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The *Apology* of Socrates: Is Socrates a Comical Hero?

This chapter proposes that, contrary to what Socrates seems to suggest in the *Philebus*, comedy and laughter can not only contribute to self-knowledge, but they suggest the contours of what such knowledge might look like. Existing literature has largely focused on the self-reflexive character of the wisdom Socrates claims to have in the *Apology*, wherein he maintains only to know that he knows nothing, including of himself. Such lack of self-knowledge lies at the heart of what is laughable, but Socrates's awareness thereof distinguishes two forms therein. Parallel to the forms of wisdom Socrates articulates at *Apology* 20d, run two forms of what is laughable. Like the more-than-human wisdom, assuming oneself falsely in possession of self-knowledge renders one an appropriate object of derisive laughter. Akin to what Socrates deems human, wisdom is the recognition of oneself as lacking self-knowledge, and therefore as being laughable in a more playful and self-reflexive way. Socrates, I will propose, embodies precisely this self-knowledge in the *Apology*, revealing himself to be not identical, but remarkably similar to, a comical hero. His comical dramatization in the *Apology* indicates the contours of potential self-knowledge, including harmonizing one's words and deeds, recognizing both our limited selves as well as our tendency toward hubris, and that unless and until we achieve such self-knowledge, we remain fundamentally laughable.

Self-knowledge is presented as discrete from the laughable in the *Philebus*. Socrates suggests there that the “nature of the ridiculous [to *geloion*]” is “a kind of vice [*ponēria*] that derives its name from a special disposition; it is, among all the vices, the one with a character that stands in direct opposition to the one recommended by the famous inscription in Delphi” (*Philebus* 48c). While Socrates could easily be referring to the maxim “nothing in excess,” for comedy and laughter are most certainly excessive, it is much more likely that he is referring to the maxim “Know thyself [*gnōthi seauton*].” What makes one laughable, it seems, is not knowing oneself.

And yet, Socrates, in the *Apology*, declares himself to lack such knowledge. Indeed, Socratic Wisdom appears to consist in precisely this awareness.

Now perhaps I will seem to some of you to be joking [*paizein*] Know well, however, that I will tell you the whole truth. For I, men of Athens, have gotten this name through nothing but a certain wisdom. Just what sort of wisdom is this? That which is perhaps human wisdom [*anthropinē sophia*]; for probably I really am wise in this. But those of whom I just spoke might perhaps be wise in some wisdom greater than human, or else I cannot say what it is. For I, at least, do not have knowledge of it, but whoever asserts that I do lies and speaks in order to slander me. No please, men of Athens, do not make a disturbance, not even if I seem to you to be boasting somewhat. For “not mine is the story” that I will tell; rather, I will refer it to a speaker trustworthy to you. Of my wisdom, if indeed it is wisdom of any kind, and what sort of thing it is, I will offer for you as witness the god in Delphi. (*Apology* 20d-e)

Socrates's wisdom, he concludes, rests in his awareness of his own ignorance, or lack of knowledge, rather than in any positive, epistemic state. Comparing himself to the person who believes himself to be wise, but turns out not to know what he thinks he knows, Socrates says, “I *am* likely to be a little bit wiser than he in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know” (*Apology* 21d). Socratic wisdom is cast in negative terms: it is constituted by *not* assuming his own knowledge. Put less awkwardly and more positively, it is an awareness of a lack of wisdom, a condition that allows Socrates to inquire further,

but one that has consequences for how we see ourselves and for how we see Socrates.

The significance of this passage extends further. There is ambiguity as to which “god in Delphi” Socrates is referring. Apollo seems the more obvious one, but Dionysus, associated not only with wine but with drama and comedy, was also worshiped at Delphi for three months out of the year, in Apollo’s absence. Could Socrates be playing on this ambiguity here? If the god in question is one associated with comedy, we may find a far more risible tone to the *Apology*, and perhaps, to the dialogues in general. The passage itself is deeply comical. At the very point where Socrates notes the jurors’ outrage over his apparent boasting, he offers a yet more outrageous claim, namely that no mere mortal, but indeed, a god will provide witness in his favor. And this from a man on trial for impiety. Socrates claims to lack self-knowledge, but distinguishes the wisdom of being aware of this lack from ignorance of it. This awareness may enable inquiry into self-knowledge, but it also begins to sketch the content of human self-knowledge. If these types of wisdom are exhaustive, then we may participate more in the Dionysian and a bit less in the Apollonian than we flatter ourselves in believing. We may be, in other words, fundamentally laughable.

Under a tree sacred to Dionysus,¹ Socrates, in the *Phaedrus*, extends this lack of wisdom to self-knowledge, saying, “I’m not yet able, in accordance with the Delphic inscription, to know myself [*gnōnai emauton*], and it seems ridiculous [*geloia*] to me to investigate things that don’t concern me while still lacking that knowledge” (*Phaedrus* 229e–230a). Two points emerge from this. The first is that self-knowledge is primary for Socrates, as suggested by various interlocutors who say that Socrates typically brings the discussion back around to the persons involved (*Laches* 188a). The second point is a broader one about humans generally. Laughable is anyone who investigates things without that knowledge, and yet we are hard-pressed to find anyone in the dialogues—including Socrates—who has such self-knowledge. Does Socrates’s own, qualified lack of self-knowledge then not render him laughable? If Socrates himself lacks it, especially given his persistent pursuit of such knowledge, is there much hope for anyone else? And if not, does this not suggest that the majority of people—perhaps even all persons—are fundamentally laughable?

Just as Socrates suggests a distinction between his own and most others’ wisdom, here too we find a significant difference. The difference

between Socrates and those believing themselves to have greater-than-human-wisdom is not one of self-knowledge, for both appear to lack it. The difference lies in the stance each takes concerning whether one has it. Being aware of one's lack of self-knowledge enables seeing oneself as laughable. An ancient precedent for what Simon Critchley calls self-directed and other-directed laughter emerges from this.² Self-directed laughter acknowledges one's own remaining laughable, whereas other-directed laughter tends to assume otherwise. But are we reading Plato anachronistically in suggesting two seemingly modern conceptions of laughter as well as their applicability to humanity? This chapter concludes with a brief look at ancient precedents and antecedents for what might otherwise seem a decidedly modern view of comedy and laughter.

If Socrates is indeed some form of a comical hero, what follows from such a presentation? Socrates plays the comic hero to prove that laughter can and ought to be directed at oneself, and at remedying one's lack of self-knowledge. The laughter provoked by this is self-directed laughter, and it is through playing the comical hero that the character Socrates helps to establish such laughter. Plato's Socrates develops a novel, but not entirely unprecedented, conception of laughter in the process.

The Comical Apology

Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, although interrupted by dialogue, is as close to a Socratic monologue as we have in Plato's works. In it, Socrates draws frequent comparisons between himself and an assortment of Greek heroes in a grand and excessive defense that becomes, instead, offense.³ Comparisons to heroes seem particularly ill-fitting given Socrates's outrageous behavior in the court room, including calling a god as his witness, insulting the jury, and suggesting, after being found guilty, that his punishment should be being treated like an Olympian victor. His provocations are met with outbursts from the jurors, noted in the dialogue. It is a very puzzling *apologia* if read straightforwardly, but a web of literary connections will help to contextualize some of the dialogue and offer support for Socrates as a hero. But this brings up a further puzzle: given Socrates's allusions to and comparisons with heroes, what kind of hero behaves as Socrates does in the *Apology*? In other words, what sort of hero is Socrates?

Jacob Howland claims that the *Apology* uses thematic and formal elements of tragedy to expose the political paradoxes in which the good of the whole is pitted against that of the individuals in it. Reading the *Apology* in line with classical tragedy allows us to see that it is the city itself that constitutes the true tragic figure because it is the city, and not Socrates, that acts in ignorance.⁴ Howland's essay is illuminating and important in acknowledging the complex relationship between the literary and philosophical, but stops short of recognizing the comic elements at work in the *Apology*, elements that one might not expect, given the dialogue's serious topic. According to Howland, Socrates's speeches and deeds "do not fit the mold of comic drama."⁵ It is Meletus, for Howland, rather than Socrates, who jests. However much the dialogue draws from tragedy, I wish to show here some of the many ways in which the *Apology* resembles comedy. Socrates's speeches and deeds do fit the mold of comic drama, Socrates does indeed jest, and Socrates himself resembles quite strongly the comic hero.

The *Apology* is exemplary in putting not just Socrates, but philosophy itself, on trial. As Sallis writes, "his defence speech will itself constitute an exemplification of that very practice against which the accusations have been brought."⁶ That practice, as the *Apology* represents it, is infused with comedy. Greene writes that "The *Apology* is a comic justification of the life lived in the spirit of comedy—the exposure of pretension—at the behest of a god: surely this is piety! The unpopularity of Socrates arises from the fact that the public has no sense of humor . . ."⁷ Socrates dramatically exposes the pretension of the jurors voting to convict, exposing their pretense to judge, rather than merely to react emotionally. He does this by giving them something to react to: a marvelous display of comic insolence and philosophical tenacity that is, in and of itself, shocking coming from someone whose life hangs in the balance. It is, however, a display perfectly consistent with the *modus operandi* of Socrates's life and practice as "lived in the spirit of comedy." Greene's claim is itself provocative: should the jurors have laughed at Socrates rather than sentence him to death? If so, is this the proper response to the *Apology* for us readers as well?

Laughter is one, but certainly not the only, appropriate response to the *Apology*. Socrates's comic antics have philosophical points. They are part of the dramatic critique and provocation toward philosophy that Socrates offers the jurors and the audience. Why does Socrates provoke the jury?

There are shorter and longer answers to this. The short answer is that he does so because he had always provoked the “men of Athens,” and consistent with what he promises to do, he continues in the *Apology* his life work of provocation. What the *Apology* makes apparent is the extent (and the stakes) to which Socrates is willing to go to do this. In the *Euthydemus*, he puts on the line his reputation as a philosopher, and with it, possibly, his honor or glory. In the *Apology*, he is willing to sacrifice his life. What he shows is that none of these things—reputation, honor, glory, life, and even being laughed at—matter so much as does living the kind of life, and presumably, dying the kind of death, that is examined. In doing so, Socrates criticizes the fundamentals of the Homeric heroic code. And yet, in the *Apology*, he compares himself repeatedly to heroes who adhere to this code. The question then becomes why Socrates is willing to put all he has on the line, and it is a question that is at least partly resolved in the longer answer.

The longer answer to why Socrates provokes the jury is that he uses comic provocation to expose their pretensions to judge and thus tests the limits of logos and its persuasive power. On what basis can Socrates distinguish those who properly “judge” him from those who are mere “men of Athens”? Socrates does not so much argue his defense as he enacts it. Rather than trying to prove his own innocence, Socrates shows the ineptitude of those assigned to judge and the lack of logos in their judgment. He does this by playing into the types of persuasion that he expects to predominate so as to emphasize the type that ought, instead, to be employed. Turning to Aristotle offers some clarity on acknowledged modes of persuasion.

In discussing forensic rhetoric, or the type of persuasion used in the courtroom, Aristotle articulates the key modes: persuasion may be achieved by the use of argument (logos), by appealing to the audience’s emotions (*pathos*), or by evincing a favorable persona (*ethos*).⁸ Aristotle is clear about the persuasive power of the latter two: “Particularly in deliberative oratory, but also in lawsuits, it adds much to an orator’s influence that his own character should look right and that he should be thought to entertain the right feelings towards his hearers; and also that his hearers should be in just the right frame of mind.”⁹ The person who lacks these “right feelings” runs punitive risk, according to Aristotle: “When people . . . feel friendly to the man who comes before them for judgment, they regard him as having done little wrong, if any; when they feel hostile, they take the opposite view.”¹⁰ These

passages are helpful in striking the contrast between Aristotle's insight and Socrates's remarkable performance in the *Apology* to the contrary. Socrates makes explicit that he will not appeal to the audience's emotions, but in a way, he does just that. By evincing a persona so contrary to what the jury expects, Socrates evokes their anger. For Aristotle, the emotions of the jury or audience changes dependent on the orator's disposition: "our anger ceases toward those who humble themselves . . . We also feel calm towards those who are serious when we are serious . . ." ¹¹ Instead of humbling himself, Socrates does the opposite. Rather than appreciating the gravity of his situation, Socrates makes light of it.

By demonstrating the effects of what are perceived as the wrong feelings by a majority of his audience, Socrates shows the extent to which emotions can override the faculty of judgment. Those voting for conviction are not judges for Socrates, as evidenced by his varying addresses to those who voted to convict him ("men of Athens") and those who voted to acquit (the more customary address of "judges"). ¹² They are emotional responders, convicting on the basis of perceived slights and their own anger, on *pathē* rather than on the basis of *logos*.

In the *Crito*, Socrates articulates clearly what is at issue concerning the trial. When Crito voices his concern about appearances, Socrates counters by stressing that the only concern he has is the basis on which he is persuaded to act. Recounting Socrates's behavior in the trial and Crito's own failure to prevent the conviction, Crito tells Socrates, "I am ashamed for you and for us, your companions, that the whole affair concerning you will seem to have been conducted with a certain lack of manliness [*anandria*] on our part" (*Crito* 45e). Crito deems the conviction and sentencing "ridiculous" (*katagelōs*, *Crito* 45e). Socrates responds by saying that he is persuaded (*peithesthai*) by nothing else but "that argument which appears best to me upon reasoning" [*tō logō hos an moi logizomenō beltistos phainētai*, *Crito* 46b]. Whether one appears to have acted without "manliness" or "courage" (*andreia*) is not the issue; how one is persuaded, and how one determines the right course of action is. Indeed, as we will see in the *Apology*, Socrates plays into the appearances that Crito comes to lament if only to stress their irrelevance. In doing so, Socrates takes a court case that might have been settled with some contrition and the offer of a reasonable fee, one that Crito intriguingly refers to as having been altogether avoidable in the first place (*Crito* 45e), and turns it into a capital conviction. The difference is made by his use of comedy.

To show this, the chapter analyzes Socrates's comically excessive performance in the *Apology*, contrasts it with a very different example of forensic rhetoric, and shows a number of ways in which Socrates's *apologia* borrows from comic heroes, comic use of language, comical strategies, and even from Aristophanes's critique of sophistic rhetoric. I will argue that Socrates uses comedy, here as he does elsewhere, not only to expose pretensions, but to test the limits of logos. Read in this way, the *Apology* reveals Socrates to be a hero in line with, if not exactly identical to, comic heroes, one who raises the stakes in his trial and uses his craftiness to turn the tables on the jurors. But the lack of identity persists, and prompts the question as to what sort of hero Socrates is.

Socrates and the Homeric Hero

Comparisons among Socrates and a variety of epic and tragic figures occur in the *Apology* both explicitly and implicitly, but one is particularly influential. Several scholars have shown a remarkable resemblance between Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and Gorgias's *Defense of Palamedes*.¹³ Coulter describes the number of thematic, linguistic, and structural parallels as, "surprising and apparently more than accidental."¹⁴ That Gorgias's *Palamedes* predates Plato's *Apology* is generally assumed and well supported by a number of scholars.¹⁵ Among the correspondences, Gorgias's Palamedes and Plato's Socrates both claim not only to be innocent of all charges, but even to be benefactors (*euergetēs*) to their cities and accusers.¹⁶ Palamedes and Socrates both proclaim that, rather than using lamentations, prayers, and other displays to move the jurors to pity, they will only *didaskein to alēthes*.¹⁷ Both texts include an interruption of the *apologeisthai* by a *dialegesthai* with the accuser (in an *erōtēsis*, or interrogation of the plaintiff).¹⁸ Thematically, both speeches claim that being condemned to die is not the issue (since all mortals effectively are); the issue is whether being killed off (*apothanein*, meaning to be killed or to die of laughter) happens justly.¹⁹ Palamedes and Socrates both claim that the accusations against them arise from *phthonos*.²⁰ Even one of the most memorable passages of the *Apology*, Socrates's claim that the "unexamined life is not worth living" [*ho de anexetastos bios ou biōtos anthrōpō*], appears to be a modification of Palamedes's claim that "a life without trust is not worth living" [*bios de ou biōtos pisteōs esterēmenō*].²¹

Aside from raising interesting questions as to the historicity of the defense speech of Plato's Socrates and adding further support to the claim that Xenophon patterns his account of Socrates in the courtroom on Plato's, these striking parallels raise the question as to why Plato would have his Socrates respond so directly to Gorgias's *Palamedes*. Morr argues that Plato consciously alludes to Gorgias's *Palamedes* so as to set Socrates's death against a mythical context of another person who was unjustly convicted, and so to enlarge its meaning.²² Calogero suggests the similarities to indicate that Gorgias was a source of philosophical inspiration for Socrates.²³ These readings assume that the similarities between the two indicate ways in which Plato is yoking his ideas to those of Gorgias, and thus pay little attention to what are quite significant differences between the two texts.

In stark contrast, Coulter emphasizes the rhetorical critique Plato's Socrates makes of Gorgias's *Palamedes*: "the *Apology* embodies a rejection in detail of the particular assumptions upon which the *Palamedes* is built."²⁴ For Coulter, the *Apology* could justly be called the *Anti-Palamedes*. Coulter argues that Gorgias's *Palamedes* acknowledges the difficulties of his situation, in which using persuasion (*peithō*), specifically in the form of arguments from probability, to cultivate the appearance (*doxa*) of truth (*alētheia*) in the jurors becomes more important than the truth itself, given that his life hangs in the balance. Rational instruction is thus less valuable in this case than persuasion, a position that Gorgias himself defended. Plato's Socrates, on the other hand, is fundamentally indifferent to the outcome of the trial, and so, does not feel constrained to employ rhetorical strategies of persuasion in addition to the truth itself. In the *Apology*, Coulter finds "... a portrait of a man who intends to let the truth speak for itself, and who is determined, for the most part, to avoid arguments based on probability."²⁵ But if Coulter is right, one would expect Socrates to offer a straightforward, perhaps even dry, rational account for why he is not guilty as charged, letting the truth itself defend him. Given that he does not do this, one is returned to the question as to why Socrates gives the excessive, incendiary speech that he does.

Beyond his philosophical correction of *Palamedes*'s rhetorical defense and the overlapping notion of the wronged innocent, Plato changes the conception of the hero and his or her reception. For the two texts' remarkable overlap, their differences are illuminating. Socrates emphasizes heroic autonomy, whereas *Palamedes* presents himself as a hero very much dependent on his audience. In the claims as to whether a life

is worth living without others' trust versus whether it is worth living without examination, Palamedes puts in the hands of the jurors the ability to trust him, and therefore render his life worth living. Socrates, on the other hand, denies the jurors this, and reformulates the claim so that his actions alone determine the value of his life, regardless of their reception.²⁶ The jurors' apparent lack of trust in Socrates need not affect the value of his life, which derives instead from his own choices and actions.

The comparisons between the texts also highlight the *Apology's* more direct references. The dialogues teem with Socrates's agonistic encounters with sophists and those under their influence, from charlatans like Euthydemus to heavyweights like Protagoras. For instance, Socrates distinguishes himself from those who, like Gorgias, claim wisdom for themselves and who allegedly impart this for a fee (*Apology* 19d-20c).²⁷ Coulter points out that when he mentions wanting to converse with Palamedes in the afterlife and describes doing so as a great pastime, he uses the word *diatribē*, a word he uses elsewhere to describe refuting pretenders to wisdom.²⁸ Gorgias's Palamedes may be such a pretender.

For all they have in common, these figures' *apologiai* have at least one critical distinction that seems to have gone unnoticed: Gorgias's Palamedes presents himself as a likable figure to the jurors, while Plato's Socrates, in the *Apology*, does not. It is in this distinction that a substantive rhetorical critique of the former can be found, one that is interesting in its own right, but also in how it aligns itself topically with comedy. Quite unlike Palamedes, Socrates deliberately presents himself as excessive, comical, and inflammatory so as to jettison the third of Aristotle's noted modes of persuasion: that of persona (*ethos*). He makes every effort *not* to appeal to the jurors in the way they would expect and want. But he does not stop there: not only does Socrates fail to employ the persuasive force of a favorable persona, he works hard to present himself unfavorably. By neglecting to appeal to the jurors' pity, and by presenting an inflammatory and defiant persona, Socrates is testing the persuasive force of logos.

This distinction is apparent even in one of the commonalities the two *apologiai* share. Employing the ancient rhetorical strategy of mentioning that one will not mention something to call special attention to it, both Palamedes and Socrates claim that they will not appeal to the jurors' pity to seek acquittal, as already mentioned. Palamedes, however, mentions this so as to attest to his own nobility of character. Beyond Palamedes's own self-praise, he also flatters the jurors, saying, "Lamentations, prayers, and

the petitions of friends are useful when judgment depends on the mob; but before you, the foremost of the Greeks, I need not use these devices, but only justice and truth.”²⁹ Aside from being Greek citizens, the jurors would have nothing in particular to distinguish themselves above other Greek citizens, let alone to merit being “the foremost of the Greeks.” This is sheer flattery on Palamedes’s behalf. Socrates, on the other hand, sets up a direct and unflattering comparison between himself and the jurors, one designed to needle the jurors, and to make them feel shame and anger. Socrates predicts an emotional reaction and vote based on this, saying,

Perhaps someone among you may be indignant when he recalls himself, if, in contesting a trial even smaller than this trial, he begged and supplicated the judges with many tears, bringing forward his own children and many others of his family and friends, so as to be pitied as much as possible, while I will do none of these things, although in this too I am risking, as I might seem, the extreme danger. Perhaps then someone thinking about this may be rather stubborn toward me, and, angered by this very thing, he may set down his vote in anger [*pros me schoiē kai orgistheis autois toutois theito an met’ orgēs tēn psēphon*]. (34b-d)

Any juror likely to be angered by Socrates’s lack of supplication is that much more likely to be enraged by Socrates’s indication of as much and even more so by Socrates’s comparison of his composure in a capital trial with their own indignity in a less consequential case.

Shortly thereafter, Socrates suggests why he has presented himself in so unfavorable of a light. In his final words to the jurors determining his innocence or guilt, Socrates instructs them as to the proper role a judge ought to play, saying “. . . it also does not seem to me to be just to beg the judge, nor to be acquitted by begging, but rather to teach and to persuade. For the judge is not seated to give away the just things as a gratification, but to judge them. For he has not sworn to gratify *whoever seems favorable* to him [*epi tō katacharidzesthai ta dikaia*] but to give judgment according to the laws” (35b-c, my emphasis). Once again, Socrates oversteps his conventional role as a defendant, audaciously taking it on himself to instruct the jurors as to their role. Socrates has made it clear that he is not playing to the crowd, but he also clarifies here that it is not the jurors’ place to gratify or punish on the basis of a defendant’s favorability.

By presenting himself as distinctly unfavorable (in personality if not in morality), unattractive, and even infuriating, Socrates has not only avoided using the mode of persuasion by persona in his *apologia*, he has gone in the opposite direction to make a point.

In this sense, then, it is possible to see that Socrates's defense is not a failure; his *apologia* is an offense against his reception by Athenians and jurors, who judge on the basis of their own *pathē* rather than logos, and who seem to demand the sort of flattery that Palamedes and some rhetoricians offer. Socrates deliberately subverts the process: instead of focusing strictly on a logical and persuasive defense against the charges, Socrates presents himself comically as so unbending and excessive a persona as to challenge the jurors not to yield to their emotional reactions to him, and instead to judge him on the basis of logos. More jurors than not fail to rise to the challenge. Socrates's response to his own conviction suggests that he is surprised that more did not fail the challenge: “. . . what has happened was not unexpected by me. But I wonder much more at the number of the votes on each side. For I at least did not suppose it would be by so little, but by much” (*Apology* 36a). He follows this up with a joke about how proportionately paltry the number of votes to convict is, given that he has three accusers.

Whereas Palamedes plays within and enforces the bounds of what is appropriate, customary, and acceptable in forensic rhetoric, Socrates goes beyond these, and even deliberately subverts such limits (here as well as in other matters, as we will see). By exceeding the bounds of appropriate and expected courtroom behavior, by playing, effectively, the comical hero, Socrates tests the persuasive power of logos. Without an appeal to pity and without a likable figure expressing appropriate contrition to whom jurors can grant favors, the jurors vote to convict. Socrates needs not and does not play by conventional rules of persuasion. Comedy affords Socrates the boundlessness necessary for this, as unlike the (arguably) more tragic Palamedes, Socrates need not constrain his behavior to fit within the bounds of acceptable behavior for a defendant. Socrates is in this sense, like comic heroes more generally, boundless.

Socrates's reception suggests further connections with comical heroes. For Aristotle, a tragic hero is determined in part by his or her reception. Assuming Socrates is right in suggesting that the jurors voting to convict him voted on the basis of their anger, he cannot be an Aristotelian tragic hero in part because his audience—or at least the majority of jurors, is not capable of feeling properly toward him. Socrates's comically insolent

behavior assures this. As Aristotle writes, “And those who are neither moved by any courageous emotion such as anger or confidence, nor by a disposition to insolence, nor yet by great fear; only those feel pity who are between these two extremes.”³⁰ Socrates stokes the audience’s outrage, anger, and envy, rather than their pity and fear, and in this way, he is no Palamedes and no Aristotelian tragic hero. We thus are returned to the question as to what sort of hero does this.

The hero who provokes anger, outrage, as well as mirth, who subverts conventions, and flaunts this boundlessness is a comical hero. Several paradigmatic conceptions of the hero precede Socrates, including the classical opposition between Homer and Archilochus. Socrates plays a role more akin to an Archilochean hero than a Homeric hero, despite frequent comparisons to the latter. The tensions between such heroic conceptions are worth exploring briefly. Plutarch writes that Archilochus was expelled from Sparta because of his claim, substantiated by the new fragment, that it is better to discard one’s shield than to be killed. For the proudly bellicose Spartans, whose mothers famously sent their sons off to war with the instruction to return “with your shield or on it,” such a claim is particularly offensive. Plutarch writes that Archilochus was exiled for writing in verse that it is preferable to throw away one’s shield than to be killed by the enemy.

Shield that was mine, fair armour, now gladdens the heart
of some Saian;
Sorry I left it behind tangled in brush in my path;
But for myself I escaped from the clutches of Death. Let perdition
Take the old shield, for no worse surely I’ll get the next time.³¹

The newly discovered fragment from Archilochus verifies Plutarch’s attribution and extends Plutarch’s quotation. The outrage over this claim, if it is to be taken as a straightforward declaration in the personal voice of Archilochus rather than a poetic persona, is not limited to the Spartans. Critias, admittedly a Spartan sympathizer, decries Archilochus as “especially revolting and disgraceful” for such a proclamation.³² *Rhypsaspia*, or the abandonment of one’s shield in battle, becomes a motif in Greek and Roman lyric poetry, with Anacreon, Alcaeus, and Horace including it in verse, but none so defiantly as Archilochus.

It is not only the heroic (or antiheroic) ideal associated with Archilochus that provokes anger; he is also held in contempt for his hateful mode

of delivery. Pindar warns against adopting such a tone: "But I must flee the deep bite [*dakos*] of evil-speaking [*kakagorian*]. For though I am far, I have seen Archilochus, full of blame [*psogeron*], very much in want [*amaxaniai*], fattening himself on grimly worded hatreds."³³ The quote can also be read as an aesthetic rejection of derisive and vicious comedy. Whether it is Archilochus himself or the persona of his poetry, it is anger, in addition to laughter, that such comic heroes provoke.

The issue this raises, and particularly, the comparisons it generates between the classical, Homeric hero and the Archilochean comic hero, are taken up by authors favoring either side. Aristophanes has a boy quote the lines ironically at the end of *Peace*, to which Trygaeus responds that, while the speaker did indeed save his own life, he "shamed the parents who gave it."³⁴ Is it better to maintain one's military honor than to preserve one's life? Can virtue be maintained in retreat from battle? The questions are philosophically relevant, and they are also relevant in how they begin to delineate various forms of the hero. For a Lacedaemonian, the story of the three hundred Spartans holding off the Persian masses to their own imminent deaths makes it clear: there is no dignity in retreat and no value to a life spared at the cost of honor. The comic hero, for whom the triumph of life trumps that of nobility, may not have an objection to the solution Archilochus's pragmatic persona offers to having one's armor catch in the bushes while beating a hasty retreat from the enemy.

It is not surprising then to find Plato's characters joining in the debate. In the *Laches*, the title character espouses a conception of courage defined precisely by never yielding one's position. Socrates counters his definition by forcing Laches to admit that one might retain one's virtue in how one retreats from battle, perhaps using a retreat to confuse the enemy and spring on them an ambush, or that one might be virtuous in retreating when the gods support doing so. Whether Socrates himself is committed to such a view or whether he is countering Laches's definition to undercut Laches's confidence and expose his ignorance may be ambiguous, but the issue does not remain merely theoretical in the dialogues. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades praises Socrates's courage, giving a vague example of how he saved Alcibiades's life and retrieved his shield, even though it was Alcibiades who received the medal for bravery (*Symposium* 220e). Alcibiades says that Socrates saved him and his shield, a shield that is described elsewhere as being made of gold and ivory and depicting Eros about to hurl one of Zeus's thunderbolts.³⁵ But Alcibiades then gives witness to Socrates's courage as exemplified by how

Socrates retreated from battle at Potidaea, quoting directly from Aristophanes to describe Socrates's comical withdrawal. Alcibiades's encomium presents Socrates as a hero, but there are clearly various models to choose from. Just what sort of hero is Plato's Socrates?

The implicit comparison between the dashing Alcibiades, fighting on horseback, and the ugly—even comical—Socrates on foot who saves him, echoes another fragment of Archilochus.

I don't care for your tall general,
with his long stride and long hair in locks
and beard well trimmed. Show me a stocky man
bandy-legged, sure of foot, full of heart.³⁶

Socrates is this stout warrior to Alcibiades's dashing general. Like the comical hero, Socrates represents pragmatic over more strictly aesthetic values. As Alcibiades describes him, Socrates is the hero deserving recognition rather than Alcibiades himself. Socrates's courage in retreat enables him to save not only Alcibiades, but his beautiful shield as well, seemingly left behind to hasten a retreat, saving him both from the battlefield and the ensuing ill repute stemming from *rhipspasia*. Unlike the Archilochean hero, Socrates not only keeps his own shield and his honor, he ensures that his beautiful, young friend does as well.

To the extent that a hero's reception determines what sort of hero she or he is, Socrates is akin to an Archilochean comical hero. He provokes emotions comparable to those elicited by Archilochus's hero, who abandons his shield, caught in the brush, to flee the battle with his life. Against conventional values, Socrates induces anger and outrage, and so appears comical. Because of this, and quite to the opposite effect, Socrates turns his into a capital trial and loses his life. One might take this to suggest that Socrates appears to be comical only in the perspective of the jurors voting to convict him, but it is not solely his reception that shows his resemblance to a comical hero in the *Apology*. He shares a great deal else in common with heroes of Old Comedy.

Socrates and the Traits of Comical Heroes

Socrates, as has become more apparent here and will be evident in chapters following, embodies the traits and behaviors of the heroes of Old Comedy.

With some qualification, Socrates can himself be seen to be a comical hero. He is not *only* a comical hero, however, interchangeable with a Strepsiades, a Lysistrata, or a Dikaiopolis, for, as Plato portrays him, Socrates is a far more nuanced and complex character. He is a philosophical hero, developed by Plato, but cut from the cloth of Old Comedy. So what are comical heroes like?

Cedric Whitman provides a thorough analysis of the comic hero, which will only be adumbrated here to underscore some of the ways in which Socrates is presented comically. Whitman describes Homer's Thersites as possessing several key characteristics of what will later become the comic hero. Thersites is a great talker (*ametroepēs*), he is ugly, poor, and he is an opponent of the government or authority figures.³⁷ He speaks truthfully but in a way designed to generate laughter. Where Thersites falls short of embodying a comic figure lies in his being ultimately pathetic, a weak and beaten figure who remains powerless, dejected, and laughed at by the soldiers. The comic hero, by comparison, may begin in such a state, but asserts himself by way of *ponēria*, in a Great Idea, to turn the tables and regain the upper hand. For Whitman, *ponēria*, despite its connotations of wickedness, is "the ability to get the advantage of somebody or some situation by virtue of an unscrupulous, but thoroughly enjoyable exercise of craft."³⁸ *Ponēria* could also be "a form of heroism," and often manifests itself in putting linguistic skills into play.³⁹ Wordplay and tricks of language are common to the comic hero, who will use these and anything else to achieve his ultimate end, catapulting himself well beyond what his humble origins and even reason itself would ordinarily allow.

The comical hero is permeated with ambiguities such as being "base," ugly, or otherwise vulgar, and yet triumphs over others who are none of these things. Whitman uses the notion of the grotesque to clarify these ambiguities. To Whitman, Thersites and other comical or proto-comical figures permeate several levels of being: they are subhuman, human, and superhuman simultaneously. The complex of beast-man-god can be exemplified in mixtures of form, such as in centaurs, satyrs, and silenoi, and in the god associated with the latter, namely Dionysus. Such figures indicate "a magical penetration of nature by the human consciousness."⁴⁰ They have contact with the "inner sources of power in the animal and vegetable world," thus suggesting ties to fertility rites and a greater link to mythology than often assumed.⁴¹ But while they are akin to the comical, grotesque figures such as Chiron are not themselves comical.

Adding the driving force of *ponēria* to such a grotesque figure results in a creature that bears a striking resemblance to many heroes of Old Comedy. Aristophanes uses this grotesque beast-human-god structure in more direct and figurative ways. Peisthetaerus exhibits this structure quite literally at the end of the *Birds*, when he stands alongside his divine bride, having grown a set of wings, and is hailed as the new Zeus.⁴² Peisthetaerus's *ponēria* is evident in the play's great plan: tired of Athenians arguing over laws, he proposes forming a new city. This marvelous city is built in the sky by birds, providing a splendid alternative city for the expatriated Athenians, but also intercedes human sacrifices to the Olympian gods. While proto-tragic and tragic heroes also share in this imagery, the comparisons in such cases are typically with more "noble" creatures. Achilles is frequently described as a lion and Odysseus is compared to a ram, but both descriptions elevate the powers associated with the hero.⁴³ Aristophanes also uses the structure in figurative ways. In the *Knights*, the oracle reveals that the lowliest person in the city—a sausage seller—will replace Cleon as head of the Athenian Council. When a sausage-seller passes by, he is hailed as a "savior" (*sōtēr*) and told of the prophecy.⁴⁴ In rhetorical competition with Cleon, the sausage-seller flatters shamelessly and offers the councilors free meals at the public's expense (an offer that Socrates will suggest as his own deserved punishment),⁴⁵ thus securing their vote. In the meantime, the sausage seller is imbued with supernatural power, rejuvenating the older Demos into a young and beautiful man by boiling him alive. Hailed at various points as immortal, superhuman, and most blessed, the sausage seller finally refers to himself as godlike.⁴⁶ He figuratively occupies multiple levels of being simultaneously—from brute or subhuman, to human, and divine.

Like the sausage seller, the comic hero can attempt to become divine by discharging her or his *ponēria* in a grand, oftentimes unscrupulous, but enjoyable plan. Socrates's *ponēria* is discharged in a scheme of putting the jurors on trial, and thereby flipping the trial on its head and testing the limits of *logos*. In this aim, tragic and comic heroes are again distinguished by Whitman: "the tragic hero tries it by the supreme moral sacrifice of *arête*, monolithic, grand, and pure of will, however tangled in his humanity. The comic hero has *poneria*, a far more resourceful weapon, and by craft, bravado, and a wholly dissociative imagination, he achieves the quest and climbs the brazen heaven."⁴⁷ In this way, the comic hero achieves a sort of transcendence.

The Aristophanean comic hero is a figure of salvation, a figure representing survival against the odds. The comic hero is a “desperate small fellow, inexcusably declaring himself for a social savior, an utterly self-centered rogue of *poneria*, representing a universal gesture of thumb-to-nose unto all the high and mighty . . .”⁴⁸ He represents “. . . the salvation of the self in all its individual waywardness, wickedness, and attachment to life. The result is a grotesque, appealing fellow, who extends one hand toward the blacker recesses of the psyche and the other toward the divine world of perfect supremacy and freedom.”⁴⁹ Underneath the comic hero is a “heroic tenacity, which bespeaks the Greek, conquered and impoverished, but free in spirit.”⁵⁰

Socrates, as we have seen and will see, illustrates most of these traits, with one notable exception. Unlike the traditional, comical figure, Socrates is thoroughly unattached to life, as he demonstrates in the *Apology*. He is unattached in a way that Archilochus’s hero, who abandons his shield with the aim of preserving his life, is not. He is unattached in a way that even Palamedes, who flatters and pleases to protect himself, is not. He is unattached in a way entirely consistent with his agnostic proclamation at the end of the *Apology* regarding the value of life as being known to no one but the god. He is a comical hero attached not to life itself, but to the logos that might enable the determination as to whether that life is worth living. He is a comical hero attached instead to philosophy.

Humanity as Laughable and Self-Directed Laughter

Like a comical hero, Socrates is laughable but in a novel way. For Socrates directs some of this laughter at himself, and in doing so, inaugurates a form of self-directed laughter that does not compromise his gravitas. He is laughable, but aware of this, and so does not venture into being ridiculous. Instead, his attention to his own laughability directs us to that in ourselves. We too can aspire to human wisdom and the attendant human laughability rather than remaining mired in our greater-than-human wisdom, and thus being ridiculous. Socrates, the comical hero, shows us the way.

While it may seem to be a dramatic step to read Plato’s Socrates in the light of comedy and humanity as fundamentally laughable, neither view is entirely novel. Viewing humanity as risible and recognizing two different types of laughter both have ancient precedents. Nicknamed

“The Laughing Philosopher,” Democritus appears to see humankind as fundamentally laughable and his Greek and Roman reception clearly identifies two different forms of laughter.⁵¹ As with too many so-called Presocratics, the bulk of what little we know of Democritus comes through doxographical sources. According to Hippolytus, Democritus laughed at everything concerning mankind.⁵² Horace ridicules Roman audiences’ demands for spectacle and imagines that Democritus would laugh to see them: “Democritus would laugh whether a hybrid monstrosity, a cameleopard, or a white elephant made the gaping people stare; he’d look at them with full attention, not the stage, as a far more monstrous and entertaining sight.”⁵³ The monstrosity of the audience Horace imagines as a more entertaining sight to Democritus than the theatrics on stage. Stranger yet than the “cameleopard” is the audience who demands such a spectacle. The true spectacle, gaping and staring, is unaware of itself as such. The audience has forgotten themselves. Democritus’s response is laughter.

But what are we to make of his laughter? Two interpretations of Democritus’s laughter follow: on the first, his laughter can be seen as sarcastic, dismissive, and misanthropic, while on the second, it is tolerant, humble, and humanistic. In his tenth Satire, Juvenal also asks what Democritus would think of Rome, and describes his imagined response as “the censure of merciless laughter” and “contemptuous mirth.”⁵⁴ Also following this first possible characterization of Democritean laughter, Cynics see him as a misanthrope, but Gerhard claims that, according to the *testimonia*, Democritus’s laughter was tolerant, not sarcastic.⁵⁵

The laughter of Democritus is broadly—perhaps even universally—applicable. Juvenal lauds Democritean laughter (as well as Heraclitean tears), particularly when directed at the misguided beliefs and desires of the present day: “Democritus, long, ago, found ample occasion for laughter [*perpetuo risu*] no matter whom he met, and we can learn from his wisdom . . . He laughed at their [the people’s] troubles, laughed at their joys and tears, and, if Fortune threatened, he told her ‘Take a jump in the lake,’ and pointed the way with his finger.”⁵⁶ Democritus would laugh at the excesses of Juvenal’s Rome, and Horace thinks the same. Juvenal goes on to discuss Democritus’s “shrewdness” (*prudencia*) in this approach. Democritus’s “contemptuous mirth” is justified and indeed constitutes a laudatory response to what might just as easily evoke tears: human excess, vanity, and self-ignorance.

From what very little that remains to posterity of Democritus's own writing and thinking, we might cull support for his humanistic and gelastic comportment. Democritus tells us that "A life without festival is like a long road without an inn to rest in."⁵⁷ In a fragment that expands on Chilon's, Democritus offers a humanistic sentiment: "Do not laugh at the misfortunes of men, but pity them."⁵⁸ Even for someone who finds the human condition inherently risible, there are limits, such as those already mentioned, including what is pitiful. Democritus is not singling out individuals who are laughable, but rather attributing being laughable to humanity generally. This is not the illiberal, "merciless laughter," Juvenal suggests, but rather a more liberal, humanistic form of laughter.

Two big questions arise from this: first, does self-knowledge turn out to be constituted by, or merely inclusive of, recognition of one's ignorance? And second, does Socrates's seeming lack of it (and ours) render him laughable? On the one hand, a lack of self-knowledge renders one (and pursuit of philosophical inquiry) ridiculous; on the other hand, recognition of being laughable and lacking self-knowledge encourages philosophical inquiry into the self. Does self-knowledge (or Socratic wisdom) necessarily include the ability to recognize oneself as laughable?

Drawing from the tradition of Democritus, Plato and Socrates develop a novel conception of laughter. This is self-directed laughter, and not the laughter of superiority. Knowledge that one is ignorant and thus laughable represents a very different way of looking at oneself as well as at one's relationship to laughter. This self-awareness distinguishes one from those who are self-blind, unaware of themselves, that they are ignorant, and that they are laughable. But it also distinguishes Socrates from most Aristophanean comic heroes in that he is aware of his being laughable. Socrates, we will see, uses laughter to prompt awareness of his and our own ignorance, and thus prompts greater self-knowledge.

The laughter Socrates uses draws from, but also modifies, older conceptions of laughter. In the dialogues, Socrates dramatizes a position similar to Democritus's that borrows from Aristophanes, but with a self-aware humility different from both. If Socrates sees himself and humans more broadly as inherently laughable, as they are for Democritus, one would expect, if not an outright statement, then behavior and dramatic clues to such effect. Socrates behaves as might Democritus, but using the literary machinations of a comical hero. We find this clearly in the dialogue in which Socrates directly defends his behavior and philosophical way

of life—the *Apology*. In it, as has been shown, Socrates plays the part of Plato’s master of comic ceremonies.⁵⁹

If this is so, then there is indeed an ambiguity as to which god Socrates comically calls as his witness. For all his Apollonian intellectualizing, Socrates, seen as properly comical, expresses (rather than suppresses) his more base, Dionysian impulses. Such expression, however, has been argued here to be decisive in bringing about the tragic destruction of Socrates himself. Had Socrates defended himself as Gorgias’s Palamedes does, or had he argued drily and rationally in his favor, he may well have been spared the death penalty. Instead, he presents himself as thoroughly unlikable, an Archilochean hero who turns the tables on and offends the “men of Athens” who “judge” him; one who angers and provokes instead of placates and pleases; and one who jests during his trial instead of taking it “seriously.” By playing a comical hero, Socrates tests the limits of logos, but simultaneously, he brings about his own destruction.

The *Apology* may then strike us as a strange occasion for comedy, laughter, and the Dionysian. But the oddity may dissipate with the Dionysian belief that, like seasons do for the grapevine, destruction brings about regeneration. Seeing the Dionysian aspects in Plato’s dialogues and in Socrates himself may point to a sort of rebirth. Far from representing tragic finality, then, the *Apology* may simultaneously be comical and philosophical.