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Comic *Parrhêsia* and the Paradoxes of Repression

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Abstract

Comic satirists such as Aristophanes thrive on the tension that arises from their need to ridicule prominent figures of contemporary society and the possibility that this ridicule will cause genuine offense. The history of satire is full of complaints by authors that they work in a dangerous profession, and that their detractors fail to appreciate their high-minded, often explicitly didactic intentions. In such moments, satirists attempt to leave the impression that those who try to repress their freedom to mock and abuse are unwelcome obstacles to their enterprise. It is precisely such allegations of risk and danger, however, that make for effective satire and allow satirists to present themselves as comically “heroic” in the first place. And if satire requires a fraught, antagonistic relationship between author and target, we cannot trust the satirist’s account of the relationship or accept the claim that the alleged oppression is unwelcome. This study begins with such conundra in Aristophanes, and examines comparative evidence from other periods and literary forms, including Homer’s Thersites, Horace, Socrates and Lenny Bruce.

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Comic *Parrhêsia* and the Paradoxes of Repression

Abstract: Comic satirists such as Aristophanes thrive on the tension that arises from their need to ridicule prominent figures of contemporary society and the possibility that this ridicule will cause genuine offense. The history of satire is full of complaints by authors that they work in a dangerous profession, and that their detractors fail to appreciate their high-minded, often explicitly didactic intentions. In such moments, satirists attempt to leave the impression that those who try to repress their freedom to mock and abuse are unwelcome obstacles to their enterprise. It is precisely such allegations of risk and danger, however, that make for effective satire and allow satirists to present themselves as comically “heroic” in the first place. And if satire requires a fraught, antagonistic relationship between author and target, we cannot trust the satirist’s account of the relationship or accept the claim that the alleged oppression is unwelcome. This study begins with such conundra in Aristophanes, and examines comparative evidence from other periods and literary forms, including Homer’s Thersites, Horace, Socrates and Lenny Bruce.

In “The *Dêmos* and the Comic Competition,” one of the most significant studies on Aristophanes to appear in the last several decades, Jeffrey Henderson put his finger squarely on what is perhaps *the* central question at the heart not only of Athenian comedy but of all comic genres that specialize in satirical mockery and personal ridicule: “Among the honour-sensitive Athenians ... the distinction between abuse and jesting often called for nice judgement ... One man’s joke is another man’s slander, depending on the skill of the jester and the butt’s reaction. Comic poets, like orators, had to be able to sail very close to the wind.”¹ Indeed, it is the moments of risk-taking on the comic stage that make the greatest impression on audiences, since this is where poets push the limits of social decorum or acceptable speech in their quest for laughs and literary supremacy. These moments of dramatized ridicule play to an audience’s taste for *Schadenfreude* against public figures and titillate them with words and actions normally repressed in daily life. Successful poets of comic satire, such as Aristophanes, generally learn how to walk the fine line between aggressive but benign humor with widespread audience appeal, and speech that offends rather than amuses, or even becomes legally actionable.

¹ Jeffrey Henderson, “The *Dêmos* and the Comic Competition,” in J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin (eds.) *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 301.

Aristophanes was aware how deftly he had to manage his satire if he was to please audiences and win prizes at the dramatic festivals. But he also knew that any form of satire required the freedom to create plots and characters intended to address contemporary affairs and ridicule people who would have been known to the audience and may even have been present during a performance.² Satirists work in a fundamentally didactic mode,³ whether explicitly or implicitly, and like the best teachers, they need to tell the truth about how the world is, even if this means making fun of reprehensible people in ways that might seem cruel and unfair in real life. When Aristophanes has Dicaeopolis tell the audience at *Acharnians* 501 that comedy speaks “what is just/true,” it is in a defensive moment, explaining why satirical comedy must sometimes say “shocking things” (*deina*) as well. The price the audience has to pay for hearing the truth, distorted as it may be in the service of the poet’s agenda, is tolerating speech that risks offense. This is why the chorus warns in the opening of the parodos of *Frogs* that anyone who is hyper-sensitive to comic ridicule should stay far away from the comic theater.⁴

The most famous example that Aristophanes himself offers of what can happen when a comic target fails to appreciate the satirist’s mockery is his supposed feud with the politician Cleon. Indeed, this narrative, recounted across three plays (*Acharnians*, *Knights* and *Wasps*), has become emblematic of the risks posed by free speech in the service of comedy’s notional goals of instruction and correction. In these early comedies, Aristophanes complains that Cleon took him to court, first for slandering the *dêmos* and its magistrates in front of foreigners present for the City Dionysia in 426 BCE, and then again—for unspecified reasons—after the performance of *Knights* in 424 BCE. We can only take Aristophanes’ (and a scholiast’s) word about the historical details of these lawsuits,⁵ but whatever happened between the two men, the story of

2 See the anecdote (late 2nd c. CE) in Aelian (*VH* 2.13) reporting that Socrates went to see Aristophanes’ *Clouds* and stood up for the entire play to identify himself as the figure represented onstage. See K.J. Dover (ed.), *Aristophanes: Clouds* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1968), p. xxxiii, and, on the comic potential that another character in *Clouds*, Megacles, might have been in the audience, Charles Platter, *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 67 with n. 8.

3 As Aristophanes enjoys reminding us, as at e.g. *Ach.* 634–5 (the poet has prevented the Athenians from being deceived by foreigners) or *Ra.* 686–7 (the comic chorus “advises and teaches” the city).

4 *Ra.* 354–5 (“whoever is inexperienced with this sort of discourse ... should stand apart from our choruses”). Aristophanes ends his list of people unsuited to appreciate his comedies by mentioning a political speaker (*rhêtôr*) who tries to reduce the pay for poets after he has been mocked (*kômôidêtheis*) (367–8). Clearly such a man cannot take a joke and has no business at a comic performance.

5 The nature of and evidence for the relationship between Aristophanes and Cleon is well laid out by S. Douglas Olson, “Comedy, Politics and Society,” in: Gregory W. Dobrov (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to the Study of Greek Comedy* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 41–5. See also Ralph M. Rosen, *Old Comedy and the Iambographic Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 62–82; Malcolm Heath, *Political Comedy in Aristophanes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1987; revised and updated in an online version, 2007, available at http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/3588/1/Political_Comedy_in_Aristophanes.pdf), pp. 14–26; C. Brockmann, *Aristophanes und die Freiheit der Komödie: Untersuchungen zu den frühen*

their relationship effectively highlights the dilemma all satirists confront at one point or another in their careers. As Henderson has put it, “Cleon’s suit against Aristophanes for slander ... may indicate either that Aristophanes’ abuse was seriously intended or that Cleon was over-sensitive to jesting.” The poet himself would surely say that both alternatives were true: he would *claim* that he was “serious”⁶ in his abuse of his target, but also that Cleon’s reaction to this abuse was unjustified and unfair. The protocols of Athenian dramatic festivals and the literary conventions of Old Comedy, after all, provide ample license for freewheeling mockery, so when a poet encounters significant pushback in the form of lawsuits, for example, his indignation is systemically and generically indicated. Indignation, in other words, becomes an expected part of an ongoing drama that pits the biting jests of a self-righteous poet who claims the protection of comic license against targets who object to being the butt of his jokes.

To hear a satirist such as Aristophanes tell his tale of woe, angry responses from injured targets or other offended listeners are, simply put, a bad thing. How dare anyone threaten, even censor him, when his only goal is to expose bad behavior and show his audience what is right and true while making them laugh? The position seems clear and simple, and it is easy to sympathize with the satirist’s plight. How nice it would be, if the Cleons of the world would disappear and stop harassing the poor poet, who could then get on with his work as a comedian! Such, at any rate, is the pretense of the poet’s complaints about the risks he claims to face in his work and the limitations on his speech he occasionally encounters. But how straightforward and serious are such complaints? Should we really believe that satirists would benefit from utterly unrestricted and indemnified freedom of expression, with guarantees that no one will seriously object to anything they say? This is a simple question but is rarely asked, even though it raises a host of questions about the very nature of comic satire.

As I hope to show in what follows, constraints on speech are simultaneously reviled and embraced by satirists in what amounts to an intractable, often unsettling contradiction. In a very real sense, these genres could hardly exist—or at least they would have little rhetorical efficacy as satire—if they did not at least present themselves as constantly at risk.⁷ Indeed, to be *actually* harassed or prosecuted in the real world for one’s satire may turn out to be a desirable outcome for a literary career, since it vindicates the satirist’s original fears and makes the audience even more

Stücken unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Acharner (Munich and Leipzig: De Gruyter, 2003), pp. 147–56; and Rosen, “Aristophanes,” in: Dobrov, *Brill’s Companion* (above), pp. 234–5 with n. 19.

⁶ On the recent history of the debate about “seriousness” in Aristophanes, see Heath (above, n. 5), pp. 237–42.

⁷ See Thomas K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy: Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 61–3; Dobrov, in: Dobrov, *Brill’s Companion* (above, n. 5) p. 7 n. 13, on Aristophanes’ self-presentation as a risk-taker.

sympathetic to his “causes.” But this situation also encourages the very question Henderson presses in his study of the interaction between the Old Comic poets and the Athenian *dêmos*, and in particular how “serious” poets such as Aristophanes were in their political comedy, which was rife with satire. Aristophanes certainly *seems* serious, and the *dêmos seems* receptive to his political humor (at least when he wins the competition). But since the relationship between poet and audience is structurally determined by the dynamics of satirical poetry even before the poet decides what bothers him about the world, how can we assess the actual content or truth of Aristophanes’ pretense of seriousness? If a satirist must always present himself as a bold risk-taker, willing to suffer for the sake of his comic *métier*, to what extent is the content of satire a function of the literary strategies a successful satirist must deploy, and to what extent is it a reflection of “sincere beliefs”?

The generically embedded tension between a satirist’s desire for *parrhêsia* and his fear of its consequences suggests the possibility of some disingenuousness in the stance of beleaguerment typical of satirists in all periods. Was Aristophanes “really” upset (as *Acharnians*, *Knights* and *Wasps* claim he was) that Cleon prosecuted him for his unbridled personal and political attacks? Or did he adopt the rhetoric of danger and repression as a strategy of *captatio benevolentiae*, intended to affirm the potency of his work as a function of the risk *parrhêsia* might incur? As we shall see, a comparative approach to such questions makes it clear that such literary conundra affect satirical artists and genres well beyond Old Comedy. Precisely because Aristophanes purports to insert his own voice forcefully into his plays, and because these autobiographical flashes seem genuinely and persuasively wedded to contemporary reality, it is difficult to think abstractly about the poetics governing such moments. A comparative approach will free us for the moment from the historical particularity of an Aristophanic comedy, and allow us—if only as an ahistorical, synchronic experiment—to view his satirical enterprise as a function of an abstracted comic poetics of *parrhêsia* and repression.

In the open societies of the West, where “freedom of speech” is often singled out as the main prerequisite of progress and justice, the idea that someone might welcome repression seems odd, if not even blasphemous. American culture offers a particularly strong version of this ideology; one thinks immediately of the First Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing the right of freedom of expression. Americans, at least, find it difficult to think of this right as anything other than positive. We recognize that in a few extreme contexts, such as when irresponsible speech will lead to explicit harm to others, constraint is called for and even legislated. But at root, Americans put a premium on their right to free speech, broadly defined; the fact that it has been difficult to legislate against hate speech in the United States, for example, suggests a belief that this abstract principle in the end trumps even considerations of civility and decorum. Most Americans would likely find it easy to sympathize with J.M. Coetzee’s position: “Nothing in either my experience or my reading persuades me that state censorship is not an inherently bad thing, the ills it embodies and the ills it fosters

outweighing, in the long run and even in the medium run, whatever benefits may be claimed to flow from it.”⁸

Greek *parrhêsia* and Roman *libertas* or *licentia* were never conceptualized as rigidly or with the same uniformly positive evaluation as the free speech of the American First Amendment. The first occurrence of the term *parrhêsia* in Greek literature, in fact, is distinctly negative: at Euripides, *Orestes* 905, the messenger describes an orator as relying on his “ignorant free expression” (*amathês parrhêsia*). In other contexts, especially in the discourse of Athenian democracy, *parrhêsia* can be a positive term. But the number of negative assessments of *parrhêsia* in 5th- and 4th-century Greek literature is not negligible.⁹ In such cases—there are many in Plato, for example¹⁰—*parrhêsia* takes on the meaning “frankness,” with the implication that this is often indecorous or offensive to the audience. In all these cases, an author implies that someone’s “freedom of speech” *ought* to be suppressed, because the speech in question is illegitimate or offensive. In short, *constraint* of speech is regarded here as positive, and the offending *parrhêsia* is presented as negative.¹¹

In such cases, the polarities are reasonably straightforward. Free expression is *good* as long as it is not offensive or harmful; when it becomes offensive, it becomes *bad* and should be constrained. But what happens when we hear the perspective of the person whose speech is constrained, and this constraint is presented as unjust, as often in satirical authors? Our first inclination in such cases is to recur to a traditional formulation with familiar premises: such a person is imagined to be claiming, “What I have to say is legitimate; I should be allowed to say it; this is freedom of expression, and it is ‘good.’ When some external force prevents me from saying what I want, this is unjust and therefore ‘bad’.” A long list of examples from classical satirists can be produced, beginning with Aristophanes’ complaints about Cleon in *Acharnians*. I discuss others in detail below, but for now it is worth pointing out that all such *apologiae* for offensive speech present the audience with the same paradox. *Prima facie* these authors want the audience to agree with them that the threat to their speech is bad and unfortunate, but the audience’s aesthetic experience of the work (chiefly, in the case of satire, laughter) is at the same time inextricably linked to the “badness” of the author’s alleged plight. Often in real life, and certainly in satirical literature, constraints on speech have consequences that defy the categories “posi-

⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 9.

⁹ See Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen (eds.), *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 4–8.

¹⁰ See Marlein van Raalte, “Socratic *Parrhêsia* and its Sequel in Plato’s *Laws*,” in: Sluiter and Rosen, *Free Speech* (above, n. 9), pp. 279–312. Plato has Socrates in particular play with various conceptions of *parrhêsia* in his *Gorgias*, as van Raalte discusses in detail, especially in the interchanges with Callicles.

¹¹ As e.g. with the drunken *erômenos* in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (240e), with his “wearisome and unrestrained explicit speech” (παρησιᾶ κατακορεῖ καὶ ἀναπεπταμένῃ).

tive” and “negative,” and that can be profound not only for the person whose speech is allegedly suppressed but also for audiences or readers—real or imagined—who happen to be listening when offended parties voice their indignation.

For the discourse of repression, the moment when someone asserts that his or her free speech has been constrained contains yet another paradox: the *absence* of speech gives rise to a whole new discourse that not only contains traces of the suppressed speech (its own form of *praeteritio*) but takes on a life of its own as an autonomous production. A modern example will demonstrate what I mean. In the early 1960s, the stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce was continually dogged by obscenity charges. After Bruce was arrested for a single offensive word (“cocksucker”) used in his act at the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco in 1961, District Attorneys across the country sent undercover agents to transcribe his speech crimes and prepare indictments. Why, one might ask, would someone use obscenity in any form of speech to begin with? We use the term “obscenity” to refer to speech that transgresses a linguistic norm and that, as such, implies the potential for its own suppression. Obscenity implies something one “should not say”—the Greeks called it *aischrologia*, implying that such words brought shame on speakers and listeners alike—and if one uses such a word, one can always *imagine* (whether or not this actually occurs) someone waiting to censor. In the case of Lenny Bruce, audiences (and here I mean the people who attended his performances voluntarily, not as agents of the law) laughed at his obscenities precisely because they knew he should not be using such words and that in doing so he was continually inviting the threat of censorship. The more real this threat became to him, as the indictments became increasingly costly to his wallet as well as his reputation, the more obsessed Bruce became with his those trying to silence him, and the more he worked this obsession into his act. Toward the end of his life, in fact, Bruce spent much of his time onstage rambling about his own research into First Amendment law. This did not play well as comedy,¹² not because real life was crossing over into comic fiction and the line between the two had become blurred, but for the opposite reason, precisely *because* that line was now so *sharply* demarcated. Bruce’s disquisitions about the law were now obvious extensions of his actual life, no longer fodder for a fictional persona whose “real” identity would—when his comedy functioned normally—remain tantalizingly elusive.

When Bruce died of a heroin overdose in 1966, he was a pitiable, abject figure.¹³ Even if we find ourselves sympathizing with his detractors, it is difficult not to see pathos in his demise. The constraints on his speech (actual or hypothetical) seem at first glance a “bad” thing; Bruce himself presented them as negative, and he assumes

¹² See Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), pp. 419–27.

¹³ See, among many accounts of Bruce’s final year, Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of An American Icon* (Chicago: Sourcebooks Incorporated, 2002), pp. 336–42.

that we, his audience, are sympathetic. The implication is that in a “better world” he would have had complete freedom to say what he wanted, with no worries about censorship or prosecution. But let us for a moment try to imagine what such an allegedly better place might be like for Bruce: imagine a milieu, for example, in which no one cared at all about obscenity, where District Attorneys were happy, paying customers instead of hostile informers, and so forth. What are we left with? Very little, for Bruce’s act can only exist so long as the threat of suppression looms large; when it does not, there would be *no* paying customers, let alone undercover agents of the law, because there would be no act to begin with.

Bruce’s creativity, in short, like that of many comedians whose humor relies on scandalous speech, exists only as a function of the threat of constraint. How “bad” can it be, then, that Bruce was continually hauled before puritanical judges? It does little good to reply that these magistrates were mindless functionaries with no sense of humor. The fact is that Bruce must simultaneously collude with them *and* construct them as adversaries, if his speech is to have its intended transgressive effect. This is a recipe for disaster, and the consequences were tragic for Bruce; few at the time did not believe that his overdose was an indirect result of his legal battles. The suppression of free speech in fact proved lethal for him. The usual positive-negative binaries around *parrhêsia* and suppression are meaningless in the face of these constraints. Bruce lived his life symbiotically with the factors that eventually killed him, and although one might say that he died a martyr to the cause of free speech, it is perhaps more accurate to say that he died a martyr to the abjection he paradoxically sought and repudiated at the same time.

Many readers may by now have begun to think of a figure from Greek literature with a strikingly similar career and a somewhat analogous death. I refer to Thersites, most famous from Homer’s depiction of him in *Iliad* 2, but a figure whose story had an equally interesting afterlife in other ancient authors and genres.¹⁴ Thersites appears early in *Iliad* 2, after Agamemnon has oddly decided to “test” his troops by disingenuously urging them to abandon Troy and leave for home. Odysseus manages to restore the soldiers’ resolve and muster them again for battle. But from the ranks, Thersites emerges to attack Agamemnon for softness and venality, in a speech of fierce mockery and invective (*Il.* 2.225–42). Odysseus responds not only with his own counter-invective but with physical blows that successfully humiliate Thersites and squelch further dissent from him. This passage is enormously rich, and has been analyzed in a variety of ways. Its narratological framework is particular complex, for Homer offers several competing perspectives on Thersites: Odysseus’, the narrator’s and Thersites’

¹⁴ See Josine Blok, *The Early Amazons: Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) pp. 200–10; Ralph M. Rosen, *Making Mockery: The Poetics of Ancient Satire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 67–116; Marco Fantuzzi, *Achilles in Love: Intertextual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 267–86.

own—and it makes a difference which perspective we adopt in deciding how to assess this famous episode of suppressed speech.¹⁵

Gregory Nagy first suggested that Thersites can be conceptualized in Homer as a “blame poet,” analogous to the Greek iambic poets Archilochus and Hipponax, who were infamous throughout antiquity as satirists.¹⁶ Thersites was not composing poetry in his fictionalized life as a soldier at Troy, of course, so calling him a “blame poet” is not entirely accurate. He is certainly “satiri *cal*” in his attack on Agamemnon, but whether he can be considered a bona fide “satirist” as he is depicted in Homer, is a tricky question we cannot pursue here. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁷ insofar as true satirists blame from a stance of self-righteousness, from *Homer’s* perspective Thersites is more the *target* of blame than the self-righteous blamer himself—a role assumed (again, from Homer’s point of view) more by Odysseus. But leaving such narratological conundra aside, Thersites (from *his* perspective) would certainly regard *himself* as a satirist, and he employs typical satirical tropes: vituperative indignation at the hypocrisy of those in power, and an attempt (which fails here, as Homer tells it) to enlist the sympathies of his audience as an in-group.¹⁸ Like most satirists, moreover, Thersites constructs a persona of abjection, as Homer tells us at *Iliad* 2.212–16, here in Stanley Lombardo’s penetrating translation:

... ἀμετροεπῆς ἐκολῶσα,
ὃς ἔπεα φρεσὶν ἦσιν ἄκοσμά τε πολλά τε ἦδη
μάψ, ἀτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεῦσιν,
ἀλλ’ ὅ τι οἱ εἴσαιτο γελοῖον Ἀργείοισιν
ἔμμεναι·

... a blathering fool
And a rabble rouser. This man had a repertory
Of choice insults he used at random to revile the nobles,
Saying anything he thought the soldiers would laugh at.

Thersites, at least, thought of himself as a comedian, and the blurred lines between performance and lived reality typical of satirists across the ages are visible here as well. But epic cannot comfortably sustain comedy for long, and Thersites is quickly silenced by Odysseus, who finds his outburst far from amusing.

This is not the last time Thersites’ *parrhêsia* gets him into trouble. Like Lenny Bruce, he too was evidently drawn to a mode of expression that guaranteed censure from his targets. From the point of view of their detractors (which would include the narrator Homer in Thersites’ case, and judicial functionaries in Bruce’s), Thersites

15 See further Rosen, *Making Mockery* (above, n. 15), pp. 73–8.

16 Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*² (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1979] 2009), pp. 261–3.

17 See Rosen, *Making Mockery* (above, n. 15) pp. 67–116.

18 See Rosen, *Making Mockery* (above, n. 15), pp. 71–2.

and Bruce practiced the kind of *parrhêsia* that would be translated as “indecorous, inappropriate frankness”—the negative form of the word. But from their own perspectives, it was something like “honest, open and self-righteous speaking.” If we allowed ourselves to imagine an interior life for Thersites, we would likely find that he characterized his own speech as legitimate, and Odysseus’ as a perfect example of the arrogance he was railing against in the first place. Both Thersites and Bruce, however, exercised their free speech knowing full well that they would receive—and, it seems, even require—rebuke from an antagonistic party. This is certainly what happened on the other occasion that epic records when Thersites’ *parrhêsia* took an unexpected turn, in the fragmentary *Aethiopsis*, a narrative of events that occur after the *Iliad*. Here the ever-cantankerous Thersites engages in his final act of mockery, inciting his target Achilles to kill him in response. Proclus in his summary of the *Aithiopsis*, which began where the *Iliad* left off (*Chrestomathia* p. 67.25–6 Bernabé = p. 47.7–12 Davies), offers the following outline of the story of Thersites’ death:

καὶ Ἀχιλλεὺς Θερσίτην ἀναρεῖ λοιδορηθεὶς πρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ ὀνειδισθεὶς τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ Πενθεσιλείᾳ λεγόμενον ἔρωτα· καὶ ἐκ τούτου στάσις γίνεται τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖς περὶ τοῦ Θερσίτου φόνου. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα Ἀχιλλεὺς εἰς Λέσβον πλεῖ, καὶ θύσας μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα Ἀχιλλεὺς εἰς Λέσβον πλεῖ, καὶ θύσας Ἀπόλλωνι καὶ Ἀρτέμιδι καὶ Λητοῖ καθαίρεται τοῦ φόνου ὑπ’ Ὀδυσσεώς.

Achilles killed Thersites after having been reviled by him and reproached for the love he allegedly felt for Penthesileia. As a result, *stasis* arose among the Achaeans over the murder of Thersites. After this, Achilles sailed to Lesbos, and after making a sacrifice to Apollo, Artemis and Leto, he was then purified of the murder by Odysseus.

This depicts a situation rather different from the one in *Iliad* 2, for there Thersites’ opposition to Agamemnon was cast by the narrator as a self-generated minority view, whereas in the *Aithiopsis* Thersites evidently takes up the popular critical opinion on a pre-existing controversial issue of the day—the report that Achilles had fallen in love with an enemy warrior—and repackages it as a form of comic mockery directed at the main perpetrator.¹⁹ Like all good satirists, Thersites ridicules a conspicuous lapse of a prominent figure, pointing out that Achilles, smitten with an erotic attraction to the dead Penthesileia, came close to compromising his heroic stature, and so to jeopardizing the entire Greek mission. Nevertheless, like Bruce’s persecutors, Achilles failed to “get it,” and the consequences were the ultimate in suppression: homicide. A number of interesting details about this story lie beyond our scope, but it does indicate that some Greeks *did* view Thersites here as a true satirist, and his murder by Achilles as unjust. And just as the governor of New York, in an act of public expiation, formally pardoned Lenny Bruce on 23 December 2003, thirty-seven years

¹⁹ See now Fantuzzi, *Achilles in Love* (above, n. 15), pp. 271–3.

after his death, Achilles too had to seek ritual purification for his crime against Thersites.²⁰

We might ask Thersites the hypothetical question we posed for Lenny Bruce—what would happen if we granted him complete *parrhêsia* with no consequences whatsoever? “Go ahead, say what you like with impunity about Agamemnon and Achilles; no one will care and no one will stop you.” Is this what he craved? It might seem almost an absurdity to contemplate the matter, partly because Homer placed Thersites in a narrative context in which unbridled *parrhêsia* is unthinkable, but also because such a character cannot exist except as a figure someone will want to censor. Homer curiously acknowledges that Thersites was conscious of his constructed, performative persona, when he notes that he would say “anything he thought the soldiers would laugh at,” and one can only conclude that for Thersites to have been Thersites, he cannot really have wanted to speak without inviting at least the threat of constraint.

Our hypothetical question may in the end seem too artificial to ask of those already identified as parrhesiasts suffering for speaking freely. But a few centuries later we find an actual example of someone who comes close to asking this question of himself: the Roman poet Horace in his capacity as the author of his two books of satires, the *Sermones*. All the Roman satirists, certainly those after Lucilius, thematize the dilemma of the parrhesiast in one way or another: they claim to compose satire because their indignation at the state of the world compels them to, but they also (claim to) fear the retaliation of their targets and detractors.²¹ Both Horace and Juvenal look back to Lucilius as an author who was relatively unconstrained—for them, he lived in a kind of romanticized Golden Age of free speech, when a satirist could excoriate the unjust and wicked with impunity. In *Serm.* 1.4, Horace famously traces this tradition in turn to the poets of Athenian Old Comedy, who could speak *multa cum libertate*. How free these predecessors actually were is a topic for a different study, but Horace certainly constructs them as a contrast to the constraints he claims to feel in his own time. To judge from this attitude, one might think that Horace would answer our hypothetical question in the affirmative, and say that, yes, he would give anything to be like Eupolis or Lucilius, who could say whatever they wanted without repercussions. But what parrhesiasts—in literature or real life—really want their speech not to ruffle feathers? And what satirist can be considered genuinely successful if he cannot at least claim to have upset the *status quo*? One suspects that Horace’s

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of Thersites’ death, dealing with different aspects of the story and its afterlife, see Rosen, *Making Mockery*, pp. 67–116.

²¹ See Susanna Morton Braund, “*Libertas* or *Licentia*? Freedom and Criticism in Roman Satire,” in: Sluiter and Rosen, *Free Speech* (above, n. 9), pp. 409–28, who discusses the tension between the *libertas* all Roman satirists craved, and the accusations of *licentia* (the Roman equivalent to the “bad” *parrhêsia* discussed above). Braund concludes (p. 426): “Satire likes to have it both ways. It draws attention to the tension between *libertas* and *licentia* not to resolve that tension but to replay it, over and over.”

nostalgia for the good old days of “safe satire” really amounts to a strategy to highlight his own stance of comic abjection and the ultimate efficacy of his own *parrhêsia*.

In *Serm.* 2.1, Horace all but confirms this, depicting a conversation with a lawyer friend named Trebatius, in which the poet asks Trebatius how he should respond to popular criticism of his satire:

*sunt quibus in satira uidear nimis acer et ultra
legem tendere opus; sine neruis altera, quidquid
composui, pars esse putat similisque meorum
mille die uersus deduci posse.*

Some people think that I'm too sharp in my satire, and that my work transgresses its laws; but another group thinks whatever I compose is anemic, and that a thousand verses like mine could be spun out in a single day.

These are charges Horace himself made against Lucilius in the first book of the *Sermones*,²² and he now complains that people accuse *him* of the same thing. Trebatius offers a simple, rational bit of advice: if you feel oppressed, don't write satire: *quiescas*. But Horace implies that what he really wants—since he proceeds to claim that he would be unable to sleep if he gave up satire—is to speak with impunity as Lucilius could. He knows he cannot have this, but he refuses to abandon the *licentia* he feels constitutionally compelled to adopt in his writing.

Adopting a disingenuous no-first-strike policy typical of satirists, Horace claims that he is harmless as long as no one annoys him (2.1.39–40):

*sed hic stilus haud petet ultro
quemquam animantem et me ueluti custodiet ensis
uagina tectus.*

But this pen will not of its own accord attack any person who's alive, and it will protect me like a sword kept in its sheath.

Whoever crosses him, however, is in for trouble (2.1.44–6):

*at ille,
qui me commorit (melius non tangere, clamo),
flebit et insignis tota cantabitur urbe.*

But that one who stirs me up (I shout out, “It's better not to lay a hand on me!”) will weep and be sung about, an infamous figure in the whole city.

²² *Serm.* 1.4.9–13, 1.10.1–2.

Trebatius warns Horace later, however, that if he persists in speaking out in his verses, he might well meet an early death, at least metaphorically speaking, since he could jeopardize the delicate social relationships he depends on (2.1.60–2), and he even reminds him of the existence of specific laws against defamation (2.1.82–3):

*si mala condiderit in quem quis carmina ius est
iudiciumque.*

If someone shall have composed bad verses²³ against another,
there's always the law and the lawcourts.

The tone of this satire is lighthearted and ironic, and the issue of constraint and verbal *libertas* is deployed more as a trope than as a somber *cri de coeur*. But the trope derives from some of the paradoxes of suppression we have been considering, in which a person might feel an almost perverse thrill at the threat of constraint or censorship even as he complains about it, and at the peculiar co-dependent relationship that can develop with the censoring agent.

Up to this point, I have focused on characters who seem to invite suppression, taunting and almost daring an antagonist to try to keep them from speaking. These characters have been drawn largely from literature, where generic forces often explain the behavior of a narrator or character whose fictional roles are supposed to mimic historical realities. As my final example will show, however, even with *bona fide* historical characters, suppression of speech implies a complex relationship between the suppressor and the suppressed with consequences that can be as productive as they are unintended.

The case of Socrates and the indictment against him for “corrupting the youth of Athens and introducing foreign deities” is usefully considered in the context of the paradoxes of repression isolated above. The defense Plato puts in Socrates’ mouth in the *Apology* makes it clear that this is essentially a case about free speech. The charges leveled against Socrates are certainly motivated by political and ideological undercurrents, as is often noted, but what his accusers really want is to shut him up for good. Socrates knows that what irks them most is his relentless questioning and his attempts to convince people to pay attention to the moral condition of their souls: “I spend my time,” he says at *Ap.* 30b, “wandering around trying to persuade young and old not to bother about their physical or financial well-being until they’ve worked on making their souls as good as possible.” Not unlike the satirist’s recurrent claim that he feels *compelled* to speak his mind in the face of a morally degenerate world, Socrates maintains that he has no choice: the gods themselves *command* him to

23 The pun on *mala* (“bad” = “hostile, aggressive” or “bad verses”) has been noted by e.g. Kirk Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 105–9.

“examine men,”²⁴ e.g. at *Ap.* 33c: “in oracles and in dreams and in every way in which the divine ever commands a man to do something.” It was Socrates’ *speech*—indeed, the relentlessness of it, which was a form of “bad” *parrhêsia* for the Athenians—that made him a dangerous man. When he imagines for a moment (*Ap.* 29c) what he might say if the court allowed him to go free on the condition that he give up the practice of philosophy—which is to say, that he accept restrictions on his speech—he regards this as unthinkable. And with a resolve that has resonated across the ages, he says at *Ap.* 30c that he would not change his ways even if were “to die many deaths.”

In the two famous Platonic dialogues that address the charges explicitly, the *Apology* and the *Crito*, Socrates displays a complex and, to us, often frustrating attitude toward his speech and the constraints upon it. In the end, he almost makes us feel that his predicament was not only inevitable but even welcome. Much of the *Crito*, in fact, poses a variation on the question that we have hypothetically asked the other victims of suppression considered above: Socrates’ influential friends offer him the opportunity to escape prison and go into exile abroad. *Crito* even tells Socrates (*Cr.* 45c) that if he goes to Thessaly, he has friends there who can see to it that no one disturbs him (implying that if Socrates set up shop elsewhere, his parrhesiastic ways will soon make him as unpopular there as he is in Athens). Readers have often found Socrates’ response both utterly predictable and almost perverse: he rules out escape and willingly submits to the legal procedures ahead of him. The response is predictable in the sense that escape would imply a fear of death, something Socrates strenuously repudiated in the courtroom speech recounted in the *Apology*, so he would naturally want to avoid charges of cowardice and hypocrisy. But it is perverse in that the indictment and conviction were so clearly unjust (at least to hear Plato recount it) that it is difficult to understand why, with a viable option of escape, one would actively choose to submit to the verdict, especially when the outcome will be death. But Socrates’ objection to *Crito*’s proposal is subtle and seemingly recognizes that even failed *parrhêsia* can in the end have the power of exemplarity.

We may remember that Plato has Socrates close the *Crito* by imagining the Laws of Athens taking on human form to address him as he contemplates escape. Socrates conceptualizes the laws as stern parents or masters, and citizens as children or slaves. As such, Socrates is duty-bound to respect the Laws and not retaliate even if he feels that they have treated him unjustly. The central principle he imagines the laws to have on their side is that—in their capacity as laws in an “open” society—they have provided citizens like Socrates a lifetime of privileges and benefits, making it unjust for him to try to destroy them if he grows displeased with their conduct. Ultimately, the Laws say, one ought to honor one’s country and its laws even more than one’s real

24 On the motif of satiric “compulsion,” see Ralph M. Rosen and Victoria Baines, “‘I Am Whatever You Say I Am...’: Satiric Program in Juvenal and Elinor,” *Classical and Modern Literature* 22 (2002), pp. 107–13.

parents, and “yield to it and flatter it when it is angry at you even more than you would a father” (*Cr.* 51b). As they say, citizens have ample opportunity to leave Athens voluntarily if they do not like what the Laws stand for. Chief among the benefits they cite, is the opportunity to *persuade* them that they are acting unjustly (51c): “In war and in the lawcourt and everywhere, you must do whatever your state and your country tell you to do, or you must *persuade* them that their commands are unjust.”

Given the circumstances, these are poignant words: Socrates has spent his life trying to persuade his fellow citizens to avoid the trappings most men regard as the keys to virtue—status, money, glibness of speech, material possessions—trying, in other words, to persuade them to live a good and just life if he sensed that they were not. Something has gone wrong, however, since the very people who made and administered the laws remained sufficiently *un*-persuaded by his discourse to turn them against him and prosecute him unjustly. At the end of *Crito*, therefore, Socrates is proud and brave, as Plato surely wanted him to be, but also melancholic and abject, like an indignant satirist but without the palliative effects of humor. He has availed himself of the freedom of speech Athens offers, but he seems to have little to show for it.

Or does he? It now becomes clearer why Socrates, like other figures whose speech is suppressed, could never choose the hypothetical “second chance” we have offered them, with their free speech assured and no one to bother them about what they say. If this were the case for Socrates in his life, it would mean that the people he talked to in the streets of Athens—about goodness and justice and their morally corrupt lifestyle—simply would not care. They would ignore him and go about their existence just as before. Since Socrates’ stance is essentially antagonistic and censorious, as soon as they began to pay attention and care, their reaction would be at least some degree of irritation, and in extreme cases, a desire to suppress his speech entirely. Callicles in the *Gorgias* famously predicted just such an outcome for anyone who insisted on practicing philosophy into adulthood.²⁵ In a very real sense, therefore, Socrates *requires* the threat of the suppression he suffers, because it means that his philosophizing is having some effect. He may not be converting souls to justice, but his speech is hitting home with others. For Socrates *not* to have felt compelled to engage in the *parrhêsia* that led to his demise, Athenians would have had to be thoroughly just—an obvious *adynaton*. In the end, therefore, he *does* have something to show for his suffering, for his death validates the *need* for the very thing that got him into trouble, a need for unconstrained, freewheeling philosophic dialectic in response to the moral deficiencies of his interlocutors.

Socrates’ martyrdom to the cause of *parrhêsia* demonstrates why he would not—even could not—change how he conducted his life if given the chance, and his escape is unthinkable precisely because he gains more by submitting to silence than by

²⁵ See Pl. *Grg.* 485e–6d, esp. 486a.

escaping and continuing to speak. His *parrhêsia* may ultimately have failed him, in that he failed to persuade much of the Athenian public to live justly. But his trial and death illustrate that he was right all along to think that the Athenians were in critical need of moral instruction, and he must have thought that this legacy would have enormous staying power—as it has. In a breezy passage, easy to miss, in Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates seems to acknowledge this desire for his failure at persuasion to serve nonetheless as an emblem of the philosophical enterprise. At 498c–d, he has been arguing for the importance of philosophy in a person’s education; his interlocutors are mildly incredulous, and point out that someone like Thrasymachus will surely object to such a view. Socrates responds:

μη̄ διάβαλλε ... ἐμὲ καὶ Θρασύμαχον ἀρτιφίλους γεγονότας, οὐδὲ πρὸ τοῦ ἐχθροῦς ὄντας. πείρας γὰρ οὐδὲν ἀνήσομεν, ἕως ἂν ἢ πείσωμεν καὶ τοῦτον καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους, ἢ προὔργου τι ποιήσωμεν εἰς ἐκεῖνον τὸν βίον, ὅταν αὐθις γενόμενοι τοῖς τοιούτοις ἐντύχῃσι λόγοις.

Don’t rile up me and Thrasymachus ... who have just recently become friends—though we weren’t enemies before. I’ll never give up my efforts until I either convince him [πείσωμεν] and others, or do something that will be useful for that life when people of future generations may encounter words like these.

This is a variation of what we see in *Crito*—the necessity Socrates feels to persuade his interlocutors of what he believes to be just, and never to give up, even (as *Crito* makes clear) if that means having to face death. In the *Republic* passage, however, Socrates is more explicit about what he imagines might happen if his attempts at persuasion fail. In that case, he will at least be satisfied if his antagonists remember that they once sparred in conversation with Socrates and perhaps take away from the experience some understanding of dialectic.

Socrates was not a professional satirist in the way that Aristophanes, Lenny Bruce, Horace and even Thersites were. The *telos* of his strategies of mockery and irony was not so much laughter as moral instruction. But like Aristophanes or Lenny Bruce, Socrates too cannot be effective without imagining a constant threat of constraint. The difference between the comic satirist and the satirical philosopher on this point comes down to the nature of their respective claims to moral didacticism and more generally their “seriousness.” Despite an apparent wariness of Socrates himself,²⁶ Aristophanes would *claim* that comedy was in some sense “philosophical” or at least “moral” (τὰ δίκαια), and he would want the audience to *believe* that he is fully serious when he ridicules politicians such as Cleon for their misbehavior. Dicaeopolis, at any rate, speaking explicitly for the poet in *Acharnians*, is willing to put his head

²⁶ A wariness obvious from the plot of *Clouds* or the mocking reference to Socrates at the end of *Frogs* 1491–5. See in general Martha Nussbaum, “Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning and Practical Wisdom,” *Yale Classical Studies* 23 (1980), pp. 43–97.

literally on the chopping-block for the comic cause—telling it like it is, performing his self-righteousness on the Athenian comic stage. Dicaeopolis in this scene presents himself as every bit as much the martyr as Plato’s Socrates in *Apology* and *Crito*. The difference is that Dicaeopolis does not end up dead, either in real life or even within the comic plot, while Socrates does. Comic satire, in short, *plays at* being philosophical and *mimics* moral posturing, but gets its laughs—wins its prizes at the competition—from its thwarted didacticism. Cleon may well have prosecuted Aristophanes in real life in an attempt to punish him for speaking out with his characteristically self-righteous didactic mockery, but in the comic world, this cannot be the end of the story. The comic poet Aristophanes, now “victimized,” must have the last word, a position that paradoxically gives him the upper hand with his audience even at the moment when he has been effectively smacked down by a greater power. The same holds true for Socrates: only through his own experience of repression can he too have the final word, making evident what his detractors attempted to silence. The difference between the two, however, reflects a difference between two major genres of discourse, the comic and the philosophical. While some “good” seems to arise from being repressed for each of them, Aristophanes, like all satirists of his ilk, will continually feed his audiences as much evidence of repression as he can, even if he must exaggerate or fictionalize to do so. The consequence is that every claim to seriousness of purpose behind his ridicule is complicated (one might even say “tainted”) by the possibility that he is motivated by the purely ludic forces at the foundation of satiric performances. There is no call to deny Aristophanes, or any other comic performer, his own personal beliefs and political opinions.²⁷ The question is rather whether these beliefs and opinions are truly accessible from a work of literary satire, or perhaps even more important, whether it matters much to any audience that they are.

27 An interview conducted by Fox News Network’s Chris Wallace with the comedian Jon Stewart (June 2011) is instructive on this point. Wallace charges Stewart with ideological partisanship in his comedy, something Stewart continually denies, even as he freely admits that his personal views “inform” his act. Consider this exchange: Wallace: “I think ... you’re pushing more of an ideological agenda than you pretend to.” Stewart: “I disagree with you. I think that I’m pushing comedy and my ideological agenda informs it, at all times.” Elsewhere in the interview, Stewart retorts to one of Wallace’s attempts to get Stewart to commit to promoting a political agenda of his own, by saying, “I’m not an activist, I’m a comedian.” I discuss this interview at greater length in Ralph M. Rosen, “Efficacy and Meaning in Ancient and Modern Political Satire: Aristophanes, Lenny Bruce and Jon Stewart,” *Social Research* 79.1 (2012), pp. 22–5.