CHAPTER 3

Laughter, Derision, and Abuse in Byzantine Verse

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Instead of trying to understand ~~these~~ texts by investigating their literary affiliations, one can alternatively consider them as cultural products that reflect, and engage with, patterns of thought and emotion in a given society. This leads us to the question how these texts provoke and perform laughter. Whether the text should be considered satire, invective, vituperation, or mocking epigram, it acquires its force because it is supposed to elicit laughter. The ultimate purpose of this laughter can of course differ greatly: liberation, insight, or humiliation—perhaps almost always a subtle combination of these.

We may think of laughter as an almost automatic bodily reaction to a certain stimulus, but of course what makes people laugh, depends on culture, social class, and (sub)community.[1] Hence, the apparent automatism of laughter is a sign of how cultural habits and assumptions are ingrained in our body. Laughter is at the very threshold between mind and body. The boundaries between conscious judgment and involuntary reflex collapse. We laugh with (or at) those things or persons according to a set of judgments about the world and humanity that we have been carefully constructing up to that moment. Laughter thus operates at the intersection of historically contingent cultural understandings and the universally shared bodily nature of humans. To probe laughter in past cultures, therefore, is to probe hidden assumptions and semi-conscious layers, which makes such an enterprise both very difficult and potentially very rewarding.[2] It involves a consideration of perspectives as diverse as philosophy, psychology, theology, history, and literature.[3]

1 To make a first incursion into the question of laughter (as distinct from the comic), I was much inspired by the following studies: Anton C. Zijderveld, "The Sociology of Humour and Laughter," *Current Sociology. La Sociologie contemporaine* 31 (1983): 1–100; Albrecht Classen, "Laughter as an Expression of Human Nature in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Literary, Historical, Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Reflections. Also an Introduction," in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin, 2010), 1–140; Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge, 2008).

2 Guy Halsall, "Introduction. 'Don't Worry. I've Got the Key,'" in *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Guy Halsall (Cambridge, 2002), 1–21.

3 Classen, "Laughter as an Expression of Human Nature."

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This chapter will be primarily concerned with the social settings of laughter and derision, not necessarily with the question of "what made Byzantines laugh." It will look at the verbalizations of derision, abuse, and humiliation in these settings, especially when expressed in metrical discourse, and chiefly focusing on the so-called middle Byzantine period.

People laugh in the company of other people.[4] Their laughter is a sign that they appreciate things along the same lines: desirable, ridiculous, pleasurable. Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten have introduced the term *Lachgemeinschaften* ("communities of laughter") to describe historical social groups which form bonds with communal laughter as a basis.[5] They rightly insist on an important point: *Lachgemeinschaften* are inherently unstable and open. They depend on improvised, unplanned performances, not on fixed structures. And while laughter brings people together, it also excludes those who do not share the same inclination to laugh: the people who are derided, or those who are deprived of the skills or mentality that make a given community laugh.

Laughter is thus also a sign of communication, especially in the Middle Ages where emotional display is understood to convey social meanings.[6] It constitutes a code that social agents are expected to master. Social roles or certain events require men and women to laugh, to smile, or to conspicuously withhold laughter, and (dependent on the context) each of these expressions contains a message: relationships of power and dominance, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, forging bonds or creating distance, etc.

But laughter is a means of communication unlike any other. Laughter is a way by which individuals or social groups come to terms with a situation that appears as unacceptable or illogical.[7] Words cannot solve the embarrassment then; only laughter can neutralize the *aporia* that was created. Laughter expresses the commonly shared understanding (among a restricted group, mostly) that this surprising deviance is now safely identified as belonging to the realm of the playful and the humorous. All the while, the deviance was there in the first place, and the thin border between laughter and indignation or anger indicates how tangible the risk is for real deviance or real subversion. Hence, laughter can be subversive, but it can also reassert existing hierarchies, as we will see in this brief overview of relevant texts.

4 Zijderveld, "Sociology of Humour and Laughter."

5 Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten, "Einleitung," in *Lachgemeinschaften: kulturelle Inszenierungen und soziale Wirkungen von Gelächter im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten (Berlin, 2005), ix–xxxi.

6 Gerd Althoff, "Vom Lächeln zum Verlachen," ibid., 3–16.

7 Zijderveld, "Sociology of Humour and Laughter," 33–36.

It is obvious that laughter is often aggressive. Laughter has the potential to denigrate, to humiliate, to bring persons to shame and make them lose face. With their laughter, the *Lachgemeinschaft* is able to single out an individual, who has no chance against the power of laughter that sweeps everything in front of it, including logical reasoning. As Plato recognized, laughter can often be an expression of superiority over the weaker, and negative emotions such as pain and envy are part and parcel of the purpose and reasons of laughter.[8] Some have even upheld that laughter *always* carries an aggressive meaning, even when seemingly innocuous.[9] Laughter is the most preferred tool of humiliation: a risky, but potentially very rewarding social punishment that always has a public nature.[10]

For a long time, Byzantine culture seemed to be a culture bereft of laughter. Famously, Margaret Alexiou asked whether instead of the Byzantines, it is perhaps rather the Byzantinists who lacked a sense of humor;[11] and still today, some scholars tend to overlook the more irreverent aspects of their objects of investigation. But overall, we have been made aware that Byzantine culture had bodily postures other than the stern-looking saint, and other forms of social organization than rigid *taxis*. Many studies (which will be referred to separately below) broke ground to draw our attention to the humorous and the scurrilous. Yet, there is no comprehensive study of Byzantine laughter, such as Stephen Halliwell's monumental *Greek Laughter*.[12]

Two points have often been made, and while it is hard to disprove them, one should set them in perspective and contrast them with other observations as well. First, the Church Fathers forbade laughter and were generally "antigelastic."[13] This suspicion toward laughter was echoed by later canonists.[14] But it is hazardous to posit a cause—effect relationship between the normative

8 Plato, *Philebus*, 49c–50a.

9 See Zijderveld, "Sociology of Humour and Laughter," at 38, who problematizes this view.

10 See William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1993).

11 Margaret Alexiou, "The Poverty of Ecriture and the Craft of Writing: Towards a Reappraisal of the Prodromic Poems," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 10 (1986): 1–40, esp. 31.

12 Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*. For late antiquity (and beyond), see Teodor Baconsky, *Le rire des Pères: essai sur le rire dans la patristique grecque* (Paris, 1996). See now also *Greek Laughter and Tears. Antiquity and After*, ed. Margaret Alexiou and Douglas Cairns (Edinburgh, 2017); references to individual chapters from this book will be given below.

13 Neil Adkin, "The Fathers on Laughter," *Orpheus* 6 (1985): 149–52 (quite incomplete); Baconsky, *Le rire des Pères*; Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 471–519.

14 Alexander Kazhdan and Giles Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium* (Washington, DC, 1982), 62. For a more nuanced view, see now Przemysław Marciniak, "Laughter on Display: Mimic Performances and the Danger of Laughing in Byzantium," in Alexiou and Cairns, *Greek Laughter and Tears*, 232–42.

discourse of religious authorities on the one hand, and everyday behavior and emotionality on the other hand.

Moreover, the Church Fathers did not hold a monolithic view on laughter. The Church Fathers and later canonists especially targeted laugher resulting from irreverent speech and acts (associated with the Christian conception of *eutrapelia*), and the physical and obscene humor of mimes and jesters.[15] Next to very stern condemnations of the perverting powers of laughter, we find also appreciations of joyfulness and smiles.[16] Patristic writers made a fine physiological distinction between guffawing, scowling, laughing out loud, and smiling, and included other physiological phenomena such as bodily posture and facial expression (the kind of "look" one ought to have). This topic would merit a further, more comprehensive study, which attempts to relate laughter to a general philosophy of emotional expression and bodily posture.

A second frequently made observation: laughing in Byzantium is mostly "laughing at." Normative texts related laughter to irreverence and familiarity, and saw it as a tool for contempt, insults, and abuse.[17] In other texts, laughter is a sign of superiority, of the "Roman" toward the barbarian,[18] the victor toward the defeated.[19] It marks "difference," whether of a social or ethnic kind.[20] Defects and mishaps are the things that caused mirth to the *homo Byzantinus*.[21] It is this rather coarse laughter that stands central in the sources that scholars use to discuss Byzantine humor. A taste for abuse has been taken to be inherent to any Byzantine humorous text, and even to Byzantine mentality as a whole.[22] This is related to some scholars' conceptions and definitions

15 Ruth Webb, "Mime and the Dangers of Laughter in Late Antiquity," in Alexiou and Cairns, *Greek Laughter and Tears*, 219–31; Marciniak, "Laughter on Display."

16 A particularly antigelastic text (also condemning banter and jokes) is John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Ephesians 17*, ed. PG 62:117–20. But see the importance of smiles and cheerfulness in Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusius tractatae* 17, ed. PG 31:961–65.

17 Martin Hinterberger, "'Messages of the Soul': Tears, Smiles, Laughter and Emotions Expressed by them in Byzantine Literature," in Alexiou and Cairns, *Greek Laughter and Tears*, 125–45, esp. 136–40.

18 Guy Halsall, "Funny Foreigners: Laughing with the Barbarians in Late Antiquity," in Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics*, 89–113.

19 Judith Hagen, "Laughter in Procopius's *Wars*," in Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages*, 141–64.

20 John Haldon, "Humour and the Everyday in Byzantium," in Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics*, 48–71.

21 Lynda Garland, ""And His Bald Head Shone Like a Full Moon …": An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Recorded in Historical Sources of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Parergon* 8 (1990): 1–31, at 26–27.

22 Ibid., 25; Lynda Garland, "Mazaris's Journey to Hades: Further Reflections and Reappraisal," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 61 (2007): 183–214, at 184.

of Byzantine satire.[23] But, of course, Byzantine literature contained also more friendly and innocuous humor,[24] which brings us to the ambit of the refined culture of *asteiotes*, as cultivated by intellectuals.[25] What made Byzantines laugh was dependent on a wide range of factors, and "one" Byzantine theory of the comic certainly never existed.[26]

Reading instances of laughter in texts is very different from hearing real laughter. Authors telling a joke, or referring to one, may give their own very personal perspective to it, downplaying or exaggerating the playful nature, or the success, of a joke or comic episode.[27] Hence, if we read episodes or situations in (for instance) historiographical works that are marked as comical and/or provoking laughter, we should be able to appreciate the color that these "sources" give to their material, and take into account the motivations of ascribing laughter (or lack thereof) to a certain person.

As noted, laughter is dependent on social settings. Something might be appreciated as comical in one setting, whereas laughing with the same thing in another setting might be completely out of place. People create "fields" where it is understood that other rules apply.[28] Consequently, an important task is to describe these delineated cultural spaces where the normal rules for license of speech and authority could be temporarily suspended. Many sources especially mention the court as a place for jest and scurrilous jokes.[29] Emperors reveled in irreverent parodies of liturgies, in pranks, and in jesters. And, indeed, it is true that many of the instances of derision and abuse that we will study here are connected to emperors and to the court.

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23 Barry Baldwin, "A Talent to Abuse: Some Aspects of Byzantine Satire," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 8 (1982): 9–28. For a discussion of this view, see elsewhere in this volume.

24 See also Przemysław Marciniak, "Laughing Against All the Odds. Some Observations on Humour, Laughter and Religion in Byzantium," in *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities*, ed. Hans Geybels and Walter Van Herck (London, 2011), 141–55.

25 Carolina Cupane, "Στήλη τῆς ἀστειότητος. Byzantinische Vorstellungen weltlicher Vollkommenheit in Realität und Fiktion," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 45 (2011): 193–209; Floris Bernard, "*Asteiotes* and the Ideal of the Urbane Intellectual in the Byzantine Eleventh Century," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 47 (2013): 129–42.

26 Aglae Pizzone, "Towards a Byzantine Theory of the Comic?," in Alexiou and Cairns, *Greek Laughter and Tears*, 146–65.

27 See also Paul Magdalino, "Tourner en dérision à Byzance," in *La dérision au Moyen Âge*, ed. Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan and Jacques Verger (Paris, 2007), 55–72, at 58.

28 Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (Haarlem, 1952).

29 Lynda Garland, "Conformity and Licence at the Byzantine Court in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: The Case of Imperial Women," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 21 (1995): 101–15; Lynda Garland, "Basil II as Humorist," *Byzantion* 59 (1999): 321–43; Garland, "Byzantine Sense of Humour."

But this should not lead to the assumption that ribaldries and entertainment were an exclusive prerogative of emperors and aristocracy. We can also identify other social spaces that provided opportunities for mockery and derision. The *theatron* (or what Byzantinists have recently understood by that) is certainly one of these. In the atmosphere of intellectual competition or intense dispute inside the space of a *theatron*, candidates put up a display of their skills and knowledge, and, when failing, they faced the laughter, the jeers, and the catcalls of the audience (and/or "judges"), resulting in humiliation.[30]

Mockery is ambivalent: it can be intended and interpreted both as innocent jesting and as humiliating derision. Mockery can confirm friendships but also fuel antagonisms. Halliwell made the useful distinction between "playful" and "consequential" laughter, corresponding with a distinction between friendly teasing and aggressive derision.[31] But the distinction is thin, and necessarily so: if a community wants to maintain its exclusive nature in comic interactions, outsiders *should* struggle to tell apart play from seriousness. Participants in the game of laughter are constantly "tested" on their perceptiveness of the hidden understandings within a *Lachgemeinschaft*.

Paul Magdalino used Halliwell's distinction to approach the phenomenon of derision in Byzantium.[32] He cites a key passage from Kekaumenos, who warns his readers how easily playful jest can result in loss of face and humiliation:[33]

> Don't play around with a fool; he will insult you, and perhaps even seize your beard, and consider how great the disgrace for you will be. If you allow him (to do this), everyone will laugh; but if you strike him, you will be criticised and reviled by everyone.[34]

Also in other passages, Kekaumenos shows himself concerned with the degrading power of laughter, when one is being mocked behind one's back, for

30 Some examples from the Palaeologan period are mentioned in Igor Medvedev, "The So-Called θέατρα as a Form of Communication of the Byzantine Intellectuals in the 14th and 15th Centuries," in *Η επικοινωνία στο Βυζάντιο. Πρακτικά του Β΄ Διεθνούς συμποσίου*, ed. N.G. Moschonas (Athens, 1993), 227–35, at 232.

31 Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 19–38.

32 Magdalino, "Tourner en dérision."

33 Ibid., 56.

34 Kekaumenos, *Recommendations and narrations*, ed. B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt, *Cecaumeni Strategicon et incerti scriptoris de officiis regiis libellus* (St Petersburg, 1896), §155, p. 63, l. 18–21: μετὰ ἄφρονος μὴ παίζῃς· ὑβρίσει γάρ σε καὶ ἴσως κρατήσει καὶ τῆς γενειάδος σου, καὶ σκόπησον πόση αἰσχύνη σοι ἔσται. καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐάσεις αὐτόν, πάντες γελάσουσιν, εἰ δὲ τύψῃς αὐτόν, παρὰ πάντων μεμφθήσῃ καὶ λοιδορηθήσῃ. English translation: Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes* (SAWS edition, 2013); trans. Ch. Roueché, at www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/cts/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg3017.Syn0298.sawsEng01 (last viewed 2017, May 18).

instance.[35] He shows a keen awareness that jokes and banter could backfire. Mockery could easily slip into offense, and thus result in a loss of face when confronted with collective laughter.

Playful mockery is also an essential element of friendship, although perhaps of the more sophisticated friendship that Kekaumenos mistrusts so much. Letters are naturally the genre where we see this being played out in action. Also here, authors are aware of the slippery slope from playful mockery to humiliating insult. Sometimes, letter writers mocked their addressee with friendly intentions, only to conclude that their friends had taken the joke in a bad way. They then wrote letters to clear up the misunderstanding, which are particularly interesting documents, because they spell out again the rules of the game and reflect on the distinction between mockery (σκῶμμα) and insult (ὕβρις).[36]

In one of these letters, Michael Psellos exclaims:

> ἵνα σεμνὸς φαίνῃ καὶ περιττός, ἀναιρεῖς μὲν λόγου χάριτας, ἀναιρεῖς δὲ φιλίας θάρσος, μισεῖς δὲ γλώττης χαριεντισμούς, καὶ ἀθετεῖς παιδιάν, ἣ μόνη τῷ βίῳ καταμεμιγμένη ἱλαρὰν ἡμῶν ποιεῖ τὴν ζωήν.
>
> In order to appear solemn and pompous, you reject the charms of words, you reject the audacity that belongs to friendship, you detest ~~facetiousness in~~ speech, and you dispense with play, the only thing that can make our life more cheerful, when we mix it into our lifestyle.[37]

Psellos here on the one hand underplays his mockery, giving it rather innocent names, such as banter (χαριεντισμός) and play (παιδιά). At the same time, he identifies it as the backbone of their kind of friendship, which celebrates the beauty of words. The license of speech (παρρησία) that allows mockery is the precondition of a mutually trusted relationship. Whoever does not appreciate the mockery (that is, whoever fails to laugh the appropriate laugh) does not live up to the standards of their community. In the same letter, Psellos also remarks:

35 Kekaumenos, *Recommendations and Narrations*, §101, p. 43, l. 5.

36 See Floris Bernard, "Humor in Byzantine Letters of the Tenth to Twelfth Centuries: Some Preliminary Remarks," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 69 (2015): 179–95, at 185–89.

37 Michael Psellos, *Letter* 12, ed. Konstantinos Sathas, *Μεσαιωνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1876), vol. 5, p. 245, l. 22–27, numbered 192 in the new edition *Michael Psellus, Epistulae*, ed. Stratis Papaioannou, 2 vols. (Boston, MA, 2019). At the time of finishing this contribution, I could consult the numbering of this new edition, but not the text itself.

> If someone had really given you offense, what would you have done, since, when being mocked in jest, you did not take this favour in good part?[38]

Here, the distinction between σκῶμμα and ὕβρις is spelled out, corresponding with the distinction between playful and consequential mockery. The playful kind is even defined as a χάρις, a favor or pleasure offered to a friend.

The effect of derision is of course dependent on relationships of power. In an informal and rather opaque way jokes express dominance and submission, establish pecking orders, and decide who has authority in a group and who does not. These power relations decide who can mock whom, and who has the right to interpret mockeries in which way. Taking offense at a joke, or taking it in good stride (i.e. laughing with it) may not be dependent on the quality of the joke itself, but on the specific relationship the mocked person has with the joker. The one who is able to joke with impunity, holds the most informal power in that social group. It is perhaps telling that the most famous Byzantine joke ended badly: the pun on ἅλας made by the jester Chalivouris,[39] insinuating that the emperor Isaac II Komnenos had an appetite for female dancers, and provoking guffaws (ἐξεκάγχασαν) from everyone present, incited the anger of the emperor, who curbed the license of speech (ἐλευθεροστομίαν) of the jester. One can imagine how the courtiers had to carefully calculate whether their hearty laughter would be out of place or not.

Also in letters, we can see how the appreciation of mockery is dependent on power relationships. Thus, when the 10th-century letter writer Symeon Magistros had received a letter from the emperor with some mockeries at his address,[40] he likened these to roses that have a sweet smell but nevertheless have thorns. Whoever has the right taste, he argues, will recognize how sweet mockeries can be, and why they are in no way to be interpreted as insults. Social hierarchy thus dictates to Symeon that he should show that he's a good sport.

Derision is used as a political weapon to punish enemies, settle scores, influence opinion, or voice dissent. One of its most ritualized and clearly recognizable forms is the defamatory parade or mock procession. Although this phenomenon is well attested in Byzantium, it has not received a comprehensive

38 Michael Psellos, *Letter* 12, ed. Sathas, p. 247, l. 14–16: Εἰ δέ τίς σοι ἀληθῶς τὴν ὕβριν προήνεγκε, τί ἂν ἐποίησας, ὁπότε οὕτως σκωφθεὶς μετὰ παιδιᾶς οὐκ εὐμενῶς τὴν χάριν ἐδέξω;

39 Niketas Choniates, *History*, ed. Jean Louis van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia* (Berlin, 1975), 441–42.

40 Symeon Magistros, *Letter* 91, ed. Jean Darrouzès, *Epistoliers byzantins du X^e siècle* (Paris, 1960), 152.

study as yet.[41] Many historiographers and hagiographers mention this ritual of humiliation, where usurpers, dethroned emperors, or other disgraced persons were paraded in public places, subject to the jeers of the crowd. These descriptions show that Byzantines had at their disposal a wide range of symbolic violence, almost always intertwined with real violence; dress, posture, shaving of beard and hair,[42] and also dance[43] could be used to mock enemies. Many parodic elements in these processions are also present in parades with "merely" a carnivalesque character,[44] which again indicates the fluid transition between playful and consequential derision.

The chronicle of Theophanes relates in detail the series of humiliations that Constantine V inflicted on the patriarch Constantine II in 766. The patriarch, bereft of beard and shaven, was paraded in the hippodrome, seated backward on an ass, while the people spat and threw dust at him. Placed in front of the benches of the demes, he was forced to listen to their "derisory words" until the end of the race.[45] Presumably, these "derisory words" (σκωπτικοὶ λόγοι) would imitate and invert the "praising" songs or acclamations that the demes were accustomed to perform at public occasions of political significance.

A similar ritual was performed in 1103, when Michael Anemas and other conspirators against Alexios I Komnenos were punished. In Anna Komnene's detailed eyewitness account, the conspirators were subjected to a mock procession through the Agora and the palace court. They were shaven, dressed in ridiculous clothes, "crowned" with wreaths of entrails, seated backward on

41 Magdalino, "Tourner en dérision," 62–72. See now also Marc Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres. Texts and Contexts. Volume Two* (Vienna, 2019), 128–33. For older overviews, see Nikolaos Politis, "Ὑβριστικὰ σχήματα," *Λαογραφία* 4 (1914): 601–69; Phaidon Koukoules, *Βυζαντινῶν βίος καὶ πολιτισμός*, 6 vols. (Athens, 1949), vol. 3; Konstantinos Sathas, *Ιστορικὸν δοκίμιον περὶ τοῦ θεάτρου καὶ τῆς μουσικῆς τῶν Βυζαντινῶν: ἤτοι εἰσαγωγὴ εἰς τὸ Κρητικὸν θέατρον* (Venice, 1878) 399–403; on parodies of imperial ceremonial (and liturgy), see Henry Maguire, "Parodies of Imperial Ceremonial and Their Reflections in Byzantine Art," in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. Alexander Beihammer, Stavroula Constantinou, and Maria Parani (Leiden, 2013), 417–31.

42 On the degrading ritual of shaving, see Sathas, *Περὶ τοῦ θεάτρου καὶ τῆς μουσικῆς*, 316–19.

43 For a "mocking dance" put up by sympathizers of Constantine V toward iconophiles, see Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger*, ed. Marie-France Auzépy, *La vie d'Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre* (Aldershot, UK, 1997), ch. 41, p. 141, l. 17: σκωπτικῶς χορεύοντες.

44 A vivid (but only partially transmitted) poetic account of such a procession (of notary students) in Christopher Mitylenaios, *Poems*, ed. Marc De Groote, *Christophori Mitylenaii Versuum variorum collectio Cryptensis* (Turnhout, 2012), no. 136.

45 Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, ed. Carolus De Boor, *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig, 1883), p. 441, l. 29–30: καὶ καθίσαντες αὐτὸν ἀπέναντι τῶν δήμων, ἤκουε παρ'αὐτῶν σκωπτικοὺς λόγους ἕως τῆς ἀπολύσεως τοῦ ἱππικοῦ.

asses, while, in an act of real violence (but with symbolic overtones), they had their eyes gouged out. The verb πομπεῦσαι and noun πομπή make clear that Anna thought of this as an (inverted) procession. The ritual again includes verbal abuse:[46]

> Ῥαβδοῦχοι ἔμπροσθεν τούτων ἐφαλλόμενοι καὶ ᾄσμάτιόν τι γελοῖον καὶ κατάλληλον τῇ πομπῇ προσᾴδοντες ἀνεβόων, λέξει μὲν ἰδιώτιδι διηρμοσμένον, νοῦν δὲ ἔχον τοιοῦτον· ἐβούλετο γὰρ τὸ ᾆσμα πάνδημον πᾶσι παρακελεύεσθαι <ἐξελθεῖν> τὲ καὶ ἰδεῖν τοὺς τετυραννευκότας τούτους κερασφόρους ἄνδρας, οἵτινες τὰ ξίφη κατὰ τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ἔθηξαν.
>
> Lictors gamboled before them, singing a ridiculous song suitable to the procession in a loud voice; it was expressed in rude language, and its meaning was somewhat like this: the song aimed at bidding all the public come out and look at these horn-bearing pretenders who had whetted their swords against the emperor.

The guards or *rabdouchoi* were representatives of imperial power on the streets. They are also elsewhere invoked as rather coarse people, who whip up the feelings of the people at public gatherings.[47] They improvised a ridiculous song, in vulgar language, to engage the mob (successfully, according to Anna). She explicitly states that the song is devised to be γελοῖον, to be laughable. It seems that the song (presumably paraphrased in the last sentence of this passage) was rather of a sexual nature: horns were signs of cuckolded husbands. The public character of the event is very much emphasized: communal laughter expresses the will and opinion of the populace.

These two examples show how imperial power organized these public degrading rituals, and were keen to include verbal derision, as a tool to engage the masses. Emperors did so through their representatives on the ground: the demes and the *rabdouchoi*, who both have power over the populace, but rather questionable loyalty. Derision helps to degrade the enemy and confirms authority, but is inherently unstable, and can, as we will see, easily achieve the opposite as well.

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46 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, ed. Diether Roderich Reinsch and Athanasios Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias* (Berlin, 2001), 12.6.5. Translation from Elizabeth Dawes, *Alexiad, the Alexiad of Princess Anna Comnena: Being the History of the Reign of Her Father, Alexius I, Emperor of the Romans, 1081–1118 A.D* (London, 1967), 313–14, who assumes a lacuna where Anna would have inserted the exact words of the song. But the Greek does not preclude that Anna just paraphrased the song in the sentence beginning with ἐβούλετο. The critical apparatus of the CFHB edition gives a suggestion of what the song might have looked like.

47 Christopher Mitylenaios, *Poems*, no. 1.

Interestingly enough, historiographers sometimes took the effort to literally quote some of these songs.[48] This is remarkable, because they employ a language that is clearly vernacular, at odds with the standards of written Greek. For the history of spoken Greek, these songs are valuable, because they predate the time (around the 12th century) that authors started to experiment more extensively with oral Greek in their written texts.[49] The meter is of a purely accentual kind, ahead of developments we see much later in the written language.[50] It is telling that historiographers pretended to abhor the low linguistic standards of these songs, but valued their political importance. Anna at one instance famously quoted and transposed a vernacular song into learned Greek. Also this song originated with the populace (τὸ πλῆθος), who commented on a failed attempt at deposing Alexios.[51]

One particularly interesting satirical song is mentioned by Theophanes' chronicle, and subsequently in many historiographers. When in 601 Maurice' popularity dwindled, some groups of the population revolted. They took their chance when the emperor was publicly holding vigil together with the whole city at the feast of Hypapante. The demes found someone who resembled Maurice, dressed him in a black coat, crowned him with a wreath of garlic, put him on a donkey, and devised the following song, quoted *verbatim* by Theophanes and other chroniclers:

Εὕρηκε την δάμαλιν	ἀπαλήν και τρυφεράν
Και ὡς το καινόν ἀλεκτόριν	οὕτως αὐτήν πεπήδηκε,
Και ἐποίησε παιδιά	ὡς τα ξυλοκούκουδα·
Και οὐδείς τολμά λαλήσαι,	ἀλλ'ὅλους ἐφίμωσεν·
Ἅγιέ μου ἅγιε,	φοβερέ και δυνατέ,
Δός αὐτῳ κατα κρανίου,	ἵνα μη ὑπεραίρεται,
Κἀγώ σοι τον μέγαν βούν	προσαγάγω εἰς εὐχήν.[52]

48 For a full overview of these satirical vernacular songs quoted by historiographers, see Paul Maas, "Metrische Akklamationen der Byzantiner," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 21 (1912): 28–51, esp. 31–37, with supplements and further commentary in Marc D. Lauxtermann, *The Spring of Rhythm: An Essay on the Political Verse and Other Byzantine Metres* (Vienna, 1999), 65–68.

49 Geoffrey Horrocks, *Greek: A History of the Language and Its Speakers*, 2nd ed. (London, 2010), 327–33.

50 Lauxtermann, *Spring of Rhythm*, 67–68.

51 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 2.4.9. See Panagiotis Agapitos, "Anna Komnene and the Politics of Schedographic Training and Colloquial Discourse," *Nea Rhome* 10 (2013), 89–107, esp. 104–06. See also *Alexiad* 8.5.8, where Constantinopolitans composed a witty line (a παρῴδιον) on contemporary events, here deriding the Russians (Scythians).

52 Cited here according to the edition of Maas, "Metrische Akklamationen," 34.

> He has found a gentle heifer, and, like the young cock, has leaped on her and made children like hard seeds, and no one dares to speak, but he has muzzled everyone. Oh my Lord, terrible and powerful, strike him on the skull to make him less arrogant. And I shall vow to you this great ox in thanksgiving.[53]

It is notable that the song is not exactly a scrutinizing critique of Maurice' policies, such as the oppressing taxes, the famine, or failed military expeditions that historiographers seem to connect with this riot.[54] They rather ridicule the personality of the emperor by hinting at his sexual drive (Maurice had nine children with his wife Constantina). Derision works here again through parodic perversion: the usual attributes of the emperor (purple robe, parading horse, golden crown) are imitated but degraded, and the song itself, metrically analogous to "normal" deme acclamations (as Maas points out), and using the same "low" register of Greek, was a parody of that very genre. Derision operates in a cultural setting where praise is expected instead.

There can be no doubt that this is an audacious expression of subversion. The song itself states that no one dared to object, since Maurice silenced everyone. And this is no vain boast, for the continuation of the story as given by Theophanes is also worthy of mention. Maurice went after the provokers of this unrest, arrested many of them, and punished them. In other words, he cared about this satire: rather than "letting steam off," this song was a public act of questioning imperial authority.

Equally subversive was a short ditty deriding Phokas, Maurice' successor.[55] After an expedition against seditious Jews had gone awry, Phokas organized a hippodrome contest, during which the Green circus faction sang a satirical song, of which two lines have been transmitted. It ridiculed Phokas' bibulousness. Again, criticism on political events is translated into a very personal attack, meant rather to have the emperor lose face than to engage in debate with him. Phokas chased down the rioters and punished them severely, beheading some of them; whether this report faithfully reflects what happened or not, it is clear that Byzantines felt that such satirical songs had real subversive power.

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53 Translation: Cyril Alexander Mango, Roger Scott, and Geoffrey Greatrex, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern history AD 284–813* (Oxford, 2006), 408. See also Horrocks, *Greek*, 328–29; now also Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry, ~~Volume Two~~*, 130–31.

54 Theophylact Simokattes, *History*, ed. Carolus de Boor, *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae* (Leipzig, 1887), 8.4–5, p. 291 attributes the unrest to famine.

55 Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, 296.

The "Song of Theophano"[56] is another vernacular satirical song, transmitted separately. The song alludes to the events of 969, when the eunuch Basil (the "matchmaker" in the song) machinated a marriage between Theodora (the "beauty") and John I Tzimiskes (the "princeling"), who was rumored to be the lover of Theophano (a "murderous adulteress"), widow of Nikephoros II Phokas. Basil and his comrades thus deprived Theophano of a chance to seize the throne through her lover John, and she was sent into exile. Just as in the popular satirical songs we saw earlier, the "Song of Theophano" mainly targets sexuality, in this case perceived female wantonness and (likely) the homosexuality of eunuchs. The song also mentions a defamatory parade (v. 7 πομπεύουσιν), where Theophano was forced to ride a mule. The parade consisted of "shriveled horn-players with hand-sized anuses" (v. 6: κουκουροβουκινάτορες φουκτοκωλοτρυπᾶτοι). This might be a reference to Basil the *parakoimomenos* and the patriarch Polyeuktos, who foiled Theophano's plot.[57] So the song seems to have originated in a parade humiliating Theophano, but by no means faithfully pledges its support to the instigators (in my reading). The mocking parade is clearly a very unstable environment. The parody of *taxis* is at once a confirmation of this *taxis*, but also potentially a dangerous opening of alternatives.

While the discussed passages are related to processions or parades, there are also many references to less ritualized occasions where the populace of Constantinople readily picked up on contentious or salacious events or rumors, and improvised ditties and songs about them, which circulated orally. These songs are only referred to by Byzantine historians, not quoted literally, but there is no doubt that the following passages imply more or less the same genre of popular satirical songs we have been discussing.

In his *Chronographia*, Michael Psellos relates the ignominious downfall of ~~Emperor~~ Michael V in 1042. This is how the people on the streets react:[58]

> Τὸ δ' ὅσον δημῶδες καὶ ἀγοραῖον χορούς τε συνίστασαν καὶ ἐπετραγῴδουν τοῖς γεγονόσιν, αὐτόθεν τὰ μέλη ποιούμενοι.

56 I followed here text and commentary in Horrocks, *Greek*, 330–31; see also Gareth Morgan, "A Byzantine Satirical Song?," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 47 (1954): 292–97; now also Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry, Volume Two*, 131–32.

57 So Horrocks, *Greek*, 331. But Morgan, "Satirical Song" and Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry, Volume Two*, 131 interpret the song differently: the insults would refer to a group of buffoons following Theophano.

58 Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, ed. Diether Roderich Reinsch, *Michaelis Pselli Chronographia* (Berlin, 2014), bk 5, ch. 38.

> Whoever belonged to the populace and the vulgar mob set up dances, and mocked the events in song, composing melodies on the spot.

Text, melody, and dance (and perhaps some play-acting?) are here closely related, together forming a cultural expression by which the populace "laughed away" the bloody event, and enshrined it in popular memory.

A passage in Michael Attaleiates underlines the political significance attributed to these mockeries. Nikephoros Bryennios' rebellion in 1077 quickly petered out when his army arrived at the walls of Constantinople. His soldiers realized the futility of their undertaking when faced with the taunts and laughter of a hostile city populace:[59]

> Ὀπισθόρμητοι δὲ γεγονότες, τραυματισθέντων καί τινων ἐξ αὐτῶν, καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις τείχεσι πλησιάσαντες, ὑβριστικὰς φωνὰς ἢ παροινίας παρὰ τῶν πολιτῶν ἠνωτίσαντο καὶ ἀκοντίοις καὶ λίθοις ἀπεσοβήθησαν καὶ μίμοις γελοίων καθυπεβλήθησαν καὶ τῆς ἀποκηρύξεως ἐν πολλαῖς ἡμέραις πρὸ τῆς πόλεως στρατοπεδευσάμενοι πληροφορίαν ἐδέξαντο.
>
> When a few of them were injured, they retreated and approached other sections of the walls, but here they heard the citizens issue insulting cries and violent taunts, and they were driven away with javelins and stones, and were made a laughing stock, as in a mime performance. After camping before the city for many days, they understood how thoroughly they had been rejected.

The phrase μίμοις γελοίων καθυπεβλήθησαν is hard to translate, and may also mean: "they were subjected to ridiculing imitations." Laughter (and derisory laughter at that) is here a clear sign that both sides understood too well, and had a real impact on morale. The laughter expresses better than any ~~discourse~~ what the current balance of power and reputation looked like. Theatrical performance, or at least improvised imitations, seems to have played a role in this episode as well.

In a third example, Niketas Choniates relates how the ordinary people mocked the empress Euphrosyne for her perceived shamelessness.[60] They trained parrots to sing "in every alley and street corner" the following words:

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59 Michael Attaleiates, *History*, ed. Inmaculada Pérez Martín, *Miguel Ataliates. Historia* (Madrid, 2002), ~~p.~~ §31.9: translation from Anthony Kaldellis and Dimitris Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates: The History* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 457–59.

60 Niketas Choniates, *History*, p. 520.

πολιτικὴ τὸ δίκαιον, which means something like "the whore got her due" or "the whore should get her due."[61] According to Choniates, the inventors of this prank were among the most vulgar (ἀγοραῖος) and the words they taught the parrots belonged to the common spoken language (κοινόλεκτον). The ploy to use parrots is apparently an attempt to retain anonymity and evade capture, since Euphrosyne is portrayed at that moment as possessing considerable power.

All three historiographers (Psellos, Attaleiates, Choniates) are keen to point out that these songs originated among the mob of the streets. In their accounts, the laughter provoked by these ditties, songs, and rhythmical taunts was a tool to express opinions, to let friends and enemies know how the state of affairs was perceived by the mob and whose side they were on. Those who were laughed at, and who were made the target of insults and taunts, were on the losing side. At the same time, these popular satirical songs or ditties had a spontaneous character that frequently eluded the control of central powers.

Occasionally, similar songs are situated in a more elevated intellectual sphere. Eustathios of Thessalonike relates the following episode in his *On the Capture of Thessalonike*. Andronikos was due to be proclaimed emperor, but feigned to escape the calls of the people, a gesture of false modesty that is criticized by Eustathios. The patriarch, loyal to Andronikos, then allegedly found a way by inventing invisible fetters to hold him in the palace. Eustathios comments on this unsavory piece of masquerade:

> The patriarch solved their difficulty in a way which made us laugh when we heard about it (and which still makes us laugh), and each of us made a comic parody of it, singing "Play, play your troubles away!"
>
> Καὶ ὁ πατριάρχης ἐπιλυόμενος αὐτοῖς τὸ ἄπορον, ὡς ἡμεῖς καὶ τότε μανθάνοντες ἐγελῶμεν καὶ νῦν δὲ ἔτι γελῶμεν, παρῳδοῦντες ἕκαστος ἑαυτῷ κωμικώτερον τὸ « παῖζε παῖζ' ἐπὶ συμφοραῖς ».[62]

The point of reference of the parody is a rather learned one: a line from Simonides πῖνε πῖν' ἐπὶ συμφοραῖς. Eustathios indicates how the uneasiness of the elite with the new emperor was channeled through laughter. Quotes and allusions are not merely a toy of intellectual friends: also the song mocking

61 Garland, "Byzantine Sense of Humour," 20 translates: "set a fair price, you whore."

62 Text and translation (adapted): Eustathios of Thessalonike, *On the Capture of Thessalonike*, ed. John R. Melville Jones, *Eustathios of Thessaloniki. The Capture of Thessaloniki* (Canberra, 1988), 50–51.

Mauricehad made use of a biblical quote (Jes 47:1), cunningly bending it to the present purpose. Eustathios emphasizes that he (and his friends, we presume) still laugh at the past event, remembered through the "parodies" they made. Laughter is here expressing the feeling of being smarter: smart enough to see through Andronikos' scenes, through the subservient cunningness of the patriarch, smart enough to turn a classical quote to effective use.

The satirical songs (or references to them) discussed so far, are recorded for us by historiographers because they are connected to important events and important persons. But they reflect a much wider phenomenon of vituperation and defamation in Byzantium. Satire, invective, insults, jeers were used on a wide scale to attack enemies, to make them lose face, and to enhance one's own reputation. The modes of transmission are different: instead of quoted by historiographers, they survive in the collections of (mostly) well-known poets. And instead of undiluted vernacular, they use a register that meets the standards of the Byzantine intellectual elite (while certainly not of the most classicizing style). But in every other aspect, they form a continuum with the popular songs we discussed so far. Importantly, also in this more "mainstream" literature, verse is the prime medium for insult, taunts, invective.

A first example shows how similar the cultural frameworks are between "folk song" and "learned poetry." Soon after Michael Psellos had retired to the monastery of Olympos in Bithynia, at the end of, or just after, Constantine IX Monomachos' reign (1042–55), he was called back by (the entourage of) Constantine's successor, the Empress Theodora. This volte face raised many eyebrows, especially with people already predisposed to question Psellos' combination of high-profile courtier with his cherished self-image of "philosopher." Here is how a certain monk Sabbaïtes translated this into poetic invective:[63]

> Ὦ δέσποτα Ζεῦ καὶ πάτερ καὶ βακλέα,
> ὀβριμοβουγάιε καὶ βαρυβρέμων,
> Ὄλυμπον οὐκ ἤνεγκας κἂν βραχὺν χρόνον·
> οὐ γὰρ παρῆσαν αἱ θεαί σου, Ζεῦ πάτερ.
>
> Oh lord Zeus, father and stick-bearer,
> mighty braggart, roaring loud,
> you did not bear Olympus, not even for a year,
> because, father Zeus, your goddesses were not there.

63 Text in Michael Psellos, *Poems*, ed. Leendert G. Westerink, *Michaelis Pselli Poemata* (Stuttgart, 1992), p. 270.

Many layers are played out here: the name of the mountain of the monastery where Psellos retired to, the rumors about him having too close relations with the Empresses Zoe and Theodora, the animosity toward his arrogance and self-assertiveness. It is easy to see that this kind of satire works in the same way, and has the same target, as the songs mentioned earlier. The poem singles out the scurrilous aspects of Psellos' turnabout. The very rare word βακλεύς, from Latin *baculum*, is a nasty jibe at the perceived sexual drive of the courtier with the short-lived monastic vocation. Defamation is the ultimate goal. Psellos could not let this pass, of course. In the poem that he wrote to counterattack Sabbaïtes,[64] he replaces epigrammatic pointedness by the verbosity of a *psogos*. Psellos' poem is not a defense of his actions, nor a refutation of the accusations. It mainly aims to discredit and humiliate the person of Sabbaïtes, through a relentless stream of vocatives that contain all kinds of cultural allusions, ranging from rhetorical theory to scatology. Vituperation, not satire or debate is here at stake. Sexuality plays again a major role: Sabbaïtes is a creature of dubious sex, a kind of monster, with a male upper body, and a female lower body.[65]

Many of the invective texts in the written tradition function in a context of virulent exchange. Texts, presumably in the form of scrolls or pamphlets, are hurled at opponents, who respond back. In this sense, they create a kind of fictional arena, where pen and paper are weapons used to defame each other. This metaphor is emphatically present in Psellos' poem to Sabbaïtes,[66] and in a poem of Christopher Mitylenaios who defended himself against two detractors.[67] This genre of texts can be seen as the exact opposite of the letter: operating ~~on the same pragmatical level~~, but with enmity instead of friendship as a social force. As Emilie van Opstall has pointed out, this fits within a cultural custom of "mudslinging," an art of poetic defamation.[68] She also draws parallels with other medieval cultures, which knew similar practices of poetic competition and invective exchange.

The practice of (literally) hurling defamatory pamphlets is well attested. Anna Komnene relates how unknown detractors had thrown a scroll, or leaflet,

64 Michael Psellos, *Poems*, no. 21, ~~For more details on the circumstances of the exchange, see Floris Bernard, *Writing and Reading Byzantine Secular Poetry (1025–1081)* (Oxford, 2014), 280–90.~~

65 Michael Psellos, *Poems*, no. 21, vv. 97–99 and 145–47.

66 Ibid., vv. 171–76.

67 Christopher Mitylenaios, *Poems*, no 36.

68 Emilie van Opstall, "The Pleasure of Mudslinging: An Invective Dialogue in Verse from 10th Century Byzantium," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 108 (2016): 771–96; see also Chapter 8 in the present volume.

into the tent of the campaigning Emperor Alexios, which greatly angered him. She gives the name *famouson* (from Latin *famosum*) for this text, a name that was apparently unfamiliar enough for her audience that she had to explain it as "written insults."[69] She emphasizes that the authors of the libel remained anonymous, and that Alexios intended to punish them severely.

In a pair of poems by an anonymous 12th-century monk, edited among the spurious poems of Michael Psellos,[70] a slanderer had sent a letter (a γράμμα), which our poet cared so little about (he says) that he had left it trailing in a corner of his cell. Only now, when he had to search for some other things, he stumbled again on the scroll, and he was made to "clap my hands and laugh out loud" at the ineptitude of the lampoon his adversary had sent.[71] As it seems, the letter that had caused offense was written in iambs (poem 68, v. 18), whereas our poet responds in *politikos stichos*. With much irony, our poet carefully destroys every intellectual pretense of his adversary.

Another poem (poem 67) was written for the same or very similar occasion. The poem contains a long justification for taking up "comedy" (perhaps referring to poem 68?): monks should not use words in vain, and certainly not indulge in "deriding and ridiculing" (v. 125: ἐπεγγελᾶν καὶ κωμῳδεῖν). This is an indication of the moral uneasiness of invective and derision, which we will discuss briefly at the end of this contribution. It appears our poet had written him a poem before, "so that, through mockeries, I would give a small hint of the art" (v. 165: ὡς ἐκ τοῦ σκώπτειν καὶ μικρὸν τὴν τέχνην ὑπανοίγων). In order to respond with equal means, the adversary had gone to teachers of grammar and rhetoric. At least, this is what our poet had heard from a friend (vv. 170–77). This indicates that the poet naturally presupposes an audience of friends who watch the successive steps that the adversaries were taking. The passage also suggests that the present poem is at least the fourth step in an ongoing exchange of jibes, in which the adversary had made fun of the poet's upbringing and boorishness (vv. 176–79).

In some cases, we have both sides of the invective exchange. John Geometres responded to a lampoon of a certain Stylianos, who in turn reacted with a poem. This spawned a virulent exchange of insults, each poem picking up on the taunts of the previous one.[72] Constantine the Rhodian had a similar exchange

69 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 13.1.6–7.

70 Edition: (pseudo-)Michael Psellos, *Poems* 67–68. Commentary and German translation: Wolfram Hörandner and Anneliese Paul, "Zu Ps.-Psellos, Gedichte 67 (*Ad monachum superbum*) und 68 (*Ad eundem*)," *Medioevo greco* 11 (2011): 107–38.

71 (pseudo-)Michael Psellos, *Poems*, no. 68, vv. 12–13: ἅπερ λαβών, ὑπαναγνούς, κροτήσας δὲ τὰς χεῖρας // μεγάλως κατεγέλασα τὴν σὴν ἀπαιδευσίαν.

72 A thorough analysis in van Opstall, "Pleasure of mudslinging."

with a certain Theodore Paphlagon,[73] where insults and blame are hurled in both directions. They question each other's literary skills (the right to be called *sophos*), even the very technique of writing iambs. But this intellectual dispute is intermingled with very personal abuse. Theodore was a eunuch from Paphlagonia, a combination guaranteed to elicit laughter with Byzantines.[74] He is a feminized creature, which prevents him from writing "masculine" heroic hexameters (v. 34). The circumstances are particularly interesting here. As the lemma above the first poem of Constantine indicates, he had written a first mocking poem in a book "containing the works of ancient philosophers."[75] This is not as far-fetched as it seems: after all, if Constantine the Rhodian is J, the main scribe of the *Anthologia Palatina*, he had done a similar thing when writing a scatological invective against Kometas, right next to Kometas' poem in the manuscript.[76]

It is interesting to ponder the question how, in all these examples, group dynamics intertwine with the circulation of poems. Laughter, as we have seen, does not work in private; it can only be effective if a group joins in, provoking public humiliation, or displaying a common feeling of superiority. One is led to believe that these invective poems were (also) read aloud in front of an audience of friends, who would all laugh together at the expense of a common enemy, whom they perhaps knew. Improvisation may have played a role in these intellectual gatherings, thriving on poetry and urbanity.[77] This audience is mostly not addressed in the text, as it is of course the adversary who is addressed in the second person. There are exceptions, however. In one prose satire against a presumptuous doctor, Theodore Prodromos addresses a public

73 Constantine the Rhodian, *Invective Poems*, ed. Pietro Matranga, *Anecdota graeca* (Rome, 1850), vol. 2, 624–32.

74 For allusions to Paphlagonia, see for example v. 111. See also Charis Messis, "Régions, politique et rhétorique dans la première moitié du 10e siècle: Le cas des Paphlagoniens," *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 73 (2015): 99–122, esp. 109–12. Constantine's long invectives against Leo Choirosphaktes are even far more outrageous: Choirosphaktes is portrayed as a swindler, a base artisan, but also a corrupter of young boys.

75 Constantine the Rhodian, *Invective Poems*, p. 627. The complete lemma reads as follows: Κωνσταντίνου Ῥοδίου ἐν σκωπτικοῖς ἰάμβοις εἰς Θεόδωρον Εὐνοῦχον Παφλαγόνα, τὸν ἐπονομαζόμενον Βρέφος, λαβόντες ἀρχὴν ἀπὸ ταύτης αἰτίας· γράψαντος γὰρ Κωνσταντίνου ἔν τινι βίβλῳ περιεχούσῃ βίβλους τῶν παλαιῶν φιλοσόφων, γνώμην τοιαύτην:

76 See Alan Cameron, *The Greek Anthology from Meleager to Planudes* (Oxford, 1993), 309–10; Marc D. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres. Texts and Contexts* (Vienna, 2003), vol. 1, p. 109.

77 See also Paul Magdalino, "Cultural Change? The Context of Byzantine Poetry from Geometres to Prodromos," in *Poetry and Its Contexts in Eleventh-Century Byzantium*, ed. Floris Bernard and Kristoffel Demoen (Burlington, VT, 2012), 19–36.

of "present people" (ὦ παρόντες), who at the end of the text turn out to include the famous doctors Nicholas Kallikles and Michael Lyzix.[78]

Some poetic lampoons were specifically aimed at excluding unwanted intruders from reading circles. Christopher Mitylenaios, for example, haughtily denies a certain Basil Choirinos access to reading his poems (poem 85), using in this very brief jibe a wide range of double entendres and *calembours*, insinuating that Basil was being cuckolded by his wife, and (perhaps) that he himself was in for sex between men. The poem works in exactly the same way that the popular satirical songs functioned, picking up on rumors about the sexuality of men and women presumably known to the audience. Wearing "horns" works also here as an element of ridicule. Christopher's "song" thus targets an individual who is expressly not tolerated in the group of friends; these friends, in turn, perhaps laugh with a touch of relief that *they* belong to the inner circle.

It would require a separate study to identify all the cultural elements that make the humor of these pieces work. Sex, defecation, alcohol, ethnic origin, animals, all play a role. Social status is also often an issue, which ~~should~~ remind us that these texts are clearly acts of social degradation. The attacked persons are defamed by being lowered in social status, or made questionable because they are of low social background, or still engage in base professions. These pieces are therefore to be seen as elements of a struggle to participate in an elite and to regulate entrance into it. A typical outcry is that of Psellos: "the bartender of yesterday is today's theologian?"[79] Constantine the Rhodian happily takes advantages of Choirosphaktes' surname (literally the "pig butcher") to denounce him for this lowly occupation: the contact with the pigs seems to turn him into a pig. In the poem of the 12th-century pseudo-Psellos (Westerink 67), it becomes clear that his opponent had ridiculed his origin. Our poet rebuts this argument, and pays back with equal means, calling the opponent a presumptuous latecomer in education (v. 291), and enumerates his lowly occupations before he became monk (vv. 313–28). He also attacks his questionable ethnic origins: fleeing from the Turks in the east, his grandmother had intermingled with them and thus bastardized the family (vv. 250–66).

To turn back to our initial premise: laughter is the ultimate goal of these pieces. The act of laughing is equivalent to the moral and social ~~annihilation~~ of the opponent. Making their opponent γελοῖος, "ridiculous" (in the full force of the word), that is the stated aim of these texts. Thus, Theodore Prodromos likens his opponent (a fake admirer of Plato) to the ridiculous sight of (among

78 *Public Executioner or Physician*, in Theodore Prodromos, *Satires,* ed. Tommaso Migliorini, *Gli scritti satirici in greco letterario di Teodoro Prodromo: introduzione, edizione, traduzione e commento* (Pisa, 2010, unpublished PhD thesis), 51–55.

79 Michael Psellos, *Poems*, no. 21, vv. 253: ὁ χθὲς κάπηλος σήμερον θεηγόρος;

others) the ring worn by a monkey, a sight that made him "laugh out loud," proceeding to call his opponent "ridiculous, truly completely ridiculous" (γελοῖος, καὶ πάνυ γελοῖος).[80] In his first poem against Choirosphaktes, Constantine the Rhodian calls him the "laughing butt of the Byzantines."[81] Psellos, with a rapid succession of speech acts, states that he despises Sabbaïtes, spits on him, and laughs at him (γελῶ σε).[82] And, at the end of his long and exuberant invective, he measures his success, boasting that Sabbaïtes "is reduced to laughter by my iambs."[83]

An instance where laughter almost literally bursts into the text can be found at the end of Psellos' piece against a certain monk Jacob, ridiculed for being a drunk:[84]

> Στεφανοὺς ἐξ ἀμπέλων / σῇ κορυφῇ
> ἐπιθήσωμεν, πάτερ Ἰάκωβε,
> καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶ βότρυας κρεμάσωμεν εὐφυῶς,
> ἀσκοὺς δὲ τοῦ τραχήλου σου / κύκλῳ ἐξαρτήσωμεν οἰνηρούς,
> καὶ κράξωμεν εὐτόνως· / ὁ πίνων ἀνενδότως
> οὕτως πομπεύει καταγέλαστα.
>
> Let us place wreaths of vine
> On your head, father Jacob,
> let us fittingly attach grape bunches on your ears,
> And hang all around wine bags on your neck,
> And let us cry out with beautiful melody: so does the unrelenting drinker
> Go around in a ridiculous procession.

The piece of Psellos is all irony and parody. Until just before the very last word, it pretends that the monk Jacob was a worthy object of a canon. The choice to use the hymnographic meter (quite rare for satire or invective, but not altogether absent) is certainly parodic,[85] and can be related to other mockeries of liturgical customs and styles. It is no accident that the very word κανών is all

80 Theodore Prodromos, *Plato-Lover or Leather-Dresser*, in Theodore Prodromos, *Satires*, p. 70, l. 66–71.

81 Constantine the Rhodian, *Invective Poems*, p. 625, v. 30.

82 Michael Psellos, *Poems*, no. 21, v. 202: καταφρονῶ, v. 203: καταπτύω, v. 204: γελῶ σε.

83 Ibid., v. 317.

84 Michael Psellos, *Poem* 22, vv. 155–60.

85 Karolos Mitsakis, "Byzantine and Modern Greek Parahymnography," *Studies in Eastern Chant* 5 (1990): 9–76 for other examples of inapposite use of hymnographic meters (not all of them parodic).

over the place in various meanings in Psellos' text, as if to hold the object of parody constantly in the mind of the audience. Psellos also imitates the particular style and vocabulary of hymnography. The specific verb form κράξωμεν in the quoted passage, for instance, clearly recalls the *kontakia* of Romanos.[86] The tension between the very recognizable formal qualities of one genre and the rather irreverent and inapposite content is a typical example of successful parody. It may be compared to how the demes, in their song for Maurice for example, used the same formal framework as in their songs of praise, but now turned to blame.

This ironic praise raises in this last strophe a climax: in the vein of many kontakia and canones, the audience is called upon at the end to give due praise to the subject. The image conjured up is that of a triumphal procession, and just as in the mock processions we encounter in the historiographical sources, all elements are present, but inverted: this poem clearly hints at a Bacchic procession, fitting for the bibulous Jacob. The discourse of ironic praise is only being shattered at the very end with the last word καταγέλαστα: ridiculously, to be laughed at. One can almost imagine how this word, at the end of the performance, would trigger the laughter that the audience of Psellos' parody was waiting to unleash. It unequivocally confirms that ridicule is the goal of this piece.

Derision is an unstable act fraught with ethical difficulties, even the more so in Byzantium where normative discourse proclaimed suspicion of laughter. To begin with, it is striking that the very fact of performing invective could again be ammunition for abuse. Psellos reproaches Sabbaïtes as being "a tongue ready for slander" (v. 129), who picks out of the art of rhetoric only those things that can hurt. Also Constantine states, at the onset of his exchange with Theodore Paphlagon, that he did not want to perform mockery (σκώπτειν), but just to play a bit (παίζων), without any envy (φθόνος) involved.[87] His adversary, on the other hand, allegedly wanted to do just that: full of envy and jealousy, he has proceeded to deride someone who had done nothing wrong. Abuse is in itself degrading to the abuser. This is also the meaning of the shocking and quite frequent metaphor of "a mouth full of dung," or "feces on lips,"[88] attributed to the one who has (supposedly) initiated the invective. Many of these pieces mention the reluctance to take up the fight: derision would defile their

86 There are eight occurrences of this exact form in Romanos' genuine hymns.

87 Constantine the Rhodian, *Invective Poems*, p. 627, v. 18, to be corrected from πέζων in Matranga's text.

88 The metaphor is very frequent in the exchange of Geometres and Stylianos; see van Opstall, "Pleasure of mudslinging," esp. 790. See also, for instance, Michael Psellos, *Poem* 21, v. 86: ὦ κοπρίας γέμουσα γλῶσσα μυρίας.

mouth. It is beneath them to engage in invective, but they are forced to do so because of the insolence of the opponent. To give but one example: Theodore Prodromos' verse invective *Against Barys* begins with a lengthy preface where the author justifies his choice to write a lampoon, among other things asking the (supposed?) audience: "Should I honor my sworn guarantees that I would not blunt my pen by writing a vituperation (*psogos*)?"[89]

Along the same line of thinking, being inclined to mockery can be identified as "slanderous" (φιλολοίδορος), and thus contribute to a negative character portrayal. Such is the case for the Emperor Andronikos II, said to be φιλολοίδορος in Niketas Choniates' *History*, when he had indulged in a very typical joke (σκῶμμα): a pun on someone's name because he limped.[90]

This contribution could only give some hints as to how the Greek establishes a moral hierarchy of σκῶμμα, ὕβρις, λοιδορία, χλευασμός, παροινία, and the like; this semantic disentanglement with strong cultural and ethical overtones would require a more fine-tuned study. Related to this, one could proceed to investigate how texts make physiological distinctions and evaluate emotional expressions. It is evident that when authors attribute scowling or loud laughter to a person, this contributes to his or her diabolization. For example, in the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, there are two scenes of public degradation and hostile acclamations, where the reviled Emperor Constantine V is said to "laugh out loud."[91] Without doubt, this loud laughter is a sign of moral depravity.

It may be clear from these preliminary observations that derision has its risks. It can easily backfire. Instead of humiliating others, the joker can eventually find himself to be the one who is humiliated. That was also the risk that Kekaumenos was so anxious about. Derision is by definition a game of which the rules are not always clear. Understanding this game—that is, its rewards, its risks, its assumptions (and misunderstandings)—remains for these reasons an attractive goal for Byzantine scholarship to pursue.

89 Theodore Prodromos, *Historical Poems*, ed. Wolfram Hörandner, *Theodoros Prodromos: historische Gedichte* (Vienna, 1974), p. 59, vv. 5–6: τηροῦμεν ἡμῶν τὰς ἐνόρκους ἐγγύας // μὴ κάλαμον ξέοντες εἰς γράμμα ψόγου. See also Przemysław Marciniak, "Prodromos, Aristophanes and a Lustful Woman," *Byzantinoslavica* 73 (2015): 23–34, at 25.

90 Niketas Choniates, *History*, p. 122.

91 Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger*, ed. Auzépy, §40, p. 140, l. 7 and §66, p. 168, l. 6: μέγα γελάσας.