Dissimulation and ambiguity also naturally combine:

*valde haec ridentur et hercule omnia, quae a prudentibus per
dissimulationem subabsurde salseque dicuntur. ex quo genere est
etiam non videri intellegere quod intellegas; ut Pontidius, ‘qualem
existimas qui in adulterio deprehenditur?’ ‘tardum.’*
(*De or.* 2.275)⁷⁵

⁷¹ Quintilian offers another example of the disappointment of expectation in his section on *contrarium*, *Inst.* 6.3.64: *libidinosior es quam ullus spado* (“You are lustier than any eunuch.”). He withholds the name of the originator out of respect, he says.

⁷² For *vetus* as “veteran, experienced,” see Cic. *Tusc.* 2.16.38, Tac. *Hist.* 4.20 et al.

Another example in 6.3.84 possibly involves simulation: *et in occurrendo, ut Cicero audita falsa Vatini morte, cum obvium libertum eius interrogasset ‘rectene omnia?’ dicenti ‘recte,’ ‘mortuus est!’ inquit.*

⁷³ Incongruity foremost, but the examples given there are disparaging, e.g. “*ex quo genere etiam illud est quod Scipio apud Numantiam, cum stomacharetur cum C. Metello, dixisse dicitur, ‘si quantum pareret mater eius, asinum fuisse parituram.’*”

⁷⁴ Cicero recalls Socrates as the most outstanding practitioner of irony and dissimulation (*De or.* 2.270).

⁷⁵ This same joke is told by Quintilian (*Inst.* 6.3.87) to illustrate the opportunities which ambiguity provides for dissimulating or turning a meaning around: *cui sine dubio frequentissimam dat occasionem ambiguitas . . . Sed averti intellectus et aliter solet, cum ab asperioribus ad leniora deflectitur: ut qui, interrogatus quid sentiret de eo qui in adulterio deprehensus esset, tardum fuisse respondit.*

[Absurd jokes]⁷⁶ are laughed at heartily, and really everything which is said in a manner somewhat absurd and funny by people sharp enough but acting ironically. Of this sort too is where you pretend not to understand what you actually do understand, like when Pontidius, having been asked what he thought about the man caught in the act of adultery, replied “Too slow.”

This same quip is relayed by Quintilian at *Inst.* 6.3.87 (see n. 75), where he explains that *sine dubio frequentissimam dat occasionem ambiguitas* (“without a doubt, ambiguity gives the most frequent opportunities for dissimulation”) and further describes this as an example of moving from the serious to the lighter (*ab asperioribus ad leniora*); we recall here the psychological transitions identified by Spencer and Morreall as the sources of laughter. Irony appears in Quintilian’s short catalog of tropes which qualify as jests (*Inst.* 6.3.67-9): *quid ironia? nonne etiam quae severissime fit ioci paene genus est?* (*Inst.* 6.3.68, “What about irony? Isn’t this, even when it is at its most severe, more or less a kind of joke?”). Generally, some element of irony or dissimulation in delivery is an essential ingredient, according to Quintilian, since *nihil enim est iis quae sicuti salsa dicuntur insulsius* (*Inst.* 6.3.26, “Nothing is less amusing than what is spoken as though it’s amusing.”); a speaker makes something funny because he neither laughs at it nor delivers it as though it were a joke.

In fact, Quintilian states that the most laughter arises from instances of (dis)simulation, deliberate frustrations of expectations.

plurimus autem circa simulationem <et dissimulationem> risus est, quae sunt vicina et prope eadem, sed simulatio est certam opinionem animi sui imitantis, dissimulatio aliena se parum intellegere fingentis. (*Inst.* 6.3.85)

The most laughter arises from simulation <and dissimulation>, which are kin and nearly the same things, but simulation is the act

⁷⁶ These absurd jokes intervene in the discussion of dissimulation in *De or.* but will be treated here shortly.

of professing an opinion not actually held, and dissimulation is the act of feigning ignorance.

These superlatively funny devices operate primarily on principals of incongruity and only secondarily, if at all, with aggression or derision. Indeed, the example of dissimulation involves Cicero roughly quoting a line of Ennius when asked if he can say anything about Sextus Annalis, a witness in a case.⁷⁷ Finding some sense of superiority established here would necessitate Grunerian hypothesizing about a loser who does not get the reference,⁷⁸ but far more obvious is the humor found in the unforeseen response, and a poetic one at that, thus differing in register and arena of life.

Related to simulation, dissimulation, and the incongruous behavior they entail is the absurd. The *De Oratore*'s exploration of dissimulation and irony bleeds into a brief treatment of just this, the *subabsurda sed eo ipso nomine saepe ridicula* (*De or.* 2.274, "rather absurd but by this very reckoning often laughable"). The Latin adjective *absurdus* has much the same effect as English "absurd," which is often synonymous with "ridiculous." Among a few examples given by Cicero is *homo fatuus postquam rem habere coepit est emortuus* ("A foolish man, after he began to possess a fortune, died."). The most obvious absurdity is the ending *emortuus*, which foils our expectations: we had expected to see what sort of foolish things the fellow did with his fortune. Then we realize that dying is rather a silly thing to do immediately after striking it rich; and next we must discount that judgment itself as absurd, for his expiration was likely out of his control. One word is unexpected in that example, but later more substantial inconsistencies (*discrepantia*) are treated, e.g. *quid huic abest nisi res et virtus?* (*De or.* 2.281, "What doesn't he

⁷⁷ *Inst.* 6.3.86. Ennius authored a work called the *Annales*; Sextus Annalis amounts to "Sixth Annal." Cicero delivered *quis potis ingentis causas evolvere belli*, replacing Ennius' *oras* with *causas*. Fr. 164 Skutsch. See Russell 2001: 93.

⁷⁸ Beard (2014: 40 and note 65) shares my skepticism.

have, besides wealth and integrity?”). We should again observe that this example and the previous one rely on incongruity for their humorous mechanism, but also work toward establishing superiority over a specific target.

Both Cicero and Quintilian near the ends of their examinations redefine the laughable.⁷⁹ Cicero, who started with *turpitude* and *deformitas* as the territory of humor, *vel sola vel maxime* (*De or.* 2.236, “either only or chiefly”; recall also *De or.* 2.238 [*materies omnis ridiculorum est in eis vitiis*], as well as *De or.* 2.239 and 2.248), augments his account considerably over the course of the excursus. In the selection below, Cicero summarizes the causes: those associated primarily with superiority are marked with a superscript “s,” while those belonging to incongruity have “i.”⁸⁰

expectationibus enim decipiendis et naturis aliorum irridendis et similitudine turpioris et dissimulatione et subabsurda dicendo et stulta reprehendendo risus moventur. (De or. 2.289)

For laughter is brought on by frustrating expectations,ⁱ mocking the character of others,^s imitating something or someone more shameful,^s dissimulation,ⁱ saying slightly absurd things,ⁱ and criticizing foolish behavior.^s

It is not insignificant that Cicero leads off with the frustration of expectations, given the recent assertion that nothing is laughed at more than that which is beyond expectation (*De or.* 2.284, see above); it seems as though Cicero started with one definition, the traditional, accepted definition from Aristotle, and this definition subsequently evolved as he explored different types and examples of humor.

⁷⁹ *Inst.* 6.3 actually finishes with a small critique of Domitius Marsus’ lost work on *urbanitas* (sections 102-12).

⁸⁰ *subabsurda dicendo* could be interpreted with superiority theory; a listener would feel superior to someone saying silly things, as though ignorant. But deliberately saying absurd things and acting ignorant would be akin to dissimulation or simulation (see *Inst.* 6.3.99, *subabsurda illa constant stulti simulatione*), which itself is easily understood as incongruity-based.

Cicero immediately follows this revision with a prescription for the execution of any verbal humor, one which necessitates a dissimulating delivery and thereby incongruity:

itaque imbuendus est is qui iocose volet dicere quasi natura quadam apta ad haec genera et moribus, ut ad cuiusque modi genus ridiculi vultus etiam accommodetur; qui quidem quo severior est et tristior, ut in te, Crasse, hoc illa quae dicuntur salsiora videri solent. (De or. 2.289)

And so he who wants to speak jokingly must be fitted with a certain disposition and manners suited to these types, so that even his expression may be adapted to each variety of funny thing; indeed, the more severe and grim someone is, as in your case, Crassus, the more amusing what he says seems to be.

This, then, is the positive precedent for Quintilian's statement above that nothing is less funny than that which tries to be funny (*Inst.* 6.3.26, quoted above). A deadpan delivery, in which someone dour says something droll, amplifies humorous effect in direct proportion.

Quintilian follows Cicero's arc as well. Early on in the chapter is a similar endorsement of superiority theory: *habet enim, ut Cicero dicit, sedem in deformitate aliqua et turpitudine* (*Inst.* 6.3.8, "For [laughter] has, as Cicero said, its basis in a certain deformity and shamefulness."). He couches this just before by noting that laughter is not aroused by one principle alone: *praeterea non una ratione moveri solet* (*Inst.* 6.3.7), but seems nevertheless to be an ally of superiority theorists when he observes that *a derisu non procul abest risus* (*Inst.* 6.3.7, "Laughter is not far from derision").⁸¹ This is borne out by many examples found in the chapter, but there are some which do not necessarily or primarily involve disparagement or derision: e.g. the Sextus Annalis joke (*Inst.* 6.3.86), the slow adulterer (*Inst.* 6.3.87), and the fatal fig tree (*Inst.* 6.3.88). These all immediately precede his own redefinition of humor: *et hercule omnis salse dicendi ratio in eo est, ut aliter quam est rectum verumque dicatur* (*Inst.* 6.3.89, "And really, the

⁸¹ And we see in this a joke on Quintilian's own part in the *figura etymologica*: *risus* really is not far from the word *derisus*, the latter being a complex form of the former.

entire principle of speaking amusingly consists in saying something in a way different from the direct and truthful one.”). Whether Quintilian here is deliberately revising his understanding in order to imitate his predecessor, or whether it evolved naturally as he went, as Cicero’s did, cannot be determined confidently. By both rhetoricians, however, we are left with this picture of Roman humor: that incongruity seems the necessary vehicle for humor, and most frequently conveyed by that vehicle is the disparagement of someone or something violating a societal norm.

Where, then, does that leave relief theory? As previously noted, Raskin observed that the three modern theories treat different aspects of humor and our relationships with them.⁸² This observation has been borne out for the Romans by our sources, where incongruity and superiority theories mesh frequently. In recommending the use of humor to orators, Cicero and Quintilian both highlight its capacity to win an audience through fostering positive feelings and releasing stress:

est plane oratoris movere risum, vel quod ipsa hilaritas benevolentiam conciliat ei per quem excitata est, vel quod admirantur omnes acumen uno saepe in verbo positum maxime respondentis, non numquam etiam lacesantis; vel quod frangit adversarium, quod impendit, quod elevat, quod deterret, quod refutat; vel quod ipsum oratorem politum esse hominem significat, quod eruditum, quod urbanum, maxime quod tristitiam ac severitatem mitigat et relaxat odiosasque res saepe, quas argumentis dilui non facile est, ioco risuque dissolvit.
(De or. 2.236)

It is clearly fitting for an orator to move people to laugh, whether because cheerfulness itself wins goodwill for the one who aroused it, or because everyone admires the wit – often a matter of a single word – especially of a person making a defense, and sometimes of a person making an attack too; or because it disheartens an adversary, obstructs him, makes light of him, discourages him, refutes him; or because it shows that the speaker himself is refined,

⁸² Raskin 1985: 40, discussed above.

learned, urbane, and most of all because alleviates and undoes the effects of grim severity and often, through joking and laughter, dismisses offensive matters that are not easily dispelled through reason.

This passage involves each of the three theories: incongruity is hinted at by the *acumen uno saepe in verbo positum*, because that single word can often resonate with two meanings; a sense of superiority either in the speaker or the audience is established by the actions described in *quod frangit adversarium* through *quod refutat*;⁸³ but finally and most importantly for the purposes of the orator (*maxime*) comes the relief which humor provides, relief from *tristitia*, *severitas*, and other *odiosae res*. The verbs *dissolvit* and especially *dilui* recall Aristotelian catharsis, but where tragedies purged feelings of pity and fear through depictions of the same (that is, homeopathic catharsis) negative feelings are removed through jokes and laughter according to Cicero.⁸⁴ This also indicates that the relief itself is a consequence of humor; the release comes after the joking and laughter, where in Freud's theory the release of anxiety or tension motivates the joke and is itself felt as pleasurable humor.

Quintilian too appreciates the ameliorative effects humor can have with regard to an audience or judge, and brings them up at the very beginning of his treatment of wit and humor, which immediately follows a discussion of *ethos* and *pathos*.⁸⁵

⁸³ Gruner would argue that a speaker using humor and showing himself to be *politum*, *eruditum*, and *urbanum* is "winning the game," and would include these effects with those immediately preceding them.

⁸⁴ See also *De or.* 2.340, following advice for the orator regarding what to do if he has lost the goodwill of the audience: *Nullo autem loco plus facetiae prosunt et celeritas et breve aliquod dictum nec sine dignitate et cum lepore; nihil enim tam facile quam multitudo a tristitia et saepe ab acerbitate commode et breviter et acute et hilare dicto deducitur.* ("But nowhere are witticisms, swiftness, and dignified and charming quips more helpful. For nothing is as easy as drawing a crowd away from harshness and often bitterness too with an apt, brief, clever, and lively remark.") Cicero at *Phil.* 2.39 defends his own stand-up routine in front of the troops as a way to relax them; Beard 2014: 38 draws a connection between this and relief theory.

⁸⁵ The sequence here is remarkable: Quintilian begins book 6 of the *Inst.* by lamenting the passing of his young son, preceded in death by Quintilian's wife and other son (6.*Proem.*1-15), and then moves into an explanation of the ideal epilogue (*Inst.* 6.1) which involves and leads into more on emotions (6.2) and their persuasive use by the orator. This precedes our section on laughter (6.3), and he launches into this precisely by explaining how laughter

*huic diversa virtus quae risum iudicis movendo et illos tristes solvit
adfectus et animum ab intentione rerum frequenter avertit et
aliquando etiam reficit et a satietate vel a fatigatione renovat.*
(Inst. 6.3.1)

A strength different from [the ability to move someone to tears (Inst. 6.2.36)] is that which, by stirring up a judge's laughter, releases those dismal emotions and frequently diverts his mind from its concentration on the issues and sometimes, in addition, refreshes him and restores him from boredom or weariness.

Quintilian's choice of *solvit* echoes Cicero's *dissolvit*, as does the entire sentiment which he reiterates shortly thereafter: *rerum autem saepe, ut dixi, maximarum momenta vertit, ut cum odium iramque frequentissime frangat* (Inst. 6.3.9, "Moreover, as I said, it often reverses the momentum in very important matters, as it shatters hatred and anger quite frequently."). Again, we do not need to speculate about nervous or psychical energy, but can recognize here the same comic relief which appears in modern forms of entertainment; in Classical literature we can trace not it only in rhetorical essays meant for judges or juries, but also in other genres of literature.

With our survey complete, we see a picture of Roman humor theory which we can approach using, to varying degrees, many of the same notions developed by each of our modern attempts to understand the phenomenon. Roman humor is generated through incongruity, first and foremost, and is frequently but not necessarily a vehicle for derision. Disparagement without incongruity, either verbally or socially, is typically not amusing, just insulting. Humor may accomplish some relief, but relief itself is neither the vehicle of humor nor identical with it.⁸⁶ We may marry Hobbes and Quintilian here, and define humor's appreciation as a "sudden glory"

can dispel the gloomy emotions which the pathos discussed just before would have engendered, as though Quintilian wishes to drive off his own sadness.

⁸⁶ Cf. Mindess 1971: 238-41, who argues for humor as liberation or release from both expectation (via incongruity) and aggression (via degradation); incongruity, Mindess says, explains form but not content, and degradation explains content but not form. I have much the same issue with this as I do with Gruner, as it too often conjures up a target for aggression (a loser, in Gruner's terms) where none is necessary.

caused by the apprehension of some incongruent thing, which allows the joker to disparage another and thereby commend himself. The relationship of the three theories is thus not analogous to Raskin's reconciliation as described above, in large part also because our study is concerned more with authorial strategies, causes and effects on the literary ground, and less with more general sociological or psychological hypotheses and reactions. This expresses itself not least in an appreciation of literature's habit of being self-conscious: a text wielding disparaging humor, for instance, may not only want us to recognize its or its author's superiority but also the very attempt to establish that authority itself. Similarly, the achievement of comic relief is no less significant than the text's aim to bring about that relief and its relationship with the greater context; that is, relief theory may shed light not only on an audience's reaction, but also on a text's strategic rhetoric.

THE LAST CONSIDERATION – ROMAN DARK HUMOR

We now must confirm that the specific subject of this investigation, dark humor,⁸⁷ is one not anachronistic or utterly foreign to Romans. If we first return to our modern theories, useful as they were in developing our arsenal of interpretations, we find that humor involving grave violations of human mores is implicitly precluded in a number of them. Apter's reversal theory posits that humans exist in either a telic (goal-oriented) state or paratelic (playful, relaxed) state; incongruity perceived leads to arousal, which in the latter state is felt as humorous, but in the former is an obstruction, an irritation.⁸⁸ Presumably a context of dark humor, such as a scene of execution or a discovery of sexual deviancy, would not put a reader into a relaxed, paratelic state, so by Apter's definition, any arousal would not be felt as humorous. This may also lead us

⁸⁷ See the introduction for a definition of dark humor as humor about taboo subjects, deliberately offensive, in grim contexts, and wedded with bitterness.

⁸⁸ Apter 1982: 47, 187-9.

to speculate about the state of a reader of any given text. Such speculation is naturally difficult, but we may proceed upon the assumptions generated by a text's genre, an expectation-defining contract between author and audience. Is one who reads Martial's epigrams likely to be in a telic or a paratelic state? The nugatory nature of the genre would suggest the latter, but many epigrams target specific individuals or treat subjects less nugatory themselves,⁸⁹ such as death or criminal acts. Statius' epic *Thebaid* and Tacitus' history by definition of their genres present a reader with a different contract, different expectations, from Martial and from each other. In conjunction with the expectations of the genre, then, we must take into account as well the context of an instance of humor and the content of the humor itself. When confronted with serious material, such as murder, incest, etc., a reader may be in a telic state; the same incongruity which would be funny in a different context may, when presented in that situation, be rejected as distasteful. But this would be to reject the primary distinguishing characteristic of the modern genre known as black humor as well as gallows humor; we should be even less strict applying Apter's theory and its extensions to ancient humor.⁹⁰

Spencer's release of nervous energy as laughter requires a change diminishing in gravity, not increasing.⁹¹ Yet gallows humor, inextricably linked with death, frequently fits this definition: its punchlines are incongruous precisely because they shirk or defy the doom and gloom of the contexts. And other instances of dark humor bear weight in the unexpected change:

⁸⁹ In the preface to Book 1 Martial disavows attacking people by their real names, but we cannot verify if he did this, or carried the practice on through the other eleven books of epigrams. Furthermore, while a veiled attack can be amusing in itself due to the incongruity, the tension may still demand a telic state from the reader.

⁹⁰ Morreall's theory of shifts, both cognitive and affective, is likewise unable to account for dark humor, as it requires that all shifts be of the pleasant variety. Unpleasant shifts only lead to laughter in situations of embarrassment, hysteria, or possibly tickling, that omnipresent foil for inquiries into laughter (Morreall 1983: 38-9). The terminology of pleasant and unpleasant is unfortunately vague and subjective, but could lead to the conclusion that if someone does laugh at a sick joke or instance of dark humor, he or she experiences a pleasant shift – but this begins to verge on psychological evaluations of sociopathy.

⁹¹ Spencer 1870: 194.

take the joke about the fig tree above relayed by Cicero (*De or.* 2.278) and Quintilian (*Inst.* 6.3.88); the response insinuates a desire to commit uxoricide, dependent on and all the more shocking for following news of a tragic suicide. Both Cicero and Quintilian identify this as amusing, and it is appreciable as an instance of dark humor today in our own culture; modern theories which attempt to explain humor in general seem unsuited to accounting for the phenomenon of dark humor, at least.

Nor do our Roman witnesses offer a direct explanation of dark humor as they do of humor in general, and in fact may seem to prohibit it in much the same way modern theorists have. Cicero echoes Aristotle's limit on the laughable, that the error or ugliness that prompts the laughter must be painless and not destructive (*Poetics* 1449a32-7), when explaining the extent to which an orator should handle humor:

nam nec insignis improbitas et scelere iuncta nec rursus miseria insignis agitata ridetur: facinerosos [enim] maiore quadam vi quam ridiculi vulnerari volunt; miseros inludi nolunt, nisi se forte iactant; parcendum autem maxime est caritati hominum, ne temere in eos dicas qui diliguntur. itaque ea facillime luduntur quae neque odio magno neque misericordia maxima digna sunt.
(*De or.* 2.237-8)

For neither conspicuous wickedness which is joined with a crime, nor conspicuous wretchedness, on the other hand, is laughed at when spoken of. People want criminals to be wounded by some force greater than humor; they do not want the unfortunate to be mocked, unless they boast boldly.⁹² Also, you must spare most of all those who are popularly esteemed, lest you speak rashly against those who are loved. Thus the things most easily ridiculed are those which are worthy neither of great hatred nor the strongest pity.

From this came Cicero's assertion that "the entire subject matter of the laughable lies in those defects found in the lives of people who are neither dear nor wretched. . ." (*De or.* 2.238). This

⁹² Here we perhaps see influence from Plato's *Philebus* again; a lack of awareness of inferiority is regarded as laughable.

temperate zone of permissible targets would seem to exclude a considerable portion of dark humor's range. The stipulations placed upon humor's objects are expanded by Quintilian.

nec accusatorem autem atroci in causa nec patronum in miserabili iocantem feret quisquam. sunt etiam iudices quidam tristiores quam ut risum libenter patiantur. (Inst. 6.3.31)

No one will tolerate a prosecutor joking in a heinous case or a defense attorney doing so in a pitiful one. There are judges also who are too serious to suffer laughter gladly.

vitandum etiam ne petulans, ne superbum, ne loco, ne tempore alienum, ne praeparatum et domo ablatum videatur quod dicimus. nam adversus miseros, sicut supra dixeram, inhumanus est iocus. sed quidam ita sunt receptae auctoritatis ac notae verecundiae ut nocitura sit in eos dicendi petulantia. (Inst. 6.3.33)

Also to be avoided is insolence, arrogance, anything inappropriate in time or place, lest anything we say appear prepared beforehand and brought from home. For it is cruel to make jokes against the miserable, as I said above. Moreover, there are also people of such accepted authority and well-known respectability that any spoken aggression against them would be harmful to the speaker.

Where Cicero above says that conspicuous wickedness or wretchedness does not draw a laugh (and he somewhat contradicts himself by his own examples, as we shall see), he also frames his reasoning in the discussion of what is appropriate for an orator in order to win an audience. Quintilian does the same: The orator's authority, his ability to effectively persuade people, is the end goal; however amusing a jest is, it should not interfere with this aim: *dictum potius aliquando perdet quam minuet auctoritatem* (Inst. 6.3.30, "Sometimes [an orator] will sacrifice a remark rather than diminish his authority."). Note that he does not say that jokes in horrendous cases or about miserable individuals are not funny, but that they are not tolerable or in the interest of the speaker seeking to win approval.

Also to be excluded from an orator's comportment are exaggerated facial expressions and gestures, the brazen speech (*dicacitas*) of *scurrae* and stage productions, and obscenity (Inst.

6.3.29); again, not because these are not funny – in fact they sometimes are – but because they do not befit upstanding citizens:

illud vero, etiam si ridiculum est, indignum tamen est homine liberali, quod aut turpiter aut potenter dicitur: quod fecisse quendam scio qui humiliori libere adversus se loquenti “colaphum” inquit “tibi ducam, et formulam scribes quod caput durum habeas.” hic enim dubium est utrum ridere audientes an indignari debuerint. (Inst. 6.3.83)

But foul or violent language, even if it is funny, is nevertheless inappropriate for a gentleman; I know of a certain fellow who did this when he said to a lesser man who spoke freely against him, “I am going to deck you, then sue you for having a hard skull.” Here it is doubtful whether an audience ought to have laughed or been outraged.

From this admission that some humor lies outside the proper purview of Roman gentlemen and a reaction to an example of said humor, we glean two important ideas: the first is that Roman authors, unbound by the restrictions and motivations of live oratory and the norms of the forum, may use foul or violent humor precisely to cast portions of their work, especially characters within a narrative, in a certain light, or to achieve those ends which an orator would avoid. To judge from Quintilian’s context, the man’s remark above perhaps would have been unambiguously funny coming from a *scurra*, on the stage, or overheard on the street. On the other hand, tasteless humor is still humor, and we must be ready to recognize and interpret failed or inappropriate attempts at humor as possibly deliberate failures and nevertheless successful poetic contributions: a failed joke is not necessarily a failure on the part of an author, but may be used to characterize figures within a narrative or the narrative itself. The second observation we draw is that anger and laughter, resentment and amusement, are closely linked and perhaps not mutually exclusive. In the excerpt above, Quintilian questions which of anger or amusement an

audience ought to have felt, seeming to set up a dichotomy, but he does not inform us of an actual reaction. It is conceivable, however, that these responses are not mutually exclusive.

And this idea, that anger and laughter are in some instances expected responses to one and the same stimulus, deserves exploration and will receive such in later chapters. For now, I will suggest that this particular stimulus may well be labeled ‘dark humor,’ and, having seen one example of it in Roman literature, we should look for corroborating evidence. Examples from other authors of this study will not work as evidence here, because arguing that their passages are humorous will be one of the first steps in their interpretation; hence adducing them here would constitute circular reasoning. We must again use Cicero and Quintilian and what they tell us explicitly is funny. Already we have seen that Cicero recommends a grim, severe demeanor for maximum humorous effect (*De or.* 2.289);⁹³ a grim form, which is most appropriate for dark material, can elicit amusement, then, but so too can content which may provoke outrage, as shown just above,⁹⁴ when linked with wit. Quintilian admits that foul and violent language may be funny (*Inst.* 6.3.83, quoted above), and Cicero shares a number of jokes which seem to fly in the face of his early restriction on what can be funny: *nec insignis improbitas et scelere iuncta nec rursus miseria insignis agitata ridetur* (*De or.* 2.237, “For neither conspicuous wickedness which is joined with a crime, nor conspicuous wretchedness, on the other hand, is laughed at

⁹³ Cicero’s juries are likely not in a paratelic state, yet nevertheless can appreciate humor.

⁹⁴ Cicero is perhaps touching on this relationship when he explains several times that the same material can spark laughter as well as something more serious: *sed hoc mementote, quoscumque locos attingam, unde ridicula ducantur, ex eisdem locis fere etiam graves sententias posse duci.* (*De or.* 2.248, “But remember this, that whatever topics from which humor may develop I approach, from these same sources we may, in general, draw serious thoughts as well.”) Also: *nullum genus est ioci quo non ex eodem severa et gravia sumantur.* (*De or.* 2.250, “There is no type of joke from which austere and more serious ideas cannot be taken.”). Cicero differentiates later between content and method, or we might say between message and medium: *sunt etiam illa venusta, ut in gravibus sententiis, sic in facetiis. dixi enim dudum, materiam aliam esse ioci, aliam severitatis; gravium autem et iocorum unam esse rationem.* (*De or.* 2.262, “Those [jests] too are charming, whether in serious expressions or witty ones. For I said earlier that joking has one set of subject matter and seriousness another; the method for serious and for joking, however, is one and the same.”) This sentence is problematic, because he earlier said that jesting and serious matters can spring from the same *locis*, which I would take to be much the same as *materiam*.

when spoken of.”). This demarcation, the insistence that some things just are too heinous or pitiful, or too obviously so, to be funny, provides us with three notional categories: the first, material which qualifies as unobjectionably funny; the second, wickedness or wretchedness which is not conspicuous and is comfortably treated in an amusing fashion; and the third, that described explicitly in the quote above. Quintilian’s doubt above, however, and our own about the proportion of prescription to description in Cicero’s line there, suggest either that the boundary between the second and third categories may not be firm, depending on the attitudes of an audience, or that excessively offensive or pitiful material may be treated in such a way as to draw ire, disgust, and laughs simultaneously, perhaps even from one and the same audience. The reception largely depends on the delivery, as Cicero indicates above (*De or.* 2.289). Furthermore, his limitation of what is laughable (*De or.* 2.237) is also predicated on the pressure an orator feels to satisfy an audience’s desires, as he goes on to explain:

facinerosos enim maiore quadam vi quam ridiculi vulnerari volunt; miseros inludi nolunt, nisi se forte iactant. parcendum autem maxime est caritati hominum, ne temere in eos dicas qui diliguntur. (De or. 2.237)

For [an audience] wants criminals to be wounded by some force greater than humor; they do not want the miserable to be mocked, unless they happen to act boastfully. Moreover, one must be especially considerate of the esteem of the people, lest you speak rashly against those who are loved.

The first portion of this quote is curious when considered in conjunction with the previous: an audience will not laugh when more egregious criminals are mocked, he says, because humor is not sufficient punishment. But I suggest that it is possible that an audience would still be amused by humorous remarks made at the expense of the accused – superiority theorists would deem this likely – and that Cicero is rather enjoining orators to take their opportunity to speak and use it for

the more pointed attacks which an audience would ultimately want.⁹⁵ In any case, this concern for an audience's immediate disposition and its potential influence over the outcome of a case is not one shared by the other authors of this study, particularly those writing about mythical events or historical past. Thus we may find Cicero's injunction against the humorous treatment of the especially wicked or wretched not perfectly applicable to our other texts. We may also find where Cicero draws the line, or does not, by reviewing some other examples of dark humor.

We have already seen the joke relayed by both Cicero and Quintilian about the suicide and the fig tree (*De or.* 2.278, *Inst.* 6.3.88). They both find it amusing due to its insinuation: "Can I have a cutting of that tree?" is funnier than "I'd like my wife to commit suicide" first because it is not overt in its outrageous content. There is an incongruity between the superficial innocence of the former request in the abstract and the latent, nearly criminal intention behind it, one fully expressed and hence less incongruent in the second. It is true that both bear some incongruity with conversational and social norms – no one expects to hear someone say they wish their spouse would expire, especially after someone mentions their own tragic loss – but the first example carries incongruity not just in content but in expression.⁹⁶ This first layer of humor-generating incongruity casts the intention behind it in a similar, ironic light, whereas "I'd like my wife to kill herself" could only ever be, obvious tastelessness aside, uncomfortably ambiguous at best and puzzling, offensive, and incriminating at worst.

We have also seen the joke about the adulterer who was judged simply as too slow (*De or.* 2.275, *Inst.* 6.3.87), which illustrated dissimulation, ambiguity, and the technique of moving

⁹⁵ Besides, we hear from Quintilian that Cicero himself produced more witticisms even in the courts than anyone else (*Inst.* 6.3.4), and Plutarch reports that Cicero's σκώμματα and εὐτραπεία were well-suited to the courts, but he carried it to excess and developed a reputation for being malicious (*Cicero* 5.4). Cicero was able, then, to exploit humor, but we may also be confident that his final warning is accurate.

⁹⁶ We may also note a potential example of dissimulation here on the part of the speaker, who likely knows that the tree is not the focus of the conversation yet asks about that instead of relaying his shock or sympathies.

ab asperioribus ad leniora. The question *qualem existimas qui in adulterio deprehenditur?* expects an answer which condemns the guilty man as morally bankrupt. The response of *tardum* tacitly endorses the act of adultery itself – it is only a crime because he got caught. This incongruity in both conversational and social expectations makes light of a deplorable situation. We may grant that adultery, common as it seems to have been to judge from ancient sources, is not an *insignis* enough example of *improbitas*; consider instead a joke about mythic rape and real sodomy in conjunction:

*trahitur etiam aliquid ex historia, ut, cum Sex. Titius se
Cassandram esse diceret, 'multos' inquit Antonius 'possum tuos
Aiaces Oileos nominare.'* (De or. 2.265)

Anything can be drawn from history too, like when Sextus Titius was dubbing himself Cassandra and Antonius commented, “I can name many of your Ajaxes.”

This comes in a description of wit based on content rather than in wordplay and is described as more amusing than the latter type (De or. 2.264). Antonius’ retort neatly replaces the flattering sense of Cassandra as prophet with her status as victim of Ajax and thereby insinuates something unflattering about Sextus Titius’ *virtus*. We will not comment on the exploitation of Cassandra’s mythical *miseria*; the suggested habitual *stuprum* on the part of Sextus Titius must qualify as significant wickedness belonging to a man with conveniently little public affection to deserve restraint,⁹⁷ and Cicero deems it even more amusing than the wordplay of which he was so fond.

The above are mostly examples of *improbitas*; Cicero later undercuts the sanctity of *miseria insignis* as well by having Strabo profess a particular fondness for gallows humor:

*me tamen hercule etiam illa valde movent stomachosa et quasi
submorosa ridicula . . . in quo, ut mihi videtur, persalsum illud est*

⁹⁷ See e.g. Cicero *Pro Rab. Perd.* 24. It matters not whether Titius’ reputation was at the time of Antonius’ quip more intact; the remark is funny from Cicero’s point of view later in history.

*apud Novium: 'quid ploras, pater?' 'mirum ni cantem:
condemnatus sum.'* (De or. 2.279)

But you know, what really get me going are those irritable and peevish jokes . . . as an example, that one by Novius is especially funny to me: "Why are you crying, Dad?" "It's a wonder I'm not singing; I'm to be executed."

Here the extreme incongruity appears to override any moral compunction which might arise from the circumstances. One may object that this classic example of gallows humor is so funny simply because it appears in a farce,⁹⁸ and hence no real misery is mocked. But we are in fact going to be examining dark humor in literature, not out on the historical streets of Rome or in the midst of a hearing in the forum. However much a text's humor may be based on historical fact or characters, it is fundamentally removed from reality. Also, questions of context and generic expectations will of course play into any interpretation of humor, but we cannot discount an instance of humor on the grounds that it appears in a traditionally un-funny genre like historiography or epic. On another front, the qualification of the jokes as *stomachosa* and *submorosa* deserves comment: people suffering emotional distress are fair game for humor, and in this instance specifically coming from themselves. Humor does not require an environment free from *miseria* to be born, and once born may continue exhibiting that woe. The *stomachosa*, irritable or ill-tempered, also recalls Quintilian's indecision over amusement or anger related in *Inst.* 6.3.83 above, which we took as a basic model for dark humor. The situation here is not perfectly analogous: it was Quintilian's audience (and he himself) who could not decide between outrage and laughter, but Cicero's capital convict is both joker and indignant. Nevertheless, some kind of affinity between humor and anger exists, and here death is added.

⁹⁸ May and Wisse 2001: 192, note 223.

So, could and did Romans appreciate dark humor as we have defined it? The answer must be a complicated affirmative: Cicero and Quintilian may at times place it outside the bounds of appropriate activity for the Roman elite in the public arena, and above all the courts, but nevertheless provide examples of its general potency. This exercise seems admittedly unnecessary when faced with an epigram such as Martial 9.15, that punning couplet about a serial murderess: *inscripsit tumulis septem scelerata virorum / 'se fecisse' Chloe. quid pote simplicius?* ("Chloe the wicked inscribed on the tombs of her seven husbands that 'she did it.' What could be clearer?"). All the force of this epigram depends on the wordplay of *fecisse*, implying both that she built the tombs (traditional) and that she did her husbands in (scandalous). This is a clean, neat example of dark humor, but now we may be more confident in defining it as such from a Roman perspective and not just from our own. With this understanding in hand, we will now proceed with our investigation of other disreputable epigrams of Martial.

CHAPTER II

MARTIAL'S EPIC-GRAM AND THE POLEMICS OF GENRE

Humor is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the genre of epigram in Martial's hands, unlike in the case of epic and historiography. The brevity, epigram's hallmark, allows an individual literary project – that is, a poem – and a single joke to be coterminous, giving epigram an advantage over all other poetic forms and traditional genres of antiquity when it comes to delivering humor: a joke can be relayed in epigram with no need to weave it into any other context,¹ and the brevity itself enhances incongruity through its economy. As a consequence, humor and epigram have a sort of chicken-egg relationship: the genre traditionally considered playful or nugatory is the right place for humor, and humor is prone to find its expression in epigram. The taboos which most often define dark humor – death and obscenity foremost – also frequent epigram and in fact each distinguish the genre independently of the other.² Humor and offensive material often combine when Martial invokes characters from epic and tragedy, conspicuously lofty genres³ – and all the more so when juxtaposed with epigram. This chapter

¹ Here comes to mind a half line of the *Thebaid*, describing the wound of Archemorus née Opheltes, *totumque in vulnere corpus* (6.598). The economy and vividity of this phrase itself is unsettling and witty; it would do well as an illustration of humor in epigram as *totumque in lepore carmen*.

² Regarding obscenities, Watson and Watson 2003: 21 explain that “The use of basic obscenities is the feature which most clearly distinguishes Latin epigram not only from the ‘higher’ Roman genres, but also from Greek epigram.”

³ The ancient conception of a hierarchy of genres is articulated by Aristotle in a passage quoted in my introduction, *Poetics* 1448b24f: “[Poetry,] then, was split according to the personal nature of the poet; the more serious poets would represent noble deeds and noble men, but the less worthy represented those of trivial people, first composing lampoons as the others did hymns and encomia.” The conception was not foreign to the Romans; Quintilian surveys the authors worth reading, albeit for students embarking on a career in oratory (*Inst.* 10.1.45), and among the *eminentissimi* lists the epic authors of Greek and Latin first. On Homer (10.1.46-51): *quid? in verbis, sentiis,*

will first provide a brief overview of the nature of epigram's humorous use of offensive material, then survey the relationships which Martial constructs between 'high' genres and his own work, and finally argue that dark humor is the ideal and in fact natural mode for Martial to use in assaulting epic and tragedy and claiming primacy for epigram.

OBSCENITY HO!

First, however, a warning about the contents of this chapter: there will be much that is offensive, much that is graphically obscene, as is to be expected in a study of dark humor. What was revolting to the Romans and is offensive to us today was also considered obscene at various times in between. Naturally, this has affected the scholarship on Martial throughout history. The first efforts to clean up Martial may date back as far as the ninth century, when the text survived in French monasteries.⁴ In the most drastic expurgations, some manuscripts lost the more obscene pieces of poems.⁵ Martial in the 16th and 17th centuries saw some censorship or, more remarkably, a rehabilitation of sorts, as in Burmeister's translation of Martial's epigrams not into another language, but into Christian sentiments, taking on even the most profane poems.⁶ Around Europe, the more outrageous poems were by and large toned down or avoided by English translators;⁷ French professors compiled selective editions, and Germans worried about harming

figuris, dispositione totius operis nonne humani ingenii modum excedit? ut magni sit viri virtutes eius non aemulatione, quod fieri non potest, sed intellectu sequi. verum hic omnis sine dubio et in omni genere eloquentiae procul a se reliquit (50-51, "Again, doesn't he exceed the limits of human talent in his diction, sentiments, figures, and the arrangement of his entire work, such that it requires great fortitude not to imitate him, since that is not possible, but to truly understand it? Indeed, without a doubt he has far outstripped all others in every aspect of eloquence"). Quintilian introduces Vergil first because of his proximity in talent with Homer: *itaque ut apud illos Homerus, sic apud nos Vergilius auspiciatissimum dederit exordium* (10.1.85, "Just as among the Greeks Homer provided the most auspicious beginning, so for us does Vergil").

⁴ Sullivan 1991: 260.

⁵ See Williams 2004: 171

⁶ Discussed briefly in Sullivan 1991: 279-80, more extensively in Fitzgerald 2007: 190-6, which notes that Burmeister's feat was contemporaneous with Ben Johnson's "de-expurgat[ion]" of Martial's text, which explicated the sexual jokes. We must be careful of assuming a period has universal aesthetic imperatives.

⁷ Sullivan 1991: 287-9.

the youth.⁸ In the 19th century, the trend was to leave the most offensive poems untranslated or else render them for indefensible reasons into Italian.⁹

This legacy and our own modern unease with obscenity are still perceptible in scholarship of the 20th century, which has for the most part continued avoiding the dirtier, darker side of Martial.¹⁰ Even Watson and Watson's Cambridge Greek and Latin edition of Martial's "Select Epigrams," published in 2003, puts obscene epigrams into a separate category entitled "Sexual *Mores*," perhaps for convenient reference but perhaps also for segregation, lest an innocent reader stumble upon them. And this collection of "Select Epigrams" conspicuously contains not a single poem from Book 11, which contains the highest concentration of obscenity.¹¹ A lack of scholarly attention to date means that I will at times be advancing without the aid of commentaries or otherwise working with little secondary material. My purpose here is to examine the vital role that humor involving obscenity and death plays in Martial's poetic program.

GROPING FOR THE DARK

As one might surmise from the explanation above, scholarly discussions of Martial's humor to date have largely avoided the intersections of the dark and the funny. Sullivan's landmark overview, *Martial: the unexpected classic*, dismisses his sexual humor on the grounds that it is difficult to treat in depth, being incompatible with modern conventions, even while

⁸ See Sullivan 1991: 294 for Dubois, Frusius, Gessner and Molshey.

⁹ Sullivan 1991: 302-5. Bohn and the Spanish translator Capalleja loom large in this period.

¹⁰ Curiously, it appears that that Catullus' objectionable material is more celebrated.

¹¹ Sullivan counts 45 of the 108 epigrams as obscene (1991: 47). Watson and Watson also include no representatives from *Liber de spectaculis*, *Xenia*, or *Apophoreta*. This is less surprising than Book 11's omission because of the natures of those books, differing considerably from the other twelve books of epigrams in mode of composition and occasion.

acknowledging that it was sometimes offensive to the original audience as well.¹² He is at least willing to explain Martial's use of obscenity as an example of shock humor, an extreme ἀπροσδόκητον which amuses by flouting social norms and allowing a reader or listener to release their otherwise repressed impulses – an example of Freudian relief theory.¹³ He does not explore its literary effects. Szelest's article "Humor bei Martial" also avoids obscenity in compiling examples of humorous poems, perhaps due to the same concerns about modern sensibilities, but it does admit a handful of jokes about death:¹⁴ among them are 9.15, the epigram about Chloe and her deceased husbands which we discussed in Chapter I, and 4.24, analogous to Cicero's joke about the fig tree and to be discussed here shortly.

The most sustained modern exploration of obscenity and humor in Latin literature is Amy Richlin's 1983 *The Garden of Priapus*. Richlin is concerned specifically with Roman satire's use of obscene, mostly sexual, humor to release hostile and/or aggressive feelings. In this we see Freudian relief, but also mechanisms of superiority, because the obscenities used carry associations of disgust, defilement, and staining.¹⁵ For the Roman satirists and Martial, Richlin argues, the model is the god Priapus: the authors claim for themselves the god's strength, masculinity, virility, and responsibility for maintaining social norms and boundaries.¹⁶ Richlin alludes at times to the capability of this sort of humor to take on literary targets, especially epic,¹⁷ but her overall approach is of a social bent, in contrast to the concerns of the present study, and she treats both obscenity and humor as secondary to what they can tell us about sexuality and

¹² Sullivan 1991: 237.

¹³ See Sullivan 1991: 240 and n. 37 and 38 in particular. Sullivan breaks Martial's humor down into five categories based on the mechanisms used: observed paradoxes or incongruities (240-2); syllogisms leading to absurd conclusions (242-4); paronomasia such as puns; metaphors and similes (244-8); and rhetorical *schemata* such as parody, hyperbole, anaphora, or irony (248-9).

¹⁴ Szelest 1981: 295.

¹⁵ Richlin 1983: 26-7.

¹⁶ Richlin 1983: 58.

¹⁷ See Richlin 1983: 62, 160-1, 179-80.

aggression.¹⁸ Privileging dark humor as a subject worth explaining in its own right is my aim here. The first step is to illustrate the humor of dark material in Martial's hands, starting with obscenity and moving on to death.

Obscenity appears in the most notorious epigrams of Catullus,¹⁹ whom Martial cites as his predecessor, along with Domitius Marsus, Albinovanus Pedo, and Cornelius Lentulus Gaetulicus – the first an epigrammatist of the Augustan age, the latter two Tiberian – in the preface to his first regular collection:

*lascivam verborum veritatem, id est epigrammaton linguam,
excusarem, si meum esset exemplum: sic scribit Catullus, sic
Marsus, sic Pedo, sic Gaetulicus, sic quicumque perlegitur.*
(1.praef.)

I would beg pardon for the licentious frankness of my words, that is, the language of epigram, if I were the first to do this; but this is how Catullus wrote, and Marsus and Pedo and Gaetulicus, and whoever is read all through.

Similar defenses of obscenity as epigram's special province can be found scattered across his books.²⁰ Martial even quotes a short poem attributed to the Emperor Augustus in 11.20 as a defense of "Roman candor" in his own collections of poems:

¹⁸ Sullivan 1991: 209-10 reiterates Richlin's argument in an apology of Martial's sexual epigrams: "It is a frequent criticism of Martial's epigrams on sexual matters that they are obscene, if not *ipso facto* immoral. A more enlightening – and more modern – approach would be to interpret Martial's attacks on women in general as a form of *political* pornography. Martial, like Juvenal, is concerned with power and therefore with the fear of losing it. . . The fear runs deeper, showing itself in a pervasive dislike of, and contempt for, the female body . . . From this stems the disgust Martial expresses for the external manifestations of the female and her formidable sexual powers." No similar explanation is given for the pederastic epigrams, unless we are to understand pederasty as a manifestation of powerful and not entirely conscious misogyny.

I submit that this approach, to see obscenity in *social* terms, in part is adopted to allow humor studies to be taken more seriously, but that it in fact has the opposite effect: the more scholars attempt to use humor merely as a touchstone for other, traditionally more serious areas of research, the more later scholars will be encouraged to do the same. Refer to my introduction for more on this phenomenon.

¹⁹ See Catullus 11, 15, 16, 25, 36, et al. For a brief discussion of Martial's need to establish his connection to Catullus, see Watson and Watson 2003: 21.

²⁰ See Martial 1.4, 1.35, 2.praef., 3.68, 4.14, 4.49, 8.praef., 8.3, 10.4, and 11.15. For a discussion of Martial's general defense of epigram, see particularly Sullivan 1991: 56-77, "Martial's *Apologia pro opere suo*." For obscenity specifically, see 64-6.

*Caesaris Augusti lascivos, livide, versus
 sex lege, qui tristis verba Latina legis:
 'quod futuit Glaphyran Antonius, hanc mihi poenam
 Fulvia constituit, se quoque uti futuam.
 Fulviam ego ut futuam? quid si me Manius oret 5
 pedicem? faciam? non puto, si sapiam.
 "aut futue; aut pugnemus" ait. quid quod mihi vita
 carior est ipsa mentula? signa canant!'
 absolvis lepidos nimirum, Auguste, libellos,
 qui scis Romana simplicitate loqui. 10*

Read six wanton verses of Caesar Augustus, you spiteful
 fellow, who read Latin words so sternly:
 "Because Antony fucks Glaphyra, Fulvia decided to punish
 me by making me fuck her in turn. Me, fuck Fulvia? What
 if Manias begged me to peg him? Would I do it? I don't
 think I would, if I were sane. 'Either we fuck or we fight,'
 she says. But my cock is dearer to me than life itself. Let
 the trumpets sound!" Augustus, you who know how to
 speak with Roman candor, you certainly vindicate my witty
 little books.²¹

Not only does this epigram appear in Book 11, the most obscene of Martial's books,²² but it
 immediately precedes a description of the woman Lydia in 11.21 which is to my mind the most
 graphically obscene piece from Martial's corpus.²³ The association by proximity implies that
 Augustus would approve of this other example of *Romana simplicitas*.

Augustus' epigram (lines 3-8) relies first on shock – a basic sort of incongruity,
 potentially very effective because it combines violations of intellectual expectation and cultural
 norms – and the absurdity of the situation for its humor, driven home by his indignant rhetorical
 questions. The final lines artfully deliver an incongruous punchline, however: a reader would
 almost expect to read that what is dearer to him than his life is his dignity or honor, or perhaps

²¹ In places here and elsewhere I draw on Shackleton Bailey's translation when I cannot improve upon it.

²² Book 11 enjoys Saturnalian license throughout, unlike Book 3. Book 11 was published following the assassination of Domitian and ascension of Nerva and Trajan; the relief and release of anxieties after Domitian's 'reign of terror' came to an end may have motivated a book appreciating the Saturnalia, a holiday involving the reversal or relaxation of social norms.

²³ 11.21 consists of five couplets describing, via similes, *quam laxa* Lydia is, followed by a laughable punchline which removes all doubt about precisely what sense of *laxa* Martial has been using.

(ironically, if at all) the tenuous peace between himself and his former mother-in-law and political opponent, Fulvia. Instead he completes the sense with *mentula*, the obscene term par excellence.²⁴ This word is also featured prominently and unexpectedly in the immediately preceding epigram, 11.19:

*Quaeris cur nolim te ducere, Galla? diserta es.
saepe soloecismum mentula nostra facit.* (11.19)

You ask why I don't want to marry you, Galla? Well, you
are eloquent, whereas my cock often makes grammatical
errors.

The first line and first hemistich of the second make clear enough sense: the speaker indicates that he may feel inadequate in the presence of a spouse more learned and refined than himself. In presenting the subject of that last line he hammers that very point home with his sudden obscenity, all while adding a number of other possible interpretations in the same move. Is the speaker conflating sexual and social inadequacy, or so preoccupied with sex that he cannot separate the two? Or perhaps he is implying that his sexual appetite mixes up (grammatical) genders, and hence he is not interested in what the feminine Galla offers. Along those same lines, maybe it has already made such a mistake: Galla is of course nearly identical to Gallus, a word for a eunuch.²⁵ Such a mix-up would explain why Martial does not want to wed this person. We cannot be confident in any interpretation of this perplexing little poem, but the presence of shock

²⁴ So dubbed by Fusi 2006: 439 for Martial's usage of the word elsewhere. It is not admitted in any other genre than epigram, but Martial uses it 48 times (Adams 1982: 9-12). This word Martial also happens to use metonymically to refer to the lascivious element in his poetry, a *sine qua non* (1.35.3-5, 3.69.1-2). Fusi 2006: 440 includes 11.90.8, but the sense of *mentula* here curiously differs from his previous use in referring to the old, rough and thus apparently 'manly' poetry of Lucilius, Ennius, Accius, and Pacuvius.

²⁵ See 2.45 and 2.47 among others.

humor is undeniable.²⁶ Poems like this often escape the notice of studies such as Richlin's, since Galla herself is not directly insulted or described as any of the traditional objects of invective.

Alongside epigram's tradition of obscenity is a long-standing relationship with death. The earliest extant Latin epigrams are funerary epitaphs,²⁷ and Greek epigram too had frequently treated the subject.²⁸ Several mock epitaphs appear in Martial's collections, e.g. 10.63 and 10.67, to be discussed later. In Martial's oeuvre, death meets humor. For example, a couplet which could be based on Cicero's fig tree joke:

*Omnes quas habuit, Fabiane, Lycoris amicas
extulit: uxori fiat amica meae.* (4.24)

Lycoris has buried every friend she's had, Fabianus.
Let her be friends with my wife.

This is an example of a seemingly serious statement which actually contains a *ridiculum dictum*,²⁹ and is thus funny on Roman terms for its insinuation (*De or.* 2.278) and simulation (*Inst.* 6.3.85) as well as perhaps for being *submorosum* (*De or.* 2.279). Frequently Martial's epigrams involving death introduce a direct wish for death or reveal a grim reality at the very end;³⁰ this suggests the taboo material constitutes the punch-line, *Aufschluss*, or *Befriedigung* so commonly appearing in Martial's epigrams, and is thereby laden with humor.³¹ Indeed, the final word of the following two poems bears the weight and delivers the humorous pay-off of each respective epigram:

²⁶ Shackleton Bailey 1993(III): 19 n. 39 directs us to Juvenal 6.456, *soloecismum liceat fecisse marito*. Martial "adds an obscene sense" relative to Juvenal's line, says Shackleton Bailey, but it may rather be the case that Martial adds to or preserves an obscene sense in a catch-phrase that was popular from the late 90s on and is lost to us in its original form. We are confident that Martial Book 11, dating to December of 96 (Kay 1985: 1) was published well before Juvenal 6 was, likely between 110 and 120 (Braund 1996: 16), so credit does not belong with Juvenal.

²⁷ See Sullivan 1991: 94 for a brief summary.

²⁸ Sullivan 1991: 83 recognizes "ninety or so epitaphs" in the *Garland of Meleager*, and a roughly equal number of epigrams on sudden fatalities or near-deaths.

²⁹ Szelest 1981: 297.

³⁰ See 1.20, 3.99 (which references 3.16 and 3.59), 4.33, 4.77, 6.31, 6.53, 9.15, 9.78, 10.16, 12.39, et al.

³¹ See Citroni 1969: 215-7, Kay 1985: 7-9 and Sullivan 1991: 223-4.

*Munera qui tibi dat locupleti, Gaure, senique,
si sapis et sentis, hoc tibi ait 'morere.'* (8.27)

Anyone who gives presents to you, rich and old as you are,
Gaurus, is saying, if you can understand it, "Die."

*Mentiris: credo. recitas mala carmina: laudo.
cantas: canto. bibis, Pontiliane: bibo.
pedis: dissimulo. gemma vis ludere: vincor.
res una est sine me quam facis: et taceo.
nil tamen omnino praestas mihi. 'mortuus,' inquis, 5
'accipiam bene te.' nil volo: sed morere.* (12.40)

You lie, I believe you. You recite bad poetry, I praise it.
You sing, I sing. You drink, Pontilianus, I drink. You fart, I
pretend not to notice. You want to play a game,³² I lose.
There is but one thing you do without me; and I don't say a
word. But you won't do a single thing for me. "I'll be good
to you when I'm dead," you say. I don't want anything; just
die.

In both instances the final *morere* explains all that has gone before it, revealing the actions described to be those of reprehensible legacy hunters, though in the latter poem it is the speaker who is culpable and we do not understand the terms of the relationship until the final line. The unexpected forwardness and the unsettling breach of social conventions both contribute to the humorous effect, but the two poems differ markedly in their angle of presentation. In 8.27, both speaker and reader can sneer at dense Gaurus and greedy legacy hunters from a position of superiority,³³ but in 12.40 we can understand the change of person in two ways: first, we become uncomfortable with the fact that Martial, whom we have presumably enjoyed for forty poems or even a dozen books prior, acts the part of a dishonorable cheat; second, the first-person forces the reader into the very shoes of that cheat. Thus the traditional disdain an audience would have for such a figure is reflected onto author and audience in a further unsettling move.

³² *Gemma* being a game piece by extension from its meaning as 'precious stone.'

³³ For more epigrams about legacy hunters, see 2.65, 5.37, 8.43, and 10.43.

Martial also combines death and sex a number of times in his works.³⁴ The startling effect of the taboos in conjunction is one of multiplication in 10.67:

*Pyrrhae filia, Nestoris noverca,
quam vidit Niobe puella canam,
Laertes aviam senex vocavit,
nutricem Priamus, socrum Thyestes,
iam cornicibus omnibus superstes,* 5
*hoc tandem sita prurit in sepulchro
calvo Plutia cum Melanthione.* (10.67)

The daughter of Pyrrha, stepmother of Nestor,
who was grey when Niobe saw her as a girl,
whom old Laertes called grandmother,
the nurse of Priam, mother-in-law to Thyestes,
already having outlived all the crows,
Plutia was at last laid in this tomb and
itches with lust along with bald Melanthio.

I identify five humorous elements in this poem, Plutia's mock-epitaph: first, the absurdity of her age, inflated by her associations with characters of myth; second, the sheer number of her relations, that we should believe (however ironically) in one common relation between such an ensemble; third, the deflation from Priam, Laertes, and co. to her modern-day tombmate Melanthio, who is only worthy of the insulting and, perhaps worse given the company, mundane epithet 'bald;' fourth, the parody of traditional sepulchral inscriptions that is substituting the dirty *prurit in sepulchro* for a traditional *iacet in sepulchro*, and *tandem* is outrageous in its own right on an epitaph or in an obituary, the opposite of the traditional lament of premature death;³⁵ and fifth, the revelation that the incredibly decrepit and now in fact deceased woman is burning with lust, not on a funeral pyre. The disgust packed into *prurire* is amplified by the competing,

³⁴ One may also examine 6.33 and 10.63, though in 10.63 the humor comes wholly from obscenity in a context of death, not from death itself.

³⁵ See Watson and Watson 2003: 354-6, which goes further and takes *prurit* as periphrasis (hardly euphemism) for sexual intercourse. This would be an even more pointed, sick twist on the traditional *iacet*. The precedent is Catullus 88.1-2.

mutually exclusive images of such an old woman and a corpse involved in the activity, and the incongruity of dead and still dirty is highlighted further by the contrast between Plutia and her supposed august relationships. The association operates in the other direction as well, however; how does it reflect on Priam and Nestor that the woman who raised them is now up to this? This question, what epigram may inflict via humor on the higher genres of epic and tragedy, what epigram does *to* those genres rather than what they do *for* epigram, we will now investigate.

MYTHOLOGICAL MATERIA

We must ground any discussion of the humorous ways in which epigram takes on its loftier literary competitors in a comprehensive examination of Martial's general use of them. Epic, tragedy, and particularly their mythical characters appear in a significant number of his epigrams: using names as a marker, we see mythology in 276 epigrams, or nearly 20% of the corpus.³⁶ This percentage is remarkably large particularly when we consider Martial's overt stance on the mythologically-based, more prestigious genres. We will now survey some poems which illustrate this stance, the most direct and recognized epigrams on the subject:

*Sili, Castilidum decus sororum,
qui periuria barbari furoris
ingenti premis ore perfidosque
astus Hannibalis levisque Poenos
magnis cedere cogis Africanis: 5
paulum seposita severitate,
dum blanda vagus alea December
incertis sonat hinc et hinc fritillis
et ludit tropa nequiore talo,
nostris otia commoda Camenis. 10
nec torva lege fronte, sed remissa
lascivis madidos iocis libellos.
sic forsán tener ausus est Catullus
magno mittere Passerem Maroni. (4.14)*

³⁶ 20% by number of epigram, not percentage of lines. The calculation was done by Szelest 1974: 297. Szelest counts 280 different names, which does include clear personifications of abstracts like Fortuna, Victoria, etc.

Silius, glory of the Castalian sisterhood, you who crush with weighty words the betrayals of the frenzied foreigners and the treacherous guile of Hannibal, and force the weak Carthaginians to give way to the great Africani: put down your seriousness for a bit, while December wanders amidst tempting games and exciting dice-boxes clatter on either side and *tropa*³⁷ plays with its even naughtier knucklebone, and offer up your leisure to my Muses. Read, with brow not furrowed but relaxed, my little books soaking with wanton jokes. In this way, perhaps, did bashful Catullus dare to send his Sparrow to the great Vergil.

Martial is well aware that Silius Italicus, author of the *Punica*, did not write mythological epic, but the opposition he sets up between the genres holds nevertheless: epic is about great men (here Hannibal, the Scipiones) and great wars, while epigram is most appropriate for one month out of the year – around and during Saturnalia, a holiday associated with leisure – and steeped in *lascivis iocis* (12). The contrast is reinforced by a shift in style between the halves of the poem, one signaled by the *severitas* being put aside (6): the first several lines imitate the diction if not the meter of epic poetry, and Silius' style in particular,³⁸ while the second half is rife with words denoting light-hearted pursuits (*alea*, *fritillis*, *tropa*, and *iocis*), none of which appear in Silius' *Punica*. This hierarchy of high epic and low epigram is familiar to any contemporary reader; Quintilian's survey of literature worth reading (*Inst.* 10.1) does not include epigram at all, and only mentions Catullus to contrast Rome's limited iambs with the more popular Greek practice (*Inst.* 10.1.96). Yet, despite his deference, Martial makes two subtly polemical moves. First, he claims for his poetry *Camēnae* (10) as inspiration, something done also by epic poets,³⁹ and

³⁷ Shackleton Bailey 1993(I): 271 explains *tropa* as a game of throwing knucklebones into some hole or jar; it sounds similar in concept to certain lawn games played today in America with beanbags. This rare word found nowhere else in Martial's corpus may be a deliberate play on the martial *tropaeum*, which does appear in the *Punica* nine times.

³⁸ See Moreno Soldevila 2006: 178-9.

³⁹ *Camēnis* especially recalls the first line of Livius Andronicus' *Odusia*. Silius himself invokes the Muse as the more Greek *Musa* in line 1.3 of his *Punica*.

thereby levels the inspiration for the two genres. Secondly, Martial alters the literary history of Catullus and Vergil: Vergil would have been only a child when Catullus was active, and Vergil rather than Catullus had the reputation of being *tener*.⁴⁰ The obvious reconstruction of their historical sequence and swap of traditional qualifier in this simile of literary history perhaps throws Martial's own relationship with Silius into an ironic light: Martial is in fact not ashamed to present his poetry to the 'great' epic author.

Later in Book 4 comes a more direct contrast between epic and tragedy on the one hand and epigram on the other. The deference displayed by Martial in 4.14 is nowhere to be found and instead is replaced by the boldness with which he defends epigram and lambasts mythical poetry:

*Nescit, crede mihi, quid sint epigrammata, Flacce,
qui tantum lusus illa iocosque vocat.
ille magis ludit qui scribit prandia saevi
Tereos aut cenam, crude Thyesta, tuam,
aut puero liquidas aptantem Daedalon alas, 5
pascentem Siculas aut Polyphemon ovis.
a nostris procul est omnis vesica libellis,
Musa nec insano syrmate nostra tumet.
'illa tamen laudant omnes, mirantur, adorant.'
confiteor: laudant illa, sed ista legunt. 10 (4.49)*

Trust me, Flaccus: anybody who calls them mere frivolities and jokes doesn't know what epigrams are. More frivolous is that poet who writes about cruel Tereus' lunches or your dinner, ill Thyestes,⁴¹ or Daedalus putting melting wings onto his boy, or Polyphemus pasturing his Sicilian sheep. All bombast is far away from my little books, and neither does my Muse puff up in tragedy's crazy robe. "Everyone praises those things, though, and admires them and worships them." I'll admit it: they do praise those, but they read these.

⁴⁰ Carole Newlands points out the possibly obscene implications of *passer* here, often interpreted in the Catullan poems 2 and 3 as a euphemism for his penis and virility. In large part this interpretation is due to Martial's epigram 7.14, in which the death of a slave trumps the loss of Lesbia's sparrow precisely because the slave possessed a gargantuan *mentula*.

⁴¹ Shackleton Bailey 1993(I): 297 chooses the vivid translation of 'dyspeptic' for *crude*, but I seek to capture both the gastronomical aspect and the sense of 'cruel' with 'ill.'

Though he submitted his poetry to Silius as soaking with wanton jokes (*lascivis madidos iocis libellos*, 12) in 4.14, here Martial is eager to make clear that epigram is more than just that (*tantum*, 2).⁴² But rather than explain what else epigram is in positive terms, he goes on the offensive: epic and tragedy dealing with mythical characters and events are more the product of unserious play (*magis ludit*, 3) than his own work is. The frivolity of epic and tragedy results, Martial implies, in greater popularity for his own work,⁴³ popularity which is elsewhere explained by epigram's utility. Martial articulates this polemic more fully in 10.4, but next in order of composition comes 8.3, resuming the deference of 4.14 but introducing a new idea, that of realism.⁴⁴

'Quinque satis fuerant: iam sex septemve libelli

⁴² Martial identifies his poetry with *ioci* without reserve elsewhere, e.g. 5.15.1, *Quintus nostrorum liber est, Auguste, iocorum* ("This is the fifth book of my jests, Augustus.").

⁴³ Two more poems treating the subject are 5.53 and 9.50, both of which attack shoddy epic production. 5:53: *Colchida quid scribis, quid scribis, amice, Thyesten? / quo tibi vel Nioben, Basse, vel Andromachen? / materia est, mihi crede, tuis aptissima chartis Deucalion vel, si non placet hic, Phaethon*. ("Why are you writing about the lady of Colchis, why, friend, are you writing about Thyestes? What do you have to do with Niobe or Andromache, Bassus? Trust me, the best theme for your pages is Deucalion or, if you don't like that, Phaethon.") This implies that Bassus' work should be either washed away or burnt up. Thus it is not a direct attack on mythological epic, just the poor poet committed to it. 9:50 is more suitable for our argument because Martial contrasts epic with his own poetry: *Ingenium mihi, Gaure, probas sic esse pusillum, / carmina quod faciam quae brevitate placent. / confiteor. sed tu bis senis grandia libris / qui scribis Priami proelia, magnus homo es? / nos facimus Bruti puerum, nos Langona vivum: / tu magnus luteum, Gaure, Giganta facis*. ("You deem my talent trifling, Gaurus, because I make poems which please with their brevity. I confess it. But you are a great man because you record Priam's battles in twice six books? I make a live Brutus' Boy, a living Langon; you, with all of your greatness, Gaurus, make a giant of clay.") Here Martial scoffs at the notion that talent is represented by size of poetic endeavor: Gaurus considers himself a great man, analogous to one of his own epic characters (Sullivan 1991: 73 n.32 and Henriksen 2012: 219 point out in his name the Greek adjective γαῦρος, 'haughty' or 'disdainful,' and Henriksen cites the suggestion from Friedländer's 1886 commentary that it could refer to a ridge named Gaurus in Campania, homeland of epic author Statius and adopted as such by Silius and Vergil, whose tomb is in Naples), and by analogy Martial's talent must be miniscule like his epigrams. But Martial's poetry is realistic art, like a living statue, while Gaurus' is a clumsy and inelegant monstrosity of clay. The realism of epigram versus epic and tragedy as well as its claim on life are issues brought up again in 10.4.

⁴⁴ The deference shown may be a consequence of placement and Book 8's overall construction: the book is dedicated to Domitian and the first two poems, those immediately preceding 8.3, address the emperor in honorific terms smacking of myth and religion. 8.1 directly disavows obscenity for the duration of the book: *Laurigeros domini, liber, intrare penates / disce verecundo sanctius ore loqui. / nuda recede Venus; non est tuus iste libellus / tu mihi, tu, Pallas Caesariana, veni*. ("Book, about to enter the laurel-crowned home of our lord, learn to speak more piously in modest words. Nude Venus, away! This little book is not yours. You, please, approach, Caesarian Pallas.").

est nimium: quid adhuc ludere, Musa, iuvat?
sit pudor et finis: iam plus nihil addere nobis
fama potest: teritur noster ubique liber;
et cum rupta situ Messalae saxa iacebunt 5
altaque cum Licini marmora pulvis erunt,
me tamen ora legent et secum plurimus hospes
ad patrias sedes carmina nostra feret.
finieram, cum sic respondit nona sororum,
cui coma et unguento sordida vestis erat: 10
'tune potes dulcis, ingrata, relinquere nugas?
dic mihi, quid melius desidiosus ages?
an iuvat ad tragicos soccum transferre cothurnos
aspera vel paribus bella tonare modis,
praelegat ut tumidus rauca te voce magister 15
oderit et grandis virgo bonusque puer?
scribant ista graves nimium nimiumque severi,
quos media miseros nocte lucerna videt.
at tu Romano lepidos sale tinge libellos:
agnoscat mores vita legatque suos. 20
angusta cantare licet videaris avena,
dum tua multorum vincat avena tubas.' (8.3)

“Five had been enough; six or seven little books now are too many. Why, Muse, do you enjoy playing further? Let there be shame and an end; fame can give me nothing more now. Everywhere my books are worn out, and when Messalla’s stones lie shattered by decay and the lofty marbles of Licinus are dust, mouths will nevertheless still recite me and countless strangers will carry my poems with them to their homelands.” Thus I concluded, when the ninth of the sisters, whose hair and clothes were stained with oil, answered thus: “Can you give up your sweet trifles, you ingrate? Tell me, in what better way will you spend your idle hours? Or would you rather exchange your slipper for tragic buskins, or thunder out tough wars in level lines of verse, so that pompous teachers can dictate it in hoarse voices and grown girls and noble boys can hate it? Let the too-grave and the too-severe write such things, those whom the midnight oil watches in their misery. But you dip your witty little books in Roman salt:⁴⁵ let life recognize and read of her own ways. So what if you seem to sing with a narrow pipe, so long as your pipe conquers the masses’ trumpets.

⁴⁵ We note the *sal* (19), sometimes translated as wit but inextricable from the arena of humor in any case, as the vital element for the success of Martial’s poetry and particularly over epic and tragedy.

taste of human life. But you don't want to see your own
habits reflected, Mamurra,⁴⁹ you don't want to know
yourself – so go ahead, read Callimachus' *Origins*.⁵⁰

Martial here develops the argument first implied in 4.49, articulating epigram's superiority over epic and tragedy on the grounds of both pleasure and usefulness. Nobody, the speaker claims, enjoys reading about Oedipus, Thyestes, Medea (made plural perhaps for absurdity), or Scylla, all guilty of monstrous crimes of one sort or another, and while people may draw vicarious pleasure from consuming the beauty of Hylas, Parthenopaeus, Attis, Endymion in text, this is in no way helpful.⁵¹ Martial does not treat half-humans like the Centaurs, Gorgons, and Harpies, but rather whole humans, i.e. all aspects of humanity; line 8's *quod possit dicere vita 'meum est.'* is echoing 8.3.20. This is at once a general defense of epigram's utility and of the offensive material common to the genre: Martial is simply writing the poetry of life.⁵² On these terms, the hierarchy of genres is inverted.⁵³

⁴⁹ We should note the universal address of this poem prior to the vocative *Mamurra* in the penultimate line, and not let that late restriction discount the general applicability of the message. Mamurra was the target of Catullus' invective in poems 29 and 57 as a greedy, profligate *improbis cinaedus*; here Martial implies that his poetry is about just such individuals while adhering to Catullus' tradition.

⁵⁰ I follow Shackleton Bailey's translation of *Aetia* as *Origins* here (1993(III): 323).

⁵¹ Damschen and Heil 2004: 50-1 and Watson and Watson 2003: 96 sketch out the artful arrangement in Martial's presentation of mythological figures: two men who killed unwittingly, two women who killed intentionally; the first in each pair killed their parents (Oedipus and Scylla), the second their children (Thyestes and Medea). Damschen elides the fact that Thyestes did not murder, only consumed his children.

⁵² Sullivan 1991: 73 takes issue with Martial's assertion: "The so-called 'realism' of Martial's subject-matter is akin to that of Petronius and authors like him. The claim to be holding up a mirror to society, particularly in its seamier sexual aspects is largely tendentious, since it is often not so much a depiction of the real as a 'denigration of the real'." Martial would likely disagree, on the grounds, one might hypothesize, that the real denigrates itself. Two other poems from Book 10 approach this theme. 10.35 praises Sulpicia and counts it meritorious that she does not write about mythological themes: *non haec Colchidos asserit furorem, / diri prandia nec refert Thyestae; / Scyllam, Byblida nec fuisse credit: / sed castos docet et pios amores, / lusus, delicias facetiasque* (5-9, "She does not claim the madness of Medea or recount the meal of dreadful Thyestes, nor does she believe Scylla and Byblis were real. But she teaches pure and faithful love, playfulness, fun, and wit."). 10.64 is predictably more respectful, as it is addressed to Lucan's wife Argentaria Polla. Martial acknowledges Lucan's accomplishment in epic yet stresses his epigrammatic spirit: *non tamen erubuit lascivo dicere versu / 'si nec pedicor, Cotta, quid hic facio?'* (5-6, "Nevertheless he did not blush at saying in wanton verse, 'If I'm not being buggered, Cotta, what am I doing here?'").

⁵³ For corroboration on this, see Watson and Watson 2003: 95-7, which also notes 10.4's mock-epic style, complete with Greek accusatives and artistic ring composition. The hypothesis that Martial and Statius were rivals for the attention of Domitian and prestige, and that Martial subtly criticizes Statius, is supported by features of this poem,

But if Martial is writing the poetry of life, what is the point of some seemingly more casual references to figures of epic and tragedy, e.g. to Pyrrha, Priam, Nestor, Thyestes, etc. in 10.67? A few of the most influential and substantial works on Martial have drawn varying conclusions on the subject of Martial and myth. Sullivan, introduced above, reads Martial's allusions to myth as "merely variations for common ideas and expressions, often about poetic inspiration, aiming only to stimulate stock responses in his audience and where metrically convenient."⁵⁴ These may be invoked for the sake of humor, Sullivan admits, but otherwise serve only to illustrate or bolster in hyperbolic fashion the ideas already present. This interpretation sees the low epigram standing on the shoulders of epic and tragedy, taking advantage of an established system of referents and adding poetic weight through names and other associations. By extension, the contents, which often refer to people like Domitian, associated with mythic material frequently are flattered or otherwise inflated, as in 7.2.1-4:

*Invia Sarmaticis domini lorica sagittis
et Martis Getico tergore fida magis,
quam vel ad Aetolae securam cuspidis ictus
texuit innumeri lubricus unguis apri . . .*

Cuirass of our lord, impervious to Sarmatian arrows, more
trustworthy than the Getic shield of Mars, which the
slippery hooves of countless boars created to be safe even
against the blows of Aetolian spear . . .

Domitian here is likened to Mars by the comparison of the emperor's armor to the god of war's shield. The former trumps the latter, a point given added weight by the emphatic delay of *magis*

namely the Greek accusative of *Oedipoden* (1) which Statius was the first to use in Latin for the character who appears in his *Thebaid*; Parthenopaeus (3) who also figures in the *Thebaid* as one of the Seven; and the words *labens* and *exutus* (5), the former appearing in the *Thebaid* a conspicuous number of times and the latter being paired with a concrete noun rather than an abstract, a rare combination which Statius also uses.

The reference to Callimachus' *Aetia* broadens the range of Martial's attack; the *Aetia* does not belong to the genres of epic or tragedy, consisting as it does of mythological and historical 'causes' for features of Greek culture in elegiac couplets. Still, it is serious poetry and would not include anything about Mamurra, as Martial's poetry would.

⁵⁴ Sullivan 1991: 232.

at the line's end, and so Domitian is raised further. Fitzgerald brings a similar interpretation to the *Liber de spectaculis* in the second chapter of his 2007 *Martial: The World of the Epigram*.⁵⁵ He argues convincingly that myth in this collection of poems about the opening spectacles in the Flavian amphitheater, more commonly known as the Colosseum, is realized and outdone by the events in the arena and the emperor's munificence which they represent. Fitzgerald sees a "dialectic between glorification and banalization," where myth is either at the disposal of epigram or disposed by it. The former would be the case for 7.2 above:⁵⁶ where the divine emperor tops the wonders of gods and myth by means of the events staged in the arena in the *Liber de Spectaculis*, in 7.2 myth is at the disposal of epigram for the purpose of glorifying the subjects of epigram and inflates the stature of epigram itself.⁵⁷

In mentioning the invocation of myth for humorous value, Sullivan is likely referring to such epigrams as 3.67, where Martial puns on *Argonautas* as "lazy sailors," from the Greek ἀργός, "slow" (10), or 11.18, where Martial hyperbolically describes the exiguity of a property he was given, where a rue plant is the grove of Diana (4),⁵⁸ and a mouse is as fearsome as the Calydonian boar (17-8). In 8.6, the blowhard Euctus claims Laomedon, Rhoecus, Nestor, Achilles, and Dido as the original owners of his tableware to laughable effect;⁵⁹ Martial may

⁵⁵ Fitzgerald himself terms the book *Liber spectaculorum* instead of *de spectaculis*; the difference is not relevant to my argument here.

⁵⁶ See Fitzgerald 2007: 34-67, but especially 48-52.

⁵⁷ For mythological material with much the same effect, see also 7.24, 4.13, 4.44, 4.45, 4.75, and others.

⁵⁸ Rue is commonly under two feet tall.

⁵⁹ Particularly amusing is Martial's punchline, that out of Priam's vessels you will drink Astyanax, i.e. young and cheap wine out of such expensive and storied vessels. I can only tentatively explore the proposition of drinking a dismembered child; it is clearly a joke, but the dark interpretation requires a mental jump which is not justified by the context. The other items are merely associated with owners or deeds, like the bowl with which Rhoecus started the battle with the centaurs (7-8) or the dish out of which Dido fed Aeneas (13-4). Astyanax is the first figure directly personified as a dining-related object: *miratus fueris cum prisca toreumata multum, / in Priami calathis Astyanacta bibes* (15-6, "After you've greatly admired the antique carvings, in Priam's cups you will drink Astyanax.") Schöffel 2002: 145 reminds us of the common motif of the stingy hosts who feed their guests inferior food; he imagines the guests' appetites being whetted by the fine vessels – after seeing the tableware, how well-aged and expensive must the wine be? – before having their hopes dashed. His interpretation locates the humor in the

there be commenting metaphorically on the amusing incredibility and irrelevance of connecting myth and the modern day, and thus reproaching, tongue in cheek, his own frequent practice. 9.25 too fits Sullivan's *schema* in the sense that myth is used for illustration, but Fitzgerald's model of banalization as opposed to glorification works better in this instance:

*Dantem vina tuum quotiens aspeximus Hyllum,
lumine nos, Afer, turbidior notas.
quod, rogo, quod scelus est mollem spectare ministrum?
aspicimus solem, sidera, templa, deos.
avertam vultus, tamquam mihi pocula Gorgon 5
porrigat, atque oculos oraue nostra tegam?
trux erat Alcides, et Hylan spectare licebat;
ludere Mercurio cum Ganymede licet.
si non vis teneros spectat conviva ministros,
Phineas invites, Afer, et Oedipodas. 10*

As often as I look at your Hyllus while he pours the wine, you glare at me with a stormy eye. What is the crime, I ask, in looking at a tender servant? We look at the sun, stars, temples, gods. Ought I to turn my face, as though a Gorgon offered me a cup, and cover my eyes and face? Hercules was violent, and still one could gaze at Hylas. Mercury has permission to tease Ganymede. If you don't want your guests to gaze at your delicate servants, Afer, you ought to invite Phineuses and Oedipuses.

Here the Gorgon introduces humorous hyperbole, while Hercules and Hylas, Mercury and Ganymede act as analogies or *exempla* for permissible behavior. The punchline depends on a continuation of myth as model: if Afer does not want people staring at his servants, he should invite only blind people, of whom Phineus and Oedipus are the type. Underlying this proposition of myth as model is the assertion that the characters of mythological literature are guilty of the very same behavior as the humans of epigram, i.e. leering at attractive attendants. The reasoning

incongruity between ancient dishes and wine expressed as young with a metaphor that is mythic and thus in keeping with the theme. Astyanax's fate is not invoked.

is logical enough: if Hercules and Hylas were real, they would operate just like contemporary Romans; and, being real, their experiences are the province of epigram, the poetry of life.

Poems like 9.25 do not simply stand on the shoulders of epic and tragedy: the epigram stakes a claim to the traditional material of other genres, but far from on their own terms. Stephen Hinds' 2007 article "Martial's Ovid / Ovid's Martial," in examining specifically the intertextuality between Martial and Ovid, adduces 4.49 and 10.4 to support his conception of Martial's treatment of myth.⁶⁰ Somewhat in opposition to Sullivan but agreeing with Fitzgerald's banalization, Hinds sees myth in Martial "programmatically disavowed," not ignored,⁶¹ or else brought down to the level of everyday experience. The latter, banalization, would arguably be the case in 9.25 above, but the same view does not hold for the fantastic use of myth in 10.67, Plutia's epitaph. There, the mythic relations of the dirty old woman enhance the humor and the invective; they are at the service of epigram for its purposes, like the myth in 7.2 above about the cuirass. But in contrast to 7.2, the purpose of mythological material in 10.67 is not to flatter, but to degrade; and this is itself ironic, not just because of its divergence from some previous uses of myth in epigram in the *Liber de Spectaculis* and in subsequent books of epigrams, but because the inclusion of the mythic characters is initially inflating. Thus I propose that myth is neither mere illustration nor disavowed, but rather that Martial co-opts the material of tragedy and epic and deliberately subordinates those genres to epigram, in large part by means of dark humor, as the next section will demonstrate.

⁶⁰ Hinds 2007: 147, specifically on *Spect.* 6, about Pasiphae and the bull.

⁶¹ Hinds 2007: 138-9. "What Martial really rejects in 4.49 and 10.4 is not mythological poetry *per se*, but rather a package of pretentious attitudes which are felt to go with mythological poetry. In this programmatic moment he belongs to the same world as Persius or Juvenal."

TREADING ON EPIC AND TRAGEDY

We have seen Martial deride the unbelievable contents of epic and tragedy and condemn the genres themselves for their lack of utility. Yet at the same time Martial includes mythological material in upwards of a fifth of this total collection. Were myth disavowed by Martial, the references to epic and tragic figures and scenes would be impotent. Yet Martial exploits their humorous potential, as we saw in Plutia's epitaph, 10.67. I suggested in my discussion above that Plutia's alleged relationships, the inclusion of which does not dismiss but rather (mock-)confirms the historicity of Pyrrha, Priam, Thyestes et al., reflect poorly on the mythical characters in two ways: they are stained by their association with the lurid corpse and, on a level removed from the narrative of the epigram itself, reduced to mere accessories in the disgusting description of a filthy old woman. In effect they are subsumed by the lowest type of poetry. The degradation and diminution of the most dignified or famous characters of epic and tragedy are humorous moves on their own: it is incongruous to see the high genres treated in this fashion, to see epigram claim superiority. Epic and tragedy are exploited by means of humor, and the exploitation itself is funny. In this way, epigram is not standing on the shoulders of epic and tragedy; it is beating them down and dancing on top of them. More examples will clarify and develop this argument further. The following poem describes an adulterer in epic terms; this is not flattering for the goddess:

*Subdola famosae moneo fuge retia moechae,
levior o conchis, Galle, Cytheriacis.
confidis natibus? non est pedico maritus:
quae faciat duo sunt: irrumat aut futuit.* (2.47)

Flee, I warn you, the treacherous nets of the infamous adulteress, Gallus, smoother than Cytherian shells. Oh, you trust your buttocks? Her husband is not a sodomizer. He does two things: he forces you to suck or he fucks.

The first line is firmly un-epic; *subdolus*, *famosus*, and *moecha* are avoided by authors of epic prior to Martial. Then, however, the adulterer is both introduced and addressed with an epic and impressive description. The register has shifted humorously. At first blush, the reference to Venus in *conchis Cytheriacis* would be analogous to the contents of 7.2, the cuirass of Domitian trumping the shield of Mars. But here an effeminate adulterer, appropriately named Gallus,⁶² trumps the shells of Cytherian Venus:⁶³ the goddess' imagery is at the service of the description of an adulterer, in comparison to whom she turns out to be inferior, and one likely about to be punished in explicit fashion at that; his hygiene, epic though it may be in register and comparison with a goddess, will avail him not at all, in fact, because of the nature of his impending punishment. The reference is made doubly obscene and additionally outrageous if we read in *conchis* a reference to female genitalia:⁶⁴ we then have an implication that Venus depilates and is still not as smooth as this Gallus. In this respect, Venus is equated with the average girl of epigram, or the nasty old woman whom Martial rebukes in 10.90 (to be discussed later). Much as in Plutia's epitaph, a disreputable denizen of epigram, a representative of life's poetry, appropriates the grandeur of mythic figures, real-izes them through obscenity, and subordinates them. Each step is funny according to both criteria of our Roman humor theory: it is incongruous or unexpected and in some way shameful.

The effect is similar in this next example, the classical precedent of the 'wedgie.'

*De cathedra quotiens surgis – iam saepe notavi –
pedicant miserae, Lesbia, te tunicae.
quas cum conata es dextra, conata sinistra
vellere, cum lacrimis eximis et gemitu:
sic constringuntur gemina Symplegade culi,* 5

⁶² Because the word can refer to a castrated priest of the *Magna Mater*; see Williams 2004: 172. The name appears ten times in Martial's epigrams but does not necessarily refer to a specific individual.

⁶³ See Williams 2004: 171-2 for the associations of Venus and the shells in this poem.

⁶⁴ See Adams 1982: 82; one type of shell was called *veneria* according to Pliny, *NH* 9.103, 32.151.

*ut nimias intrant Cyaneasque natis.
emendare cupis vitium deforme? docebo:
Lesbia, nec surgas censeo nec sedeas.* (11.99)

Every time you get out of your chair – I have noticed it often – your wretched underwear buggers you, Lesbia. You try to pluck at it with your right hand, with your left hand, until you rescue it with tears and groans: so trapped is it in the twin Symplegades of your ass as it enters your gargantuan, Cyanean buttocks.⁶⁵ Do you want to correct this shameful fault? I will tell you how: Lesbia, I advise you neither to get up nor sit down.

This is nearly a textbook example of incongruity and the *deforme* used simultaneously for humorous effect. Characterized as grossly obese or at least of abnormal proportions by the metaphor of her ship-shattering shitter, to translate obscenity with obscenity, Lesbia inadvertently causes her *tunicae* to penetrate her to some degree, which Martial describes with a surprising personification (*pedicant*). Her effort to escape this embarrassing discomfort is truly epic, described with a popular pair of words from the *Aeneid* and its epic successors, *lacrimis* and *gemitu*.⁶⁶ Vergil uses them in precisely these forms to describe the recovery of Pallas' body and in a different case only shortly before, when Hercules hears Pallas' vain prayer.⁶⁷ This epic diction of deepest emotional distress, now in bastardized usage, then leads the reader into a similar crime perpetrated on the myth of Jason and the Argonauts. We note that Martial delays

⁶⁵ Cyanean is merely another name for the Symplegades or Clashing Rocks which threatened ships crossing the Bosphorus.

⁶⁶ According to my searches of Brepolis' Library of Latin Texts, the pair of words or very slight variations (e.g. *gemitus lacrimabilis*, *Aen.* 3.37) appears in close proximity but once in Lucretius' *DRN*, four times in the *Aeneid*, four times in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, thrice in Lucan's epic, five times in Silius Italicus' *Punica* (three times with these inflections), and a significant eight times in Statius' *Thebaid*. No other genre uses this diction as much. Martial is consciously playing with epic vocabulary, and perhaps most pointedly with Statius, his reputed rival.

⁶⁷ *Aen.* 10.505, 10.464. In this instance I am reminded of Rimell's curiosity-inspiring summation: "In many ways, Martial does his best to ruin Latin literature as we know it, dumbing down, graffiti-ing over, in short *epigrammatising* everything from Vergil's *Aeneid* to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Horace's *Odes*." 2008: 209.

culi until the very end of the line;⁶⁸ we might thus be tempted to read in *sic constringuntur gemina Symplegade* the beginning of a simile about the voyage of the *Argo*, which would still be a degrading use of the myth. Martial is much more direct, however: the Clashing Rocks are her ass, the obscene *culi* is delayed and juxtaposed with the grand *Symplegade* for doubly humorous effect. Like Venus' shells in 2.47, Martial appropriates the epic imagery of the Symplegades to describe this *vitium deforme* (7), language which recalls Cicero's first definition of the *ridiculum*, something marked by *turpitude* and *deformitas* (*De or.* 2.236),⁶⁹ or more pointedly his description of caricatures:

*valde autem ridentur etiam imagines, quae fere in **deformitatem**, aut in aliquod **vitium** corporis ducuntur cum similitudine turpioris.*
(*De or.* 2.266)

But then caricatures also are laughed at loudly, since they generally are aimed at ugliness or some bodily flaw using a likeness of something even uglier.

In Martial's hands, however, the caricature wields myth in place of *similitudine turpioris*: the Symplegades are certainly more monstrous than any human features, especially now that they have been likened to buttocks. Hence, in addition to all of the effects for Martial's epigram, we may speculate about what this does to the tradition of the Argonauts. How does a post-Martial audience react when reading in Ovid's letter from Medea to Jason, "I wish the clashing Symplegades had crushed us, so that my bones would cling to yours!"?⁷⁰ Or when two goddesses, Juno and Pallas Minerva no less, had to spread the rocks wide and hold them fast in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, a work relatively fresh in Martial's day?⁷¹

⁶⁸ Adams 1981: 233 delineates between *culus* as anus and *nates* as buttocks, but also notes that the definitions sometimes get exchanged. Here it makes much more sense to understand *nates* for *culus*.

⁶⁹ As before, see also Quintilian *Inst.* 6.3.8

⁷⁰ *Heroides* 12:121-2, *compressos utinam Symplegades elisissent, / nostraque adhaererent ossibus ossa tuis*.

⁷¹ Val. Flacc. 4.682-5. We note one more goddess than was necessary in Apollonius' *Argonautica* 2.

We may also consider this use of Thyestes' cannibalistic meal, in Martial's estimation possibly the tritest and most clichéd material for tragedy, if the frequency of Thyestes' appearances in Martial's epigrams is anything to go by.⁷²

*Fugerit an Phoebus mensas cenamque Thyestae
ignoro: fugimus nos, Ligurine, tuam.
illa quidem lauta est dapibusque instructa superbis,
sed nihil omnino te recitante placet.
nolo mihi ponas rhombos mullumve bilibrem 5
nec volo boletos, ostrea nolo: tace. (3.45)*

Whether or not Phoebus fled Thyestes' dinner table, I don't know; we flee yours, Ligurinus. Sure, it's sumptuous, laid out with grandiose dishes, but nothing at all is pleasing when you are reciting. I don't want you to serve me turbot or a two-pound mullet, I don't want mushrooms, I don't want oysters: shut up.

Martial professes ignorance about the actuality of Phoebus' flight, a reversal of the sun's travel when it discovered the most famous aborted supper in all Classical literature. The enjambment of the otherwise casual *ignoro* perhaps speaks over the top of our own confident answer to the first line: we know the myth, we know the tragedy;⁷³ of course Phoebus fled. Martial is quite clear about his own escape, however. By contrasting the two events in this way, by casually handling and dismissing the traditional cosmic response to cannibalism, Martial diminishes the horror and questions the historicity of Thyestes' feast, thus undermining the import especially of Seneca's *Thyestes*, which dwelt on the sun's departure for the entirety of a choral ode.⁷⁴ He does all this while making more horrifying and immediate Ligurinus' offense. Unlike Atreus' menu, Ligurinus offers appetizing, even lavish fare, but it is worse than eating one's children if guests

⁷² See Moreno Soldevila 2006: 360 and Fusi 2006: 330, who both cite 5.53, 10.4, and 10.35, along with 4.49 for Thyestes as a repeated subject. Fusi notes that Thyestes is especially appropriate for introducing an epigram about an unbearable reciter because of it was such a popular subject and hence more frequently unbearably recited; Fusi speculates that it is even possible that Ligurinus was reciting a poem about this myth, but I hesitate to insist on real events behind the inspiration of Martial's poetry.

⁷³ In Seneca's *Thyestes*, it was announced by the messenger at 776-7 and lamented much thereafter.

⁷⁴ The fourth ode, *Thyestes* 789-884.

are forced to listen to Ligurinus recite his poetry. The epigram's hyperbolic comparison subordinates in terms of import the classic tragic plot to a no-name's tasteless literary production.⁷⁵

The Symplegades and Thyestes' cannibalism are not the traditional subject matter of epigram, but adultery is. Martial reclaims this subject from epic in a manner that casts the premise of the Trojan cycle as just another dysfunctional marriage:

*Quis tibi persuasit naris abscidere moecho?
non hac peccatum est parte, marite, tibi.
stulte, quid egisti? nihil hic tibi perdidit uxor,
cum sit salua tui mentula Deiphobi.* (3.85)

Who persuaded you to cut off the adulterer's nose? That's
not the part that offended you, husband. What have you
done, you fool? Your wife, I tell you, loses nothing here,
seeing as your Deiphobus' cock is unharmed.

This could be addressed to any of the many cuckolds who appear throughout Martial's collections.⁷⁶ The name at the end, rather than specifying and limiting the addressee as a name should, universalizes the poem's applicability by using an epic model as a type. At the same time *Deiphobi* recasts this problem in epic terms, recalling the fate of Paris' brother who inherited Helen as wife after Paris' death and was punished fatally by Menelaus; it is perhaps slightly anticipated by *naris*, which is more epic in flavor than the alternative *nasus*.⁷⁷ In fact, Deiphobus appears in the Underworld scene of the *Aeneid* with *truncas inhonesto vulnere naris* (6.497,

⁷⁵ Martial links the story Atreus and Thyestes with tasteless culinary production in 11.31: *Atreus Caecilius cucurbitarum: / sic illas quasi filios Thyestae / in partes lacerat secatque mille. / gustu protinus has edes in ipso, / has prima feret alteraque cena. / has cena tibi tertia reponet, / hinc seras epidipnidas parabit.* (1-7, "Caecilius is the Atreus of pumpkins. As though they were the sons of Thyestes he slashes and slices them into a thousand pieces. You will eat them immediately as appetizers, he will offer them for the first and second courses, he will serve them to you as a third course, and he will make desserts out of them afterward.") The account of Caecilius' artful pumpkincraft continues for another twelve lines, perhaps prompting us to re-imagine the details of Atreus' presentation.

⁷⁶ Fusi 2006: 501 directs us specifically to 2.83, a poem with a nearly identical premise. The latter's humor relies on much the same mistake, but Martial does not exploit any mythological parallel.

⁷⁷ Watson and Watson 2003: 230.

“nose slashed off by a shameful wound”). Perhaps Martial has imagined this *inhonesto* as an epithet transferred from the crime for which the *vulnus* is punishment and is consequently reminding readers of the relatively mundane and unheroic if grotesque nature of this scene. Menelaus and Deiphobus are nothing more than epigrammatic cuckolds and adulterers, a fact represented perfectly by the juxtaposition of obscene *mentula* – a word which epic’s traditions of decorum would never admit – with the epic hero Deiphobus.⁷⁸ By extension, Menelaus, along with the poem’s *maritus*, is judged a fool for mutilating an inoffensive nose. Once again we see the material epic claimed by epigram as its own province. Martial writes the poetry of life, and consequently extracts the “real” out of myth: the conflict between Menelaus and Deiphobus, the flirting between Mercury and Ganymede – these have analogs in Martial’s own day and are thus appropriated for his genre.

Another denizen of epigram finds her expression precisely in her ability to affect the most austere and insensate figures of epic and tragedy in 6.71:

*Edere lascivos ad Baetica crusmata gestus
et Gaditanis ludere docta modis,
tendere quae tremulum Pelian Hecubaeque maritum
posset ad Hectoreos sollicitare rogos,
urit et excruciat dominum Telethusa priorem:
vendidit ancillam, nunc redimit dominam.*

Trained to perform lusty moves to Baetic tunes and to play in Spanish styles, able to arouse trembling Pelias and to stir Hecuba’s husband at Hector’s funeral, Telethusa burns and tortures her former master; he sold a handmaiden, now he buys back a mistress.

⁷⁸ Though we remember Deiphobus primarily for his fate, he does take part in the action of the Trojan war in *Iliad* Book 13.

The punchline is a variation on the *parvenu* theme seen elsewhere in the epigrams and Roman satire,⁷⁹ but this study is concerned more with the gratuitous characterization of Telethusa. The epigram achieves this by invoking Pelias and Priam (through his wife Hecuba), two figures from epic and tragedy and stereotypes for stately old men. Not only is this former slave skilled and desirable enough to arouse such superannuated individuals, both of whom will figure in the next poem to be discussed, but she could do so in the middle of arguably the most solemn occasion in all Greek and Roman literature and the closing scene of the *Iliad*, the funeral of Hector.

Telethusa's efficacy is mythicized just as is the adultery in 3.85 treated directly above, and here even the most somber scene of high literature is subject to the wiles of the low. On top of that, Martial's irreverent play with epic and tragedy is not even the focal point of the epigram: it is at the service of a modern epigrammatic joke. The poetry of life has priority.

The incorporation and degradation of epic figures continues in Book 11, the dirtiest of Martial's lot. Two will wait for the next section, but this one will round off our look at degraded myth and transition us to a section which investigates epic and tragic characters acting as *exempla*.

*Sit Phlogis an Chione Veneri magis apta requiris?
 pulchrior est Chione; sed Phlogis ulcus habet;
 ulcus habet Priami quod tendere possit alutam
 quodque senem Pelian non sinat esse senem;
 ulcus habet quod habere suam vult quisque puellam, 5
 quod sanare Criton, non quod Hygia potest.
 at Chione non sentit opus nec vocibus ullis
 adiuvat; absentem marmoreamve putes.
 exorare, dei, si vos tam magna liceret
 et bona velletis tam pretiosa dare, 10
 hoc quod habet Chione corpus faceretis haberet
 ut Phlogis, et Chione quod Phlogis ulcus habet. (11.60)*

⁷⁹ In Martial, for more examples of the *parvenu* see 2.16, 2.29, 3.82, 8.6, 9.73, 12.54, et al.

You ask whether Phlogis or Chione is more fit for love-making?⁸⁰ The more beautiful one is Chione, but Phlogis has the fever.⁸¹ She has a fever that could stretch Priam's strap and not allow old Pelias to be old. She has a fever that every man wants his girl to have, one that Criton can cure but Hygia cannot. But Chione doesn't feel your effort or help things along with any sounds; you'd think she was absent or else marble. If it were allowed to beg for something so great, gods, and you wanted to give such precious gifts, you would grant that Phlogis have Chione's body and Chione have Phlogis' fever.

In this poem the speaker debates the merits of Chione and Phlogis, likely two prostitutes if we guess by their names.⁸² Chione, whose name translates from Greek as "snow," is appropriately beautiful yet frigid. Phlogis, whose name translates as "flame,"⁸³ has a lust to drive a man wild, and not just any man. Phlogis can arouse Priam and Pelias, two figures from epic and tragedy and stereotypes for stately old men. The power of this lusty, epigrammatic prostitute, who so often figures as the object of derision and invective in this genre, can arouse Priam, aged king of Troy, father of a hundred children. Such a feat, like that of Telethusa above, given Priam's age is an impressive revival, but Martial tops this by describing what Phlogis could do to Pelias. In fact, Phlogis, not a particularly attractive whore, can finish what the most famous witch of Classical myth and literature, Medea, would not and fully 'revive' Pelias.⁸⁴ This theme continues in lines 5-6: Criton is effective in curing this *ulcus* where Hygia is not. Some explanation is required

⁸⁰ We note the use of the proper name of Venus to refer to her domain, sex. This is considerably less specific than, for example, the reference to the *conchis Cytheriacis* in 2.47 above, but may still play into the sort of reading which I have developed.

⁸¹ Shackleton Bailey 1993(III): 53 translates *ulcus*, otherwise "ulcer" or "sore," as "itch." I choose "fever" as a modern disease-related metaphor for lust. See Adams 1982: 40 for a more thorough explanation of both *ulcus* and *aluta*.

⁸² Kay 1985: 201.

⁸³ "Flame" from φλόξ, or as "piece of broiled flesh" or "beef-steak" from φλογίς. We could capture both senses by calling her "Barbecue," but this would dispel much of the erotic tone.

⁸⁴ In the myth, Jason and Medea upon the return of the *Argo* discover his uncle Pelias unwilling to give up the throne. Medea schemes his removal by demonstrating her power to rejuvenate an old ram by dismembering it and putting it into a pot. Pelias' daughters, thrilled as any examples of filial piety should be, eagerly dismember their father. Medea does nothing; she has solved Jason's problem of succession.

here: there was a Criton in Trajan's court who specialized in sexual problems, and it is not unreasonable to assume that he had developed a reputation by December of 96 when Martial's Book 11 was published.⁸⁵ Hygia, on the other hand, is health personified as a goddess and the daughter of Aesculapius, yet she cannot aid Phlogis. Of course, this also relies on the ignoble reasoning that Criton, being male, bears the sort of medicine which Phlogis desires, making for another base joke.

Throughout this selection we see humor not only in the juxtaposition of low and high and in the sheer gall to try it, but also in the triumph of low over high. Martial does not just put Priam and Plutia together, which is inherently incongruous in terms of dignity, station, period, and genre; his dark humor puts them in compromising, embarrassing or offensive situations for another layer of laughter; and he sees the Phlogis of epigram subject the kings of epic with her discomforting wiles, for yet more superiority-driven amusement. Thus I observe that humor is both the characteristic method and the ideal mode for epigram, genre of the low and offensive, to render irrelevant lofty epic and tragedy and revive their contents under the banner of his poetry of life. I argue that in Martial's method the results are compounded by the multiple angles of attack. First, Martial humorously asserts epigram's superiority over epic and tragedy in terms of character and action when he sullies their language and figures with obscenity or reduces them to mundanities. Second, on the level of generic decorum and tradition, Martial assaults epic and tragedy on two fronts: both by juxtaposing them with obscene and disgusting material, the stuff of epigram, and by subsuming their own subjects. Furthermore, the iconoclasm itself of the above actions is itself capable of generating irony, a realization which once again promotes epigram and flies in the face of traditionally dignified genres.

⁸⁵ See Kay 1985: 202-3, citing Galen's *De Comp. Med. Sec. Loc.* i 3 vol. 12.

IMPLICATING *EXEMPLA*

The epigram about Phlogis and Chione, where Priam and Pelias were examples of just how powerful lust could be, introduces well this next section, which will look at five more epigrams invoking the characters of epic and tragedy as *exempla*, either good or bad. Within these imagined scenes, Martial constructs and plays out a localized superiority with the same general, or generic, implications we saw in the previous section. Book 11, home of Phlogis and Chione, provides our first two examples. The Saturnalian frame of the book is especially appropriate for the execution of the poetic program which we sketched out above: the holiday was known for its focus on play and temporary relaxation of social norms, including, and particularly suitable for our purposes, a brief dissolution if not reversal of social hierarchies.⁸⁶

*Depreſsum in puero tetricis me vocibus, uxor,
 corripis et culum te quoque habere refers.
 dixit idem quotiens lascivo Juno Tonanti!
 ille tamen grandi cum Ganymede iacet.
 incurvabat Hylan poſito Tirynthius arcu: 5
 tu Megaran credis non habuiſſe natis?
 torquebat Phoebum Daphne fugitiva: ſed illas
 Oebalius flammas jussit abire puer.
 Briseis multum quamvis averſa iaceret,
 Aeacidae propior levis amicus erat. 10
 parce tuis igitur dare maſcula nomina rebus
 teque puta cunnos, uxor, habere duos. (11.43)*

Having caught me with a boy, wife, you lay into me with harsh words and remind me that you too have an ass. How often did Juno say the same thing to her lusty Thunderer! But he lies with well-built Ganymede anyway. His bow laid aside, the Tirynthian would bend Hylas over; do you believe Megara had no butt? Flighty Daphne tormented Phoebus, but the Oebalian boy told those flames to vanish. And however much Briseis laid facing away, Aeacus' grandson was more fond of his smooth friend. So forbear

⁸⁶ For the Saturnalian context, see e.g. 11.1, 11.2, 11.15, *passim*. Other books of Martial contain Saturnalian epigrams, including 4.14 to Silius Italicus, discussed above. For more on Saturnalia, see Catullus 14 and Macrob. *Sat.* 1.7.

from giving your own assets masculine names, wife, and
assume you have two cunts.

Here the speaker uses mythological *exempla* to defend his adulterous and pederastic behavior to his wife.⁸⁷ The tone is irreverent throughout: we are asked to believe, for instance, that Juno repeatedly reminded Jupiter “*ego quoque culum habeo!*” The final line plays humorously on the *annominatio* between *culus* and *cunnus*.⁸⁸ That epic specifically is being lampooned we can see in the use of *Tirynthius*, an epithet for Hercules, the usage of which exploded in the Flavian period: Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* uses it thirteen times, which can in part be explained by the presence of Hercules as a character, but it appears in Silius Italicus’ *Punica* twelve times and fourteen times in Statius’ *Thebaid*.⁸⁹ Martial seems to be targeting his contemporaries’ literary and specifically epic production and suggesting the questionable behavior at issue can be learned from their works’ characters; at the same time, Martial once again reduces these figures of epic to mere epigrammatic tropes.⁹⁰

11.104 accomplishes much the same, though now Martial’s marital issue is reversed:

*Uxor, vade foras aut moribus utere nostris:
non sum ego nec Curius nec Numa nec Tatius.
me iucunda iuvant tractae per pocula noctes:
tu properas pota surgere tristis aqua.
tu tenebris gaudes: me ludere teste lucerna* 5

⁸⁷ Sullivan 1991: 26 argues persuasively that Martial was never married during his literary career. Regarding this poem and 11.104, discussed below, he says: “Such a lowering of dignity would only be possible, given the natural tendency of the ancient audience to look for biography in even the most literary of works, if Martial were *known* to be unmarried.” Sullivan adduces as evidence the announcement that Martial was granted the *ius trium liberorum* in 2.92, something less likely to be done if he were married if we take seriously 8.31, where he rebukes a married man for asking for this privilege; this, however, presumes Martial was writing autobiographically and truthfully in 2.92, but not in 11.43 or 11.104.

⁸⁸ Kay 1985: 165 points out a nearby example of the very same play less subtly executed in 11.46.

⁸⁹ The explosion is relative to two appearances in the *Aeneid* (7.662, 8.228), four times in the *Fasti* (1.547, 2.305, 2.349, 5.629), and six times in the *Metamorphoses* (6.112, 7.410, 9.66, 9.268, 12.564, 13.401). It is used nine times in Statius’ *Silvae*, not epic in genre but composed alongside the *Thebaid* from 89 on, but thought to be published after the *Thebaid* in 93, 95, and 96 for Books 1-3, 4, and 5 respectively; see Shackleton Bailey 2003(I): 4-5. Briseis’ presence in this poem of Martial’s also speaks to epic as the target.

⁹⁰ Pederasty or erotic admiration of boys appears frequently in Martial’s collections, e.g. 4.42, 12.75, 1.58, 5.83, 14.205.

*et iuvat admissa rumpere luce latus.
 fascia te tunicaeque obscuraque pallia celant:
 at mihi nulla satis nuda puella iacet.
 basia me capiunt blandas imitata columbas:
 tu mihi das aviae qualia mane soles. 10
 nec motu dignaris opus nec voce iuvare
 nec digitis, tamquam tura merumque pares:
 masturbabantur Phrygii post ostia servi,
 Hectoreo quotiens sederat uxor equo,
 et quamvis Ithaco stertente pudica solebat 15
 illic Penelope semper habere manum.
 pedicare negas: dabat hoc Cornelia Graccho,
 Iulia Pompeio, Porcia, Brute, tibi;
 dulcia Dardanio nondum miscente ministro
 pocula Juno fuit pro Ganymede Iovi. 20
 si te delectat gravitas, Lucretia toto
 sis licet usque die: Laida nocte volo. (11.104)*

Wife, get out of my house or accept my ways.⁹¹ I am
 neither Curius nor Numa nor Tattius. I like my nights drawn
 out by cheerful drinks: you drink water and rush away from
 the table disdainfully. You enjoy the dark; I like to play
 with the lamp watching and to get laid with the windows
 open. Your bra and slip and opaque robe hide you, but no
 girl lies naked enough for me. Kisses like charming doves
 are what keep me enraptured; you kiss me like you do your
 grandmother in the morning. You don't deign to help things
 out with movement or your voice or fingers, as though you
 were prepping incense and wine. The Phrygian slaves
 would masturbate behind the doors whenever Hector's wife
 rode her horse, and even when the Ithacan was snoring,
 chaste Penelope always used to keep her hand right there.
 You won't give up your ass; Cornelia did for Gracchus,
 Julia for Pompey, Porcia for you, Brutus. When the
 Dardanian attendant was not yet mixing his sweet cups,
 Juno was Jupiter's Ganymede. If solemnity pleases you, be
 Lucretia all day for all I care; at night I want Lais.⁹²

Here Martial pokes holes both in epic decorum and Roman *gravitas* while compressing myth and
 history into epigram's world. Martial takes the voyeuristic license to invent the graphic scenes

⁹¹ *vade foras* "would suggest divorce to Roman ears;" Kay 1985: 277.

⁹² It should be known that the rapper Ludicrus' lyrics "lady on the street but a freak in the bed," or the unattributed phrase "lady on the streets but a freak in the sheets" owe Martial.

Death and obscenity collide once more in this bookmate of Plutia's epitaph. Ligeia is imagined as so old that she is depilating while in her tomb – or does the *bustum* refer to her anatomy like the dead lion does at the end, both of them being parts she harasses? Martial drags in the epic and tragic characters Andromache and Hecuba and forces the reader to imagine them in the same act as Ligeia: even though Andromache is not explicitly judged for her maintenance, she is revealed to be no different from contemporary Roman *puellae*; Hecuba suffers from her association with Ligeia. One could scarcely imagine a more disgusting metaphor for *vetulum cunnum* than the dead lion, which paints a vivid image of a gigantic, mangled mane. It may be multivalent, however; seeing as Hector was just brought up, Martial may be playing with the traditional simile of the lion which so commonly describes epic heroes, including Hector.⁹⁴

Martial rebuffs another woman like Ligeia and Plutia – so old as to be virtually dead – in 3.32. He takes the opportunity to subordinate epic and tragic characters not to an epigrammatic figure like Phlogis or Deiphobus' abuser, but significantly to his speaker's first person:

*non possum vetulam. quereris, Matrinia?*⁹⁵ *possum*
et uetulam, sed tu mortua, non uetula es.
possum Hecubam, possum Niobam, Matrinia, sed si
nondum erit illa canis, nondum erit illa lapis.

I can't do an old lady. You complain, Matrinia? Alright, I
 can do an old lady, but you are dead, not old. I can do
 Hecuba, I can do Niobe, Matrinia, but only so long as the
 one is not yet a dog and the other is not yet stone.

While one may suggest Hecuba and Niobe are nothing more than types for matrons, the anaphora of *possum* and its vivid indicative mood suggest that Hecuba and Niobe are in fact accessible to him, ready to be conquered despite being old (see above in 10.90 for Hecuba). The final

⁹⁴ Hector receives a short lion simile when fighting Ajax at *Il.* 7.256 and a longer one at 18.161-4.

⁹⁵ Shackleton Bailey prefers *non possum vetulam. quereris* over the more prevalent *an possim vetulam quaeris*. The difference is negligible for my purposes.

condition the speaker adds – only if they have not yet been transformed – adds yet another humorous element.⁹⁶

3.32 has a curious relationship with another poem of its book, 3.76. Here again, an epic character is implied to be sexually available and thus claimed by epigram:

*arrigis ad uetulas, fastidis, Basse, puellas,
nec formonsa tibi, sed moritura placet.
hic, rogo, non furor est, non haec est mentula demens?
cum possis Hecaben, non potes Andromachen!*

You're turned on by hags and turned off by hotties,
Bassus; not the fetching but the fading please you.
Is this not madness, I ask, is this not a crazy cock,
that you could do Hecuba, but not Andromache?

While Martial's speaker in 3.32 admitted he could bed Hecuba, here Bassus' preference of Hecuba over Andromache is an aberration: he is the possessor of a *mentula demens*. This particular jingle may recall a famous fragment of Ennius from another context of rhetorical *dissuasio*: that of Appius Claudius Caecus' when rebuking the senate for considering negotiation with Pyrrhus:

*Quo vobis mentes, rectae quare stare solebant
antehac, dementes sese flexere viai?*

Whither have your minds, which used to stand so straight,
mindlessly veered off the path?

This epic fragment, *Annales* 199-200, does not juxtapose the oxymoronic pair *mentes* and *dementes* as Martial does *mentula demens*, but the epigrammatist may do that to make the reference more clear. If the connection to Ennius' hexameters, which also contain *rectae*, a cognate of the *arrigis* used in 3.76, is legitimate, we have another instance of epic deflation with

⁹⁶ See Ovid's *Met.* 13.422-577 for Hecuba's transformation, 6.146-312 for Niobe's. For another reader of Martial's finding amusement in these situations, see e.g. Fusi 2006: 67 and 279: "la menzione di grandi figure del mito nel contesto umile degli epigrammi produce effetti di notevole comicità."

clear comic value.⁹⁷ Additionally, Martial's aim may extend past Ennius' *Annales* into Greek epic and tragedy: Ennius' verses may be modeled on the beginning of Hecuba's response to Priam regarding his proposed sojourn to the ships of the Greeks and the recovery of Hector's body,⁹⁸ and the oxymoronic expression *mentes . . . dementes* recalls by its wordplay Euripides' αἰὼν δυσαἰὼν ("life not worth living") or γάμοι δύσγαμοι ("ill-married marriage").⁹⁹ Elliott highlights the distress motivating Hecuba's entreaty, an intensity which would emotionally charge Appius Claudius' speech in the *Annales*.¹⁰⁰ But the depth of passion and the grave context of both speeches contrast drastically with the basis of Martial's own outrage; Bassus' predilection for older women is humorously equated with life- and state-risking propositions; and Hecuba is reduced from articulate queen to disgusting fetish. The poet, on the other hand, who in this very book admitted that he would go for Hecuba in 3.32, now ironically levels himself with the great Appius Claudius in his rhetorical protreptic against such an attraction.

The relationship between 3.32 and 3.76 is made all the more remarkable for their places within Book 3, which, unlike any other book in Martial's corpus, is divided up into clean and dirty halves.¹⁰¹ The break is explicitly indicated at 3.68, where Martial wards off the matrons but

⁹⁷ The preceding *hic, roro, non furor est* may be playing with Vergil's *quis furor iste novus* (5.670, "What is this new madness?"), spoken by Ascanius to the women burning the ships; or Lucan's *Bellum Civile* 1.8, *quis furor, o cives, quae tanta licentia ferri?* ("What madness is this, citizens, what excessive freedom of combat?"). Lucan's line, also addressed to the citizens like Ascanius' (5.671), is a rhetorical question about the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey. Only the indignant question and the *furor* are shared between Vergil, Lucan, and Martial here, but intertextual play with Ennius immediately following acts as circumstantial evidence in support of the otherwise tenuous links.

⁹⁸ *Il.* 24.201-2, ὦ μοι, πῇ δὴ τοι φρένες οἴχονθ', ἧς τὸ πάρος περ / ἔκλε' ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους ξείνους ἢ δ' οἴσιν ἀνάσσεις; ("Oh no, where has your sense gone, for which you used to be so famous among foreigners and your subjects?")

⁹⁹ *Hel.* 213 and *Phoen.* 1047 respectively. See Elliott 2013: 220-2, Fantham 2006: 556-7, and Skutsch 1985: 360-2 for discussions of these models in relation to the fragment of Ennius.

¹⁰⁰ See Elliott 2013: 221.

¹⁰¹ Fusi 2006: 64-5 suggests that this segregation inhibits *variatio*, a hallmark of Martial's organization generally, and thus generates boredom, so it remained an isolated experiment. Martial does seem confident that the lurid poems held readers' attention at least up to 3.86: *Ne legeres partem lascivi, casta, libelli, / praedixi et monui: tu tamen, ecce, legis* (1-2, "I told you earlier and warned you not to read part of my lusty book, virtuous woman; and nevertheless look, you are reading it anyway.").

acknowledges that they will read on more eagerly.¹⁰² The similarity of 3.32 and 3.76, two epigrams on either side of the clear break, prompts a question: why are they where they are, separated, and not both together on one side? The simple answer is the presence of *mentula* in 3.76; this confirms for us its status as an obscenity analogous with our own “four-letter words” in English. But not all the poems after 3.68 contain direct obscenities; 3.32 could easily have appeared there. That it does not I take as evidence that Martial wrote in 3.32 something beyond invective against a lusty old woman or a low-brow joke about degrading mythical matrons, both of which would be at home in the dirtier half: it is both of those things, but it is also a quiet assertion that his epigrams are content residing below no genre in the hierarchy. The use and abuse of epic, tragedy and their characters that we see in 3.32, 3.76, 3.45 about Ligurinus’ feast, and 3.85 about the modern Deiphobus gain articulation in 4.49 and 10.4, as well as several times in between when Martial champions epigram,¹⁰³ before the epigrammatist lashes out loudly in Books 10 and 11. In Martial’s hands and imbued with dark humor, the epigram becomes paradoxically a vibrant *mimesis* of the lowest pieces of everyday life and an all-consuming, giant-killing juggernaut.

The next chapter moves away from epigram and to one of the genres which Martial raided: epic poetry and specifically Statius’ *Thebaid*.

¹⁰² 3.68.1-4, 11-12: *Huc est usque tibi scriptus, matrona, libellus. / cui sint scripta rogas interiora? mihi / gymnasium, thermae, stadium est hac parte: recede. / exuimur: nudos parce videre viros. . . si bene te novi, longum iam lassa libellum / ponebas, totum nunc studiosa leges.* (“Up to this point, matron, my little book was written for you. For whom are the latter parts written? Me. The gym, the baths, the racetrack are in this part, so scram. We’re stripping; don’t look at nude men. . . If I know you well, you were tired and about to put the long book down, but now you will read the whole thing eagerly.”)

¹⁰³ Among them 5.53 and 9.50, in footnotes above.

CHAPTER III

HUMOR AND *NEFAS* IN STATIUS' *THEBAID*

The previous chapter focused on dark humor's function within Martial's epigram.

Whereas humor is at home, even natural, in epigram and I argued that Martial's use of it is transgressive, humor in epic is transgressive by nature; that is, while humor is not entirely absent from epic poems of antiquity, it is not a frequent and defining feature of the genre in the way that it is of epigram and satire. Likewise, epic's sense of decorum generally forbids the exploitation of taboo material for humorous purposes.¹ The *Thebaid*, however, as it relates the war between the brothers Polynices and Eteocles, the sons (and siblings) of the incestuous parricide Oedipus, takes for its subject *nefas*, unspeakable wrong. We can define this peculiarly Roman word as something forbidden by or contrary to the divine and natural laws of the universe,² and thus

¹ The glaring exception here is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the humorous tenor of which has been discussed by Peek 2001. I omit the *Metamorphoses* here in part because of Peek's prior work and in part because it differs considerably in content from the more martial epics, i.e. the *Iliad*, *Aeneid*, *Bellum Civile*, and *Thebaid*. At any rate, the *Metamorphoses* hardly made humor the norm of subsequent epics: Peek 2001: 128 points out that its reception by the two Senecas and Quintilian included criticism of the inappropriately humorous elements.

² As in this scene from the *Aeneid*, a significant precursor to the *Thebaid*, when Aeneas and the Sibyl encounter Charon, ferryman of the Styx: *Quisquis es armatus qui nostra ad flumina tendis, / fare age quid venias iam istinc, et comprime gressum. / umbrarum hic locus est, somni noctisque soporae: / corpora viva nefas Stygia vectare carina.* (*Aen.* 6.388-91, "Whoever you are who come to my river armed, tell me why you are here, from right there, don't take another step. This is the land of shadows, of sleep and lulling night: it is forbidden to carry living bodies in this Stygian boat.") In this passage the *nefas* is evidently not morally reprehensible to humans (crossing the Styx is not typically an option to dare or avoid), but crimes which violate the highest laws often are, and thus the sense can extend further, as in the scene where Dido berates Aeneas for planning to leave: *Dissimulare etiam sperasti, perfide, tantum / posse nefas tacitusque mea decedere terra? / nec te noster amor nec te data dextera quondam / nec moritura tenet crudeli funere Dido?* (*Aen.* 4.305-8, "Did you really hope to cover up so great a crime, traitor, and depart from my land silently? Our love, our hands given in marriage, Dido about to die a bitter death, do they matter to you at all?") These two examples of *nefas* differ in nature, one being cosmic and the other personal, but walking out on an ambiguously formal marriage and crossing the Styx into the Underworld while living are both transgressive acts.

typically abhorrent or taboo, like the incest, rape, infanticide, parricide, cannibalism, and fratricide which populate Statius' epic. So fixated is the *Thebaid* upon *nefas* that the word appears fifty-two times across its twelve books, compared with only seventeen in the comparable length of the *Aeneid*, the *Thebaid*'s explicit target of emulation.³ Ganiban's 2007 monograph *Statius and Virgil* highlights both the synoptic prologue, which recounts the many crimes to come in the epic,⁴ and the initial prominence of Oedipus as illustrative of *nefas*' primary role in the poem.⁵ Oedipus, the most transgressive and horrific figure possible, one who killed his father, married and fathered children with his own mother, blinded himself, and now lives secluded and in darkness like the Furies who torment him (*Theb.* 1.46-55) motivates the events of the epic by praying for punishment to come from the Underworld upon his sons, Polynices and Eteocles, for neglecting their father (*Theb.* 1.56-87). He specifically requests *quod cupiam vidisse nefas* (1.86, "a crime which I would long to see"); the irony here passes without comment (though its significance will be made clearer by the main thrust of this chapter), but his request is granted as Statius delivers twelve books of epic *nefas*. Oedipus is thus programmatic for the epic as a whole, a metapoetic representative for a work on *nefas*.⁶ In this chapter I will explore how the *Thebaid* uses dark humor to develop the same overriding poetics of *nefas* which Ganiban identifies in affiliation with Oedipus. This humor is transgressive, an affront to decorum and

³ The *Aeneid* is 9,896 lines (Mynor's OCT); the *Thebaid* comes in at 9,748. The word appears twenty-two times in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, roughly proportionate to its presence in the *Aeneid*; twenty times in Flaccus' *Argonautica* (eight books); and only eighteen occurrences are in Silius' *Punica*, the longest surviving Latin poem at seventeen books and contemporaneous with the *Thebaid*'s production. Worth observing is the fact that *nefas* appears fifty-three times in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, another poem about civil war. The cognate adjectives *infandus* and *nefandus* are likewise used with much greater frequency by Statius: forty-four times total in the *Thebaid*, compared with twenty-five in the *Aeneid* and twenty-seven in the *Bellum Civile*. Flaccus' *Argonautica* contains thirteen instances and the *Punica* of Italicus fifteen. These numbers were obtained doing searches of Brepolis' Library of Latin Texts. For the *Aeneid*'s importance to the *Thebaid*, see first Statius' own epilogue at 12.816-7 and Ganiban 2007: 4-7.

⁴ Ganiban 2007: 44-7, on *Theb.* 1.32-45 especially.

⁵ Ganiban 2007: 24-43.

⁶ See Ganiban 2007: 34. Hershkowitz 1998: 247-301 developed this same idea around *furor* rather than *nefas*, being interested as she is in the theme of madness across ancient epic.

sensibilities just like Oedipus' crimes and the *nefas* of civil war, and a metapoetic extension of the perversion found in the family of Oedipus. Moreover, humor's dialogic nature acts to implicate an audience in the crimes and convey once again the sense of universal violation and horror.

Again, this is not to suggest that the *Thebaid* should be counted among comedies; rather, humor here is another example of conscious and explicit breaches of boundaries, as when the narrator asks the Muses for a greater lunacy,⁷ a mode different from previous poets, to sing the ambitions and ends of Capaneus:

*Hactenus arma, tubae, ferrumque et vulnera: sed nunc
comminus astrigeros Capaneus tollendus in axes.
non mihi iam solito vatum de more canendum;
maior ab Aoniis poscenda amentia lucis:
mecum omnes audete, deae!* (Theb. 10.827-831)

Hitherto I have sung of arms, trumpets, steel, and wounds;
but now Capaneus must be raised to fight the star-laden sky
hand-to-hand. I can no longer sing in the traditional custom
of the bards; I must demand a greater lunacy from the
Aonian groves: dare along with me, all you goddesses!

Here the daring of the poem will need to match the excesses of the narrated events, and the standard fashion of poetry is rejected as insufficient to the task. In my interpretation, dark humor as an aesthetic *nefas* is something for which Statius would require abnormal and amplified inspiration. Statius signals his awareness of and concern with such aesthetic crimes in describing the death of Parthenopaeus:

⁷ Here I follow Shackleton Bailey's translation (2003) with 'lunacy' for *amentia*, which does not necessarily carry a sense of anger or rage as 'madness' can. McNelis 2007: 142 elaborates the generic implications of the passage: "Moreover, given the perversity of the battles thus far in the poem, Statius' claim that greater madness is required is startling. Indeed, the words *hactenus arma*, the first two words of the invocation, seemingly call attention to the destruction of generic boundaries, as if to say that so far the poem has handled the material of epic (i.e. *arma*), but now Capaneus' novel fight demands something more." Capaneus' fight is indeed novel in its actions and ambitions, and this novelty is the primary prompt of this invocation. The perversity which McNelis notes in previous scenes should not be understood then as merely typical of epic; this is understatement on Statius' part, meant to accentuate all the more the absurdity of Capaneus' fight, not to claim the previous books were unremarkable in their content.

*At puer infusus sociis in devia campi
tollitur (heu simplex aetas!) moriensque iacentem
flebat equum; cecidit laxata casside vultus,
aegraque per trepidos exspirat gratia visus,
et prensis concussa comis ter colla quaterque
stare negant, ipsisque nefas lacrimabile Thebis,
ibat purpureus niveo de pectore sanguis. (Theb. 9.877-84)*

But the boy, slumped upon his comrades, is borne to a remote part of the field. Alas, simplicity of youth! Even while dying he wept for his fallen horse. Once his helmet was unstrapped, his face fell, and his beauty, now suffering, passes away through his quivering visage. Thrice, four times they grasp his hair and shake his neck, but it will not stand, and, a crime tearful even to Thebes itself, purple blood flowed down his snowy chest.

I do not argue that this scene is funny; I wish to highlight the incongruity in visual terms, the *purpureus sanguis* which flows down and, through word order, swallows up the snowy chest. The vivid imagery prompts a strong emotional response in that it is labeled *nefas* even to the enemy. Dark humor in the *Thebaid* operates in much the same way: a stain which courses across the epic and elicits horror, confusion, and disgust from the audience.

First I will sketch out the history of humor in epic from the *Iliad* to the *Thebaid* to demonstrate the limited range of humor in previous epic. Then I will discuss a number of the *Thebaid*'s recurring themes or phenomena – excess to the point of absurdity, sarcasm, the inverted validity of the Olympian gods compared to those of the Underworld, and Fortune's different character. These I see as charging the atmosphere of the epic with both darkness and humor and the two in conjunction. Following this will be lengthier discussions of marked instances of dark humor within the text, before I turn to look at the laughter found in the epic. The gods in particular, both Olympian and Tartarean, act as an audience for the events of the poem, and their laughter, like humor in general, has startling prominence relative to previous

epics and lends confidence to the assessment that what we see in the *Thebaid* is on some level funny.

EPIC – NOT A FUNNY GENRE

In this section I will survey instances of humor in epic, focusing on those which are martial and mythological in their subject matter, i.e. the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, and thus most akin to the *Thebaid*, but I will make observations about other epics along the way, such as the *Odyssey*. Epic is not entirely devoid of humor: after all, in Chapter I we illustrated humor theories with scenes from the *Iliad* involving Thersites and Hephaestus. But humor is not a defining characteristic of epic, a fact appreciated by the original Greek and Roman audiences and critics.⁸ Aristotle supplies us with an explanation, the same differentiation of genres which I discussed in previous chapters: the high genres feature fine men and fine deeds, the low genres feature low men and low deeds (*Poetics* 1448b); and humor resides in the errors and ugliness which mark inferior people by definition (1449a). To the same end, critics have observed that war, a common subject for epic poetry, is not a traditional source of humorous material.⁹ Consequently, the humor within epics prior to the *Thebaid* is by and large sequestered away from the main events of the plot, the fine men and fine deeds – we see humor most among the gods (admittedly not inferior people, but not primary characters and not subject to the destinies and struggles of humanity) or in books devoted to funeral games and thus not advancing the narrative. These instances would then seem to be present at least partially for comic relief if not primarily so. We will later see how much the *Thebaid* diverges from tradition on this count.

⁸ See Sikes 1940: 121, 124.

⁹ e.g. Clarke 1969: 246: “. . . accordingly, Homer has never been considered a comic writer.”

Beyond the early scenes of Thersites and Hephaestus, the clearest instances of humor in the *Iliad* are located in the Theomachy of Book 21 and the funeral games of 23. Athena laughs in superiority after smiting Ares with a rock (*Il.* 21.400-14) and speaks sarcastically upon subduing Aphrodite immediately thereafter:

τοιοῦτοι νῦν πάντες ὅσοι Τρώεσσιν ἄρωγοὶ
εἶεν, ὅτ' Ἀργείοισι μαχοίατο θωρηκτῆσιν,
ὧδέ τε θαρσαλέοι καὶ τλήμονες, ὥς Ἀφροδίτη
ἦλθεν Ἄρη ἐπίκουρος ἐμῷ μένει ἀντιόωσα·
τῷ κεν δὴ πάλαι ἄμμες ἐπαυσάμεθα πτολέμοιο
Ἴλίου ἐκπέρσαντες εὐκτίμενον πτολίεθρον. (*Il.* 21.428-33)

“May all who fight for Troy and against the Greeks be like this, and be as brave and persistent as Aphrodite was when she came to Ares’ aid and opposed me. We surely would have ended this war long ago and sacked the well-built citadel of Ilion.”

Also likely amusing to the original audience is Hermes’ deference to Leto when he was pitted against her: she should just go ahead and brag that she thrashed him (*Il.* 21.498-501). Most helpful in our understanding of these instances is the prior indication that Zeus as the audience was amused:

ἄϊε δὲ Ζεὺς
ἦμενος Οὐλύμπῳ ἐγέλασσε δέ οἱ φίλον ἦτορ
γηθοσύνη, ὅθ' ὀρᾷτο θεοὺς ἔριδι ξυνιόντας. (*Il.* 21.388-90)

And Zeus, sitting on Olympus, watched and laughed with delight at the spectacle of the gods clashing in combat.

The Theomachy also comes to a close with more laughter from Zeus as he teases Artemis about her poor performance in her match versus Hera (*Il.* 21.507-10). Zeus can laugh out of superiority because he himself is not participating in the petty conflicts, and out of incongruity: battles of the gods have none of the high stakes, excepting perhaps pride, with which human combatants must

reckon. For this reason, they offer audiences, as instanced by Zeus within the poem, a chance to relax.

The other most obvious humorous scene in the *Iliad* comes from Book 23, in the funeral games of Patroclus. Ajax competes against Odysseus in the footrace, and the latter receives an unfair advantage:

ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ τάχ' ἔμελλον ἐπαΐξασθαι ἄεθλον,
 ἔνθ' Αἴας μὲν ὄλισθε θέων, βλάπεν γὰρ Ἀθήνη,
 τῇ ῥα βοῶν κέχυτ' ὄνθος ἀποκταμένων ἐριμύκων, 775
 οὐς ἐπὶ Πατρόκλῳ πέφνεν πόδας ὠκύς Ἀχιλλεύς·
 ἐν δ' ὄνθου βοέου πληῖτο στόμα τε ῥῖνάς τε·
 κρητῆρ' αὖτ' ἀνάειρε πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,
 ὥς ἦλθε φθάμενος· ὃ δὲ βοῦν ἔλε φαίδιμος Αἴας.
 στῆ δὲ κέρας μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχων βοὸς ἀγραύλοιο 780
 ὄνθον ἀποπτύων, μετὰ δ' Ἀργείοισιν ἔειπεν·
 'ὦ πόποι ἦ μ' ἔβλαψε θεὰ πόδας, ἦ τὸ πάρος περ
 μήτηρ ὥς Ὀδυσῆϊ παρίσταται ἡδ' ἐπαρήγει.' (Il. 23.773-84)

But when they were about to sprint to the prize, then Ajax slipped as he ran, for Athena hindered him, in the dung left by the bulls which Achilles had slain for Patroclus. Both his mouth and nostrils were filled with ox dung; Odysseus finished first and took the bowl, and shining Ajax took the ox as prize. Standing with his hands on a horn and spitting out the dung, he spoke to the Greeks: "Shit, the goddess tripped me. She's like Odysseus' mom, always helping him out." They all laughed sweetly at him.¹⁰

The placement of this light-hearted scene and the near-slapstick Theomachy is conspicuous: earlier in Book 21, Achilles fights the river Scamander at the end of his *aristeia*; in Book 22 comes the climactic duel and Hector dies at the hands of Achilles; and in Book 24 is the ultimate pathetic scene where Priam begs Achilles for his son's body. Between each of these moments of

¹⁰ The sweet laughter is worded the same as that aimed at Thersites (ἡδὴ γέλασαν, Il. 2.270).

high tension we have relief, comic to some degree. Likewise we should observe again that none of these events, none of these characters are integral to the overall arc of the poem.¹¹

The *Odyssey* differs from the *Iliad* in many aspects and to a great enough degree that one critic has said “To pass from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey* is to pass from tragedy to comedy, or, at least, from tragic country to comic country.”¹² The main character’s goal, a happy ending at home, bears more in common with comedies than the *Iliad*, *Aeneid*, and *Thebaid*, and so our survey here will be more limited than the *Iliad*’s. Perhaps the most famous example of humor in the *Odyssey*, however, corroborates our hypothesis about humor being used for relief or at least kept separate from the main plot: the song of Demodocus (*Od.* 8.266-366), where Aphrodite and Ares are caught in adultery.¹³ Hephaestus, upon trapping them, invites the other gods to witness the ἔργα γελαστά (8.307, “laughable deeds”) and indeed ἄσβεστος γέλως (8.325, “unquenchable laughter”) is their reaction.¹⁴ Pseudo-Demetrius’ *On Style* makes a significant observation on the language of the Cyclops episode in Book 9:

Χρῆται δὲ αὐταῖς Ὅμηρος καὶ πρὸς δεινῶσιν ἐνίοτε καὶ ἔμφασιν,
καὶ παίζων φοβερώτερός ἐστι, πρῶτός τε εὐρηκέναι δοκεῖ φοβερὰς
χάριτας, ὥσπερ τὸ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἀχαριτωτάτου προσώπου, τὸ ἐπὶ τοῦ
Κύκλωπος, τὸ [οὖν] Οὗτιν ἐγὼ πύματον ἔδομαι, τοὺς δὲ λοιποὺς
πρώτους, τὸ τοῦ Κύκλωπος ξένιον· οὐ γὰρ οὕτως αὐτὸν ἐνέφηγεν
δεινὸν ἐκ τῶν ἄλλων, ὅταν δύο δειπνῇ ἐταίρους, οὐδ’ ἀπὸ τοῦ
θυρεοῦ ἢ ἐκ τοῦ ῥοπάλου, ὡς ἐκ τούτου τοῦ ἀστεϊσμοῦ. (130)

¹¹ Clarke 1969: 247-9 argues for Paris being a comic hero, or rather anti-hero (but without the modern glamour associated with the term). Paris operates outside the heroic norms, but is a minor character in the *Iliad*. One flagrant moment of potential humor with Paris comes at *Il.* 11.377-83, when he wounds Diomedes and laughs at his success, perhaps out of surprise that he could be successful or with a thrill of superiority.

More problematic is the laughter of Andromache and Hector in 6.466-85, when Hector’s helmet crest scares the infant Astyanax. Jäkel 1994: 25-6 categorizes as “a sign of friendly communication.” I think it is sparked by incongruity – what is so normal for Hector, a warrior, is startling for an infant innocent of war – and continues as a release of tension; for the former, something so natural to Hector is foreign and frightening to his son, and for the latter he has come in from battle and will soon enter again.

¹² Clarke 1969: 249-50.

¹³ Miralles 1994: 15 puts this scene first in a list of the *Odyssey*’s laughs, but observes that apart from this scene the gods of the *Odyssey* are not prone to mirth.

¹⁴ The gods’ commentary (8.329-32) focuses on the novelty of slow, lame Hephaestus catching the swiftest of Olympians in Ares. This would lead us to interpret the humor as incongruity-based.

Homer too uses these [witticisms] at times for amplification and for expression, and by playing he becomes more fearsome, and he seems to be the first to discover intimidating jests, just as when the most inelegant character, the Cyclops, says “I will eat Nobody last, and the others first; this is my hospitality to you.”¹⁵ For nothing else Homer says presents the Cyclops as terrifying as does this striking phrase, not when he eats two friends for dinner, not the boulder for a door, not the huge club.

The *Odyssey*, then, does provide a precedent for the sort of humor which crops up repeatedly in the *Thebaid*: humor which drives home just how fearsome or disturbing a scene is. Akin to this is the repeated sarcasm and mockery of the suitors,¹⁶ who receive a similarly fatal hospitality when their host returns. Another example may be that query made by Odysseus to Elpenor, upon discovering the latter in the Underworld: “How did you come to the murky Underworld? You arrived on foot swifter than I in my black ship!” (*Od.* 11.57-8). Cicero might call this dissimulation combined with ironic absurdity (*De or.* 2.275), because while it may be that Odysseus is unaware of exactly how Elpenor died, he could likely hazard a guess that the crewman had not actually arrived there alive and on foot.¹⁷ This potential levity right at the beginning of Odysseus’ communion with the shades is jarring and all the more incongruous when set against the bitterness of Agamemnon and Achilles, two other interviewees.

¹⁵ Demetrius is paraphrasing here; the original at 9.369-70: Οὐτιν ἐγὼ πύματον ἔδομαι μετὰ οἷς ἐτάροισιν, / τοὺς δ’ ἄλλους πρόσθεν· τὸ δέ τοι ξεινήιον ἔσται. Sikes 1940: 123 asserts that Homer’s humor was missed or misinterpreted by Greek critics, but he may not have consulted Demetrius or else considered him too late to have a relevant opinion.

¹⁶ Eumaeus, loyal swineherd and friend to Odysseus, responds in kind to Melanthius, disloyal goatherd and ally of the suitors, after they tie him and hoist him up into the rafters at 22.195-9, “Now you’ll be on watch for sure, Melanthius, all night long, lying on a feather bed, as befits you; nor will you miss out on the golden-throned dawn coming up from the streams of Ocean at the time when you drive your goats to the house to make a feast for the suitors.” Of course, he will not be able to lead the goats this time, and this soft bed is the air. Sarcasm throughout the homecoming books is indicative of (re)claimed superiority. See Miralles 1994: 16-21 for a discussion of sardonic laughter involving the suitors.

¹⁷ Mitchell 2009: 15 identifies this as black humor in a brief survey of Greek laughter in literature.

This introductory discussion must now come to a close with humor in the *Aeneid*,¹⁸ a subject of some debate, albeit limited; we recall that humor in non-comedic genres of Classical literature has received relatively little scholarly attention. Sikes felt Vergil “was careful to preserve the utmost gravity in the *Aeneid*.”¹⁹ Lloyd responds, admitting that “The *Aeneid* is not a funny poem” before embarking on a survey of what he understands to be smile-inducing moments in the epic.²⁰ Lloyd locates a large portion of the humor around the gods, following Homeric tradition, and in particular the snarky interactions between Juno and Venus.²¹ Much of what Lloyd sees as humor elsewhere, however, seems better described as artful language,²² and in this way Lloyd exhibits the opposite of the typical academic trend in interpreting humor. But like those the *Iliad*, the games in Book 5 do offer comic relief, as when sluggish Menoetes is pushed off the back of a ship in the boat race when the captain is unsatisfied:

*at gravis, ut fundo vix tandem redditus imo est,
iam senior madidaque fluens in veste Menoetes
summa petit scopuli siccaque in rupe resedit.
illum et labentem Teucri et risere natantem,
et salsos rident revomentem pectore fluctus.*
(*Aen.* 5.178-82)

¹⁸ Sikes 1940: 124 insists that there is not a trace of levity in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* is “desperately serious,” and intervening Latin epic is fragmentary. As noted above, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, influential as it is for Statius, is radically different in subject matter and narrative structure and thus does not act as an example of normal epic from which the *Thebaid* deviates. Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* will require attention at a later date in the context of other Neronian literature; a future study will include Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* and Silius Italicus’ *Punica*, some of which was being composed concurrently with the *Thebaid* and was likely in circulation before the final publication of Statius’ epic.

¹⁹ Sikes 1940: 124. He does admit that Book 5 acts as a lighter interlude between the weightier Books 4 and 6, “but it contains practically no humour, except in the description of Nisus, pleading for a prize with muddy and bloody face.” I believe that Sikes, despite writing “The Humour of Homer,” is a good example of modern scholarly dismissal of humor.

²⁰ Lloyd 1977: 250. Lloyd laments a lack of recognition for the *Aeneid*’s humor in scholarship preceding his own article, and attributes this to the more pessimistic interpretation of the *Aeneid* commonly associated with American scholarship.

²¹ Lloyd 1977: 251-3.

²² e.g. *pedibus timor addidit alas* (8.224, “fear gave wings to his feet”) in the story of Hercules and Cacus. Lloyd admits that his definition of humor is “exceedingly broad” (1977: 250) in that he includes any passage where he thinks Vergil intended that his reader smile.

But Menoetes, heavy and old, as he finally bobs up from the deep, soaking wet in his clothes, reaches for the highest rock and sits back on the dry stone. The Teucrians laughed when he fell, laughed when he swam, and now laugh as he hurls up salty waves from his chest.

Menoetes does not figure large in the rest of the epic and neither does drowning. This is unproblematic comic relief, a moment of relaxation both for the characters within the narrative and for readers between the tension-filled end of Book 4 and the sojourn to the Underworld in Book 6.

A less easily interpreted instance is Ascanius' quip in Book 7: *heus! etiam mensas consumimus* (*Aen.* 7.116, "Aww, we're even eating our tables!"), which is explicitly labeled a jest (*adludens*, 117). No laughing from the audience here; Aeneas and the astute reader instantly recognize that they have fulfilled a prophecy and found the promised land (120-34). Ascanius' observation moves the plot along, but the humor appears inconsequential; it seems mostly to characterize the youthfulness of Aeneas' son, who comes off brash, jesting at such a portent. It may also be meant for relief between the Underworld, Aeneas' confusing exit from it,²³ and the beginning of the war with the Latins in Book 7.

The final passage from the *Aeneid* which I will consider here has long troubled critics. Humor is typically not among the points of discussion; instead, the subjects are taste, incongruity, and bathos. While in the Underworld Aeneas spots the shade of Dido, the lover he left in order to found Rome, who killed herself upon his departure. He approaches her, weeping, and speaks:

*infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo
venerat extinctam, ferroque extrema secutam?
funeris heu tibi causa fui? per sidera iuro,
per superos, et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,*

²³ Through the Gate of Ivory, meant for false dreams (*Aen.* 6.893-901).

invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi. 460
sed me iussa deum, quae nunc has ire per umbras,
per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam,
imperiis egere suis; nec credere quivi
hunc tantum tibi me discessu ferre dolorem.
siste gradum, teque aspectu ne subtrahe nostro. 465
quem fugis? extremum fato quod te adloquor hoc est.
 (Aen. 6.456-66)

Poor Dido, then the news is true that you were dead, that
 you sought your own end with a blade? Was I the cause of
 your death? I swear by the stars, by the gods above, and
 whatever faith there is in the world below, I left your shore
 unwillingly, queen. The orders of the gods forced me, as
 they force me now to go through these shadows, through
 rough desolation and the deep night, to carry out their
 commands. I could not believe that I would bring you such
 great grief when I left. Stop, don't turn away from me!
 From whom do you flee? This is the last time fate will let
 me speak with you.

The problematic line in this heart-wrenching passage is 460, *invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi*. It
 quotes with slight alteration a poem of Catullus (66) which is a translation of Callimachus'
 Greek *Coma Berenices*. This poem in elegiac couplets is a mock-heroic account from the point
 of view of a lock of hair; the line in question reads *invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi* (66.39).
 Austin sums up the problem and his own opinion on it in his commentary on *Aeneid* 6:²⁴

With minimal change, Virgil has applied the frivolity to an
 anguished moment of high Epic. . . Modern susceptibilities are
 pained by Virgil's presumed indifference to the incongruity so
 produced, and suggest that his line is an unconscious reminiscence:
 this is mere wishful thinking. He knew what he was about, and this
 means that for him no violation of literary taste existed in his
 ennoblement of a piece of fun.

I find Austin's apology wholly unsatisfying. Vergil certainly "knew what he was about," but
 Austin assumes that means he intended no violation and consequently none exists. The less
 strained conclusion to draw in the face of this unexpected frivolity is that Vergil did intend some

²⁴ Austin 1977: 164, on line 6.460.

sort of violation; this, however, prompts the difficult question of “Why?” Across the rest of this chapter, I will be arguing for deliberate violations of poetic norms and developing our understanding of their role in the larger work. We may later return to *Aeneid* 6 at the end and make more informed speculation about the effect of this line.

EXCESS AND HYPERBOLE

In this section I highlight details of the *Thebaid*’s environment which prime the audience to perceive dark humor or contribute directly to a humorous atmosphere themselves: rampant excess and grotesquerie; recurring sarcasm and irony on the part of the characters; the reduced power of the gods and the Underworld’s dominance; and the *Thebaid*’s peculiar Fortune, who differs markedly from previous epic iterations. All of these involve incongruity, whether with audience expectations or generic norms, and many are results of the pervasive *nefas* which defines the poem.²⁵

Regarding hyperbolic excess, the contemporary Quintilian explains:

monere satis est mentiri hyperbolen, nec ita ut mendacio facere velit. quo magis intuendum est quo usque deceat extollere quod nobis non creditur. pervenit haec res frequentissime ad risum: qui si captatus est, urbanitatis, sin aliter, stultitiae nomen adsequitur.
(Inst. 8.6.74)

It is enough to warn that hyperbole lies, though it has no intention to deceive. For this reason we must be all the more careful about stretching things further than can be believed. This trope very frequently results in laughter; if that was the aim, we call it wittiness; if otherwise, we call it foolishness.

Hutchinson, in his *Latin Literature from Seneca to Juvenal*, elaborates: “[Quintilian] notes (like others) the comic potential of hyperbole; in between sublimity and comedy there is only a chasm

²⁵ See Ganiban 2007: 184 and throughout his book.

of absurdity, into which the unwary will tumble.”²⁶ I would emend this to include the deliberate along with the unwary; absurdity is an effect to be discussed later. In any case, Hutchinson attests that playful extravagance is “of fundamental significance” for poetry of the period, and Statius is no exception.²⁷ We may on this count affirm that the *Thebaid* is a poem of excesses:²⁸ excessive delays, such as Book 5’s Lemnian narrative;²⁹ excessive deaths, those of the seven leaders of the avenging army and many others described in detail; and excessive darkness, represented by the unchallenged authority of the Underworld.³⁰ Even in seemingly benign scenes Statius outstrips his predecessors. Compare the wood-cutting scenes between the *Iliad*, Ennius’ *Annales*, Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and the *Thebaid*.

οἱ δ’ ἴσαν ὑλοτόμους πελέκεας ἐν χερσὶν ἔχοντες
 σειράς τ’ εὐπλέκτους· πρὸ δ’ ἄρ’ οὐρῆες κίον αὐτῶν. 115
 πολλὰ δ’ ἄνακτα κάταντα πάραντά τε δόχμιά τ’ ἦλθον.
 ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ κνημοὺς προσέβαν πολυπίδακος Ἰδης,
 αὐτίκ’ ἄρα δρυὺς ὑψικόμους ταναήκεϊ χαλκῷ
 τάμνον ἐπειγόμενοι· ταὶ δὲ μεγάλα κτυπέουσai
 πῖπτον· τὰς μὲν ἔπειτα διαπλήσσοντες Ἀχαιοὶ 120
 ἔκδεον ἡμιόνων· ταὶ δὲ χθόνα ποσσὶ δατεῦντο
 ἐλδόμεναι πεδίοιο διὰ ῥωπήϊα πυκνά. (Il. 23.114-22)

The men set out with cutting axes in their hands and well-woven ropes; ahead of them went their mules. From above, from below, sideways and slantwise they came. But when they reached the ridges of spring-spotted Ida, they immediately set to felling towering oaks with bronze axes. They came down with great crashes, and the Achaeans then split them and lashed them to the mules, who tore up the ground as the made for the plain through the thick underbrush.

²⁶ Hutchinson 1993: 112.

²⁷ See Hutchinson 1993: 113: “most of all in its greatest authors.”

²⁸ Dewar 1991: xxxii attests to hyperbole as a major feature of Statius’ rhetorical style. Parkes 2012: xx-xxi also describes his extravagance and takes as an example the necromancy scene (4.406-645).

²⁹ See Coleman’s introduction to Shackleton Bailey 2003(II): 13-4. Another example is the interruption of Tydeus’ *aristeia* when the narrative shifts to Ismene and Antigone (8.607-54).

³⁰ Dominik 1994a: 99-129, 178-80 sums up Statius’ bleak worldview, much of which centers on the helplessness of human in the face of an oppressive universe. The forces of the Underworld are the most obvious oppressors.

This scene describes the preparation of Patroclus' funeral pyre. One species of tree is cut by the Greeks: δρῦς, the oak. Ennius' version develops a richer taxonomy with five different trees, and indeed the pyre must be larger, since, as we infer, it is built for all those slain in the Battle of Heraclea.³¹

*incedunt arbusta per alta, securibus caedunt,
percellunt magnas quercus, exciditur ilex,
fraxinus frangitur atque abies consternitur alta,
pinus proceras pervortunt: omne sonabat
arbustum fremitu silvae frondosae.* (Ann. 175-9)

They march through the tall groves, they chop with axes,
they fell the great oaks, the holm oak is hewn, ash shatters
and the tall fir is laid low, they throw down the lofty pine;
the whole grove resounds with the roar of the leafy woods.

Vergil does not expand on Ennian variety, but introduces some alternate vocabulary. Now the pyre is for a single man, Misenus, and given that the procedure has not diminished in scale, a sense of excess accompanies Vergil's rendition if we accept Skutsch's inference about the Ennian example.³²

*itur in antiquam silvam, stabula alta ferarum,
procumbunt piceae, sonat icta securibus ilex
fraxineaeque trabes cuneis et fissile robur
scinditur, advolvunt ingentis montibus ornos.*
(Aen. 6.179-82)

They go to an ancient forest, the deep lairs of beasts; the
spruces topple, the holm oak rings with the axe blows, the
trunks of ash and oak are split with wedges and they roll
the huge flowering ash trees down the mountains.

Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (6.399-452) weaves a wood-cutting scene into the larger narrative of the civil war; Caesar orders an ancient grove to be cut to build siege engines, and Lucan and spends

³¹ See Skutsch 1985: 341; Skutsch locates the passage in Book 6.

³² See Skutsch 1985: 341-2. Another similar scene occurs at *Aen.* 11.134-8 when the Trojans and Latins each build pyres for their casualties. Vergil adds *olens cedrus*, "fragrant cedar," but does not otherwise expand the trope.

over fifty lines describing this forest, how the army struggles to be loggers, and Caesar's response to the soldiery's reluctance in profaning the numinous place. Statius develops Lucan's martial twist with epic epithets for the trees and tacks on two similes: a tree-cutting scene is no longer just characteristic of martial epic; it becomes assimilated to the war itself:

<i>sternitur extemplo veteres incaedua ferro</i>	90
<i>silva comas, largae qua non opulentior umbrae</i>	
<i>Argolicos inter saltusque educta Lycaeos</i>	
<i>extulerat super astra caput: stat sacra senectae</i>	
<i>numine, nec solos hominum transgressa veterno</i>	
<i>fertur avos, Nymphas etiam mutasse superstes</i>	95
<i>Faunorumque greges, aderat miserabile luco</i>	
<i>exscidium: fugere ferae, nidosque tepentes</i>	
<i>absiliunt (metus urget) aves; cadit ardua fagus,</i>	
<i>Chaoniumque nemus brumaeque inlaesa cupressus,</i>	
<i>procumbunt piceae, flammis alimenta supremis,</i>	100
<i>ornique iliceaeque trabes metuendaque suco</i>	
<i>taxus et infandos belli potura cruores</i>	
<i>fraxinus atque situ non expugnabile robur.</i>	
<i>hinc audax abies et odoro vulnere pinus</i>	
<i>scinditur, adclinant intonsa cacumina terrae</i>	105
<i>alnus amica fretis nec inhospita vitibus ulmus.</i>	
<i>dat gemitum tellus: non sic eversa feruntur</i>	
<i>Ismara, cum fracto Boreas caput extulit antro,</i>	
<i>non grassante noto citius nocturna peregit</i>	
<i>flamma nemus; linguunt flentes dilecta locorum</i>	110
<i>otia cana Pales Silvanusque arbiter umbrae</i>	
<i>semideumque pecus, migrantibus adgemit illis</i>	
<i>silva, nec amplexae dimittunt robora Nymphae.</i>	
<i>ut cum possessas avidis victoribus arces</i>	
<i>dux raptare dedit, vix signa audita, nec urbem</i>	115
<i>invenias; ducunt sternuntque abiguntque feruntque</i>	
<i>immodici, minor ille fragor, quo bella gerebant.</i>	
(Theb. 6.90-117)	

Immediately a forest and its ancient foliage, untouched by iron, is felled; no forest richer in lavish shade, reared between Argolis and the glades of Lycaeus, had raised its head above the stars. It stood sacred with supernatural age, and was said to have outlived not only men of antiquity but even to have surpassed generations of Nymphs and Fauns. Pitiable destruction came to the grove. The beasts fled, the birds rush away from their warm nests; fear compels them.

The towering beech falls and the Chaonian copse and the cypress unharmed by winter; spruces topple, food for funerary flames, trunks of flowering ash and holm oak, and the yew of fearsome sap and ash about to drink the abominable blood of war and oak, unharmed by age. Then the bold fir and the pine with fragrant wound are split, and the alder, friend of the seas, and the vine-welcoming elm bend their untrimmed tops to the ground. The earth lets out a groan. Ismara is not overturned like this when Boreas raises his head from his broken cave, neither does a wildfire at night destroy a forest more quickly when Notus is on the march. Pales and Silvanus, the master of the shade, and the herd of demigods leave their beloved haunts of aged leisure weeping; the wood groans in sympathy with them as they depart, and the Nymphs won't stop hugging the oaks. As when a commander allows greedy victors to plunder captured citadels, hardly is a signal given before the town vanishes: they lead and lay low and drive away and carry off with no restraint; they waged wars with less roar.

As mentioned above, the trees, more numerous here (twelve species) than in the *Annales* (five), the *Aeneid* (five) or the *Bellum Civile* (six), bear epic epithets (99-105). Lucan's trees had two in the *Bellum Civile* (3.442-3), but Statius goes yet further in describing the trees with qualifiers usually reserved for humans, *audax* and *vulnere* (104). Not only is the scope so much larger but his language is bolder and blurs the distinctions between this, a book dedicated to funeral games and thus traditionally a respite from the more emotionally taxing books of battles, and the war to come. The last simile accomplishes much the same: the images of war override and co-opt a scene traditionally kept separate from such material, and the logging comes off as more barbaric, war less so, by comparison. Another important difference is that Statius' trees are cut for a pyre not to honor warriors, but an infant, Opheltes or Archemorus, who was killed by a monstrous snake and the negligence of his babysitter. The baby's father had deemed that he earned honors and games (*et meruit*, 5.742), but he gives no explanation of how he did so – and so the inflated

logging scene is all the more vastly disproportionate.³³ The incongruity on both counts – both the surprising invasion of war into new literary territory and the excessive scene relative to the cause – may be edging toward humor; we may interpret this, moreover, as a caricature of the analogous scene in the *Iliad*, *Annales*, and *Aeneid*.

This is a larger example of the *Thebaid*'s tendency toward excess, one verging on absurdity, a classic prompt to humor (see Cicero and Quintilian in Chapter I). Poetic excess on a smaller scale occurs throughout the work,³⁴ as at 4.483-4, when the Theban necromancers Tiresias and Manto note the demographics of the Underworld: *contra per crimina functis, / qui plures Erebo pluresque e sanguine Cadmi* ("On the other hand, those who died in the act of a crime, being the majority in Erebus and mostly of Cadmean blood . . ."). This "extravagant hyperbole"³⁵ reiterates the dark legacy of Thebes, from Pentheus and Agave through Laius. To similar effect, when Tisiphone rises to fulfil Oedipus' prayer:

*arripit extemplo Maleae de valle resurgens
notum iter ad Thebas; neque enim velocior ullas
itque reditque vias cognatave Tartara mavult.*
(*Theb.* 1.100-3)

She suddenly shoots out of the Malean valley and rushes
down the familiar road to Thebes: no other route does she
frequent faster, not even kindred Tartarus is dearer to her.

The idea that Thebes is the Fury's most visited haunt is not surprising, but *itque reditque* suggests a constant circuit, and that she prefers the city to Tartarus, both her home and her relation (*cognata*), pushes into the territory of disbelief and absurdity. Hyperbole takes a

³³ We have here an aetiology for the foundation of the Nemean games, but within the narrative the scale makes little sense.

³⁴ Dewar 1991: 66 identifies 9.41, *madet ardua fletu / . . . galea* ("His tall helm soaked with tears"), as "a favorite hyperbole also found at 2.635," which reads *undantem fletu galeam* ("the helmet swimming in tears"). Dewar (1991:102-3) labels as hyperbole also 9.223-4, where Hippomedon beheads people on the run and passes by before their trunks hit the ground; this seems to me not so impossible, and in any case is a common trope in modern martial arts media.

³⁵ Shackleton Bailey 2003(II): 241.

grotesque and paradoxical turn at 4.734-5, when the Argive army is wandering through a drought-stricken landscape: *gelant venae et siccis cruor aeger adhaeret / visceribus* (“Their veins congeal and their spoiled blood clings to their dry innards.”).³⁶ The Furies themselves, vengeance and malevolence personified, while watching the fraternal dual between Polynices and Eteocles, *tantum mirantur et astant / laudantes, hominumque dolent plus posse furores* (11.538-9, “only marvel and stand by praising them, and are grieved that the rage of humans can be greater than their own.”). At 12.565-7 the beasts and birds which normally feast on fallen soldiers avoid the field full of bodies decaying by the decree of Creon, so overwhelming is the magnitude of the stench: the natural order of war and the food chain are broken.

All of these instances of hyperbole scattered across the poem challenge us to recognize Statius as either witty if he intended amusement or foolish if he did not, per Quintilian’s rhetorical assessment of the trope. Statius does signal his awareness that the content of his epic is *monstra*, ‘extraordinary’ or ‘unnatural’ in an ominous sense, through the leader of the Maenads, inspired by Bacchus:

*aeternis potius me, Bacche, pruinis
trans et Amazoniis ululatum Caucason armis
siste ferens, quam monstra ducum stirpemque profanam
eloquar. en urges (alium tibi, Bacche, furorem
iuravi: similes video concurrere tauros . . . (Theb. 4.393-7)*

I’d rather you, Bacchus, bear me beyond the Caucasus,
howling with Amazonian arms, and leave me in the endless
frosts, than I tell of monstrous deeds of leaders and the
impious family. But see, you push me; I swore a different
madness to you, Bacchus: I see twin bulls clashing . . .

Here the Bacchant queen (so called at 4.379) deems recounting the war between the brothers – that is, exactly Statius’ activity in the *Thebaid* – as worse than exile at the ends of the earth, even

³⁶ See Parkes 2012: 304 for a small explanation.

worse than her typical madness, in which she would as a Maenad tear apart living animals and with which inspiration her predecessors murdered and mangled Pentheus. Statius here consciously casts his poetic program as edgy and outlandish; the sustained hyperbole lends an air of deliberate absurdity, even dark whimsy, to the epic.

SARCASM AND IRONY

Another device which creates a humorous atmosphere in the *Thebaid* is the sarcasm and irony of the dialogue. This is not without precedent; we saw sarcasm from Athena above in the *Iliad*, and Turnus of the *Aeneid* offers a few examples. At 10.649: *quo fugis, Aenea? thalamos ne desere pactos; / hac dabitur dextra tellus quaesita per undas* (“Where are you running to, Aeneas? Don’t ditch your wedding! My right hand will give you the land you sought through the waves.”). The humor lies here in Turnus’ dissimulation and metaphor, a euphemism for killing him and granting his wish. Turnus would fit right in with Cicero, who appreciates the humorous potential of dissimulation (*De or.* 2.275), when scolding the council of Italian leaders: *‘immo,’ ait ‘o cives,’ arrepto tempore Turnus, / ‘cogite concilium et pacem laudate sedentes; / illi armis in regna ruunt.’* (11.459-61, “Sure, citizens,” said Turnus, seizing the moment: “gather the committee and sit around praising peace. They are attacking our kingdom!”). Remarkable here is how Turnus’ wit responds directly to the main flow of the narrative. The *Thebaid* runs with this: sarcasm is a common mode of communication for several characters, and perhaps the primary mode for Tydeus, Polynices’ best friend and soldier. For example, as Polynices’ ambassador to Eteocles, after his demand that Eteocles step down is rejected:

*haec pietas, haec magna fides! nec crimina gentis
mira equidem duco: sic primus sanguinis auctor
incestique patrum thalami* (Theb. 2.462-4)

What familial love, what great faith! No, I'm not surprised
by the sins of your clan. The first author of your blood was
the same, and your parents' incestuous wedlock.

Tydeus elides together Eteocles' disrespect for his brother and Oedipus' patricide and incest with a rhetorical stamp of sarcasm. This mode of humor is the fitting response to congenital moral degeneracy, but also the means to continue *nefas*: after Polynices' (grand)mother Jocasta approaches the Argive camp along with his two sisters, Ismene and Antigone, and sways both Polynices and the army with her entreaty, Tydeus motivates them toward war again with his sarcasm:

*ipse etiam ante oculos nunc matris ad oscula versus
nunc rudis Ismenes, nunc flebiliora precantis* 535
*Antigones, variaque animum turbante procella
exciderat regnum: cupit ire, et mitis Adrastus
non vetat; hic iustae Tydeus memor occupat irae:
'me potius, socii, qui fidum Eteoclea nuper
expertus, nec frater eram, me opponite regi* 540
*cuius adhuc pacem egregiam et bona foedera gesto
pectore in hoc. ubi tunc fidei pacisque sequestra
mater eras, pulchris cum me nox vestra morata est
hospitiis? nempe haec trahis ad commercia natum.'*
(Theb. 7.534-44)

[Polynices] himself before their eyes now gives in to the kisses of his mother, now those of innocent Ismene, now the more tearful kisses of Antigone as she beseeched him, and a tempestuous storm in his mind made him forget the throne. He longs to go, and gentle Adrastus does not stand in the way; here Tydeus, mindful of righteous anger, seizes him: "Me, comrades, send me instead, who recently tasted Eteocles' good faith and I'm not even his brother, to face the king, whose outstanding peace and honest treaty I still bear on this chest. Where were you then, mother, mediator of faith and peace, when your nation's night held me back with such fine hospitality? I suppose you are dragging your son off to such affairs."

Tydeus speaks ironically of the fifty men sent by Eteocles to ambush and kill him after his embassy was rejected (2.527-743). His choice of words here (*fidum Eteoclea, fidei*) recalls that

above (*magna fides*) and he adds more exaggerated sarcasm in *pulchris . . . hospitiiis*. The final line quoted here contains the strongest punch, however, when he insinuates that Jocasta wishes to trap Polynices, but there may be something more: with my translation ‘affairs’ I aim to capture an ambiguity in *commercias*. Its surface-level meaning must be that of ‘official interactions,’ referring flippantly to the ambush of Tydeus, but an underlying sense could refer to a sexual congress of the sort in which Jocasta has infamously already participated.³⁷ The juxtaposition of *commercias* and *natum* reinforces this reading, and Jocasta herself had brought up her history in her plea (7.514); again, Tydeus’ sarcasm is a response to *nefas*. Jocasta’s admission itself is potentially humorous: *nupsi equidem peperique nefas* (7.514, “I married and gave birth to sin, yes.”), where she refers metaphorically to marrying her son and bearing the products of that incest. But *nefas* stands in for her sons as the object of *peperi* – and, in startling fashion, of *nupsi* as well. This remarkable economy is of the sort which fascinated Freud in his study of jokes.³⁸

But just as Tydeus’ sarcasm denounces Jocasta’s and Eteocles’ *nefas*, so it paradoxically perpetuates Polynices’ and the central *nefas* of the epic:³⁹ once the *arma* and *furiae* are in favor once more (7.562) because of his speech, Tisiphone commences the war by compelling to attack the Argives two tigers dear to Dionysus and thus to Thebes (7.565-607).⁴⁰ Sarcasm defines Tydeus’ character: he drives Jocasta and her daughters away from the camp with another example:

*fugit exsertos Iocasta per hostes
iam non ausa preces; natas ipsamque repellunt
qui modo tam mites, et praeceps tempore Tydeus*

³⁷ *Commercium* as a euphemism for sexual intercourse dates back to Plautus (*Truc.* 94). It can refer especially to that arranged through prostitution, a sense to which *trahis* may point. See Adams 1982: 203.

³⁸ See Chapter I for his relief theory involving economy. The content would have been of interest to him as well.

³⁹ See Ganiban 2007: 197-8 for an analogous sequence: “At Thebes, *nefas* creates more *nefas*.”

⁴⁰ The scene obviously harkens back to *Aen.* 7.475-539, where Allecto inspires some Trojan hunting dogs to find a tamed Latin stag and aids Ascanius in shooting the animal. In Statius’ account, the animals are far less innocent; the Fury inspires nature to oppose the Argives rather than motivating human folly.

utitur: 'ite age, nunc pacem sperate fidemque!'
(Theb. 7.609-12)

Jocasta flees through those now revealed as enemies, no longer daring to supplicate; those who were just now so gentle now shove her and her daughters away and Tydeus, ready to take the opportunity, says: "Go on, now hope for peace and good faith!"

Later he jokes bitterly after he enters the fight and casually slays an enemy:

*ibat fumiferam quatiens Onchestius Idas
lampada per medios turbabatque agmina Graium,
igne viam rumpens; magno quem comminus ictu
Tydeos hasta feri dispulsa casside fixit.
ille ingens in terga iacet, stat fronte superstes 470
lancea, collapsae veniunt in tempora flammae.
prosequitur Tydeus: 'saevos ne dixeris Argos,
igne tuo, Thebane, (rogum concedimus) arde!'*
(Theb. 8.466-73)

Onchestian Idas was going through their midst shaking a smoking torch and disrupting the Greek ranks, blazing a trail with fire; with a mighty blow, point-blank, fierce Tydeus' spear splits his helmet and pierces him. The huge man lies on his back, the lance standing straight up from his forehead, and the flames fall to his temples. Tydeus presses: "You shall not call the Argives cruel; we allow you a pyre. Burn in your own flames, Theban!"

Here Tydeus highlights the irony of Idas' end and looks ahead in the mythic account to Creon's decree that none of the Argive dead be buried. Statius puns on *superstes*, the spear both outliving and standing straight up out of Idas; this imagery is at once amusing and discomfoting, the hallmark of dark humor. Upsetting as well is the thought of a torch falling on one's face, yet this is an opportunity for Tydeus' own grim humor. Further irony may underlie *collapsae veniunt in tempora flammae*, however: the image of flames around the head, particularly the temples, recalls a number of significant figures in Roman (literary) history. Perhaps most directly recalled is the young Ascanius, when it appears as an omen of Jupiter's protection at *Aen.* 2.679-84 and

harmlessly grazes his temples (*circum tempora pasci*). Also in the *Aeneid* and possibly even more ominous are the twin flames around Augustus' temples (*geminas cui tempora flammis*, 8.680) on Aeneas' shield. Tied up with these but less directly evoked are Servius Tullius, who as a young boy had much the same experience as Ascanius and was destined for kingship (*AUC* 1.39), and Hersilia, apotheosized with flaming hair in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (14.845-51).⁴¹ All of these are positive omens, signs of divine assistance or divinity itself; Idas, on the other hand, has a spear in his head as he actually burns. The perversion of the omen is reiterated later in the epic: following Eteocles' sacrifice thanking Jupiter for the thunderbolt that ended Capaneus' threat, black fire leaps forth and burns up his crown (11.226-7), which signals that his reign is ending. Statius thus perverts the trope of epic in order to emphasize the perversity of his theme, the corruption of autocratic authority.

Tydeus speaks spitefully once more in demeaning and amusing fashion after a bout with the young Atys shortly thereafter:

*mox ignotum armis ac solo corpore mensus
 Tydea non timuit, fragilique lacerare telo
 saepius infrendentem aliis aliosque sequentem
 ausus erat. tandem invalidos Aetolus ad ictus 580
 forte refert oculos et formidabile ridens,
 'iamdudum video, magnum cupis, improbe, leti
 nomen,' ait; simul audacem non ense nec hasta
 dignatus leviter digitis imbelles solutis
 abiecit iaculum: latebras tamen inguinis alte 585
 missile, ceu totis intortum viribus, hausit.
 praeterit haud dubium fati et spoliare superbit
 Oenides. 'neque enim has Marti aut tibi, bellica Pallas,
 exuvias figemus,' ait. 'procul arceat ipsum
 ferre pudor; vix, si bellum comitata relictis 590
 Deipyle thalamis, illi illudenda tulissem.'*
 (Theb. 8.577-91)

⁴¹ Lavinia's head, hair, and crown actually caught fire in *Aen.* 7.71-80; this is labeled *nefas* by the narrator but judged within the narrative to be a good omen for her, though one portending war for her nation.

Soon [Atys] no longer feared Tydeus, not recognizing him by his armor and judging only by his size, and he dared to harass him again and again with weak darts while Tydeus gnashed his teeth and chased down other foes. At last the Aetolian noticed the feeble attacks and said with a terrifying laugh: "I've seen for a while now that you crave a glorious death, miscreant." At once he cast his javelin, the throw light and unwarlike, his hand casual, not deeming the rash enemy worthy of his sword or spear. Nevertheless the missile drank down the deep crevices of Atys' groin, as though hurled with his utmost strength. The son of Oeneus passed by him, not doubting he would die, and sneered at the spoils. "Indeed, I will not dedicate these trophies to Mars or to you, warlike Pallas," he said. "And I would be ashamed to bear them myself. I would hardly give them to Deipyle as playthings if she were to leave her bedchambers and join me in war."

We see the epic laugh of superiority at 581 (*formidabile ridens*), but the following statement bears humor in its own right: we know, and Tydeus can likely guess, that Atys does not seek a great name of death (*magnum . . . leti / nomen*, 582-3), because the narrator developed the young man's character just before this scene at 8.554-69. Atys had been betrothed to Ismene and they were fond of each other, but the war intervenes and prevents a wedding. For this reason he fights more ardently, and ironically meets his end. The pathos is enhanced when attention is called to his youth: his mother arms him, he is not yet done growing, his chest is still bare (564-8). The end of this boy is worthy of the narrator's sympathy (*heu!*, 569), but Tydeus mocks it, even while amplifying the pathos himself by recalling Atys' youth and aborted engagement when he brings up Deipyle, her *thalami* (so frequently referring to marriage metonymically), and the play or mockery in *illudenda*.⁴²

⁴² There may be a sexual sense to *illudenda* as well, developing the idea of toys; see Adams 1982: 200. I mostly follow Shackleton Bailey 2003(III): 45 with my translation here, though his preserves some ambiguity as well. We should not bar obscene or erotic senses simply because this is epic; I will argue for their presence later in this chapter.

As Tydeus' *aristeia* progresses, his reputation precedes him and the enemy flees. He speaks coyly: *quo terga datis? licet ecce peremptos / ulcisci socios maestamque rependere noctem* (8.664-5, "Whither are you running? Behold, you can avenge your slain comrades and pay back that tragic night!") *licet ecce* is nearly amicable in tone, as though he drops his weapons and holds out his hands empty. Of course Tydeus does not expect to be defeated, and he goes on to taunt the Thebans for their cowardice. Then he spots Eteocles and addresses him with yet more irony and mock-formal language as *Aoniae rex o iustissime gentis* (8.677, "O most just king of the Aonian race.").⁴³ Of course Eteocles is precisely the opposite of this, hence the war and *nefas*: Tydeus confronts it with humor once again.

But as Tydeus wields sarcasm both against and at the service of *nefas*, so it is wielded against him. In battle after being ambushed by the Thebans, his spear pierces the man Periphas as he lifts his dying brother off the ground (2.635-8). The weapon fully impales the victim and enters the brother, sewing their kindred chests together (*cognataque pectora telo / conserit*). Now that the siblings are linked by more than blood, one says to Tydeus: *'hos tibi complexus, haec dent,' ait, 'oscula nati.'* (2.641, "May your children give you hugs and kisses like these."). The jibe is powerful for its bitterness and irony, if not perfectly coherent and analogous to the scene at hand. Nevertheless, Periphas is responding to this *nefas*, his grim death and that of his brother, with sarcasm, just as Tydeus did.

Nor are they alone.⁴⁴ Eteocles, arrogant son of Oedipus, responds to news of Tydeus' act of cannibalism and death (to be discussed at length later) with hyperbole and sarcasm:

⁴³ *o iustissime* recalls Juno's plea to Jupiter at 1.250, prefaced *o iustissime divum*. The irony of the appellation for Eteocles may be retrojected back to the council of the gods.

⁴⁴ See also Capaneus at 3.655-7: *quod si bella effera Graios / ferre vetas, i Sidonios legatus ad hostes: / haec pacem tibi sarta dabunt* ("But if you forbid the Greeks to wage a barbaric war, go on, be an envoy to the Sidonian foes. Your prophet's garland will keep you safe.") The tone is undeniably ironic and mocking.

*et nunc ille iacet (pulchra o solacia leti!)
 ore tenens hostile caput, dulcique nefandus
 immoritur tabo; nos ferrum immite facesque:
 illis nuda odia, et feritas iam non eget armis. 20
 sic pergant rabidi claraque hac laude furantur,
 dum videas haec, summe pater. (Theb. 9.17-22)*

And now [Tydeus] lies there (splendid solace in death!), holding his enemy's head in his mouth, and the unspeakable wretch passes on amidst the gore that so delights him. For us there is harsh steel and torches; for them, naked hatred, and their savagery no longer needs weapons. Let them go on being mad, then, and let them enjoy this illustrious praise, so long as you see, highest father [Jupiter].

Eteocles inflates the actions of one man (Tydeus) into “the new normal” for all the invading army. What constitutes the *clara laude* is unclear; it may be a sarcastic reversal of the regard of the gods, who flee from the scene (8.760-7, 9.4-7), Eteocles' own, or a general reputation developing after the incident. Likewise, the apostrophic *pulchra o solacia leti* is somewhat ambiguous. This could be an ironic reference to the fate of Tydeus' victim, Melanippus, or a straightforward one – at least he is dead. Or is it the comfort of Tydeus, now deceased, or an ironic twist thereof, i.e. the soul of such a profane individual could not have solace in the afterlife? The placement of the apostrophe in the clause, following Tydeus' verb *iacet*, lends weight to the solace being his; coming before *ore tenens*, it rather leads one to imagine Melanippus' head as a grotesque pacifier.⁴⁵

Eteocles may have inherited his penchant for sarcasm from both his father and brother, Oedipus. Creon, crowned king after the deaths of Polynices and Eteocles, bids the hateful, blind man to leave Thebes and purge the city with his departure (11.669-72). Oedipus retorts with ironic vitriol in a speech praised as *callidus* by Antigone later (11.716):

⁴⁵ Romans did not use these, but their infants still drew comfort from having something in their mouths.

*iamne vacat saevire, Creon? modo perfida regna
 fortunaeque locum nostrae, miserande, subisti,
 et tibi iam fas est regum calcare ruinas?
 iam tumultis victos, socios iam moenibus arces? 680
 macte, potes digne Thebarum sceptrum tueri:
 haec tua prima dies. sed cur nova contrahis amens
 iura? quid anguste tantos metiris honores?
 exsilium intendis. timida inclementia regum
 ista! feros avidus quin protinus imbuis enses? 685
 crede, licet . . .
 sed dulces Thebae. nimirum hic clarior ortus,
 et meliora meos permulcent sidera vultus, 700
 hic genetrix natique! habeas Thebana regasque
 moenia, quo Cadmus, quo Laius omine rexit
 quoque ego; sic thalamos, sic pignora fida capessas;
 nec tibi sit virtus Fortunam evadere dextra,
 sed lucem deprendus ames. (Theb. 11.677-705)*

You already have time for cruelty, Creon? You just
 ascended the treacherous throne, the site of my fortune, you
 poor soul, and it is now right for you to crush the ruins of
 kings? You now exclude the defeated from their tombs and
 allies from their walls? Well done! You are worthy to retain
 the scepter of Thebes. And this is just your first day! But
 why do you senselessly check your new rights? Why do
 you reckon such great offices so meager? You offer exile.
 Such a shy severity for a king! Why not be greedy and
 straightaway sully your fierce blades? You can, believe me.
 <Oedipus asks rhetorically if it matters where he dies.>
 . . . but Thebes is sweet. Without a doubt the sunrises here
 are brighter and the stars are better at soothing my
 anxieties. Mother and sons are here! You can have the
 Theban city and rule it with the same omen Cadmus had,
 and Laius, and I myself. May you seize such a marriage,
 such faithful progeny. May you not have the courage to
 escape Fortune with your own hand, and may you love
 light and life when you are caught.

Oedipus, like Tydeus' victim above and Tydeus himself before that, explicitly answers his
 mistreatment with sarcasm: "Well done!" (681). Further items of irony abound: a tyrant who
 restrains himself must be *amens*, 'senseless' or even 'demented' (682-3); Oedipus, being blind,
 cannot even appreciate the sunrise or stars of Thebes (699-700). He also knows well himself that

Creon could execute him outright: if we accept Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* as authoritative,⁴⁶ the tables for Oedipus and Creon were turned when the former was king and the investigation into his past began.

Κρ.: τί δῆτα χρήζεις; ἦ με γῆς ἔξω βαλεῖν;
Οἶ.: ἥκιστα· θνήσκειν, οὐ φυγεῖν σε βούλομαι. (OT 622-3)

Creon: "What do you want, then? To banish me?"
Oedipus: "Hardly; I want you to die, not to flee."

The intervention of the chorus leader and Jocasta's arrival on scene prevent a hasty execution in Sophocles' tragedy. Creon of the *Thebaid*, at least, opts for non-corporeal punishment of his own volition. Oedipus' own foul past arises again (701) in a phrase jaunty for its brevity – but this too is dark, as his sons and their mother, his mother, all died not two hundred lines earlier.⁴⁷ If only we could excise the context, the legacy of Thebes and Oedipus' house, lines 701-3 would be unambiguously well-wishing; the distance between the superficial positivity and the reality is stunning. The veil of irony is lifted, however, in the final two lines, where Oedipus predicts that Fortune will find Creon, as it did the rulers of Thebes in the past; Fortune, as we shall soon see, is a fearsome mistress in the *Thebaid*.

Bitter irony and sarcasm is a thus frequent response to *nefas* in the *Thebaid*. Relief theory may identify this as a coping mechanism, a way to release the anxieties caused by the intense wrong. As seen above, however, it can also generate or motivate further *nefas*, and, I propose, acts as its own crime, a flagrant display of humor in an epic dark and serious by nature. This, then, may prompt us to read sarcasm as indicative of a 'bad' character, someone contributing to the hopeless world of the text – certainly Tydeus, Eteocles, and Oedipus are at best morally ambiguous and at worst responsible for the most outrageous acts of the poem. But the earliest

⁴⁶ And we cannot entirely, seeing as Jocasta is alive in the *Thebaid*, at least up through Book 11.

⁴⁷ Jocasta slew herself at 11.634-47.

instance of sarcasm belies this hypothesis. In Book 1, the Argive king Adrastus explains his peculiar religious rites to Polynices and Tydeus with a story (1.562-668): Apollo had a dalliance with a local girl and fathered a child. This child, due to carelessness of both mother and divine father, is torn apart by wild dogs. The mother is executed by her own father, and in vengeance Apollo unleashes a monster bred in the Furies' bedroom and sends it to kill other infants. A brave man, Coroebus, stands up to the monster and slays it, which enrages Apollo further, so he shoots his arrows of disease at the townspeople and lays a thick fog over the area. Coroebus confronts Apollo himself:

*non missus, Thymbraee, tuos supplexve penates
advenio: mea me pietas et conscia virtus
has egere vias. ego sum qui caede subegi, 645
Phoebe, tuum mortale nefas, quem nubibus atris
et squalente die, nigra quem tabe sinistri
quaeris, inique, poli. quod si monstra effera magnis
cara adeo superis, iacturaque vilior orbi
mors hominum, et saevo tanta inclementia caelo est, 650
quid meruere Argi? me, me, divum optime, solum
obiecisse caput Fatis praestabat. an illud
lene magis cordi quod desolata domorum
tectata vides, ignique datis cultoribus omnis
lucet ager? sed quid fando tua tela manusque 655
demoror? (Theb. 1.643-56)*

Thymbraean, I come to your domain neither sent nor as a supplicant: my sense of duty and conscious valor drove me here. I am he who slew your mortal evil, Phoebus, the one whom you seek with black haze and filthy daylight, with dark decay of a malicious heaven, you unjust god. But if savage monsters are so dear to the mighty gods and the death of humans is of less expense to the world, and if the harsh heavens are so merciless, what does Argos deserve? Me, better that I alone, best of gods, should have offered my head to the Fates. Or are you more pleased by that gentle way that sees homes deserted and every field set to flames along with the farmers? But why do I delay your darts and violence with my words?

Coroebus answers Apollo's *nefas* with sarcasm and shows his bravery in doing so. Apollo is not a god to be respected here; he attempts to remedy the *nefas* of his child's death with another *nefas* (1.646),⁴⁸ a petty and absurd solution for which, along with his subsequent vengeance, Coroebus takes him to task. Coroebus is successful and the god relents, whether because Coroebus' sarcasm swayed him or a feeling of guilt came over him,⁴⁹ but then Coroebus is possibly the only unambiguously heroic character in the *Thebaid*,⁵⁰ and he only exists within Adrastus' tale. More concerning is that his speech is prompted by the crime of a god, and not a god of the Underworld. The darkly humorous mode of sarcasm cannot be avoided, as it is necessary for confronting a world rife with *nefas* of every origin, and the greater irony is that the reaction itself breaches epic decorum. The next section will explore the terms in which the *Thebaid*'s world is so *wrong*.

COSMOS INVERTED

The dominance of the Underworld forces, Dis and Tisiphone, and the relative weakness of the Olympian gods is inextricably linked to the overriding *nefas* of the *Thebaid*, whether as cause or effect. Ganiban and McNelis have already examined this inversion of cosmic power,⁵¹ but I will recount a few instances and add my own thoughts. I argue that the subversion of the typical cosmic order generates incongruity and thereby contributes to the humorous atmosphere in much the same way as the hyperbole and sarcasm. At the same time, of course, it constitutes a

⁴⁸ The death of another infant, Opheltes, is termed a *nefas* by Hypsipyle at 5.628.

⁴⁹ Ganiban 2007: 12-3 stresses that Apollo never explicitly acknowledges Coroebus' *pietas*, and is restrained by *reverentia caedis* (1.662), "misgiving about slaughter," though we do not know if this means guilt for the monster's rampage, Apollo's own petty vengeance, or Coroebus' potential death. Given that Coroebus goes on to dare Apollo to kill him and his sarcasm censures Apollo for his barbaric tendencies, I suggest that Apollo shies away from killing Coroebus. Ganiban is nevertheless correct, however, in explaining that *pietas* is "ultimately an irrelevant concept, unappreciated and unrewarded in this embedded narrative."

⁵⁰ See Adrastus' glowing apostrophe as narrator, 1.638-40.

⁵¹ See Ganiban 2007: 180-5 and McNelis 2007: 150-1.

large part of the epic's darkness. In referring to the cosmos, I mean not only the supernatural order but all order, including natural associations between words, thoughts, and emotions. The world which the *Thebaid* inhabits is thoroughly distorted on every level. I will begin with the gods and move on to the ramifications of this disorder.

In her first appearance in the narrative, Tisiphone is presented as faster than Jupiter's lightning bolt: *ilicet igne Iovis lapsisque citatior astris / tristibus exsiluit ripis* (1.92-3, "At once, swifter than the fire of Jove and falling stars she launched herself from the gloomy banks."). This fury, the instigator of war and violence, is faster than the extension of Jupiter's will and justice. But while *ignis Iovis* is frequently used to refer to Jupiter's lightning, *ignis* is fire, strictly speaking, and the conjunction of fire from Jupiter and falling stars recalls the omens given to Aeneas' family in *Aeneid* 2: after the flames around Ascanius' head which were discussed above, Anchises prays to Jupiter (*Aen.* 2.689-91) and is given a falling star to confirm the omen: *de caelo lapsa per umbras / stella . . . cucurrit* (2.693-4, "A star falling from the heavens flashed through the shadows."). We see a verbal parallel in *lapis/lapsa*, but this alone is not especially significant. *Ignis* appears when describing the flames, however (*Aen.* 2.683-6), which are said to lick his hair using *lambere*: Tisiphone, just prior to leaping off the banks of the Cocytus, allowed the serpents on her head to lick the brimstoned waters, using *lambere* in the same initial line position.⁵² The appropriateness of the Vergilian language here, then, does not just constitute the perversion of the Olympian portent: it also makes clear that Tisiphone, the addressee of Oedipus' prayer, is also the omen and confirmation that it is heard and will be answered. Moreover, she is faster than the ruler of Olympus. Statius had warned us that his subject matter would be dark

⁵² *Theb.* 1.89-91: *inamoenum forte sedebat / Cocytos iuxta, resolutaque vertice crines / lambere sulphureas permiserat anguibus undas.* *Aen.* 2.683-6: *tactuque innoxia mollis / lambere flamma comas et circum tempora pasci. / nos pavidi trepidare metu crinemque flagrantem / excutere et sanctos restinguere fontibus ignis.* *Crines/crinem* is shared as well.

with his prologue; this is a confirmation of the extent to which that darkness reigns and the inefficacy of traditional boundaries.

Throughout the epic, Tisiphone and Dis, ruler of the Underworld, are responsible for the continuation of the war and the epic itself. Tydeus, having spotted Eteocles, slings an accurate spear at him:

*ibat atrox finem positura duello
lancea (convertere oculos utrimque faventes
Sidonii Graique dei), crudelis Erinys
obstat et infando differt Eteoclea fratri. (Theb. 8.684-7)*

The dreadful lance flew, about to end the war; Sidonian and
Greek gods on both sides watched in favor. But the
bloodthirsty Fury blocks it and saves Eteocles for his
abominable brother.

The Olympians, united though they are in their desire to see the war end, are an audience, unable to intervene. The word *infando* reminds us of Oedipus' prayer for *nefas*, which Tisiphone continues to grant. Dis, offended by the invasion of Amphiaraus (8.34-79), orders Tisiphone to produce *nefas* as well (8.68). Ganiban proposes that the diction, *ede nefas*, may suggest a sense of writing or publishing:⁵³ a following line, *iuvet ista ferum spectare Tonantem* (8.74, "Let the brutal Thunderer enjoy the spectacle."), figures Jupiter as a passive consumer, a reader like us. The narrator emphasizes Dis' efficacy following his speech, at which his grim kingdom had been trembling: *non fortius aethera vultu / torquet et astriferos inclinat Iuppiter axes* (8.82-3, "Not more mightily does Jupiter twist the sky with a scowl and bend the star-laden poles.").

Dis and Tisiphone together supersede Jupiter when Eteocles sacrifices in gratitude after Capaneus' death:

*sacra Iovi merito Tyrius pro fulmine ductor
nequiquam Danaos ratus exarmasse ferebat.*

⁵³ See Ganiban 2007: 184.

*nec pater aetherius divumque has ullus ad aras,
sed mala Tisiphone trepidis inserta ministris
astat et inferno praevertit vota Tonanti.
'summe deum, tibi namque meae primordia Thebae 210
(liveat infandum licet Argos et aspera Iuno)
debent. . .'* (Theb. 11.205-12)

The Tyrian leader was respectfully offering sacrifice in vain to Jupiter for the thunderbolt,⁵⁴ assuming that he had disarmed the Danai. But the heavenly father was not present at the altar, nor were any of the gods, but foul Tisiphone was there, hidden among the nervous attendants, and she diverts the prayer to the infernal Thunderer: "Highest of the gods, for my Thebes owes her beginning to you, however much accursed Argos and harsh Juno envy it. . ."

Not only is the absence of the gods concerning, but Tisiphone's interception and redirection now casts a dark irony on the prayer: Dis, the Thunderer of the Underworld, is now addressed as the highest of gods (*summe deum*, 210); Thebes owes her beginning to Dis, an idea that would explain its legacy of *nefas* and disproportionate representation in Erebus (4.483-4); Argos, accursed as it is, and its patron goddess *aspera* Juno, famed for her persecution of Aeneas and affiliation with Allecto in the *Aeneid*,⁵⁵ are jealous of Thebes' unsurpassed wickedness.

The appositeness of the title 'Thunderer' is soon realized and the usurpation of divine authority is reiterated:

*ter nigris avidus regnator ab oris
intonuit terque ima soli concussit, et ipsi
armorum fugere dei: nusquam incluta Virtus,
restinxit Bellona faces, longeque paventes
Mars rapuit currus, et Gorgone cruda virago
abstitit, inque vicem Stygiae subiere sorores.*
(Theb. 11.410-5)

⁵⁴ *merito* may modify *fulmen*, 'the deserved thunderbolt,' in the sense that Capaneus deserved to be slain with it. When reading in *merito* the adverbial 'rightfully' or 'deservedly,' I find an ironic tension with the following *nequiquam*, as if being pious is in this world somehow still right, but pointless anyway.

⁵⁵ See Ganiban 2007: 30-3 for an exploration of the relationship between the *Aeneid*'s Juno and the *Thebaid*.

Thrice the ambitious ruler thundered from the black realms
and thrice he struck the foundations of the earth, and the
gods of war themselves fled: nowhere was famed Virtus,
Bellona smothered her torches, Mars hauled his terrified
chariot far away, and the maiden warrior, fearsome with
her Gorgon, withdrew, and in their stead came the Stygian
sisters.

This should come as no surprise: the Olympian gods throughout the *Thebaid* are weaker, slower, less effectual than the deities of the Underworld or their own counterparts in prior epics. They are frightened by Capaneus' bold assault as though he were a Titan (10.915-20), for example, and it takes *toto Iove* (10.927, "all of Jupiter") to stop the mad human; it nearly was not enough:

*stat tamen, extremumque in sidera versus anhelat,
pectoraque invisibilibus obicit fumantia muris;
nec caderet, sed membra virum terrena relinquunt,
exiitque animus; paulum si tardius artus
cessissent, potuit fulmen sperare secundum.*

(*Theb.* 10.935-9)

Still [Capaneus] stands, and gasps out his last against the stars, hurling his smoking chest against the hated walls; and he would not have fallen, but his earthly limbs abandon him and his spirit is shed. If only his body had given up a little later, he could have hoped for a second bolt.

Jupiter's diminished strength is highlighted at the beginning of the epic, in fact, when he admits in his first speech: *taedet saevire corusco / fulmine* (1.216-7, "I am weary of raging with my flashing bolt"). He is likewise slow, he himself admits, to destroy the houses of Labdacus and Pelops in punishment (7.207-8, *Labdacios vero Pelopisque a stirpe nepotes / tardum abolere mihi*).⁵⁶ For this he blames Mars:

*at si ipsi rabies ferrique insana voluptas
qua tumet, immeritas cineri dabit impius urbes
ferrum ignemque ferens, implorantesque Tonantem*

⁵⁶ Jupiter moves slowly at 5.177-8 to delay the arrival of night on Lemnos, under the cover of which the women would murder their husbands. He is also *tardo pondere* at 7.84-5, slow to change his attitude once Mars cooperates and inflames the Argives again.

*sternet humi populos miserumque exhaustiet orbem.
nunc lenis belli nostraque remittitur ira. (Theb. 7.22-5)*

But if he has the frenzy and the crazed fetish for steel in which he boasts, he will ruthlessly raze innocent cities with sword and fire and crush people beseeching Jupiter and drain the miserable world. Now he is kind in war and relaxed by my wrath.

Jupiter oddly highlights his own refusal or inability to act on behalf of victims whom he imagines Mars killing, and suggests that his wrath is so unintimidating as to render the god of war gentle. Jupiter continues ironically: “Fine, let him be a gentle and kind god. . . I will ordain universal peace.” (7.29-3). Of course, this is not to be; Mars goes to fulfill his original charge, in the issuing of which Jupiter also emphasizes his own passivity and diminished authority: *tibi fas ipsos incendere bello / caelicolas pacemque meam* (3.234-5, “It is right for you to torch with war the gods themselves and my peace.”). The gods are vulnerable, subject to the horrors of war, and *fas* and *nefas* are inverted according to Jupiter’s testament itself.

This impotence, passivity, and vulnerability culminate just prior to the final duel between Polynices and Eteocles when Jupiter exhorts the other gods to stop watching and turns away himself (11.122-35). Jupiter and the Olympians had been an audience throughout (a concept discussed more later in this chapter), yet they abdicate even that role. The contrast between this Jupiter and the supreme god of the *Aeneid* and *Iliad* is stark, as Ganiban observes: there they observe and facilitate the climactic battles between Aeneas and Turnus, Achilles and Hector, and make sure fate is fulfilled.⁵⁷ This Jupiter takes no such responsibility, but rather gives it up to Dis and Tisiphone. Likewise, Jupiter as Zeus in the *Iliad* was an amused spectator of the gods’ duels, amusing in part because the gods could come to no harm. The sense in the *Thebaid* is that the Olympian gods are not so safe and care-free; we, the external audience, may even feel some

⁵⁷ Ganiban 2007: 180-1.

uneasy superiority at seeing the gods brought low, but in any case the incongruity with tradition is profound.

In fact, divine impotence belongs not solely to Jupiter alone. Apollo intercepts Diana as she is on her way to save Parthenopaeus and explains his own failures with Amphiarus:

*fida rogat genetrix: utinam indulgere precanti
Fata darent! en ipse mei (pudet!) irritus arma
cultoris frondesque sacras ad inania vidi
Tartara et in memet versos descendere vultus; 655
nec tenui currus terraeque abrupta coegi,
saevus ego immeritusque coli. . .
finis adest iuveni, non hoc mutabile fatum,
nec te de dubiis fraterna oracula fallunt.'*
(Theb. 9.652-7, 661-2)

His loyal mother [Atalanta] asks you. If only the Fates would allow to grant her prayer! Look at me, how shameful, I was helpless as I watched my own follower's arms and prophet's branches, and his face turned toward me, descend into Tartarus' chasm. I did not stop his chariot and close the earth's gap; I am cruel and do not deserve to be worshiped.
<Apollo discourages her from bringing help in vain.>
The youth's end is near, his fate cannot be changed; have no doubts, your brother's oracle does not deceive you.

This helpless Apollo is that same flawed figure who was forgetful of his lover and child in Adrastus' story in Book 1, which saw those figures killed and the *nefas* monster unleashed as a result. Here he can only mourn, and Diana is similarly limited: she goes to Parthenopaeus, hopes to bring him some honor and avenge him, but the agency behind the death of Dryas is conspicuously anonymous.⁵⁸ The personified abstracts, Virtus and Pietas, are also weakened or distant: Virtus, we saw above, was driven from the battlefield by Dis (11.410-5). Prior to this she had occupied two positions: the middle of Mars' court, appearing *tristissima* (7.52-3) either

⁵⁸ See Ganiban 2007: 129-31 for a discussion which contrasts the unsuccessful Diana here with the avenging of her other favorite, Camilla, in *Aeneid* 11, an action linked explicitly to Diana.

because of her fearsome and hateful company there or because of the rampant *nefas* in the epic at large; and beside Jupiter on his throne,

*unde per orbem
rara dari terrisque solet contingere, Virtus,
seu pater omnipotens tribuit, sive ipsa capaces
elegit penetrare viros, caelestibus ut tunc
desiluit gavisia plagis* (Theb. 10.632-6)

from which she rarely was sent into the world to alight on
the earth, whether the almighty father bestows her or she
herself chooses to enter worthy men, then leapt down
joyfully from the heavenly regions.⁵⁹

Between these two passages we get a sense of Virtus being pessimistic, curbed, and frustrated; Jupiter, decisively not the traditional *omnipotens* ruler in the *Thebaid*, is either unwilling or uninterested in using her, or perhaps there are too few men in the world capable of being inspired by her. In any case, this rare opportunity to act is cause for joy, as she begins her grand contribution to the epic and inspires Menoeceus to kill himself as a sacrifice on Thebes' behalf (10.650-782). It achieves nothing.

Pietas too is distant from the events of the war, a fact highlighted in the midst of the fraternal duel: *iamdudum terris coetuque offensa deorum / aversa caeli Pietas in parte sedebat* (11.457-8, "For a long time Pietas, upset by earth and the company of the gods, was sitting in an opposite part of the heavens."). She recognizes that there is no reverence for her (11.467, *nil iam ego per populos, nusquam reverentia nostri*), but will attempt to carry out her role, even acknowledging the futility (11.471, *temptemus . . . licet irrita coner.*"). She is confronted by Tisiphone, who again is swifter than heavenly fire (11.483 *caelestique ocior igne*), censured as lazy (11.485, *iners*) and late (11.486, *sera*), and so Pietas flees, abashed, to complain to Jupiter

⁵⁹ Shackleton Bailey 2003(III): 172 n. 50 expresses consternation at this *ut*, a reasonable use for which he cannot explain. *Et as quoque*, 'too,' would make sense.

(11.496). In this topsy-turvy world where Dis and Tisiphone are supreme and violating Jupiter's peace is *fas*, Virtus is not valid, Pietas not potent: the actions of both are futile. Fortune, on the other hand, has free rein.

LUSIT FORTUNA

The final component in my evidence for the *Thebaid*'s inversion of cosmic power and inherent darkness concerns *Fortuna*, *Fors*, or Fortune. The famous maxim that "Fortune favors the bold" appears in various Latin texts in various forms,⁶⁰ but two epic iterations are significant here: *fortibus est Fortuna viris data* (*Ann.* 233, "Fortune is given to brave men") and *audentis Fortuna iuvat* (*Aen.* 10.284, "Fortune aides the daring"). Both present an optimistic, positive image of Fortune for men of the heroic type. The *Thebaid*'s Fortune is explicitly the opposite, as here: *invida Fata piis et fors ingentibus ausis / rara comes* (*Theb.* 10.384-5, "The Fates are spiteful to the pious and Fortune is seldom the companion of great ambitions."); and here, shortly following, a more focalized version: *arma ira dabat, Fortuna precari, / non audere, iubet* (10.407-8, "Anger gave arms, Fortune bids [him] to pray, not to dare.").⁶¹ The *Thebaid*'s narrator contradicts the general proverb and specific sentiments expressed in prior epic,⁶² which further differentiates the dark world of the *Thebaid* from previous epics. Here, Fortune is not helpful – we have seen how pointless it is to pray – and it is fear that assists: *est ubi dat vires nimius timor* (10.493, "Sometimes excessive fear gives strength."). Not only is Fortune not positive; it is

⁶⁰ Skutsch 1985: 413 cites Terence's *Phorm.* 203, Cicero's *Tusc.* 2.11, and Livy 8.29.5. We know nothing about the context in the *Annales*; Skutsch suggests that the fragment is "Obviously the words of a leader encouraging his men, as in the Virgilian passage compared by Macrobius, where Turnus is the speaker."

⁶¹ Next *distulit ira preces* (10.409, "Anger postponed prayers.") for the character in question, Dymas.

⁶² We do not know the speaker of Ennius' fragment, but Turnus is the source of the Vergilian quote. Turnus is otherwise brash, and so we must not take for granted the general truth of the statement for the *Aeneid*'s Weltanschauung.

antagonistic, even malevolent in the *Thebaid*.⁶³ Following the outcome of the fraternal duel and introducing Creon as the new ruler:

*et iam laeta ducum spes eluisse duorum
res Amphionias alio sceptrumque maligna
transtulerat Fortuna manu.* (Theb. 11.648-50)

And now, pleased by cheating the hopes of the two leaders, malicious Fortune had handed off the Amphionian state and scepter to another.

Similarly, in one of the most pathetic scenes of the poem, after the duel is over and the Thebans come out to view the field:

*frigida digeritur strages: patuere recisae
cum capulis hastisque manus mediisque sagittae 30
luminibus stantes; multis vestigia caedis
nulla: ruunt planctu pendente et ubique parato.
at circum informes truncos miserabile surgit
certamen, qui iusta ferant, qui funera ducant.
saepe etiam hostiles (lusit Fortuna parumper) 35
decepti flevere viros; nec certa facultas
noscere quem miseri vitent calcentve cruorem.*
(Theb. 12.29-37)

The cold carnage is sorted out.⁶⁴ There are severed hands with hilts and spears and arrows sticking straight out of eyes. For many there are no traces of bloodshed; they rush about everywhere, a ready lament left hanging. But around trunks devoid of detail pitiful squabbles arise about who is responsible, who should arrange the funeral. Often even enemies – Fortune was teasing them for a while – deceived them and were wept over, nor was there a sure way for the wretches to know whose blood to avoid and whose to trample.

⁶³ Lucan's *Bellum Civile* may offer an intermediate point. Caesar, ever the problematic character Lucan's epic, still views Fortune as a positive to be sought; after crossing the Rubicon, '*hic*,' *ait*, '*hic pacem temerataque iura relinquo / te, Fortuna, sequor* (Luc. 1.225-6, "'Here,' he said, 'here I leave behind peace and broken laws. Fortune, I follow you.'"). The people of Ariminum, however, as local onlookers and thus having an interest in maintaining peace in the region, have differing feelings about this Fortune: *quotiens Romam fortuna lacessit, / hac iter est bellis* (Luc. 1.256-7, "Whenever Fortune harasses Rome, this is the road to wars.").

⁶⁴ This translation I borrow from Shackleton Bailey 2003(III): 253.

Fortune in this inverted world order seems to take a sick glee in playing with people engaged in the grimmest task, just as she enjoyed deluding Polynices and Eteocles. Her jokes play on two of the oldest and most fundamental elements of humor theories: first, from Plato's *Philebus*, that ignorance, foremost of one's own lot, as is the case with Polynices and Eteocles, is funny; and second, from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, that frustrating expectations makes for a good laugh. By deluding the primary figures in a war of *nefas* and tricking folks into mourning the mutilated corpses of their enemy, Fortune establishes herself as a dark humorist.

The ascendancy of the Underworld, the impotence of the Olympians, virtue, and piety, and the ill will of Fortune establish, I suggest, in their inversion of norms a Saturnalian or carnivalesque environment, one traditionally ripe for humor.⁶⁵ We witness the ramifications of this in the narrative arc – Oedipus getting his vengeance is also his own punishment – but also within the text's paradoxical language,⁶⁶ especially about emotions: Eteocles can label gore as sweet when focalizing through Tydeus, as we saw above (9.18-9, *dulcique . . . tabo*) and juxtapose 'sweet' with *nefandus* (abominable), and, even more shocking, the Lemnian women can take oaths for a *dulce nefas in sanguine vivo* (5.162, "a sweet evil in living blood"). In a world where *nefas* is the new normal, instances of it can be compared: Polynices and Eteocles each believe his own crime is the more just (11.541-2 *nefasque / iustius*). The Fury Megaera is cheerful (3.641, *hilarem*), Frenzy itself (*Furor*) is happy in the domain of Mars (7.52), and Tydeus can be out of his mind with joy and wrath simultaneously (8.751-2, *amens / laetitiaque iraque*).⁶⁷ Conversely, the desire to live is obscene (3.370, *pro vitae foeda cupido*).

⁶⁵ See Martial's epigrams, e.g., and Book 11 especially.

⁶⁶ Dewar 1991: xxxii attests to Statius' fondness for paradoxes.

⁶⁷ This mirrors the Underworld, a trope for inversion, where leisure is grievous (8.44, *otia maesta*) and the light, revealed when Amphiaraus was swallowed up, is offensive (8.33, *iucundaque offensum luce*) to Dis.

One of the most jarring features of the *Thebaid* in this regard is the use of *gaudia*, ‘joy,’ or the verb *gaudeo*, ‘enjoy,’ which appear more often in the *Thebaid* than in the *Aeneid* and *Bellum Civile* combined.⁶⁸ This prominence seems at first glance strange for an epic so pessimistic, but it is the *nefas* and concomitant blood, rage, and grief which are enjoyed. Oedipus is first and describes in his prayer to Tisiphone how he took joy in his crimes:

*si dulces furias et lamentabile matris
conubium gavisus ini noctemque nefandam
saepe tuli natosque tibi, scis ipsa, paravi . . .*
(*Theb.* 1.68-70)

If I entered joyfully into sweet madness and a woeful
marriage to my mother, and so often withstood the
abominable night and produced children for you, which
you know well. . .

Of course this is slightly less revolting if we assume he was only *gavisus* because of his ignorance, but this is not perfectly clear, especially since he presents the *lamentabile matris / conubium* first; nevertheless, we see again *dulces furias*, yet another paradox like those above.

After Tydeus mocks the dead and burning Idas, his continued prowess is described by a simile: *inde, velut primo tigris gavisu cruore / per totum cupit ire pecus* (8.474-5, “Then, like a tigress rejoicing in her first slaughter, she desires to go through the whole herd.”). Eteocles shudders with hatred when the duel with Polynices approaches, yet *mediaque tamen gavisus in ira est* (11.249-50, “nevertheless he rejoiced in the midst of his wrath.”). After the duel is over and the Thebans come out to see the dead, *amant miseri lamenta malisque fruuntur* (12.45, “In their misery they love their wailing and delight in their woes”), and after Theseus slays Creon it is renewed: *gaudent lamenta novaeque / exsultant lacrimae* (12.793-4, “Laments rejoice, fresh tears exult”). For another example, Maeon, sole survivor among the Thebans who ambushed

⁶⁸ The two words appear sixty-four times in the *Thebaid* compared to just twenty-six instances in the *Aeneid* and thirty in Lucan’s epic. Again, I obtain these numbers through searches in Brepolis’ Library of Latin Texts.

Tydeus, reproaches Eteocles and commits suicide afterward: *vado equidem exsultans* (3.85-6, “I for my part go joyfully”).

Lamentation is loveable and death is delightful: the subversion or rather perversion of norms is itself inherently humorous, and only the context and generic expectations hold us back from appreciating this humor – which merely adds another layer of incongruity, another layer of humor and another degree of offense. This is the same cycle we saw with Martial’s epigrams in Chapter II, where assaulting high genres with dark humor made the situation all the more humorous. These last few sections have argued that the atmosphere of the *Thebaid* is humorously charged; the next two sections will explicate clearer *loci* of dark humor.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER(-IN-LAW)

Looming large over the *Thebaid* and any account of the *Oedipodae confusa domus* (*Theb.* 1.17, “the confused house of Oedipus,” clinical understatement) is of course the incest: Oedipus himself brings it up early on (1.68-70, discussed above) and Polynices is so ashamed of it that he does not name his father when introductions are made with his future father-in-law, Adrastus (1.678-9). Along with the ignorant murder of his father, Laius, his marriage and its products are the foundational *nefas* of the epic, and the incest is in the *Thebaid* unique to the house of Oedipus. The most vulnerable target for dark humor, then, is this incest, and two jokes regarding that appear.

Antigone intervenes after Oedipus’ outraged, ironic rant, that discussed above for its sarcasm (*Theb.* 11.677-705), and assuages Creon’s anger by explaining that her father wants to provoke his own execution, such is his misery after the granting of his wish, the death of his sons, and now the exile imposed upon him (11.716-7). Antigone offers to usher Oedipus away and take care of him in the future:

*pone metum, procul usque tua summotus ab aula
flebit; ego erectum subigam et servire docebo,
coetibus abducam solaque in sede recondam.*
(Theb. 11.727-9)

Don't fear, he will weep far from your court. I will quell him when he rises and teach him to be servile; I will lead him away from the community and hide him in a lonely dwelling.

The language of the second line is suspect here; the ideas and diction are new to the context.

Oedipus had just wished to die, as he himself requests (11.622-3) and Antigone knows well: she had just prior to the above quote explained this to Creon, that Oedipus has *saevae spes aspera mortis* (11.715, "drastic hope of a violent death") and was craftily provoking Creon to that end (11.716-7). Antigone pledges to remove the offense and distraction that is Oedipus, which he himself requested at the end of his ironic reproach: *duc age, nata, procul* (11.706, "Come, daughter, lead me far away."); she then adds, with no prompting, that she will subdue him when he rises and teach him to be subservient. If he will be in exile as she claims immediately after this (*exsul erit*, 11.730), what is the need for this proactive taming? To whom will Oedipus be servile, and what is the point?

The words themselves give pause, particularly coming from the daughter of Oedipus. Both *servire* and *docebo* are significant words in Ovid's love poetry for participating in and preparing someone for an erotic relationship. *Amores* 2.17 opens thus:

*Siquis erit qui turpe putet servire puellae
illo convincar iudice turpis ego.* (Am. 2.17.1-2)

If there is anyone who thinks it a disgrace to serve a girlfriend, I will be convicted as disgraceful by that judge.

Amores 1.2 describes the condition of one stricken by love as *servitium* (line 18), and *Amores* 3.8 uses *servire* for the role a man plays relative to his girlfriend (14). Concerning *docebo*, the *Ars Amatoria* explicitly aims to teach men how to love:

*siquis in hoc artem populo non novit amandi,
hoc legat et lecto carmine doctus amet.* (*Ars am.* 1.1-2)

If anybody here does not know the art of loving, let him
read this poem and then let him be a learned lover.

Antigone, with *servire docebo*, is figuring herself as entering into an Ovidian relationship with her father-brother Oedipus. The choice of *subigam* is curious too and now is cast erotically: the verb, otherwise uncommon in the *Thebaid*,⁶⁹ can suggest taking on the active role in sexual intercourse, the assumption of erotic dominance.⁷⁰ Reading this sense would tempt a modern audience to assume a clearly erotic use in *erectum*, but the original Latin word did not regularly share the meaning of the modern derivative;⁷¹ instead, the cognate *arrigo* was used for the phenomenon.⁷² Its equivalent participial form, *arrectum*, is rather homophonic, especially seeing as the first vowel quantity would be elided following *ego*. Strengthening this heinous reading is the word following *servire docebo* at the beginning of the following line, *coetibus*, “the verbal euphemism *par excellence* for copulation.”⁷³ Given the asyndeton and original lack of

⁶⁹ It appears at 1.645, when Coroebus introduces himself as the one who conquered Apollo’s monster; at 10.191, when Thiodamas explains that Amphiaraus has inspired him after the Argives’ *fides* compelled him to replace the prophet; and in participial form at 7.380 and 12.787 to refer to vanquished peoples.

⁷⁰ See Adams 1982: 155-6, which cites Caesar’s soldier’s song from Suetonius’ *Iul.* 49.4, *Gallias Caesar subegit, Nicomedes Caesarem*, among other sources. The frequentative form *subigito* seems to refer to manual ministrations.

⁷¹ *Erigo* is used twice in the *Thebaid* in similes referring to snakes (2.412, 4.97) and once in describing the snakes on Minerva’s aegis (12.608-9); Adams 1982: 30-1 explains the murky association between snake and phallus in Greek and Latin: “The snake was felt to have phallic significance by Latin speakers . . . but there is no certain example of the metaphor in Latin.” The *Priapea* may have a candidate in 83.33.

⁷² See e.g. Martial 3.75, 3.76, 4.5, 6.36. *Tentigo* and *rigidus* were also common; see Adams 1982: 103.

⁷³ Adams 1982: 179; the related verb *coeo* is first used in this sense by Lucretius (4.1005), whose *De rerum natura* falls within the didactic genre, one akin to epic and bearing similar standards of decorum. *Coeo* became popular in the Augustan period.

punctuation, this *coetibus* could easily be read as an ablative of means with *servire docebo*, at least until the verb *abducam* asks for something to complete its sense.

Taking all of this together, then, Antigone (or the poet) is making a subtle double entendre about sexual relationship between herself and her father-brother Oedipus. After all, *nefas* begets *nefas*, especially in Thebes. Statius may here be drawing on the uncomfortable language from Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, when the titular character vows to bury Polynices and risk death in defiance of Creon's decree: φίλη μετ' αὐτοῦ κείσομαι, φίλου μέτα (73, "I will lie with my loved one, being loved myself"). The erotic overtones of this devotion to her brother's corpse evoke Antigone's own incestuous origins; indeed, the language with which the *Thebaid*'s narrator later describes Antigone and Argia, Polynices' widow, fawning over the body of Polynices has already been identified as erotic:⁷⁴

*hic pariter lapsae iunctoque per ipsum
amplexu miscent avidae lacrimasque comasque,
partitaeque artus redeunt alterna gementes
ad vultum et cara vicibus cervice fruuntur.*
(*Theb.* 12.385-8)

Here they both collapse and, with combined embrace,
eagerly mix their tears and hair over the body; they divide
the limbs up and return to his face, one after the other
lamenting and enjoying his dear neck in turns.

The words *iuncto*, *amplexu*, *miscent*, and *fruuntur* are all used in other works as euphemisms for sex.⁷⁵ Their rapid-fire presence here sexualizes their mourning, which would be less objectionable were Antigone not involved. But in Antigone's pledge to Creon, Statius adheres more strictly to the Oedipal theme by hinting at last for parent rather than brother. Statius' point, I submit, is not just to have an uncomfortable laugh at obscenity; it is rather to demonstrate, both

⁷⁴ See Hershkowitz 1998: 293-4, who cites Henderson and Vessey among observers of the eroticism.

⁷⁵ See Adams 1982: 179, 180-1, and 198.

on the level of the narrative and metaliterarily by using shocking humor, that Thebes' particular brand of *nefas* is insidious and pervasive, and Statius will deliberately undermine the pathos of a scene to achieve this revelation. In the cosmos established here, as we saw above, piety has no place; perverted lust permeates Antigone's care for her father. And so laughter in response to this joke should be like Antigone's from her Sophoclean role: ἀλγοῦσα μὲν δῆτ', εἰ γελῶ γ', ἐν σοὶ γελῶ (551, "If I laugh, I laugh at you painfully").

Another transgression worthy of Oedipus' family comes when Argia, widow of Polynices, finds his body and laments his death:

*ardebis lacrimasque feres quas ferre negatum
regibus, aeternumque tuo famulata sepulcro
durabit deserta fides, testisque dolorum
natus erit, parvoque torum Polynice fovebo.*
(*Theb.* 12.345-8)

You will burn and receive tears denied to kings, and a forsaken faithfulness will forever endure, tending your tomb; the witness of my sorrows will be our son, and with a little Polynices I will warm my bed.

These lines end Argia's heartwrenching speech directly to her deceased husband. The clause which gives pause, the final one, is more immediately objectionable to readers not steeped in Latin literature; the *Aeneid* contains the significant and potentially mitigating precedent, when Dido berates her ex-lover Aeneas for attempting to sneak out of Carthage and desert her:

*saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset
ante fugam suboles, si quis mihi parvulus aula
luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret,
non equidem omnino capta ac deserta viderer.*
(*Aen.* 4.327-30)

If only you had at least given me a child before you fled, if only a little Aeneas, who would still look like you, were playing in my halls, I would not feel so utterly used and abandoned.

The parallel is clear: a little Polynices, a little Aeneas, though Argia's child is at least not hypothetical. But comparison makes clearer how sordid Argia's plan is. Dido's imagination is innocent, however obsessive it seems: she wants a memento of Aeneas, a child to play in the court and cheer her up. Argia, on the other hand, will warm her bed with a little Polynices, i.e. sleep with him in the euphemistic sense. The verb for warming, *foveo*, appears in erotic contexts of love elegy: e.g. *iam Delia furtim / nescio quem tacita callida nocte foveat* (Tib. 1.6.5-6, "Now sneaky Delia secretly warms some guy under the cover of night")⁷⁶ These lines and the final, all-important verb are quite suggestive, as are Argia's. The verb is also used of Dido and another young boy earlier on in the *Aeneid*.

*ille ubi complexu Aeneae colloque pependit
et magnum falsi implevit genitoris amorem,
reginam petit. haec oculis, haec pectore toto
haeret et interdum gremio foveat inscia Dido
insidat quantus miserae deus. at memor ille
matris Acidaliae paulatim abolere Sychaeum 720
incipit et vivo temptat praevertere amore
iam pridem resides animos desuetaque corda.*
(Aen. 1.715-22)

After hanging from Aeneas' neck and his hugs and satisfying the fooled father's great love, [the boy] seeks the queen [Dido]. She clings to him, fixed on him with her eyes and all her heart, and Dido cuddles him on her lap, unaware of how great a god has seized her, poor thing. But he, remembering his Acidalian mother [Venus], bit by bit begins to erase Sychaeus and tries to captivate with a fresh love her long-since jaded soul and rusty heart.

Dido, just having met Aeneas in Book 1, is under the impression that this child is Aeneas' non-imaginary son, Ascanius Iulus. It is actually Cupid in disguise. Lines 718-9 make clear the ominous tone of the scene; fostering the love he inspires will be her doom in Book 4. If we read

⁷⁶ See also Tibullus 1.8.30; Prop. 1.18a on Tithonus and Aurora and 2.22a.37; and Ovid, *Am.* 1.4.5. Adams 1982: 208 cites *Priap.* 83.25 where the verb clearly denotes a manual sexual act: *puella nec iocosa te levi manu / fovebit.*

these scenes together, the tone transfers: Argia does not know what she is getting into, nothing less than perpetuating the crimes of the house of Oedipus. Hence Argia's closing remark sullies our appreciation of the scene's pathos and deeply complicates our sense of closure for the poem and family. By reminding the audience of her family's *nefas* and insinuating that it is cyclical, she at once acts out her own crime and enhances our understanding of *nefas*' all-encompassing, permeating nature.

TYDEA CONSUMPSI

Puns involving cannibalism are generally in poor taste, but Statius serves one up in the middle of Polynices' sorrowful speech mourning the death of his dearest comrade (*Theb.* 9.49-72). I will investigate this as our final instance of dark humor in this text. First I will argue that it is in fact a pun and then explicate its effects on the narrative: exemplifying and encapsulating the *nefas* which we have seen plaguing the entire *Thebaid*. A review of the narrative context is necessary. Book 8 ends with Tydeus' *aristeia* (8.655ff) and shocking death: after avenging himself upon the Theban who mortally wounded him, Melanippus (8.724-7), Tydeus requests the head of his foe in lieu of any particular funeral (8.735-44). It will become his last meal, as we know from the myth,⁷⁷ and this foul deed costs him the immortality which Minerva had requested for him (8.756-9). The book ends with the fright and flight of the goddess (8.760-6). Book 9 opens with the reception of Tydeus' crime by the two armies; it is met with near-universal loathing (9.1-7). Only Polynices, Tydeus' best friend, grieves at first (9.32-48) and delivers a speech in his grief:

hasne tibi, armorum spes o suprema meorum,

⁷⁷ The foreknowledge which we have as readers familiar with the myth is thoroughly relevant, as Statius does not explicitly describe Tydeus eating Melanippus; instead, the description (a periphrastic one) is shared through Minerva's eyes. We will discuss the effect of this later.

Oenide, grates, haec praemia digna rependi, 50
funus ut invisa Cadmi tellure iaceres
sospite me? nunc exsul ego aeternumque fugatus,
quando alius misero ac melior mihi frater adeptus.
nec iam sortitus veteres regnique nocentis
periurum diadema peto: quo gaudia tanti 55
empta mihi aut sceptrum quod non tua dextera tradet?
ite, viri, solumque fero me linquite fratri:
nil opus arma ultra temptare et perdere mortes;
ite, precor; quid iam dabitis mihi denique maius?
Tydea consumpsi. quanam hoc ego morte piabo? 60
(Theb. 9.49-60)

Last hope of my arms, son of Oeneus, is this the thanks,
 this the worthy reward which I have granted you, that you
 lie a corpse on the detested ground of Cadmus while I am
 unharmed? Now I am an exile, forever banished, since my
 other and better brother has been stolen from me. No longer
 do I seek the old lots and the foresworn crown of criminal
 royalty. What do joys bought at such a price matter to me,
 or a scepter which your hand will not deliver? Go on, men,
 leave me alone with my fierce brother; there is no need to
 try arms further and waste deaths. Go on, I beg. What
 greater thing will you give me now? I have consumed
 Tydeus. With what death will I atone for this?

The pun here is of course in the double meaning of *consumpsi* (60), which is preserved in the translation despite the slight difference in registers between the English derivative ‘consume’ and the Latin verb. The humor lies in the gustatory meaning of *consumpsi* (as opposed to an economic sense) in a speech lamenting the death of a recent cannibal; more than that, the sentence itself describes an act of cannibalism, “I have gobbled up Tydeus.” Yet this meaning, valid in Latin as in English, is rejected by most translators: Shackleton Bailey offers a lackluster “I have expended Tydeus;”⁷⁸ Melville similarly, “I have squandered Tydeus;”⁷⁹ Ross renders it less awkwardly but with the same meaning, “I wasted Tydeus.”⁸⁰ Joyce in the minority, and in

⁷⁸ Shackleton Bailey 2003(III): 65.

⁷⁹ Melville 1995: 217.

⁸⁰ Ross 2004: 234.

the most recent and colloquial translation, appreciates the double meaning present: “I’ve squandered Tydeus – chewed him up!”⁸¹ Ahl sees the latter meaning perhaps at the expense of the former: “[Polynices’] despair finds vent in *Tydea consumpsi* (9.60). *Consumpsi*, “I have devoured”, recalls Tydeus’ gnawing on Melanippus’ head (8.751-766). Polynices thinks his own folly rivals his dead friend’s madness.”⁸² Dewar’s commentary rejects this outright and defends the others’ choice: “[T]he metaphor is surely primarily financial: cf. *perdere*, 58.” But this limits the potential of *perdere*, a comfortably non-specialized term, to the economic or financial sense in order to limit *consumpsi* unnecessarily along with it; both words, being polysemic, can enjoy both their meanings at once. For example, this is the same sort of pun found in *fecisse* in Martial’s epigram 9.15: *Inscrisit tumulis septem scelerata virorum / ‘se fecisse’ Chloe. Quid pote simplicius?* (“Chloe the wicked inscribed on the tombs of her seven husbands that ‘she did it.’ What could be more straightforward?”) Shackleton Bailey and the Watsons note that the joke depends on the double meaning of *fecisse*: Chloe built the tombs and Chloe did her husbands in.⁸³ Far from Martial in genre and time, Aeschylus’ chorus in the *Agamemnon* calls Helen a κῆδος ὀρθώνυμον (“a rightly-named pain-in-law,”⁸⁴ 699-700). This exploits the bifurcated definition of κῆδος as someone who is cared for, thus either one who causes grief or is a relation by marriage. Our own example exploits the two related yet distinct meanings of *consumpsi*: something is used up, lost, in either sense, but the precise actions and the connotations differ

⁸¹ Joyce 2008: 232.

⁸² Though not in a translation, but a lengthy ‘reconsideration.’ Ahl 1986: 2882.

⁸³ Shackleton Bailey 1993(II): 239; Watson and Watson (2003: 290) also point out the other ambivalent uses of *scelerata* and *quid pote simplicius*. They both point the reader to Juv. 6.638 for a similar use of *facio*.

⁸⁴ My translation here is doing its best to reconcile ‘someone annoying, causing grief’ with ‘sister-in-law.’ English, to my knowledge, does not have the means to render this satisfactorily.

between the two senses. The polysemy of words is valuable in all of these examples, and should not be ignored.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the larger context of the poem encourages us in two different ways to read the sentence with a meaning of “I have chowed down on Tydeus,” that is, to notice the dark humor. Firstly, the beginning of Book 9 repeatedly brings up the consumption of human flesh and the inhumanity:

*ergo profanatum Melanippi funus acerbo
vulnere non aliis ultum Cadmeia pubes
insurgunt stimulis quam si turbata sepulcris
ossa patrum monstrisque datae crudelibus urnae.*
(Theb. 9.8-11)

And so the Cadmean youth rise up to avenge the corpse of Melanippus, desecrated by the harsh wound, no less outraged than if the bones of their fathers were thrown from their tombs and their urns were given to cruel monsters.

Eteocles’ speech, discussed above for its irony, expands vividly on the idea of beasts desecrating corpses; now Tydeus’ allies are vicious animals as well, as in the passage quoted in part above:

*iam morsibus uncis
(pro furor! usque adeo tela exsatiavimus?) artus
dilacerant. nonne Hyrcanis bellare putatis 15
tigribus, aut saevos Libyae contra ire leones?
et nunc ille iacet (pulchra o solacia leti!)
ore tenens hostile caput, dulcique nefandus
immoritur tabo.* (Theb. 9.13-9)

Now they tear our limbs with curved fangs; what madness! Have we sated their weapons so much? Don’t you think we war with Hyrcanian tigers, or face savage Libyan lions? And now that one lies there (splendid solace in death!), holding his enemy’s head in his mouth, and the unspeakable wretch passes on amidst the gore that so delights him.

⁸⁵ For more on the appreciation of this ambiguity, see Stanford 1939, especially 69ff.

Even the simile which follows Eteocles' demagoguery evokes the consumption of people, this time by vultures:

magno sic fatus agebat
procursu fremituque viros, furor omnibus idem 25
Tydeos invisi spoliis raptoque potiri
corpore. non aliter subtexunt astra catervae
inestarum avium, longe quibus aura nocentem
aëra desertasque tulit sine funere mortes;
illo avidae cum voce ruunt, sonat arduus aether 30
plausibus, et caelo volucres cessere minores.
 (Theb. 9.24-31)

Having spoken thus he led his men with a start and a roar, the same mad desire to take the spoils and the stolen body of hated Tydeus. No differently do flocks of foul birds veil the stars, when a breeze from far off has brought to them a harmful odor and deaths abandoned without burial; there the greedy things rush in with a clamor, the high air resounds with wings, and smaller birds leave the sky.

The grisly subject is inescapable even in a simile: what the vultures will do to the corpses is left unstated but is nevertheless quite obvious. A tension builds between text and understanding; as readers, we are thus primed by the earlier part of Book 9 to read in *consumpsi* the darker meaning over the unobjectionable financial sense.

The word *consumpsi*, from *consumo*, deserves its own investigation. Forms of the word appear in the *Aeneid*, an important model and intertext for the *Thebaid*, as we have seen, a mere four times, typically governing 'night' or 'months' to describe the passage of time.⁸⁶ Statius uses the word a remarkable seventeen times, and only rarely in the innocuous usage of the *Aeneid*.⁸⁷ Its most frequent sense is one of violent death, e.g. in reference to Niobe consumed by arrows (6.124-5 and 9.682). Menoeceus' mother laments his suicide thus: *viden ut iugulo consumpserit*

⁸⁶ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have eight instances, Lucan's *Bellum Civile* five, and Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* just one; curiously, Silius Italicus' *Punica*, composed contemporaneously with the *Thebaid* for a time, also uses the word seventeen times, but this is proportionately less than in the smaller *Thebaid*.

⁸⁷ e.g. *Theb.* 2.347, *consumpsit annum*.

ensem? (10.813, “Do you see how he devoured the sword with his throat?”). Theseus kills Phyleus in battle: *ferrum consumpsit pectore Phyleus* (12.745, “Phyleus swallows up the sword in his chest.”).⁸⁸ Consuming humans as a metaphor for killing appears all across the *Thebaid*, even when *consumo* itself is not in play: see e.g. Tydeus’ boast, ominous as it is before his final act, *ille ego inexpletis solus qui caedibus hausit / quinquaginta animas!* (8.666-7, “I am that one who all alone drank down fifty lives in insatiate slaughter!”),⁸⁹ or Argia, when arriving on the scene after Polynices’ death and vowing vengeance:

*hoc frater? qua parte, precor, iacet ille nefandus
praedator? vincam volucres (sit adire potestas)
excludamque feras; an habet funestus et ignes?*
(*Theb.* 12.341-3)

A brother did this? Where, I pray, does that abominable
robber lie? Give me the chance and I’ll outdo the birds and
leave nothing for the beasts; or does the murderer have a
pyre?

Argia shockingly frames her vengeance upon Eteocles as cannibalism. Tydeus’ act and Polynices’ assumption of it are universal.

Secondly, despite reminding us frequently of cannibalism in the abstract between Tydeus’ death and Polynices’ speech, and despite so often using metaphors of eating, drinking, and death, the narrator actually avoids a straightforward narration of Tydeus eating human flesh. One may think that readers familiar with the myth know well enough what happened, and this is true, but the narrator, as if disgusted by and unwilling to touch the material himself, focalizes the response to the deed through other characters, some of whom would rather avoid the scene as well. Minerva sees his jaws bloodied and flees (8.760-6); Mars is offended and turns away his

⁸⁸ See also e.g. 12.806, Parthenopaeus *consumpto . . . sanguine*; 10.170-2 on Atys.

⁸⁹ See also e.g. 8.107-10, where Amphiaraus’ descent is described as being swallowed; 10.675, where Menoeceus is inspired like a tree which is struck by lightning and drinks (*combibit* fire).

own eyes and even his horses (9.4-7). Eteocles recounts the sight, as above, but stops short of describing Tydeus actually *eating* anyone – only holding a head in his mouth. Perhaps this vague approach is a consequence of epic decorum, and in fact, Polynices himself never brings up Tydeus’ sin, never even broaches the subject – *unless* we read *Tydea consumpsi* with that other meaning, a sense which we have just shown is more active in the text. *Consumpsi*, being the first explicit term to describe the act of eating, thus confronts the readers for the first time with the ghastly reality – a human ate another human – and compounds the startling effect it has as a pun in a lamentation.

This example of humor has three major effects. First and least abstract, it undermines Polynices as a speaker and leader, since his joke is, as we have said, out of place in tearful mourning, an absolute rhetorical blunder. After *Tydea consumpsi*, audiences and readers will find it more difficult to sympathize with his anguish.⁹⁰ This is in line with Statius’ treatment throughout the poem, where *nefas* sullies all and neither Polynices nor Eteocles seems to be heroic: we may look in particular at disdainful apostrophe immediately after their deaths, pronounced by the poet: *ite, truces animae, funestaque Tartara leto / polluite* (“Go, savage souls, and pollute horrid Tartarus with your death,” 11.574-5). Even if the poet’s attitude toward them were ambiguous before, the enjambment with *polluite* puts a fine point on it. Forcing into Polynices’ mouth a clumsy statement in the context of his lament for Tydeus begins to shift sympathy away from him. I suggest that this may possibly be the effect of Aeneas’ Catullan line

⁹⁰ See *De Oratore* 2.189-191; a speaker must display the emotions he wants his audience to feel. Shackleton Bailey 2003(II): 176 notes that Polynices seems to lie in an address at 3.374-6, when he claims that he knows what it is like to leave a wife and children behind: “How would he know? Statius seems to forget that Polynices had no wife or child in Thebes.” Shackleton Bailey assumes this is an oversight on Statius’ part, but I propose that the *Thebaid*’s author deliberately has Polynices lie here in order to develop his character.

to Dido in the Underworld from *Aen.* 6: it makes taking Aeneas seriously and giving him fair hearing very difficult, which indeed is something Dido does not do.

Next, as the pun is out of place in Polynices' speech, so it is out of place in the epic genre; parallel to this is the *nefas* of the cannibalism itself. Statius plays with this sense of decorum, using various characters in the epic to grant relief from the crime or ultimately to force a confrontation: Minerva flees, washing out her eyes even, and Mars similarly avoids viewing the act. We may compare the injunction of Jupiter for the gods to avert their eyes early in Book 11 to avoid the fratricide (11.122-33); on the other hand, the gods are important as viewers during Tydeus' *aristeia* (8.685-6), and we witness his feats along with them. Similarly, in the case of Tydeus' last meal, we managed to escape the scene of the crime and the *nefas* itself along with the gods; we could flee with Minerva Tritonia or gallop off with Mars Gradivus. By contrast, the profane Eteocles wallows in it, if obliquely (see above): he ironically speaks of the *nefandus* Tydeus with dripping sarcasm in *dulci tabo* (9.18-9) and *pulchra o solacia leti* (9.17); and, likewise, Polynices forces the ultimate realization of the crime with his own admission of (metaphoric) cannibalism. The pun reflects the *nefas* both of Tydeus' crime and all those throughout the epic, a breach of human custom translated from within the contents of the text into a local breach of generic custom.

The last effect of dark humor in the *Thebaid*, of Antigone and Argia and of *Tydea consumpsi*, is that it profanes the reader as well. Incongruity theories explain humor as either the tension between typically two concurrent and often mutually exclusive meanings or the resolution thereof.⁹¹ In either case, the listener or reader is responsible for the comprehension of

⁹¹ See Ritchie 2004: 46ff. and Martin 2007: 62ff.

both meanings, and in the latter case, the selection of one.⁹² To take a different angle: the phenomenological theory of art and literature necessitates consideration of any response to the text as a part of the text itself.⁹³ Our activation and confrontation of the darker reading of *consumpsi* and of the foully erotic plans of Antigone and Argia, and any disgust and amusement we may feel as a result, are thus a part of Statius' literary work. Thus we become accessories to, participants in, the crime of the pun and, consequently, the *nefas* itself.

LAUGHTER IN THE *THEBAID*

Above I sketched out the dark, humor-charged atmosphere of the *Thebaid*. I showed how characters in the narrative confronted *nefas* with sarcasm and perpetuated it through humor as well. For this final section I want to consider the laughter present in the poem, important instances of which involve the gods, who are figured as an internal audience.⁹⁴ *Rideo* and its complex forms have been translated typically as 'laugh' or 'smile' depending on the context;⁹⁵ as mentioned in the introduction, Beard recently discouraged us from resorting to the meaning of 'smile' whenever it is convenient.⁹⁶ I concur and argue that there is indeed something to be gained by teasing out the humor of a given situation rather than accepting an instance of *rideo* as denoting mere affection: most obviously, it could be a clue that we should read a scene as containing something funny.

⁹² We may consider also Carrell's (2008: 314-5) "audience-based" theory of verbal humor, in which any joke has four necessary constituents: the teller, the text, the audience, and the context. Each element is determinate in whether the joke is in fact a joke or not.

⁹³ See Berger 1995: 4-5 for how this relates to humor specifically, and also Bakhtin 1981: 284 on dialogization, in "Discourse on the Novel."

⁹⁴ See Ganiban 2007: 181 on 8.65-74 and all of his Chapter 8 for a thorough discussion of the *Thebaid* as spectacle.

⁹⁵ Like *gaudia/gaudeo*, *rideo* and its cousins *inrideo*, *subrideo*, and *adrideo* appear more in this gratuitously dark epic than one might guess: twenty occurrences, compared to twelve occasions in the *Aeneid*.

⁹⁶ Beard 2014: 73-5.

When Eriphyle, Amphiaraus' wife, accepts the cursed necklace of Harmonia (4.21-2), *grave Tisiphone risit gavisa futuris* (4.213, "Tisiphone, rejoicing in what was to come, laughed grimly"). Both superiority and incongruity, that essential combination for Roman humor, are in play here.⁹⁷ On the first count, Eriphyle receives the necklace and in turn convinces her husband to participate in the war which he knows will be his doom; Tisiphone, who is apparently watching the army assemble, laughs at her ignorance. On the second, out of her ignorance Eriphyle acts contrary to expectations, not in her own interest, and Amphiaraus will do the same with full knowledge of the consequences.

After the Lemnian women murder all the men on their island, they spot the *Argo* approaching. Not knowing what to expect, they don their husband's armor and hoist their weapons for protection, and are not ashamed: Minerva blushes at their boldness, but Mars laughed from far off (5.357, *averso risit Gradivus in Haemo*). Again, superiority and incongruity operate in conjunction, and toward the latter, not only do women in men's armor look absurd, but their efforts would be futile.

Laughter at ignorance and futility appears in a touching scene involving Parthenopaeus and Diana: the latter appears and discourages the former, young as he is, from pressing his luck in battle. Parthenopaeus resists, and asks that he be allowed to slay a man and give his spoils to his mother as a gift. In response: *audiit et mixto risit Latonia fletu* (9.820, "Latona's child heard and laughed amidst her weeping"). Diana knows that Parthenopaeus will never return to his mother; her brother Apollo just informed her (9.661-2). Her laughter is a response to the futility of Parthenopaeus' actions and his ignorance of his fate, both facts of which he is unaware but

⁹⁷ So I emphatically reject Shackleton Bailey's choice of "smiled."

we, the audience, know full well.⁹⁸ Hence the scene is a microcosmic illustration of our own complicated reaction to the various events of the *Thebaid*: laughter, sorrow, disdain, and disgust at futility, pain, absurdity, and obscenity.

Futility is also a factor when Capaneus assaults the heavens: *ingemuit dictis superum dolor; ipse furem / risit* (10.907-8, “The gods groaned in their grief at [Capaneus’] words; [Jupiter] himself laughed at the madman.”). While the other gods are grieved, Jupiter laughs because he knows from experience that the assault is doomed (10.909). The two actions, *ingemuit* and *risit*, are set in opposition at either end of the two clauses. Given that punctuation is an editorial decision, *ipse* might be assumed to qualify *dolor* until an object and an additional verb appear. Indeed, the subject referred to by *ipse* is unknown until he shakes his sacred hair (908). This ambiguity of subject draws into closer contact the two clauses and highlights the incongruity between the two verbs and the two very different responses of the gods, here an explicit audience. We the readers have much more in common with Jupiter, given that we are invulnerable to the events of the text as well, and his laughter signals to us that we should find the humor in this scene, in the hyperbole, the absurdity, and the futility. Jupiter’s laugh is also deflating, hence incongruous itself, because it dispels the tension from the scene.

Deflation is key to the last passage I would like to discuss. When Virtus or Valor descends on a rare occasion to inspire Menoeceus’ suicide, she disguises herself as Manto, the prophetic daughter of Tiresias:

*abiit horrorque vigorque
ex oculis, paulum decoris permansit honosque*

⁹⁸ Beard 2014: 137 explained laughter in epic, thinking especially of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as sometimes “a signal to the reader that the power differentials between immortal and mortal are about to be exposed or reasserted.” While this does involve both incongruity and superiority, it does not speak to a nuanced relationship between text and reader; in this instance, the reader has more in common with the prescient Diana and her immortality relative to Parthenopaeus’ mortality has little to do with the laughter.

*mollior, et posito vatum gestamina ferro
 subdita; descendunt vestes, torvisque ligatur
 vitta comis (nam laurus erat); tamen aspera produnt
 ora deam nimique gradus. sic Lydia coniunx
 Amphitryoniaden exutum horrentia terga
 perdere Sidonios umeris ridebat amictus
 et turbare colus et tympana rumpere dextra.*
 (Theb. 10.641-9)

The dread and force left her eyes, a bit of beauty and a softer dignity remained, and she took up the effects of a prophet after laying down her sword. Her garments lengthen, a fillet crosses her stern brow (it had been laurel); nevertheless, her harsh expressions and impressive strides betray her as a goddess. In such a way, the Lydian wife [Omphale] would laugh at Amphitryon's son [Hercules], stripped of his bristly hide, ruining Sidonian garments, knocking over spindles, and breaking drums with his right hand.

Disguises are inherently funny: their entire point is incongruity between what one is and what one appears to be. Statius emphasizes the incongruity here between Virtus becoming Manto and between Virtus' Manto disguise and the actual Manto, with this simile about Hercules, manliest of men, in drag. Virtus by analogy is rendered clumsier, inept, more laughable; both this recasting of her disguise and the simile itself dispel the gravity of the scene, and act as ill omen for Virtus and Menoeceus, who may fairly be branded her victim. Again, Statius undermines a scene's emotional depth in order to convey a more abstract message – that Virtus is ineffectual and out of place in this world – via humor.

Bakhtin, though speaking about poetry, epic, and the novel in highly artificial and abstract terms, may help us conceptualize the general consequences of Statius' scheme:

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up

close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides . . . Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically.⁹⁹

As I have argued before, the end aim of dark humor in the *Thebaid* is not simply to make one laugh, but to convey some deeper understanding of the wrong, or specifically *nefas* for Statius. Humor confronts *nefas*, like the sarcasm wielded in the narrative; it forces the audience to confront *nefas* and it acts as *nefas* itself, as with *Tydea consumpsi*; but in Bakhtin's terms it also removes the imperative of the taboo, the need to run and hide or cover our eyes, as the gods of the *Thebaid* do, for instance, at Tydeus' crime. In this last sense, the *Thebaid*'s humor takes the first step in helping us come to grips with the bleak world and deeply flawed characters and cosmos it mocks.

⁹⁹ Bakhtin 1981: 23.

CHAPTER IV

IMPERIOUS HUMOR IN TACITUS' *ANNALES*

This chapter reviews the function of humor in the *Annales* of Tacitus, a historiographical text post-dating the last book of Martial's epigrams by perhaps ten years and Statius' *Thebaid* by some twenty. Here I will briefly locate the *Annales* within historiography's legacy of humor and discuss the major contributions of scholarship regarding Tacitus and humor before acquainting the discussion with his humorous style.¹ I will then present what I argue to be specifically dark humor in the *Annales*, and link this to the figure of Tiberius, the successor of Augustus Caesar. I discuss the problem of obfuscated communication which is so central to Tiberius' characterization, and place this in the context of historiography written by an author who participates in much the same activity.

Paul Plass presents in *Wit and the Writing of History* between his copyright page and table of contents a quote from Fulgentius, an author writing around four hundred years after our historiographer, which suggests that a Cornelius Tacitus had written a book of jokes.² Given that we know of no other author named Cornelius Tacitus and no other evidence assigns any such book to him, Plass speculates that Fulgentius was referring to Tacitus' epigrammatic histories.³ If

¹ I select the *Annales* not because they offer the most examples to discuss; in fact, Tacitus *Histories* bear far more *sententiae*, at least. Goodyear 1972: 137 and 1968: 27 discuss this. He finds the *Annales*' *sententiae* less caustic overall, but I am interested in their more sustained, less frantic, dark atmosphere.

² See Plass 1988: v.

³ Or that a book of jokes was constructed, like an anthology, from picking out his and possibly other authors' aphorisms. The clause which Fulgentius supplies to explain the meaning of *elogium* is not found among the surviving texts of Tacitus.

we accept this explanation, then the recognition of the humor within Tacitus' *Historiae* and *Annales* has a relatively long history. The 18th century thinker Voltaire, Mellor tells us, disliked Tacitus but nevertheless admired his wit.⁴ In more recent times, Baldwin published an article in 1977 on Tacitean humor where he bemoans the lack of attention paid to his subject by scholars of the 20th century.⁵

In this dissertation's introduction I identified reasons why humor came to be neglected in modern scholarship on the Classics, foremost the fact that humor is an intimidating field with many competing theories and that humor came to be disdained in scholarly Classical circles of the 20th century.⁶ Tacitean humor faces an additional hurdle: like the *Thebaid* and its genre, epic, historiography does not characteristically feature humor, and definitely not sustained humor. To recall a few instances of where humor does, after all, appear: in Herodotus there appears the story of a clever thief, who stole the great wealth of the king Rhampsinitus (Hdt. 2.121); over the course of the thievery and the recovery of his brother's body, the thief got the guards drunk and shaved their right cheeks after they passed out (2.121D.5-6).⁷ This scene is comedic in its imagery rather than its delivery; it is no less Herodotus' for that, but it is rather anomalous. Sallust, much closer to Tacitus in time, culture, and style, may offer a bit of wry humor when criticizing Sempronia, a woman who supported Catiline:

*haec mulier genere atque forma, praeterea viro liberis satis
fortunata fuit; litteris Graecis et Latinis docta, psallere, saltare
elegantius quam necesse est probae, multa alia, quae instrumenta
luxuriae sunt.* (Sal. Cat. 25.2)

⁴ See Mellor 1993: 129.

⁵ Baldwin 1977: 128. Goodyear is among the more prominent scholars to conspicuously omit humor from a discussion of style.

⁶ Witness even Paul Plass' own landmark book for this study, entitled *Wit and the Writing of History*. Using *Humor* rather than *Wit* would have provided him with similar alliteration.

⁷ We may compare this to the modern phenomenon of 'shaming' at parties of adolescents.

This woman was rather blessed in terms of her lineage and beauty, in addition to her husband and children; she was educated in Greek and Latin literature and could play cithara and dance more attractively than befits an upright woman, and was capable of many other things which assist extravagance.

Sallust turns what would be a compliment into a backhanded slight with the comparative *elegantius quam necesse est probae*: the twist is surprising. Her objectionable behavior also warrants a laugh of superiority from the disdainful Sallust. Sallust's fellow in Latin historiography, Livy, describes the consul Papirius Cursor of the fourth century BC, who played off to grimly humorous effect his reputation for severity as a commander: to weary troops asking for the remission of their tasks, he permits them to forgo stroking their horses after dismounting (9.16.15-16); he intimidates a cowardly subordinate praetor by summoning the lictor with his axe (usually precursor to an execution), only to ask that a root be removed for the convenience of passers-by (9.16.15-18). Papirius and Livy generate their humor by manipulating the expectations of the audience inside and outside of the text, expectations built on the serious moments traditionally immortalized in historiography and epic.⁸ This contrast, the *materia* ('raw matter') for humor, is available to any author embarking upon the historiographic genre, but it loses its potency if exploited too much: generic traditions lose their influence over expectations when violated too frequently.

Paul Plass' 1988 monograph *Wit and the Writing of History*, as the first sustained inquiry into Tacitus' use of humor, blazed the trail for this chapter.⁹ As mentioned in the Introduction, Plass argues for a current of wit running throughout not only Tacitus' historiography, but also in

⁸ Elliott 2009: 652-3 argues that Livy's Papirius here is recalling the severity of T. Manlius Torquatus, both from Livy's own history and from Ennius' *Annales*. The manipulation of Ennius' epic legacy into a model and then point of contrast for Papirius' prank with the lictor amplifies our expectations and the incongruity resulting from their frustration.

⁹ See Woodman 1990 and Ginsburg 1991 for reviews of Plass' book. Both reviewers take exception to Plass' habit of omitting the original Latin or Greek and quoting only translations of the text; as we shall see, so much depends on the original Latin vocabulary and word order, which are lost to varying degrees in any translation.

the works of Suetonius and Cassius Dio. The main thrust of Plass' argument is that these authors, and Tacitus primarily, use wit to expose moral and political absurdity which develops as a result of the Principate.¹⁰ He defines wit as a combination of epigram with quip, meaning by this that a quip, a "live, spoken repartee" becomes increased in stature and put on permanent display as an epigram in literature.¹¹ Plass' taxonomy of humor-related terms is vague,¹² and his avowedly impressionistic sense of wit does serve his explicitly descriptive aims,¹³ but embracing more precise terminology could facilitate deeper analysis.

Wit exposes the absurdity of the Principate foremost by reflecting its peculiar political realities, says Plass.¹⁴ The Principate is responsible for certain political phenomena that defy expectations; Tacitus reports these using language that similarly frustrates reader's expectations. For example, when Mucianus encourages Vespasian to lay a claim to the position of emperor, he advises that they take up arms because *qui deliberant desciverunt* (*Hist.* 2.77.3, "those who deliberate have already deserted").¹⁵ English does not have the ability to translate effectively the patent similarity between the two verbs, in terms of syllable count, initial alliteration, final alliteration, and their tight proximity. All of these factors assimilate the two words together in a striking manner, just as the political reality has made the two ideas identical: even the thought of revolt is revolt itself. Another example, one less predicated on linguistic ingenuity and more on

¹⁰ Plass 1988: 7.

¹¹ Plass 1988: 6.

¹² See Plass 1988: 6: "'Aphorism,' 'joke,' 'humor,' 'epigram,' the 'comic,' and 'wit' are, of course vague terms. . . ." Plass paints with a broad brush; his use of modern humor theories is limited and relegated almost entirely to the endnotes.

¹³ Plass 1988: 7.

¹⁴ See Plass 1988: 12, 18, 63-4, and *passim*.

¹⁵ Plass 1988: 45-6 discusses the passage, which he translates as "Those who think of revolt, have revolted." He cites this as common *topos* in the first century, appearing in Plut. *Galba* 4.4, Seneca's *De Beneficiis* 5.14.2, *De Constantia Sapientis* 7.4, and *De Ira* at 1.3.1. Plass highlights the epigrammatic form here and says that it frames the issue with the antithesis of deliberation and decision. I think he may be reading in *desciverunt* a sense not strictly present, or else finding within *desciverunt* that a decision was made by whoever was deliberating; in any case the first antithesis to strike the reader is not between these two options.

conceptual absurdity, is that at *Hist.* 3.25.3, *factum esse scelus loquuntur faciuntque* (“They call the deed a crime and they do it”). The juxtaposition of *loquuntur* with *faciuntque* highlights the hypocrisy or disinterest in morality already present in the actions of the civil war’s soldiers. Plass sums it up thus: “Tacitus’ epigrammatic style helps make the point that ordinary language is inadequate to the queer reality of Roman politics.”¹⁶

There are important differences between Plass’ work and the present study. Plass is not explicitly interested in dark humor as it appears in Tacitus or his other authors,¹⁷ but some of his formulations work well for our purposes. For instance, Plass locates the political truth which Tacitus conveys “in the profound dissonance of norms,” which is best expressed through an epigram, witty because it too trades in dissonance.¹⁸ This political truth Plass likens to the universal truths which were typically the purview of poetry in that it is not concerned with historical authenticity or literal truth.¹⁹ Dark humor too relies on extreme dissonance, that which is formed by the humorous treatment of taboos. Likewise, though Plass links the trend he sees in Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio to Seneca and the declaimers,²⁰ and likens the historiographic strategy to poetry as above, he makes no connections with contemporary or near-contemporary authors of poetry such as Martial, Statius, or Juvenal. The previous chapters of this dissertation should inform our discussion of Tacitus here.

¹⁶ Plass 1988: 63.

¹⁷ He does mention black comedy (Plass 1988: 82), but the discussion there mostly seems to have Suetonius’ caricatures of the “grotesque” emperors in mind. Elsewhere he treats what does qualify as dark humor for this study, but Plass himself does not generally differentiate this material from typical, less objectionable humor.

¹⁸ Plass 1988: 57.

¹⁹ Plass 1988: 83-4, n. 19 on 155 citing Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b.

²⁰ See Plass 1988: 90-102, Chapter V, entitled “Wit in Seneca and the Declaimers.”

TACITUS, YOU HAM

This section will demonstrate how the style of the *Annales* is humorous by nature, the next how dark the work is. We may term this style epigrammatic, but I want to stress that I will not focus on the *sententiae* alone;²¹ the characteristics of those episode-ending aphorisms crop up throughout the text, even in the middle of the narrative. These defining features are the frequent use of antitheses or oppositions, the frustration or reversal of expectations, and compression of thought,²² more frequently termed brevity when epigrams and aphorisms are the object of discussion. For examples of antithesis within the narrative, we may turn to Tacitus' own summary of the formation of Roman laws (*Ann.* 3.25-28): *sexto demum consulatu Caesar Augustus, potentiae securus, quae triumviratu iusserat abolevit deditque iura, quis pace et principe uteremur* (3.28.2, "Finally, in his sixth consulship Caesar Augustus, secure in his power, ended the orders which he had made during the triumvirate and issued legislation by which we could enjoy peace and a princeps.") Here incongruity arises between *pace* and *principe* and is stressed by their similar letters and sounds.²³ The two are not mutually exclusive, but they are far from coterminous: Tacitus has already spent over two books in the *Annales* (and likely at least twelve in the *Historiae*²⁴) describing the crimes, travesties, and violence which could exist under or because of the Principate. Peace and the Principate are also joined with *uteremur* in a zeugma: the verb does not bear the same sense with both objects. This is not only incongruous

²¹ And indeed it is important to note that not all *sententiae* are obviously humorous; for example, Tiberius' response to the proposition of poisoning some enemies of state that *non fraude neque occultis, sed palam et armatum populum Romanum hostes suos ulcisci* (2.88.1, "Not with trickery or deceit, but openly and armed do the Romans take vengeance on their enemies"); also we may observe the pithy aphorism from 3.6.3, *principes mortales, rem publicam aeternam esse* ("emperors are mortal; the state is everlasting"). This uses antithesis and asyndeton, which are treated below, but neither this nor 2.88.1 violate expectations. Sinclair's 1995 *Tacitus the Sententious Historian* discusses *sententiae* such as these and others while virtually never broaching the subject of humor.

²² See Mellor 1993: 132-4 for a larger discussion.

²³ Plass 1988: 32 calls it a "derisive jingle."

²⁴ Jerome reports thirty books of Tacitus' history: most reckon twelve books of *Historiae* and eighteen for the *Annales*, but some suggest fourteen and sixteen. See Woodman 2004: x n. 6.

and hence potentially humorous itself; it exhibits a compression of thought which we will discuss shortly.

A specific subset of antitheses are the correlative phrases, much discussed by Plass but unfortunately divorced from their contexts and presented too often as epigrams.²⁵ For example: Rubrius Fabatus, a character who must have figured in the fragmentary *Annales* 5, had fled the Romans but was recaptured and put under guard: *mansit tamen incolumis, oblivione magis quam clementia* (6.14.2, “He nevertheless survived unharmed, due to forgetfulness more than mercy”). Not only does this place into balance two qualities which are not typically opposed – we would expect to see *clementia* and *inclementia*, perhaps explaining as *inclemens* the prison sentence which got Rubrius out of sight and out of mind – but we typically think of *oblivio*, forgetfulness, as a negative thing. Here, *oblivio* on the part of the emperor Tiberius saved a man’s life. The incongruity of the correlated ideas and the absurdity of the situation are both humorous. A less layered example: the Armenians in the year 16 went through a number of rulers, and after expelling one Erato, *incerti solutique et magis sine domino quam in libertate profugum Vononen in regnum accipiunt* (2.4.2, “indecisive and unrestrained, and being more without a master than free, they admit the fugitive Vonones to the throne”). It may seem at first glance that Tacitus is splitting hairs here: a basic sense of *dominus* involves the master-slave relationship, and if a slave has no master, he would be free. But there is more to true *libertas*, Tacitus suggests, than simply having no ruler. By contrasting these two phrases which we would expect to amount to the same thing, Tacitus forces us to look for the incongruity between them. The distinction is one which illustrates well his first description of the Armenians as *incerti solutique*.

²⁵ See Plass 1988: 50-4.

The frustration of expectations, as discussed in Chapter I, is a classic means of generating humor. For Tacitus, following Sallust, that his style is marked by inconcinnity means readers' expectations regarding sentence structure and rhetorical phrasing would constantly be frustrated.²⁶ Tacitus goes beyond periods and clauses, however, to arrange his narrative in a way that surprises his audience. We may take, for example, the account of Nero's debauchery on the pleasure barge:

ipse per licita atque inlicita foedatus nihil flagitii reliquerat, quo corruptior ageret, nisi paucos post dies uni ex illo contaminatorum grege (nomen Pythagorae fuit) in modum solemnium coniugiorum denupsisset.
(Ann. 15.37.4)

[Nero] himself, defiled by acts both lawful and unlawful, left out nothing disgraceful by which he could become even more corrupt, except that a few days later he took one of that herd of deviants (his name was Pythagoras) in the way of solemn marriage, to be his husband.²⁷

Reading up through *nisi pauc-* ("except a few"), we then might expect Tacitus to relate a few items which Nero had the opportunity to do but did not, or in some other way omitted from his tour of depravity. This opening thereby seems to soften the disparagement of Nero, who initially, it was stated, did not miss a thing in his quest for disgrace. Reading on, however, we find that Tacitus ramps back up the disgust and had never really slackened off in the first place: Nero, the emperor of Rome, married a man and acted the part of the wife through all the nuptial affairs and for all to see.²⁸

²⁶ See Syme 1958: 347 for *inconcinnitas*. See also Martin 1981: 220-3 for a discussion of *variatio*.

²⁷ I borrow here some wording from Woodman 2004: 322; his "took one...to be his husband" enables us to delay for effect the more outrageous verb, *denupsisset*.

²⁸ The section continues: *inditum imperatori flammeum, missi auspices; dos et genialis torus et faces nuptiales, cuncta denique spectata, quae etiam in femina nox operit* ("The emperor was dressed in a veil, augurs were summoned; there was a dowry and marriage bed and wedding torches; everything, in short, which night hides even in the case of a woman was observed.").

At the end of Tiberius' life: *iam Tiberium corpus, iam vires, nondum dissimulatio deserebat: idem animi rigor* (6.50.1, "Now Tiberius' body was failing him, now his strength, but not yet his dissembling ways; he had the same severity of spirit"). One of the three things in tricolon is not like the others. We expect to see *corpus* and *vires* linked with *animus*, but for Tiberius, dissimulation supersedes all other mental functions. Tacitus reminds of us this by supplying *animi rigor*: he reveals what was left out, like telling the punchline of a joke or the answer to a riddle, and makes more striking how integral dissimulation was to his character. It supplants *animus* in the sequence, and the additional *idem animi rigor* makes clear that his *dissimulatio* and *animus* are inseparable.

One final example of the frustration of expectations, this one more illustrative of the general absurdities of the Principate: when the senators were feeling Augustus' successor out, Asinius Gallus, whom Tiberius already resented, offended him with a question. Lucius Arruntius does much the same, *quamquam Tiberio nulla vetus in Arruntium ira: sed divitem promptum, artibus egregiis et pari fama publice, suspectabat* (1.13.1, "although Tiberius had no standing grudge against Arruntius; but he was rich, eager, of exceptional skill and with matching public reputation, so Tiberius was suspicious of him"). The qualities which would make him an ideal senator and support in the Republic are those which would draw the ire of an emperor; indeed, Arruntius would later commit suicide after being charged by Sejanus and later Macro, Tiberius' prefects (6.48). The verb *suspectabat* following the array of Arruntius' merits surprises us and confirms that all the advantages he possesses make up for there being *nulla vetus . . . ira*. Indeed,

Arruntius fares no better than Gallus who spoke before him and was resented by Tiberius for marrying his ex-wife Vipsania, whom he was forced to divorce by Augustus.²⁹

The last potentially humorous feature of Tacitus' style is his habitual compression of thought, as in *Hist.* 2.77.3 above, *qui deliberant desciverunt*. The mechanism is the same as we saw in Martial's epigrams: brevity generates incongruity by presenting an idea in fewer words than would usually be used. At the same time, the terser phrasing and omission of words can lead to some ambiguity of sense, which can itself be grounds for humor (see Chapter I). Tacitus' fondness for asyndeton and, to a greater degree, his general disdain for prepositions has this effect.³⁰ Additionally, economy of thought can be discharged as laughter per Freudian relief theory. Tacitus packs into this taut sentence a wealth of incongruity and insinuation: *postremo Livia gravis in rem publicam mater, gravis domui Caesarum noverca* (1.10.5, "Finally there was Livia, burdensome to the state as a mother, burdensome to the family of the Caesars as a stepmother"). We have parallel phrasing, with *gravis* followed by the sphere to which the adjective refers (though the second opts for a dative rather than a prepositional phrase, for the sake of inconcinnity) and a qualifier of Livia's role in that sphere. Thus far we can conceive of the sentence with parallel thought to match the phrasing. But the circumstances which make her *gravis* are both opposed and identical: to the state as a mother because she gave birth to Tiberius, who is reputed to be arrogant and cruel (1.10.7, following this) and because she will have an alarming amount of influence over him; and to the house of the Caesars as a step-mother, because she was rumored to be behind the deaths of Gaius and Lucius Caesar (1.3.3), the

²⁹ Tiberius reportedly still harbored feelings for Vipsania; see Suet. *Tib.* 7. Gallus would perish in prison by Tiberius' command (6.23).

³⁰ See Syme 1958: 346.

grandsons of Augustus, and thus again meddles too much. The parallel structure highlights both the similarity of her ruinous influence in each situation.

It can be difficult to accept as amusing any of these instances, given how grim Tacitus' view of his subject-matter is; but as Chapter III on the *Thebaid* showed, humor can enhance our appreciation of the depth of darkness and crime, a facet of the *Annales* which I will discuss shortly. Regarding his use of humor, Tacitus, more so than Martial and Statius, is imbued with the practices of oratory, the practices which informed Chapter I's Roman humor theory from Cicero's *De Oratore* and the *Institutio Oratoria* of Quintilian, a contemporary of Tacitus. It is difficult to tell how far we should understand their precepts as prescriptive or descriptive, but Tacitus had earned a sterling reputation as an orator prior to his work on the *Annales*, and he must have been aware of their tracts and similar thoughts on humor.³¹ Quintilian, who was roughly twenty years Tacitus' senior, may even have instructed Tacitus as he did Pliny, although we have no indications that he did so. Syme insists that Tacitus' *Dialogus* "confutes and supersedes Quintilian,"³² but we must remember that the question there is not about whether Tacitus agrees with Quintilian's teachings about the proper practice of oratory, but whether oratory was obsolete or at least had a function different from its heyday in the Republic due to changes in political structure. Even if Tacitus the historiographer were not to observe the precepts of the orator specifically, passages of the *De Oratore* and *Institutio Oratoria* attest to the universal application of the principles of humor (*De or.* 2.270-1; *Inst.* 6.3.14, 105). It is

³¹ See Syme 1958: 112-6 for Tacitus' career as an orator. Syme attests to Tacitus' close attention to Cicero's literary treatises, particularly by comparing the *Dialogus* with Quintilian's *Inst.* and their respective citations to lost Ciceronian works.

³² Syme 1958: 115.

oratory, in fact, which must be more careful and discerning with its use of humor, seeing as it aims to persuade a live audience and risks far more by offending that audience.³³

We can be more confident that Tacitus appreciates the understanding of humor which Cicero and Quintilian largely share because Tacitus actually uses a joke analogous one of Cicero's own when introducing Poppaea Sabina, Nero's mistress-turned-wife-turned victim: *huic mulieri cuncta alia fuere praeter honestum animum* (13.45.1, "His woman had everything except good character"). In Chapter I, I likened this to Cicero's joke which makes the same point and uses the same mechanism: *ridetur etiam discrepantia: 'quid huic abest nisi res et virtus?'* (*De or.* 2.281, "Inconsistencies too are laughed at: 'What doesn't he have, besides wealth and integrity?'"). Tacitus may not have lifted and altered this directly from Cicero's original; it may rather be evidence of a continually valid sense of humor between Cicero's day and Tacitus'. This joke encapsulates several vital features of Tacitus' humorous style: incongruity and the frustration of expectations, with the set-up and deflating punchline; and a loaded brevity, saying a great deal about an individual in a terse and periphrastic way. The epitome of verbal humor, we recall from Quintilian, lies in clever periphrasis: *et hercule omnis salse dicendi ratio in eo est, ut aliter quam est rectum verumque dicatur* (*Inst.* 6.3.89, "And really, the entire principle of speaking amusingly consists in saying something in a way different from the direct and truthful one"); and Cicero claims the violation of expectations as the ultimate humor-generator: *sed ex his omnibus nihil magis ridetur, quam quod est praeter expectationem* (*De or.* 2.284, "But out of all these nothing is laughed at more than that which is unexpected"). Furthermore, Tacitus' otherwise serious and grim demeanor and subject matter actually enhances the humorous

³³ See e.g. *Inst.* 6.3.28-33, 46-7, 83; *De or.* 2.239.

potential, through a framing incongruity.³⁴ We will discuss some instances of his dark humor next.

TACITUS AS DARK HUMORIST

Any look at the *Annales* (including many of my quotes from the work thus far) offer a glimpse of Tacitus' overwhelmingly pessimistic, gloomy, and bitter worldview, one which reflects the history of people and rulers corrupted into absurdity. Syme sums up the historian's material: "His theme was savage and sinister, with no place for hope or ease or happiness"³⁵ to such an extent that, as Syme points out, he rejects words like *humanitas* and *integritas*; *veritas* and *prudencia* expire as the Principate ages; *felicitas* only appears in speeches and only twice there.³⁶ Tacitus further develops this world bereft of courtesy, integrity, and possessing only the memory or facade of happiness, with audacious diction and phrasing: the sky can have *truculentia* (2.24.1, "ferocity"),³⁷ and even peace under the Principate can be gory (1.10.4, *pacem sine dubio post haec, verum cruentam*).

Tacitus relates this world to us with his habitual humorous style and, I argue, highlights its darkness with that humor. Tacitus' obituary of Memmius Regulus offers an outstanding example of both bold language to describe the darkness and the absurdities of the Principate:

eo anno mortem obiit Memmius Regulus, auctoritate constantia fama, in quantum praeumbrante imperatoris fastigio datur, clarus, adeo ut Nero aeger valetudine, et adulantibus circum, qui finem imperio adesse dicebant, si quid fato pateretur, responderit habere subsidium rem publicam. rogantibus dehinc, in quo potissimum, addiderat in Memmio Regulo. vixit tamen post haec Regulus, quiete defensus et quia nova generis claritudine neque invidiosis opibus erat.
(Ann. 14.47.1)

³⁴ *De or.* 2.289 and *Inst.* 6.3.25-6, see Chapter I for a larger discussion.

³⁵ Syme 1958: 348.

³⁶ See Syme 1958: 545.

³⁷ The noun *truculentia* appears nowhere else in Tacitus' extant works; forms of the adjective appear four times.

In this year Memmius Regulus passed away, illustrious, as much as the overshadowing eminence of the emperor would allow, because of his ability to influence people, steadfastness, and reputation; so illustrious, in fact, that when Nero was in poor health and there were sycophants around declaring that the end of the empire was nigh if he would suffer anything fatal, he answered that the state had a reserve. And when they then asked “In what, exactly?” he supplied “In Memmius Regulus.” Nevertheless Regulus lived on after this, protected by keeping his head down and because he was of newly outstanding lineage and of no enviable wealth.

First we note *praeumbrante imperatoris fastigio*, “the overshadowing eminence of the emperor,” which uses in *praeumbrante* a verb which appears nowhere else in extant Classical Latin and may have been coined by Tacitus himself. With *praeumbrante* Tacitus imagines the empire being dark as a result of the emperor’s enormous influence and edifice (*fastigium* being an architectural term), such that it drowns out to some degree the brilliance (*clarus*) of men like Memmius and Arruntius before him. We recall from Arruntius that his excellence was a cause for imperial spite; Tacitus observes with some wry wonder that Regulus, despite being recognized as a capable successor to Nero for his excellent qualities, “nevertheless lived on.” To emphasize this surprise, I submit, Tacitus delays the subject until the end of the clause; we would otherwise more naturally assume it was Nero, who was the previous subject as well as ill and possibly gravely so. Regulus, after all, met his death at the very beginning of the section quoted. Hence I suggest Tacitus teases us with a sentence that reads something like “He lived on after this, Regulus did, that is.” This gives us a start when we realize that his survival conflicts with our expectations of the Principate and its “new normal.”

The cruel corruption of *mores* is illustrated again when Sejanus’ children are executed following his fall from power:

igitur portantur in carcerem filius imminentium intellegens, puella adeo nescia, ut crebro interrogaret, quod ob delictum et quo

traheretur; neque facturam ultra, et posse se puerili verbere moneri. tradunt temporis eius auctores, quia triumvirali supplicio adfici virginem inauditum habebatur, a carnifice laqueum iuxta compressam; exim obliis faucibus id aetatis corpora in Gemonias abiecta. (Ann. 5.9.1-2)

And so [the children of Sejanus] were brought to prison, the son understanding what was impending, the girl so clueless about the matter that she was constantly asking what her crime was and where she was being taken; she would not do it again, and she could be admonished with a child's beating. Authors of that time report that since it was considered unheard of that a virgin should receive capital punishment, she was violated next to the noose by the executioner. Then, once their throats had been crushed, despite their young ages their bodies were hurled onto the Gemonian steps.

Here perverse logic of the monstrous era means that the supposed administration of justice necessitates another crime: rather than forbearing from capital punishment (*triumvirali supplicio*, for the board of three officials which would oversee the execution) on the traditional grounds that a virgin should not be executed, they simply found a loophole. The unexpected economy of this solution is unspeakably atrocious, but the mechanism is nevertheless humorous: *quid ironia? nonne etiam quae severissime fit ioci paene genus est?* (Inst. 6.3.68, "What about irony? Isn't this, even when it is at its most severe, more or less a kind of joke?"). There is profound irony in the fact that what would have been a merit in another situation, in a just world, is the cause for a heinous crime in this. Tacitus delays the euphemistic participle *compressam*,³⁸ revealing only at the end the shocking extent of the horror, and introduces an element of pathos in describing how she was assaulted next to the noose, presumably quite aware of what would happen to her next. Moreover, he is disturbed enough by this account that he ascribes it to his sources, lest anyone think he could imagine it himself.

³⁸ The verb *comprimo* most often means something like 'press' or 'crush,' but by extension can be used to refer to sexual acts with a male aggressor.

The world of the *Annales* is thus much like that of the *Thebaid*, where the traditional Olympian powers are ineffectual, the forces of the Underworld reign, and positive qualities like *virtus* and *pietas* are irrelevant. Here in the *Annales*, such things as *veritas* slowly die away, being an outstanding talent and of upright character can get a person killed or exiled, and justice requires the perpetration of further crime.³⁹ Tacitus, as a historian, does not deal in gods; in his works they are unavailable to illustrate the inversion of the cosmos. Instead, he presents the Principate as a reversal or adulteration of the Republic: *igitur verso civitatis statu nihil usquam prisci et integri moris* (1.4.1, “And so the community was upended and no trace of ancient custom was left untouched”).

The consequence of the *Annales*’ humor, darkness, and the combination of the two is the following: to start, the use of humor draws attention to Tacitus’ artful manipulation of historical material. Plass reasons that wit in historiography “carried with it grave problems of credibility,”⁴⁰ and modern humorists have determined much the same: “humor undermines the distinction between *reality* and *media*; more precisely, between the immediate presentation of reality and its mediated representation.”⁴¹ What, then, are we to take away from the *Annales* about Roman history? I suggest that Tacitus’ lesson for us is akin to what we learned from humor in the *Thebaid*: the medium becomes the message; the greater truths about politics and humanity lie precisely in the absurdity of the situation and Tacitus’ language, the manipulation by the emperor and historian, and the consequential violation of decorum. Tacitus more effectively conveys to us the state of the empire and life under the Principate through surprise,

³⁹ See e.g. 16.29.2, where the poet Montanus, *probae iuventae neque famosi carminis, quia protulerit ingenium, extorrem agi* (“a young man of honesty and not of slanderous poetry, was sent into exile because he promoted his talent”).

⁴⁰ Plass 1988: 87.

⁴¹ See Davis 1993: 95, italics original.

incongruity, and hidden thoughts packed into terse phrasing. This is in essence an extension of one of the most well known observations of Tacitean scholarship, that the author's style reflects his content.⁴²

TACITUS AS TIBERIUS

Tacitus, with his own pointed use of incongruity and surprise, is patently interested in the problems of communication. In this section I will explore his characterization of the emperor Tiberius, whose oppressive and opaque reign was marked by miscommunication, deliberate or otherwise, and demonstrate that the emperor and author were not so different in their style of speech. Tiberius is a morose and guarded individual: early on Tacitus attaches to him the word *taciturnitas*,⁴³ which only appears one other time in Tacitus' extant works, when describing the silence among those conspiring against Nero.⁴⁴ His issues with communication are highlighted early as well, in fact following Augustus' funeral, when he suggests that one man should not shoulder the burden of the entire empire:

plus in oratione tali dignitatis quam fidei erat; Tiberioque etiam in rebus quas non occuleret, seu natura sive adsuetudine, suspensa semper et obscura verba: tunc vero nitenti, ut sensus suos penitus abderet, in incertum et ambiguum magis implicabantur. (Ann. 1.11.2)

There was more pride in such a speech than credibility; and Tiberius' words, even regarding matters which he did not conceal, whether by nature or habit were always anxious and dark. But on that occasion he was striving to hide deep down his feelings, so his words became more complicated and increased the doubt and ambiguity.

⁴² See e.g. Martin 1981: 226-7, where he presents the enormity and complexity of the first sentence of *Annales* 1.2 as representative of the magnitude and complexity of Augustus' task in converting the Republic into the Principate.

⁴³ At 1.74.4, Tiberius breaks his taciturnity, incited by charges levied against a praetor which involved respect paid (or not) to Augustus and himself.

⁴⁴ At 15.54.1. Nor does the adjective *taciturnus* appear in his texts.

Some of this description could apply to the prose of the *Annales* as well: *suspensa semper et obscura verba* and *in incertum et ambiguum magis implicabantur*. Ambiguity, as we recall, is a standard ingredient in Roman humor,⁴⁵ yet here, with stakes so high, it also prompts the terror of the senators (1.11.3), his audience.

Tacitus allows for the possibility that this is a natural part of Tiberius' personality, but suggests that the emperor can and will deliberately increase his obfuscation. His intentional agency is more apparent in the following example. After Nero's eulogy for Claudius, it was noted that Nero was the first emperor to require a ghost writer. Tacitus takes the opportunity to recount the skill in oratory of each of the preceding rulers: *Tiberius artem quoque callebat, qua verba expenderet, tum validus sensibus aut consulto ambiguus* (13.3.2, "Tiberius too was proficient with a method by which he would weigh his words, being on those occasions effective at relating his thoughts or deliberately ambiguous"). The phrase *consulto ambiguus* is further defined through its opposition to *validus sensibus* ('effective at communication'); we would expect the *aut* to introduce a word opposed to *validus*, something meaning 'weak' or 'ineffective,' but Tacitus instead emphasizes Tiberius' control rather of the opposite effect, that is, of being difficult to understand. We may also note Tacitus' own stylistic choice with *consulto ambiguus*, which avoids wording parallel to that of the previous phrase, *validus sensibus* (adjective followed by ablative of respect): this example of his habitual *variatio* is thrown into sharper relief by comparison with the description of Augustus' oratory which immediately precedes it: *et Augusto prompta ac profluens quae deceret principem eloquentia fuit* (13.3.2, "... and Augustus had the ready and flowing eloquence which befitted an emperor"). The description of Augustus' *eloquentia*, short as it is, displays alliteration and elision (*prompta ac profluens*) as

⁴⁵ e.g. *De or.* 2.250, 253-5; *Inst.* 6.3.58, 87: see Chapter I.

well as hypotaxis with the subordination of the relative clause, and transmits the verb at the end in classic periodic style. Tiberius', on the other hand, exhibits parataxis; the verb comes early and appendices are added, another feature of Tacitean style.⁴⁶ Tiberius, then, is aligned with Tacitus himself in form of communication, from the sentence structure, to the careful weighing of words, to being *consulto ambiguus*.

We have already discussed an example of Tiberius' *dissimulatio* (6.50.1 above) and being *consulto ambiguus* would qualify as such when responding to people: "without a doubt, ambiguity gives the most frequent opportunities for dissimulation," per Quintilian.⁴⁷ Tiberius' proclivity for dissimulation is explained by his love for it: *nullum aequae Tiberius, ut rebatur, ex virtutibus suis quam dissimulationem diligebat* (4.71.3, "Tiberius esteemed none of his virtues, as he considered them, so much as his dissimulation"). Again we must recall that simulation and dissimulation were deemed by Quintilian as the greatest sources of laughter,⁴⁸ and Cicero too treats irony and dissembling as funny both in public speaking and conversation.⁴⁹ Given the terror and anxiety which Tiberius' deliberate miscommunication caused, can we accept a current of humor underlying his actions? If it is not acceptable to transfer the findings from Chapters II and III on Martial's epigrams and the *Thebaid*, that dark humor may manipulate or is a useful response to obscenity, crime, and *nefas*, we may look to Tacitus and Tiberius themselves:

*nam principem orabat deligere senatores, ex quis viginti sorte
ducti et ferro accincti, quotiens curiam inisset, salutem eius
defenderent. . . Tiberius tamen, ludibria seriis permiscere solitus,
egit grates benevolentiae patrum: sed quos omitti posse, quos
deligi? semperne eosdem an subinde alios? et honoribus*

⁴⁶ See Martin 1981: 223 for a short discussion about the Tacitean syntactical appendix.

⁴⁷ See *Inst.* 6.3.87 and Chapter I.

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 6.3.85, *plurimus autem circa simulationem <et dissimulationem> risus est, quae sunt vicina et prope eadem, sed simulatio est certam opinionem animi sui imitantis, dissimulatio aliena se parum intellegere fingentis*; see Chapter I.

⁴⁹ *De or.* 2.269-70, 275.

perfunctos an iuvenes, privatos an e magistratibus? quam deinde speciem fore sumentium in limine curiae gladios? neque sibi vitam tanti, si armis tegenda foret. (Ann. 6.2.3-4)

For [the senator Togonius Gallus] begged the emperor to select some senators, twenty of whom would be chosen by lot and armed with blades, and they would look after his safety whenever he entered the curia. . . Tiberius, nevertheless, being accustomed to mix ridicule with seriousness, thanked the senators for their considerate thought: but who could be left out, and who chosen? Would they always be the same ones or different each time? And those who have completed their duties or young men, private individuals or those in office? And then, what a scene it would be for those at the threshold of the curia to take up swords! No, his life was not worth so much to him if it had to be protected by weapons.

The combination or even confusion, to draw nuance out of *permiscere*, of mockery or ridicule with serious things is the hallmark of dark humor.⁵⁰ Tiberius' rhetorical questions and final proclamation smack of irony and may contain an insinuation that he suspects the senators would murder him as those in 44 BC did Julius Caesar: hence giving thanks to the senators is a mix of *ludibria* and *seriis*.

The likeness of Tiberius' and Tacitus' method of communication – ironic, crammed with conflicting tones – disturbs readers. But I propose that Tacitus appropriates Tiberius' style, or rather that Tacitus finds in Tiberius the greatest opportunity to express his ideal style for describing the problems of empire, for more effectively conveying the opacity, doubt, anxiety, and terror of his reign. Tacitus finds this tool so effective to that end that he employs it to a greater or lesser degree across his history of the Principate. This, then, is why the *Historiae* are

⁵⁰ See again Winston 1978: 33, which defines black humor as the combination of “horror and fun, the unsettling and the amusing, or . . . pleasure and guilt.” The disparity between content and form is key.

more aggressive and florid than the *Annales*:⁵¹ the latter have adopted a Tiberian *taciturnitas* and *dissimulatio*. On the other end, Syme compares the styles of those books of the *Annales* which focus on Tiberius with those that do not:

The Tiberian books of the *Annales* show the historian in his developed idiom, in full mastery of structure and coherence. The style there stands at its uniform perfect – most Tacitean, with demonstrable efforts and devices. It is not easy to divine why Tacitus should deliberately choose to become less like himself, abating his intensity.⁵²

We may now divine an answer to Syme's question; the problem is that he has incorrectly phrased it. As we now figure it now, the issue is not that the Tiberian books are "most Tacitean;" it is that they are most Tiberian, and without Tiberius to anchor the narrative and the style, to enact *ambiguitas* and *dissimulatio*, Tacitus' style would shift. Dark humor is indeed useful for illustrating the outrages of the Principate through Nero and beyond, but the character of Tiberius is a nexus of its most essential ingredients.

LOOKING BACK

Anthropologist Mary Douglas offers us a way to compare the humor in the varied texts of Martial, Statius, and Tacitus with her division of four political culture groups.⁵³ These groups – hierarchical or elitist, individualist, egalitarian, and fatalist – are categorized according to cultural biases they would share. These groups have been associated with different types of humor as well: elitists prefer ridicule which attests to and reinforces their superiority; individualists like exaggeration, imitation, and eccentricity; egalitarians favor repartee, reversal,

⁵¹ See Martin 1981: 220 for the "paring down" of Tacitus' style between the *Historiae* and the *Annales*. See also Syme 1958: 350, which compares the speeches between the two works: those in the *Historiae* are "eloquent, redundant," while those in the *Annales* "exhibit a more concentrated genius."

⁵² Syme 1958: 362, which is perhaps overstated. cf. Goodyear 1968 for an opposing view on the change of Tacitus' style.

⁵³ Douglas 1982: 190.

exposure, and allusions; and fatalists use absurdity, disappointment, and ignorance.⁵⁴ Martial's epigrams, Statius' *Thebaid*, and Tacitus' *Annales* all feature a combination of these devices but most prominent are those associated with egalitarians and fatalists, which are supposed allies in terms of their biases.⁵⁵ The epigrams use dark humor to expose the material of high genres as actually belonging to the low and reverse the hierarchy when Martial makes claims on realism; the *Thebaid* reveals how pervasive *nefas* is and upends the hierarchy of the gods; the *Annales* explore the depth to which traditional morals had been vitiated. Absurdity too figures in all three works, from Plutia's epitaphic associations, to a pun about cannibalism, to the transformation of a mitigating merit into grounds for greater punishment. Tacitus' use of dark humor is in fact demonstrably similar to the functions it held in his predecessors' poetry: stripping away pretense to expose the irony and laughable behind both the loftiest and basest of things, confronting the reader with *nefas* and demonstrating its ubiquity.

Dark humor unites the literature of this period from three different authors and three different genres, much as Peek argued it united the *Metamorphoses* with a consistent tone and as Meltzer proposes it ties together Seneca's *Thyestes*.⁵⁶ Flying in the face of Aristotle's categorical distinction of serious subject matter for serious authors, Martial, Statius, and Tacitus all utilize the unsettling and aggressive qualities of dark humor to serious ends, the accomplishment of their literary aims and at times even the amplification of the most grave and tragic scenes.⁵⁷ All along these texts violate their readers by serving up taboos and playing with them, forcing us to witness gratuitous literary crime, to grimace and to laugh all at once; it is when we play along with the dark humor that we grasp some of the deepest truths about the texts.

⁵⁴ See for this division Berger 1995: 109-12.

⁵⁵ Berger 1995: 115 explains that egalitarians ally themselves with fatalists, but the reverse does not happen.

⁵⁶ Peek 2001: 145-6 and Meltzer 1988: 312.

⁵⁷ A use identified also in the *Metamorphoses* by Peek 2001: 146 and in the *Thyestes* by Meltzer 1988: 312.

EPILOGUE

ONWARD AND DOWNWARD

Marie Plaza's 2006 *The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire* closes with a discussion of Juvenal's fifteenth satire,¹ which would have been published sometime around the year 130;² it is subsequent to the texts of this study, but Juvenal was nevertheless a contemporary of Martial, Statius, and Tacitus. Plaza reasons that the humor in this poem about cannibalism goes too far to be funny any longer and so "satire had nowhere else to go."³ I disagree, and argue that Juvenal is picking up the trend of dark humor which appears in the texts discussed in the earlier chapters of the present study. To begin, I quote the relevant parts of Juv. 15 and offer a commentary which highlights the dark humor:

*nos volgi scelus et cunctis graviora coturnis;
nam scelus, a Pyrrha quamquam omnia syrmata volvas,
nullus apud tragicos populus facit. accipe, nostro
dira quod exemplum feritas produxerit aevo. (15.29-32)*

My story is the crime of a mob, one worse than all the tragedies; you can go through all the tragedies from Pyrrha on down, and you will find no crime committed by a whole people. Hear what example the terrible savagery of our age produced.

¹ Plaza 2006: 338-41.

² See Highet 1954: 16.

³ Plaza 2006: 340.

Plaza interprets this to mean the story that Juvenal is about to relate goes beyond tragedy and beyond satire;⁴ I see here a Martialian move, where Juvenal asserts that tragedy's cannibalism, that of Thyestes, does not compare with the cannibalism which he now claims to be the territory of satire. Satire treats what it presents as the real world and *nostro aevo*, our age, and this is bigger and better than tragedy.

Juvenal goes on to describe two tribes which harbor a lasting grudge; one holds a feast and the other tribe crashes the party. A fight breaks out:

*dein clamore parti concurritur, et vice teli
saevit nuda manus. paucae sine vulnere malae;
vix cuiquam aut nulli toto certamine nasus 55
integer. aspiceres iam cuncta per agmina vultus
dimidios, alias facies et hiantia ruptis
ossa genis, plenos oculorum sanguine pugnosc.
ludere se credunt ipsi tamen et puerilis
exercere acies, quod nulla cadavera calcent. 60
et sane quo tot rixantis milia turbae,
si vivunt omnes? ergo acrior impetus, et iam
saxa inclinatis per humum quaesita lacertis
incipiunt torquere, domestica seditioni
tela: nec hunc lapidem, qualis et Turnus et Ajax, 65
vel quo Tydides percussit pondere coxam
Aeneae, sed quem valeant emittere dextrae
illis dissimiles et nostro tempore natae.
nam genus hoc vivo iam decrescebat Homer;
terra malos homines nunc educat atque pusillos; 70
ergo deus quicumque aspexit, ridet et odit. (15.53-71)*

Then they clash with a matching roar, and bare hands rage in place of weapons. Few cheeks are left without a gash, hardly any or not a single nose in the whole battle is left unbroken. You could see through all the ranks mutilated faces, changed features and bones gaping out of torn cheeks, fists full of blood from eyes. Yet they thought they were playing and waging childish warfare because they were not crushing corpses. And really, what's the point of mobs of so many thousands of brawlers if everyone lives? So their attacks become fiercer, and now they bend down

⁴ Plaza 2006: 340.

and search the soil for stones, and begin to hurl them, the weapons of domestic strife: not like the stones which Turnus and Ajax threw, or with which Diomedes struck Aeneas' hip, but the sort which the different hands, born in our time, can throw. For even in Homer's day the human race was diminishing; the earth now rears wicked and weak men; so whatever god watches laughs at and despises them.

The juxtaposition of graphic descriptions of injuries with *ludere* at 59 captures the absurdity of their attitude toward the violence and at the same time signals to us that Juvenal himself is playing around. The same playful and disgusting effect is achieved by *cadavera calcent* (60), a crunchy phrase that would imitate onomatopoeically the action which it describes. Juvenal then wields Tacitean irony to present the perspective of the brawlers. We next read a comparison with epic heroes, and Juvenal presents us with a god for an internal audience, just as the *Thebaid* did: moreover, this god laughs and hates. The strange combination may seem impossible to us, but is exactly the reaction to dark humor which I have argued for in this dissertation, the same reaction which Quintilian pondered when considering brutal language:

illud vero, etiam si ridiculum est, indignum tamen est homine liberali, quod aut turpiter aut potenter dicitur: quod fecisse quendam scio qui humiliori libere adversus se loquenti "colaphum" inquit "tibi ducam, et formulam scribes quod caput durum habeas." hic enim dubium est utrum ridere audientes an indignari debuerint. (Inst. 6.3.83)

But foul or violent language, even if it is funny, is nevertheless inappropriate for a gentleman; I know of a certain fellow who did this when he said to a lesser man who spoke freely against him, "I am going to deck you, then sue you for having a hard skull." Here it is doubtful whether an audience ought to have laughed or been outraged.

For Juvenal and the behavior of the humanity he resents, for Martial and for Statius and for Tacitus, the answer can be both.

The satirist Juvenal continues, building up to the most shocking moment:

a diverticulo repetatur fabula. postquam subsidiis aucti, pars altera promere ferrum

audet et infestis pugnam instaurare sagittis.
terga fugae celeri praestant instantibus Ombis 75
qui vicina colunt umbrosae Tentyra palmae.
labitur hic quidam nimia formidine cursum
praecipitans capiturque. ast illum in plurima sectum
frusta et particulas, ut multis mortuus unus
sufficeret, totum corrosis ossibus edit 80
victrix turba, nec ardenti decoxit aeno
aut veribus: longum usque adeo tardumque putavit
expectare focos, contenta cadavere crudo.
hic gaudere libet quod non violaverit ignem,
quem summa caeli raptum de parte Prometheus 85
donavit terris; elemento gratulor, et te
exultare reor. sed qui mordere cadaver
sustinuit, nil umquam hac carne libentius edit.
nam scelere in tanto ne quaeras et dubites an
prima voluptatem gula senserit; ultimus autem 90
qui stetit, absumpto iam toto corpore ductis
per terram digitis aliquid de sanguine gustat. (15.72-92)

Let's end the digression and get back to the story: after the one side was reinforced, they dared to draw swords and refresh the fight with hostile arrows. The inhabitants of the shady palms of nearby Tentyra present their backs in swift flight from the advancing Ombites. Here one of them slipped due to his haste and excessive fear, fell headlong, and was captured. But him, cut up into many little morsels and bits, so that one dead person could fill many, the triumphant crowd ate right up to the gnawed-on bones. They did not stew him in a boiling pot or use spits; they thought it so slow and tedious to wait for a fire that they were content with a raw corpse.

Here one may rejoice that they did not violate fire, the gift which Prometheus stole from the highest heavens and gave to the earth. I rejoice for the element, and I think you too exult. But those who could bear to bite into the corpse never enjoyed any other meat so much. For in such a crime do not ask or doubt whether only the first gullet felt pleasure; those standing on the edges, once the whole body was gobbled up, dragged their fingers through the dirt to get a taste of blood.

The incongruity of a person becoming *frusta* is ghastly; line 79's *multis mortuus unus* through its alliteration and assonance may be getting at the sounds of enjoyment people make when eating.

Line 83's *contenta cadavere crudo* repeats the alliteration from 60, but in this context the crunching evokes sounds of chewing. Juvenal's weak criticism in 81-2 takes us aback in Tacitean manner; would cannibalism really be any better if they cooked the man first? But then Juvenal counts it to their merit that they did not contaminate fire; line 85 grows consciously bombastic with its spondees; and he actually addresses the element of fire, all to underline his sarcasm.

Plaza bases her assertion that this cannot be funny on Cicero's *De Oratore*:

itaque ea facillime luduntur quae neque odio magno neque misericordia maxima digna sunt. quam ob rem materies omnis ridiculorum est in eis vitiis, quae sunt in vita hominum neque carorum neque calamitosorum neque eorum, qui ob facinus ad supplicium rapiendi videntur; eaque belle agitata ridetur. (De or. 2.238)

The things most easily joked about are those which deserve neither great hatred nor the utmost pity. On account of this, the entire subject matter of the laughable lies in those defects found in the lives of people who are neither dear nor wretched nor who are evidently doomed for punishment for some crime; these things, if presented well, are laughed at.

Cannibalism, reasons Plaza, is obviously a crime which deserves punishment,⁵ and so is barred from being funny. At the same time, she struggles with the humor she perceives in the "macabre feast on human flesh."⁶ We can reconcile these: Cicero at *De or.* 2.238 is speaking about those things which are most easily joked about (*ea facillime luduntur*) and furthermore is speaking specifically about what befits an orator. Immediately preceding is this:

quatenus autem sint ridicula tractanda oratori, perquam diligenter videndum est . . . nam nec insignis improbitas et scelere iuncta nec rursus miseria insignis agitata ridetur: facinerosos [enim] maiore quadam vi quam ridiculi vulnerari volunt; miseros inludi nolunt, nisi se forte iactant; parcendum autem maxime est caritati hominum, ne temere in eos dicas, qui diliguntur. (De or. 2.237)

⁵ Plaza 2006: 339.

⁶ See Plaza 2006: 340.

But to what extent the laughable should be handled by an orator must be examined most carefully . . . For neither conspicuous wickedness which is joined with a crime, nor conspicuous wretchedness, on the other hand, is laughed at when spoken of. People want criminals to be wounded by some force greater than humor; they do not want the unfortunate to be mocked, unless they boast boldly. Also, you must spare most of all those who are popularly esteemed, lest you speak rashly against those who are loved.

Dark humorists are more than capable, as we have seen, of taking on those topics which are not most easily joked about. Moreover, Juvenal the satirist, like Tacitus as historian and Martial and Statius, is not bound by the considerations of oratory. Satire 15 is not the end of humor and of satire; it is merely a continuation of the dark humor which both stains and enlivens Imperial Latin literature.

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