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DOSSIER HUMOEROTICA

HUMOR AND EROTICISM IN GREEK AND ROMAN ANTIQUITY.

INTRODUCTION TO « *HUMOEROTICA* »

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ABSTRACT

This issue examines ways in which humor can, in different cultural contexts, be bound up with gender and eroticism, and thus reveal norms and values specific to the Greek and Roman worlds. By historicizing both “laughter” and “sexuality”, and being particularly sensitive to the physical performance contexts of various cultural practices, the authors develop new interpretations of a variety of sources (images on symposium pottery, Athenian comedy, courtroom oratory, Socratic dialogue, Latin epigram, prose fiction). The neologism *humoerotica*, which plays on the often anachronistic association of homoeroticism with antiquity, exemplifies our commitment to the use of fluid heuristic categories for exploring cultures “before sexuality” — a territory less familiar than is often supposed.

MOTS-CLÉS

Humor,
laughter,
sexuality,
gender,
eroticism,
Attic pottery,
Aristophanes,
Aeschines,
Xenophon,
Socrates,
Martial,
Lucian.

Ce dossier propose une réflexion sur la façon dont l’humour peut, dans différentes performances culturelles, impliquer le genre et l’érotisme, et ainsi révéler des normes et des valeurs propres aux mondes grec et romain. En historicisant à la fois la notion de « rire » et de « sexualité », et en étant particulièrement sensibles au contexte concret de performance des différentes pratiques culturelles, les auteurs de ce dossier développent des analyses nouvelles à partir de documents variés (images et vaisselle de banquet, comédie attique, procès, dialogue socratique mis en scène, épigramme romaine, fiction en prose). Le néologisme *Humoerotica* joue avec le lien que l’on fait souvent – et de façon anachronique – entre homoérotisme et Antiquité : il s’agit par ce clin d’œil humoristique d’affirmer une volonté de recourir à des catégories heuristiques fluides pour explorer un territoire « d’avant la sexualité », bien moins familier qu’on ne le pense souvent.

KEYWORDS

Humour,
rire,
sexualité,
genre,
érotisme,
céramique attique,
Aristophane,
Eschine,
Xénophon,
Socrate,
Martial,
Lucien.

What did people laugh at in Greek and Roman antiquity? What made them smile subtly or laugh out loud? What kinds of laughter brought people together or, conversely, divided them? And above all — since this is the subject of our collection of papers — was sex considered, as is today, a good subject for humor, mockery, or witticisms?

The early twenty-first century has seen considerable interest in laughter among scholars of antiquity, whether in the field of cultural anthropology, history or philosophy [1]. Stephen Halliwell, in his 2008 book, studies the various functions of this human behavior, describing the contexts in which laughter was used to build community, refine philosophical reflection, or play with cultural norms. Above all, he highlights the “instability” of laughter as a category — the instability of something that is “volatile”, occurring at the subtle interface between two possible interpretations of a given situation. Since this applies to the Greeks themselves [2], such phenomena are equally uncategorizable for us moderns.

This instability has important implications for anyone involved in studying this kind of material. First, we cannot assume that the Greeks and Romans perceived “laughter” or “humor” as exactly the same phenomenon that we do. Indeed, the purpose of such an inquiry is — *without* presupposing unified or globally homogeneous categories — to uncover the Greek and Roman concerns and logics

governing the perception and categorization of such behaviors, whether individual or collective. Whether it is a case of ritualized group laughter at a festival, audience response to a comedy performed in competition, humorous understatement in a philosophical dialogue, or a witticism hurled during a symposium, the anthropologist of antiquity must seek to identify the specific context for each cultural practice, without presupposing, anachronistically, some sort of ahistorical and universal link connecting these manifestations of “humor” that we can detect in the ancient evidence.

To take this anthropological caution still further, in the absence of comments by *the ancients themselves*, scholars must refrain from reading humor into an image or a description when we lack the context to determine just how the ancients would characterize the reaction it elicited. Even if a term belongs explicitly to a lexical field connected with laughter [3], this methodological caution should prevent the scholar from generalizing from her interpretation of a specific document by applying it to other contexts (for example, by analogy). We must resist the temptation to laugh along with the ancients: the inquiry may look cheerful and amusing, but there is nothing obvious about it.

The situation become even more complex when we introduce a second consideration: sex. Indeed, gender, sexuality and eroticism have this in common with ancient laughter and humor: sex

[1] See especially the rich and varied contributions to the impressive volume edited by Marie-Laurence Desclos (DESCLOS 2000), the detailed study devoted to Greece by Stephen Halliwell (HALLIWELL 2008; also 1991), John Clarke’s study of Roman visual representations (CLARKE 2007), and, more recently, the chapters on classical antiquity in ALEXIOU & CAIRNS 2017 and BRIAND, DUBEL & EISSEN 2017. Many edited collections include

chapters on laughter, humor and comedy, and this note makes no claim to be exhaustive. Our selection is merely intended to highlight the prominence of this theme in recent work on Greek and Roman culture.

[2] HALLIWELL 2008: 1-50, esp. 18-19.

[3] See, for example, the terms discussed by Stephen Halliwell in his Appendix 1 (HALLIWELL 2008: 520-529).

is not, any more than humor, a matter of universal and ahistorical evidence. In both cases, our questions are formulated based on unstable categories, which need to be interpreted freshly in each specific context. As American researchers, in particular David Halperin and John Winkler [4], established, starting at the end of the 1980s, the terms of inquiry governing this field — whether it is a matter of desire, identity, or sexual practices — depended heavily in the past on contemporary categories applicable only imperfectly, or very partially, to ancient erotic practices [5]. We may view a certain behavior as comically effeminate, but did the ancients perceive this same behavior as a form of gender deviance that characterized someone definitively? A certain erotic relationship may be mocked today, but was it out of the ordinary for the ancients themselves?

The risk of anachronism is especially acute in a field where, as Michel Foucault showed, the logics of cultural norms, truth, or self-definition, are applied to a biopower totally foreign to ancient eroticism (*aphrodisia*) [6]. In a society “before sexuality” [7], personal identity and the perception of sexual practices were grounded in logics very different from ours, which often escape us. The awareness that we are trying to open up an unknown field should restrain our impulse to think of and perceive ancient behaviors, first, in terms of binary gender, and second, through the opposition between “heterosexual” and “homosexual” [8]. Strenuous debate on these matters roiled the field of Classics at the end of the twentieth century; our collection operates from a firmly post-Sexuality Wars perspective, as outlined by Kirk Ormand in a chapter of the recent *Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities* [9].

This new scholarly landscape regarding ancient sexuality is described and analyzed by Ruby Blondell and Kirk Ormand in the introduction to their edited volume *Ancient Sex: New Essays* [10], and by Sandra Boehringer and Michel Briand in their collection, *Questions de genre et de sexualité dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* [11].

The difficulties posed by the highly unstable character of the fields of laughter and eroticism are further compounded by the uncertainty besetting the researcher confronted with ancient documents of various kinds. Prior to their existence as texts or images, these documents are traces of cultural performances from a world where “literature” did not exist [12], where song, speech, image and writing were valued differently from today [13], and which, in turn, require appropriate analytical tools. These tools are those of the ethnopoetian, who studies “poetic-musical performances in their aesthetic complexity and their multiple languages: words, vocalization, melody, instrumental music, bodily gestures, dance, movement through space, and creation in space and time; [these] are social and cultural events that connect participants to each other and to the world they live in” [14]. This interconnection of individuals, specific to each performance, is what interests the anthropologist of antiquity, when trying to understand the norms and practices of different situations (one element of which is the documents themselves) [15]. It is essential to reflect on the nature of the performance in this way, in order to identify regular patterns and detect departures or transgressions — in short, to perceive the effects of humor and the comic.

An Attic pelike in the British Museum, attributed to the Hasselmann Painter (fig. 1), illustrates the

[4] HALPERIN 1990 and 2002; WINKLER 2005 (1990).

[5] HALPERIN 2000 (1990): 29-63.

[6] FOUCAULT 1976-1984. See also DAVIDSON 1987, for an analysis of the contemporary moment when sexuality “emerged”, which reminds us of the epistemological need to posit a world “before sexuality”.

[7] This expression is borrowed from the pioneering work of HALPERIN, WINKLER & ZEITLIN 1990 (French trans. forthcoming).

[8] For a non-essentialist approach to ancient sexuality see esp. CALAME 1996; WILLIAMS 1999, PARKER 2001; DUPONT & ÉLOI 2001; BOEHRINGER 2007; MASTERSON, RABINOWITZ & ROBSON 2015; BLONDELL & ORMAND 2015. The last three decades have seen a proliferation of articles and books on eroticism and sexuality, and it is obviously impossible to give here a representative bibliography of every area that has been explored.

[9] ORMAND 2014.

[10] BLONDELL & ORMAND 2014.

[11] See also the contributions to the recent collection BOEHRINGER & LORENZINI 2017 on Foucault, antiquity and sexuality.

[12] For the non-existence of a regime of literature, as described by Jacques Rancière (RANCIÈRE 2007), see DUPONT 1994.

[13] Cf. the numerous works of Claude Calame on the pragmatic dimension of the ancient statements that have come down to us, esp. CALAME 2000.

[14] This is how Florence Dupont defines the work of the ethnopoetian (DUPONT 2010).

[15] On the transcultural approach of the anthropologist of antiquity see CALAME 2002.



Figure 1
Attic Red Figure Pelike,
Attributed to the Hasselmann Painter,
440-430 BCE
© Trustees British Museum.

only be hypothetical, in spite of the obvious comic effect — as it seems to us moderns — of portraying a woman calmly watering a bed of erect phallos-plants that seem to depend on her attentive care.

Laughter, sex and cultural performance, three “fuzzy” objects [17], are mobilized in this humorously titled collection, *Humoerotica*, whose contribution lies in the intersection of these three axes of thought. Unlike studies of ancient laughter per se, it does not take eroticism and sexual humor into account among other things. It is, rather, an attempt to grapple with these questions by scholars of ancient eroticism who are aware of the historical dimension of sexuality and of discursive practices [18]. Approaching the subject of humor from this perspective, our contributors examine ways in which it can, in different cultural performance contexts, be bound up with gender and eroticism, thereby revealing norms and values specific to the Greek and Roman worlds. The discursive practices in which sex and humor are entangled and co-constructed are very varied: pottery used at symposia (Marina Haworth), comedy on the Athenian stage (James Robson and Carmen Damour), a speech in court (Deborah Kamen), a dramatization of Socratic dialogue (Yvonne Rösch), the reading and

intersections among these three areas of uncertainty in the field covered by our investigation: in the absence of clear information about the vessel’s practical use (was it used to pour liquid at a banquet? Was it used as an offering, or for storage?), we can not specify the image’s comic or humorous effect with any certainty. This brings us back to the relationship between image and discursive practice, a question that must be addressed in a way specific to antiquity (since it is treated quite differently in our own time). In the absence of any ancient discussion of this image, it is hard to understand what exactly it represents. (Is it a simple scene of sexual humor, or part of a ritual known to the Ancients, presented humorously here?). In a discussion of women’s festivals, John Winkler suggests that it is linked to the practice of Adonis Gardens by a bond of “cultural equation” [16], but does not see (as others do) a realistic reference to ritual practices. But a “humoerotic” reading of this image can

[16] WINKLER 2005 (1990): 385-386. This image has given rise to numerous interpretations, which we cannot summarize here. We cite this example simply as a reminder of the enormous extent of this unknown realm into which our anthropologist-explorer ventures. For this metaphor, and an “invitation to travel”, see DUPONT 1996: 7.

[17] On the anthropological value of “fuzzy sets” and “soluble categories” see DUPONT 2010: 12-13.

[18] The theme of sex plus humor is obviously not new. Our contribution, we hope, is an interrogation of the impact of discursive practice itself, as well as the results of recent work on gender and sexuality in antiquity.

visualization of Roman epigram (Eugene O'Connor and Sandra Boehringer), and finally, prose fiction by Lucian, a master of hybridity and gender fluidity (Michel Briand).

In 2015, a panel entitled *Humoerotica*, organized by Ruby Blondell and Kathryn Topper for the Lambda Classical Caucus, was held in New Orleans at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association (now the Society for Classical Studies). Several of the participants have developed their presentations into papers for this collection (Marina Hayworth, Deborah Kamen, Eugene O'Connor, Sandra Boehringer). In the intervening years, this most enjoyable occasion stimulated numerous friendly and collegial scholarly exchanges. The present collection is the result of this collaborative work, which has been expanded to include other scholars working in the same spirit [19].

The neologism "humoerotica" is a play on words addressed to readers who may be (too) accustomed to hearing about ancient "homoeroticism" without a heuristic framework. Its Greek etymology

notwithstanding, "homoeroticism" is a contemporary formation, betraying the modern tendency to organize erotic impulses into our own categories (homo- vs. hetero-). The phonically similar term "humoerotica" was invented as a way of reaffirming, with a playful epistemological wink, our commitment to using fluid, unstable heuristic categories, of a kind suited to revealing indigenous categories (themselves fluid), as we plunge deeper into foreign territory. Like explorers, we are eager to discover, not the illusory origins of our western civilization (our humor, our identity, our sexuality), but the cultural specificity of the Greeks and Romans in all their fascinating strangeness. ■

[19] The workshop "Genre, sexe, sexualité dans le monde grec et romain", sponsored by the French association EFiGieS (Jeunes chercheuses et chercheurs en études féministe, genre et sexualité), was for ten years, a meeting place for scholarly interaction and fruitful exchange that fostered a number of collaborations.

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