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†ΡΙΝΗ ΕΣΩΟΠΕ ΜΑΣ

—Judges 6.23
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Humor in Byzantine Letters of the Tenth to Twelfth Centuries

Some Preliminary Remarks

FLORIS BERNARD

I believe that a witty man can converse about anything more easily than about wit itself.

Cicero

Ceux qui cherchent des causes métaphysiques au rire ne sont pas gais.

Voltaire

These two maxims highlight the problem of writing studies like this one: any attempt to analyze humor in a serious way is doomed to fail.1 When trying to describe the essence of humor in an objective, scientific way, the humor itself slips through our fingers and we fail to contribute any insight beyond the near-magical revelation that humor, in a spontaneous situation, brings to the knowledgeable hearer.

Humor and scientific discourse operate according to two very different, even mutually exclusive, principles. Humor (by which I also mean witticisms, playful language, jibes, and so forth) relies on tacit understanding rather than factual knowledge, on subtle insights and real-life experience rather than formally established rules. Humor works exactly because it does not explain itself. It is commonly agreed that having to explain a joke kills the fun instantly. Humor is often blatantly irrational and illogical. That is humor’s force, too. Instead of logically coming to a conclusion, it brings things together in a surprising and incongruous way. Its success occurs in the instant when it unexpectedly provides a resolution of two entirely different levels of understanding, which in normal discourse are kept apart.2 One of these levels is implicit or taboo, but is suddenly confronted with another more pedestrian level of understanding, allowing us to see the world in a new light. Instead of, or exactly because of, this logical incongruity, humor makes sense to us on a scale entirely separate from rational argumentation. Therefore it can express thoughts we might not otherwise give voice to, ideas we have not been consciously

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1 For good overviews of theories of humor, see the still useful D. H. Monro, Argument of Laughter (Melbourne, 1951); and J. Morreal, Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor (Malden, MA, 2009). For the epigraphs, see Cicero, De oratore 2.217 and Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique, s.v. “rire.”

2 S. Attardo, Linguistic Theories of Humor (Berlin and New York, 1994), which also has an excellent overview of earlier theories.
formulating. At that moment of revelation, humor does not expect more language, more discourse, more reflection, and especially not scientific rationalization. Instead, it expects a bodily reaction: laughter.

Since humor operates within a framework totally different from normal, “logical,” discourse, it is able to address issues and ideas that normally do not come to the surface. It lays bare ambiguities in the dominant discourse of a given society, and gives people an opportunity to vent their opinions or express their ideas on issues that are normally difficult to discuss (sex, food, religion, and others). Because humor can circumvent social decorum and has direct access to thoughts latent within us, it is able to bring emotional relief. But this also means that humor can be subversive. It often embodies a conflict of social norms, a transgression of conventions. From an anthropological perspective, jokes challenge dominant ideas of order. Humor is a less controlled domain of speech, and hence a domain where criticism can be expressed, albeit in an indirect way. In medieval societies, where free speech was suppressed in many ways, humor fulfilled an important role in expressing divergent voices. Humor is by definition a social act. Humor is a potent agent in the chemistry of human relationships and the makeup of communities. Humor defines communities more sharply and aggressively (and hence also more effectively) than other discourse precisely because it tests people on their sensitivity to hazardous or implicit issues. Hence, humor can confirm shared mentalities and shared ideologies.

I shall consider here humor in a broad sense, also including witty and playful speech, banter, and mockery. Play, as Johan Huizinga brilliantly demonstrated, is a series of acts governed by rules that take place in a well-defined situation demarcated from “real life.” Play also needs a certain tension, a certain risk, in order to be effective. As he argues, play is inherent to human culture and can very easily, even in intellectual and literary pursuits, lead to a sportful contest. The function of play, and the need to demarcate it, will be important issues in the letters I study here. I will not delve deeper into the issue of irony, because this is often complicated by (imitation of) philosophical tradition, but the subject is potentially very rewarding.

The analysis of historical humor and play, especially of a culture that has become somewhat alien to us, is a hazardous enterprise. As Guy Halsall notes, it is very difficult to develop hermeneutical tools to understand humor from the past. One would need to reconstruct the whole system of social norms and codes. Humor is usually based on knowledge shared intimately between speaker and audience. It is often also essential, as we will see, that this intimately shared knowledge is inaccessible to outsiders. And more than anything else, humor depends on context, on tacit presuppositions that are not easily conveyed across different cultures. Sometimes we find that Byzantines are funny when they may not have intended to be so. We perceive some statements as so vastly exaggerated that we believe they cannot have been meant in earnest. Conversely, Byzantine jokes are often lost on us: we do not appreciate them, or worse.

5 The so-called “relief theory” of humor was made popular by Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1905; repr. 1970).
8 See also H. Bergson, *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (Genève, 1900; repr. 1924), 18 and 25–26.
we do not even recognize them. This is because humor is based on exactly those things for which we have no record: tacit social conventions, hidden mentalities, unspoken prejudices, and invisible social norms. But it is also for this reason that the cultural historian can gain so much from studying humor. It reveals information that otherwise would remain in the dark.\(^\text{13}\)

Scholars were slow to discover humor in Byzantium,\(^\text{14}\) both in its literary texts and in its visual art.\(^\text{15}\) Byzantine literature is generally portrayed as serious and even dour, although some exceptions have been recognized. Hans-Georg Beck summed up this stereotype when he wrote: “What one always feels is lacking in this [Byzantine] literature, is humor, even if it is not entirely absent.”\(^\text{16}\) Gustav Soyter’s overview of humorous texts is quite slim, and letters are not treated.\(^\text{17}\)

Christianity is mostly portrayed as aggressively inhibiting, and even prohibiting, laughter and the comic element in culture. In his important history of laughter in Greek culture, Stephen Halliwell saw a strong “anti-gelastic” element in early Christian theological writing.\(^\text{18}\) The Church Fathers state on many occasions that Christians must take control of their emotions, feel sadness for the wretched state of this mundane life, and for the inherited sin that weighs on humans. Moreover, there is no biblical evidence that Christ himself ever laughed.\(^\text{19}\) In one of John Chrysostom’s homilies are particularly strong condemnations of humor, playful language, and laughter.\(^\text{20}\)

However, upon closer examination of patristic texts, a more nuanced position emerges. In one of his rules, Basil of Caesarea states that one should not laugh out loud, since this shows a lack of restraint, but a smile is a sign of a harmonious soul.\(^\text{21}\) Clement of Alexandria condemns buffoons and jesters but allows for a smile, even saying that surleness is unbecoming, arguing that all facial and bodily expression of emotions should show restraint.\(^\text{22}\) It would seem that moderate humor and moderate laughter (smiles) are acceptable. Perhaps our view is distorted by the situation in western Christianity, where medieval Latin struggled to unequivocally express the concept of a smile.\(^\text{23}\) Moreover, it would be wrong to suppose that general behavior simply complied to these theological and philosophical prescriptions, or even that a majority of the populace was aware of them.\(^\text{24}\)

Considering the reticence in scholarship about the more frivolous aspects of Byzantine culture, Margaret Alexiou famously asked: “Can it be that it is Byzantinists, not Byzantines themselves, who lack a sense of humor?”\(^\text{25}\) Since then, Byzantinists have made greater effort to understand and study humor, and as a result our view of Byzantium as an overly serious, static, stifled society has changed. The Ptochoprodromic poems especially have been at the center of attention: scholars have pointed out the sexual innuendos, scatological jokes, and humoristic references to everyday life that are abundantly present in these poems.\(^\text{26}\) In historiographical texts, we find evidence for convivial

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laughter, practical jokes, and punning emperors. The Byzantines took an interest in the *Philologos*, an ancient collection of jokes. Many jokes took place in the court, which seems to have been a space that allowed a certain license and nonconformity, also allowing a place for the court jester (νιμωσ). Much humor can be found in literature that is called “satirical,” and this humor often equates with aggressive abuse and deliberate humiliation. Laughing in late antique and medieval texts is often “laughing at”: jokes and laughter are chiefly made at the expense of others. In Byzantium there was a strong sense that being ridiculed in public was a shameful experience. Paul Magdalino’s study of derision in Byzantium shows that mockery was targeted at specific persons, with the aim of damaging the reputation of enemies.

The kind of humor that has emerged from the studies made since Alexiou’s statement deviates from social, moral, and sexual norms. It is decidedly non-conformist. More learned instances of humor are often dismissed in scholarship, because, allegedly, the texts of the elite give us a distorted perspective that filters out the more irreverent, and hence more interesting, forms of humor. The humor of the intellectual elite is only occasionally thought to reflect the humor of the *homo byzantinus*, in whose everyday life many scholars are interested. Yet this fact itself may be interesting. From a sociological perspective, humor is used as an important force in defining the elite and creating distinctions. Therefore, a study of the more elitist forms of humor can fruitfully enrich our knowledge of laughter and the comic. The influence of the literary theorist Michail Bakhtin may actually have exercised a pernicious effect on scholarship. Bakhtin’s notions of the carnivalesque and the liberating force of scatological humor have influenced many studies on Byzantine humor. But as Aron Gurevich notes, Bakhtin presents a one-sided view of medieval culture, privileging inversion and masquerade to the detriment of other aspects of humor and laughter.

Humor in letters is particularly intellectual and cerebral, conforming to rather than challenging the existing social order. It presents wit and playfulness rather than outright jokes. But what makes this kind of humor interesting is that it is anchored in a transparent communicative situation. In letters, we see humor in action, communicated from one person to another. We see how relationships are shaped, how solidarities are forged, and how common ethics are celebrated or fine-tuned. However, the quest for humor in letters is impeded by the fact that jokes are often based on information that is privately shared by the letter writer and recipient. The letter is by definition an expression and communication that is privately shared by the letter writer and hence a letter. Moreover, it is difficult to gauge the effect of concrete instances of humor, since

and the Everyday”; and idem, “Laughing All the Way to Byzantium” (n. 15 above).


28 See B. Baldwin, *The Philologos or Laughter-Lover* (Amsterdam, 1981), iv, for the Byzantine manuscript transmission; see also “Humor,” *ODB* 2:956 (which is a very brief entry).


32 G. Halsall, *Funny Foreigners: Laughing with the Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, in *Humour, History and Politics* (n. 12 above). This seems to be the conclusion one must also draw from the observations made in J. Hagen, “Laughter in Procopius’s *Wars*,” in *Classen, Laughter in the Middle Ages* (n. 12 above), 141–64.


34 Bakhtin features prominently in Alexiou, “Poverty and the *Ecriture*” (n. 25 above), and Haldon, “Humor and the Everyday” (n. 15 above).

we have only a few examples in which both halves of two-sided correspondence are extant.

Foteini Kolovou includes a brief discussion of humor and irony in her introduction to the edition of letters of Eustathios of Thessalonike.\(^{36}\) She notes that contemporaries appreciated his refined wit, and points to some ironic self-portraits, supported by virtuoso double speech (amphoteroglossia). There exist also some publications on humor and irony in the letters of the fourth-century Church Fathers, especially Basil of Caesarea.\(^{37}\) These studies do not seek to explain humor out of a reconstruction of the contemporary norms, codes, and mental frameworks, but rely instead on our own interpretive framework, that is, our perception of what is humorous. As an example, I should note that all these studies marvel at the strange mixture of details of everyday life and lofty subjects, resulting in a typically humorous clash. However, this perceived incongruity may be just a natural feature of the Byzantine letter, which was both literary and real, fulfilling practical goals as well as (certainly in Basil’s case) providing moral edification and theological discussion.

The epistolary networks in the tenth to twelfth centuries chiefly consisted of high-level officials, both in ecclesiastical hierarchy and state administration. In their letters, these members of the intellectual elite typically treat each other as “friends,” revering philia as an ideal.\(^{38}\) The concept of philia implied devotion to intellectualism. Letters are by definition a friendly genre. No wonder that we encounter especially friendly humor—no outright abuse or crude jokes here (in significant contrast to some poetry of the period). This is a world of refinement, of elegance, and of good manners.

In the following, I avoid the trap about which Cicero and Voltaire warned us. I will not try to provide an answer to the question of what was funny in Byzantium and why, although some patterns will emerge. Rather I will seek to clarify the cultural frameworks in which humor was appreciated, what role Byzantine letter writers attributed to it, and how it helped to shape a social and cultural identity. Also, I do not rely on my own interpretive strategy to identify jokes. Instead, I use as my point of departure some examples in which we can identify reactions to humor (and wit, playfulness, mockeries, etc.), or humorous passages explicitly marked as such by the author, be it in the letter itself, in a follow-up letter, or in an external text. First, I deal with misunderstandings: letters that try to clear up a failed joke in a previous letter. Second, I give some examples in which the anticipated reaction of laughter or smiles is described (or prescribed) in the text itself. Third, I discuss banter and playful speech that is announced as such, for various reasons. And finally, I look at a remarkable text in which a Byzantine author analyzes his own humor.

**Asteiotes**

To understand the social and cultural background of humor, wit, and playfulness in learned Byzantine literature one must first understand the idea of *asteiotes*.\(^{39}\) It is a concept inherited from classical antiquity; *urbanitas* (whence English “urbanity”) is its Latin counterpart.\(^{40}\) It refers to the personal qualities of a city dweller, qualities that are beyond reach for someone living outside the city. But it does not refer only to education and the acquisition of formal knowledge. Rather,


37 G. Tsananas, “Humor bei Basilius dem Grossen,” in *Philoxenia: Prof. Dr. Bernhard Kotting gewidmet von seinen griechischen Schülern*, ed. A. Kallis (Münster, 1980), 259–79; and K. Nikolakopoulos, “Der Humor als rhetorischer Ausdruck bei Basileios dem Grossen,” *Orthodoxes Forum: Zeitschrift des Instituts für Orthodoxe Theologie der Universität München* 23, no. 2 (2009): 147–55, who concludes that Basil uses humor to achieve pedagogical aims and moral edification. See also C. Macé, “L’ironie dans les *Discours de Grégoire de Nazianze*,” in *Approches de la Troisième Sophistique: Hommages à Jacques Schamp*, ed. E. Amato, A. Roduit, and M. Steinrück (Brussels, 2006), 469–76. See also M. Mullett, “On friendship in letters,” in *Foteini Kolovou includes a brief discussion of humor and irony in her introduction to the edition of letters of Eustathios of Thessalonike. She notes that contemporaries appreciated his refined wit, and points to some ironic self-portraits, supported by virtuoso double speech (amphoteroglossia). There exist also some publications on humor and irony in the letters of the fourth-century Church Fathers, especially Basil of Caesarea. These studies do not seek to explain humor out of a reconstruction of the contemporary norms, codes, and mental frameworks, but rely instead on our own interpretive framework, that is, our perception of what is humorous. As an example, I should note that all these studies marvel at the strange mixture of details of everyday life and lofty subjects, resulting in a typically humorous clash. However, this perceived incongruity may be just a natural feature of the Byzantine letter, which was both literary and real, fulfilling practical goals as well as (certainly in Basil’s case) providing moral edification and theological discussion.

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it includes all the aspects of personal deportment that come from education and knowledgeable urban company. As such, an urbane man is cheerful company, he is elegant and careful in his pronunciation, the use of his voice, and his body language, and he punctuates his conversation with witty remarks and delectable sayings without ever being disingenuous or garrulous. As such, asteiotes values a smile over laughter, spontaneity rather than studied pedantry.

For Byzantine intellectuals, asteiotes and related ideas (notably the qualification of politikos) emphasize the distinction between the urban elite in Constantinople and the rest of the population. Asteiotes kept intruders at bay who wanted to make use of the opportunities of education to gain promotion and access to the elite. Precisely because asteiotes depends on the use of less formal, more subjective traits, it is a powerful tool for the self-identification of a group.

In a letter to a former classmate, Michael Psellos elaborates on the value of asteiōmata, “urbane jokes” or “witticisms,” to their friendship, as the friend often lagged behind in sending letters:\footnote{Michael Psellos, \textit{Letter} 17, ed. E. Kurtz and F. Drexl, \textit{Scripta Minora} (Milan, 1942), 2:12.25–29. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.}

\begin{quote}
Νηλεής σὺ καὶ ἀμελήχος μηδὲ παλαιὰς μεμνημένος φιλίας μηδὲ κοινῆς παιδείας, μὴ μαθημάτων, μὴ δόσα παιδικά προσημεύματα τε καὶ κατασκεύασμα.

ὅν ἐγώ μὲν ἐτί μεμνημαι, προσθήσω δὲ, ὅτι καὶ μεμνήσομαι.
\end{quote}

You are merciless and harsh, since you don’t remember our old friendship and the education we shared, the lessons, and all our boyish games and jokes. I still remember them—even more: I will remember them also in the future.

The letter refers to a nigh universal phenomenon: that of the old boy network. As the letter stresses, the shared education of friends is not only important for the knowledge gained, but also for the development of common behavior. Cliques at school form their own codes regulating their behavior, and these codes remain impenetrable to others. Because of shared career paths, these little communities prefigure later relationships of power and friendship in which these codes remain important. This holds especially true for the mid-eleventh-century environment of Psellos, in which talented courtiers and intellectuals based their influence and careers on education. Psellos expresses in the letter above the importance of games and jokes in this process of male socialization. In another letter, he expressly opposes asteiotes to a monastic lifestyle, thus marking it as a defining feature of his own social group.\footnote{Michael Psellos, \textit{Letter} 54, ed. K. Sathas, \textit{Μεσαιωνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη} (Venice and Paris, 1876), 287.2.} Many of Psellos’s letters thrive on friendly relationships created through education,\footnote{F. Bernard, “Educational Networks in the Letters of Michael Psellos” (forthcoming).} and references to games and banter are never far away. In a letter to his former pupils Constantine and Nikephoros, nephews of the patriarch Michael Keroullarios, Psellos, in an effort to amuse them, offers to play a game, just as they did in the past when he was their teacher.\footnote{K. Snipes, “A Letter of Michael Psellus to Constantine the Nephew of Michael Cerularios,” \textit{GRBS} 22 (1981): 89–107.} Michael Choniates, too, in a letter to a close friend, argues that the playful but sophisticated games in which they indulged during their youth formed the basis of their friendship.\footnote{Michael Psellos, \textit{Letter} 263, ed. K. Sathas, \textit{Michaelis Choniatae Epistolae} (Berlin, 1903), esp. lines 2–6.}

The importance of elegant banter and playfulness in the behavioral code of this social environment is echoed in many letters. In a letter to an unidentified high-ranking official, Psellos says that he still remembers the dinner table talk and games he and his friend once shared. He praises the lightheartedness of his company, his friendly manners, and his graceful smile.\footnote{Psellus, \textit{Letter} 146, ed. Kurtz and Drexl, esp. 172.8–13.} In another letter, he mentions “graceful laughter” as one of the habits of friendship, alongside embraces, addresses, and gestures.\footnote{Psellus, \textit{Letter} 263, ed. Kurtz and Drexl, 309.8–9: “χαρίεντι γέλωσι.”} And in a letter to his good friend Eustratios Choirosphaktes he mentions how much he misses their gatherings and conversations, when “we sometimes bantered, and sometimes were serious,” that are now replaced by a letter. He also brings to mind the cheerful spirit and the “sweet laughter” of their shared friends.\footnote{Psellus, \textit{Letter} 54, ed. P. Gautier, “Quelques lettres de Psellos inédites ou déjà éditées,” \textit{REB} 44 (1986): 111–97, at 176.16–17;} In the same vein, Michael Italikos evokes in a letter to Lizix the sweet laughter that they
share with their common friend Theodore Prodromos, and the pleasure they give to each other. The urbanity expected in letters seems to be an extension of the urbanity expected in conversation when friends of this caliber met in person.

One can thus see how the common ethos of asteiotes also includes a conditioning of emotions: cheerfulness and laughter, both of a moderated and elegant kind, are held in high esteem. Emotions are central to letters, in the sense that letters frequently describe emotions and attach great importance to them. Letters bring genuine joy, or at least consolation. We should not underestimate the value of letters as entertainment in a world without mass communication and an empire in which administrative realities made it necessary for peers to be geographically separated from each other. Laughter and, even more commonly, smiles are often mentioned as desirable or expected emotional reactions to letters. Psellos describes as follows his reaction upon receiving a letter from a friend: “At that moment, I realized that not only sadness and tears have a great impact on a person, making him thunderstruck, but also enjoyment and laughter shake and agitate someone when they violently set upon him.” Psellos then enumerates all the enjoyment he found in the letter, mentioning among other features the “urbanity [asteiotes] of his syllables.” Psellos also laughs himself when reading others’ letters. Theophylact of Ochrid also expects his friend to smile at a letter of his, and, in a passage which is interesting from many points of view, he describes another kind of laughter caused by the defects of a letter. Michael Choniates describes how his friend made Michael “smile and be moderately exhilarated with his letters.” Michael’s letter itself is an elaborate game involving many allusions. It is significant, from the perspective of moral inhibitions with regard to laughter, that Michael tones down the desired emotional reaction: not outright laughter, but smiles and moderate mirth are the emotional expressions he clings to.

Misunderstandings
In oral communication, jokes, banter, irony, playful derision, and other humorous devices are marked as such by extratextual means: intonation, body language, etc. In turn, the only appropriate reaction to humor is laughter, which instantly removes any doubt about the seriousness of what has been said—especially useful when the joke actually includes an insult or a potential offense. Letters, in contrast, lack these means (although there are some extratextual options, such as the messenger and the gift): in most cases, the text had to convey the play on its own. Misunderstandings were much more likely to arise in letters.

Derision is particularly at stake here: mockeries, jibes, and irreverent remarks. These often seek to transgress the apparent rules of correct social behavior. Mockeries in letters are (nearly) all meant to remain friendly, but they involve a great risk: where does friendly teasing stop and real ridicule begin? Stephen Halliwell has made the very useful distinction between playful and consequential laughter, pointing out that the two are very close to each other and only a few contextual factors mark the difference. Byzantines, so inclined to abuse, were conscious of the thin line between the two. Kekaumenos’s Strategikon, for

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56 Theophylact of Ochrid, Letter 60.34–35.
57 Michael Choniates, Letter 106.43–44: “ἐπιμειδίασε καὶ δικαίωμας γεράμενον.”
example, warns against buffoonery, since a playful joke can easily backfire and become real abuse. But why do this, if it is so risky? Sociologists have pointed out that risk is a necessary element in a social group that claims some exclusivity. The members of this group continually test each other to prove their own worth. The art of playful derision implies a tacit understanding that the recipient will not be offended. Members of a social group establish a presumption of trust. Pierre Bourdieu explains how the playful treatment of rules and conventions, sometimes slightly transgressing them, is a hallmark of the truly knowledgeable actor in a given social field and carries significant social prestige. An alternative boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable is formed, a boundary that is impenetrable for outsiders. Knowing when to "take a joke well" and when to hazard an apparent insult testifies to a sensibility of tacit conventions within a certain social group. Therefore, playful derision is a strong unifying agent of friendship and at the same time a dividing force between a social group and the outside world.

I wish to discuss here some letters that respond to a reaction of the recipient to an earlier letter by the same author. In the follow-up letter, the author tries to clear up a misunderstanding that arose because of playful derision in his first letter. These accounts give us unique insight into some assumptions behind joking and teasing that might otherwise remain unspoken. Normally a Joker does not explain the framework of shared assumptions that underlies the joke, precisely because the humor arises when this framework appears in a surprising, novel way. However, if the joke is missed and instead interpreted on the level of "normal" discourse, the speaker is compelled to explain anew the rules of the game to avoid damaging their relationship. The fact that quite a few such letters exist suggests that joking, teasing, and playful derision were widespread in Byzantine letter writing (with the majority of instances completely eluding us). A first example is a letter of Michael Psellos to the epist on deeseon, an important functionary, but not a member of the inner circle of Psellos's best friends. What went wrong? In a previous letter, Psellos had teased his friend somewhat, probably about a physical feature. This prompted an indignant reply. Now Psellos tries to repair the damage. He argues that his previous letter was full of praises, but his friend only had eyes for one derisive remark made in passing. Psellos does not deny that he had poked fun at his friend: twice he uses the verb skópetai (to mock). But his friend took it the wrong way and was insulted. By reacting this way, says Psellos, he does not comply with the "rule." The use of this word indicates that the conventions for the urbane community were quite strongly felt. Psellos states anew the expected properties of an "urbane man," and explains the consequences of his friend’s reaction:

ἐνα σεμνὸς φαίνῃ καὶ περιττός, ἀναίρεις μὲν λόγον χάριτας, ἀναίρεις δὲ φιλίας θάρσος, μοισις δὲ γλώττης χαριεντισμός, καὶ ἀδετεὶς παιδιάν, ἢ μόνη τῷ βίῳ καταμεμιγμένη ἱλαρὰν ἡμῶν ποιεῖ τὴν ζωήν· καὶ σοὶ μὲν εὐφυῶς ἔχει τὸ σῶμα, ἡμεῖς δὲ παίζοντες ἵσως τὴν μορφήν ἐπισκώπτομεν.

In order to appear solemn and exaggerated, 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 include it in our lifestyle. You surely have a magnificent body, but I perhaps make fun of its appearance while jesting.

Psellos stresses that his mockery was made only "while jesting," marking it as playful derision. Significantly, Psellos links the appreciation of joking with the "audacity of friendship" (φιλίας θάρσος). In Byzantine society, speech was conditioned by social hierarchies, and Byzantine letter writers show themselves to be very

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59 Kekaumenos, Strategikon, ed. M. D. Spadaro, Raccomandazioni e consigli di un galantuomo: Strategikon (Alessandria, 1998), §155, p. 196. See also Magdalino, "Tourner en dérision" (n. 12 above), 56.
61 P. Bourdieu, Le sens pratique (Paris, 1980), 57–60. See also Halsall, "Introduction" (n. 12 above), 12.
62 Of course, there are more examples in Byzantine epistolography than the ones quoted here within our chronological framework.
sensitive to this, notably in the forms of address they use. A friendly relationship implies a certain freedom of speech, some space for teasing and irreverence. Psellos also links a humorous sensibility to an appreciation of rhetorical charm. His friend had remained “solemn,” which could in other circumstances be a positive value, but which in this limited milieu was not always appreciated. Moreover, Psellos again underlines the consolatory, almost therapeutic value of play.

He goes on to argue (complete with examples) that a “true philosopher” does not really care about external appearance, and thus should be able to appreciate a joke about his looks. After this, the playful/consequential opposition is again brought up:

So apparently you did not take the meaning of the letter in a good way, not as a joke, my dear—est soul? I instead, I almost even danced when I composed it, and I was sure that you would dance together with me and participate in the performance.

Psellos places his joke under the aegis of shared appreciation for refined humor. Psellos repeats this later in the letter: he has written this letter and set up his joke so that Constantine could laugh and enjoy, and praise Psellos for his ingenuity. Laughter features prominently in this letter, and it is clear that genuine enjoyment and fun were deemed important ingredients of epistolary exchange. After the exordium above, Psellos argues that just like lovers teasing each other, or roses also giving thorns, so charm and pleasantries should be accompanied by some barbs. In other words, jibes are allowed and even considered desirable in this “joking relationship.” The metaphor of the theater is present throughout the entire letter. Psellos likens his joke to a theatrical performance. In order to make his joke effective, he says, he faithfully mimicked the character, the situation, and the external features, just as an actor would. Psellos unveils here the workings of successful humor. A joke works when it faithfully garbs itself as serious reality before being unmasked. Also important in this letter is the opposition of “real” insult and a mockery made “in jest.” The word παιδιά and its cognates again feature prominently.

He repeats his sentiment from the introduction: “Don’t you understand that I wrote this in jest [παίζων]?” Elsewhere he states that his letter was meant as Constantine’s “toy” (τὰ σὰ παιδικά). Play is the overarching concept that allows Psellos to breach normal social conventions. The recurrent juxtaposition of play and seriousness, in the letters of Psellos and others, may owe something to Plato’s dialogues.

On two occasions, Psellos had to fine-tune his relationship with John Mauropous, his erstwhile teacher and close friend. One letter indicates that Mauropous had reacted indignantly to a teasing letter.

Psellos is forced to carefully distinguish between playful teasing and real offense (in Greek, the term ὕβρις is a very severe one; σκῶπτω refers to mockery). Psellos states that his jokes were just a game, literally, but apparently the game could be more dangerous than it seems. “Play” (παιδιά and cognates) is a central idea; in the fragments of the letter quoted above, it occurs three times. It serves as a warranty that a statement should not be taken at face value. It is also represented as something absolutely necessary in the liberal and urbane lifestyle that Psellos propagates.

Another letter of Psellos, addressed to his good friend and former pupil Constantine, nephew of the patriarch Michael Keroullarios, begins thus:

If someone really had offended you, what would you have done, since, when being mocked in jest, you did not take this pleasure in good part?

Psellos is forced to carefully distinguish between playful teasing and real offense (in Greek, the term ὕβρις is a very severe one; σκῶπτω refers to mockery). Psellos states that his jokes were just a game, literally, but apparently the game could be more dangerous than it seems. “Play” (παιδιά and cognates) is a central idea; in the fragments of the letter quoted above, it occurs three times. It serves as a warranty that a statement should not be taken at face value. It is also represented as something absolutely necessary in the liberal and urbane lifestyle that Psellos propagates.

Another letter of Psellos, addressed to his good friend and former pupil Constantine, nephew of the patriarch Michael Keroullarios, begins thus:

Μή ποτε οὐ καλῶς, οὐδὲ ὡς παιδιάν ἐδέξω τὸν νοῦν τῆς ἐπιστολῆς, φιλτάτη ψυχή; ἐγὼ δὲ μικρὸ δεῖν καὶ ὠρχούμην, ὅτε ταύτην ἐδημιούργουν, καὶ σέ γε ἵππην συνορχήσατο μοι καὶ μετασχεῖν τοῦ θέατρου.


65 Psellos, Letter 12, ed. Sathas, 4.7.14–16.

66 Ibid., 46.8.17–18: “ἵν’ ἔχοις καὶ γελᾷν καὶ τρυφᾷν, καί με τῆς γλώττης ἐγκωμιάζειν.”

67 Ibid., 46.11: παιδιά and l.36: ἀντιπαίζομεν; 46.8.11: παιδιάν and l.29: προσπαῖξαι καὶ παιδιάν.

68 See for instance Plato, Gorgias 48.11.

69 Εἰ δέ τίς σοι ἀληθῶς τὴν ὕβριν προήνεγκε, τί ἂν ἔποιήθη, ὃπότε οὗτός σκωπθεῖς μετὰ παιδιάς οὐκ εὐμενῶς τὴν χάριν ἐδέξω;

70 Psellos, Letter 184, ed. Sathas, 467–69.
from Psellus. Psellus argues that his previous letter was meant to be interpreted in an ironic way, as had been the case before. This is of course a significant indication for the presence and importance of irony in letter writing. Psellus faults the overly serious nature of his friend: he thought he knew him as someone who could mix the serious and the playful, but apparently Mauropos is stuck in his severe stance. Thus, Psellus’s call for Mauropos to be more “pleasant” (χαρίεις) once more specifies the behavior expected from an urbanite intellectual. In another letter, Psellus deplores Mauropos’s lack of cheerfulness. According to Psellus, Mauropos risks suppressing completely the charms of friendship, which moderate its solemn character. Psellus did not feel he had the obligation to be somber in his letters, “speaking without a smile,” merely because Mauropos was beset by worries. Receptiveness to joking and resistance against surliness and excessive seriousness are important elements of the asteiotes ideal celebrated in this limited group.

Let us now consider the twelfth-century grammarian and author John Tzetzes, who had to defend himself in a letter to an unidentified bishop. What was the failed joke in this case? Apparently, Tzetzes had received a precious gift from his friend, an encomium, and he had given the appearance of not being grateful for this gift. He says:

 sperma ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἐσμεν οὐκ ἀγνώμονες, κἂνπερ πρὸς σὲ πρότερον ἀκραιφνεστάτη φιλία τὴν παρρησίαν λαβόντες ἠστεϊσάμεθα.

I am not ungrateful, although I have poked fun at you, being so audacious because of our most genuine friendship.

In the verb ἧστεισάμεθα, we recognize the root of asteiotes. Tzetzes had intended to make a friendly and elegant joke. The main argument that Tzetzes adduces is that such jokes are allowed because genuine friendship should imply some license, recalling the “audacity of friendship” that we found in Psellus earlier. Tzetzes twice uses the word παρρησία, here and in the last sentence of his letter. In my view, this term encompasses the available latitude of acceptable speech, as conditioned by social hierarchy. In a friendly relationship, some license may be taken in conversation, even if it is slightly irreverent on the surface. Tzetzes gives here the appearance of bending the usual rules concerning gratitude. In contrast to Psellus, Tzetzes takes the burden of the misunderstanding upon himself. In the last sentence, once more repeating the parresia and the asteion of his enterprise, he admits it may have been a mistake and apologizes. Ultimately, it is the sin of ingratitude with which Tzetzes was accused. As Dmitri Chernoglazov points out, the giving of gifts in Byzantium required the appropriate ceremony. Breaking the normal rules of gratitude was possible, but this was a dangerous game, one in which Tzetzes obviously misjudged his audience.

Uncertainty about the consequential or playful nature of mockery can also be gauged from a letter of Michael Choniates in which he expresses his hope that the jibes launched by his friend do not result from real “hate.” Conversely, some letter writers explicitly state that they have taken a joke from their correspondent in a good way. The tenth-century author Symeon Magistros uses this strategy in a response to a letter from the emperor. He praises the qualities of the imperial letter, saying that even if there were some harsh words in it, this is still sweet to “people who have the right taste for these [harsh words].” Someone who is subjected to “beautiful” mockery will not feel insulted: in the Greek we see again the distinction between σκῶμα and ὕβρις, mockery as opposed to real insult. Symeon then enumerates all the laudable stylistic and rhetorical features of the imperial letter,

72 Psellus, Letter 183, ed. Sathas, esp. the passage at 466.11–21.
74 Tzetzes, Letter 16, 30.13–16.
75 Chernoglazov, “Piat’ pisem,” takes a more general perspective, referring to the liberal lifestyle proposed by Tzetzes.
76 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 152.7: “τοὺς καλὰς αὐτῶν γευομένοις.” The letter was accompanied by a gift of cinnamon. Curiously enough, this is likely also the case with the similar letter of Michael Choniates discussed above.
even praising his “effectiveness in mockeries.” The appreciation of mockery works as a socially exclusive force: more educated people understand the arcane rules that underlie the mockery, even if they contravene more formal rules. Derision can only work if both parties understand that no harm is intended, that the mockery is playful. Of course, Symeon does not have much choice here, since he is writing to the emperor. In asymmetrical relationships, the hierarchically superior person has more latitude to mock and tease, while the mocked had better show that he appreciates the joke. The license to mock people at will is a confirmation of social superiority, a phenomenon that sociologists call “downward humor.”

Inscribed Laughter

We have already pointed out that humor in letters has an important impediment to overcome: that of physical separation. There is no possibility for laughing together, which in live conversation immediately makes clear the playful nature of a joke. However, letter writers sometimes resorted to other ways of conveying laughter. They often anticipate the expected reaction of the recipient upon reading their letter. They describe laughter as happening now, as if an oral conversation is taking place. It is a kind of laughter that can be said to be “inscribed” in the text.

For example, in the beginning of a letter in which Psellos addresses a request to Basil Maleses, a good friend of his, the author jokes that no one could be happier than Maleses upon receiving so many requests and entreaties from him. The joke here is that Psellos contravenes expectations: mostly, requests such as this one begin by stating how sorry the letter writer is to bother his friend in such an oppressive way. Psellos radically reverses this by suggesting Maleses should be happy, but he makes sure Maleses cannot take the joke in a bad way:

\[\text{εἰ μὲν οὖν εὐελασίας, ἐπέγνως τῆς φιλίας τὸν χαρακτήρα. εἰ δὲ ἐστύγνασας ὡς ὑβριστήρας, ἐγὼ πάλιν ὑμᾶς τομόν.}\]

If you have now laughed, you have recognized the character of our friendship. But if your face has clouded over, as if you suffered from an offense, I will amend my words.

After this, Psellos lavishes some unconditional praise on Maleses. Psellos apparently felt it necessary to add this clarification. Psellos of course cannot see Maleses’s reaction or even be certain of how he would react. He expects Maleses to laugh, and he sees this laughter as a sign of their friendship. But the joke could have been taken in a bad way too: Psellos anticipates that Maleses could be offended. Of course, this could also be a game in its own right, but it is clear that Psellos is keen to point out how humor should be appreciated in their relationship. Again, the word ὕβρις points to a “real” offense.

The next example, again taken from Psellos’s letter corpus, is somewhat more intricate. Psellos writes to John Doukas, an important patron in the latter part of his life, to whom he often wrote playful letters. The occasion of the letter is John’s gift of truffles. Psellos’s response teems with fanciful explanations, complete with some risqué language, fables, and mythological stories. Then, Psellos openly snubs John’s gift: instead of truffles, he would have preferred meat. Pursuing this quite hazardous course, he closes his letter as follows:

\[\text{πυνθάνομαι δέ σου τῆς πάντα καλλίστης καὶ ἀσυγκρίτου ψυχῆς, καὶ πυνθάνομαι οὐ (μὰ τὴν ἱερὰν καὶ τριπόθητον κεφαλήν) χρειωδῶς, ἀλλὰ ὅλικῶς, ἵν’ ἔχοις τρυφᾶν καὶ γελᾶν. πυνθάνομαι δ’ οὖν· οὐχὶ πατρὶς ἡ πολυύμνητος Παφλαγονία ἐστίν, ὅθεν ἔστι ταρίχη κρέα τὰ ὕεια; τί δ’ οὖν ἐγέλασας; εἰσὶ καὶ παρ’ ἡμῖν ὀδόντες οὐκ ὀπτὰ καὶ ἑφθὰ καὶ ταρίχη ἀλλὰ καὶ ὠμὰ μικροῦ δεῖν ταῦτα θοινούμενοι.}\]

I have a question for you, my most dear and incomparable man, and this question (I swear this by your sacred and beloved head) is not a specific, but a universal question, so that you can enjoy and laugh. So this is my question: don’t you hail from that much-famed land of Paphlagonia, where pickled pork meat comes from? Why did you laugh now? I have teeth
too, and they feast not only on roasted, boiled, or pickled, but also on all but raw meat.

Obviously, Psellus is joking, and this on several levels. First, he snubs the gift, in a gesture that is not unheard of in Byzantine letter writing, but that nevertheless risks being taken badly, as in the example of Tzetzes. Moreover, Byzantine letter writers usually reject gifts because they want more words, but here Psellus asks for another kind of gift, which goes a step further. The normal social conventions, stipulating gratitude for gifts, are ingrained and tacitly agreed upon to such an extent that they can be slightly transgressed. Psellus explores the boundaries of the acceptable. Second, he (albeit with apparent hesitation) refers to Doukas’s Paphlagonian origin. Paphlagonians were the butt of many Byzantine jokes; they were seen as shrewd, unreliable, and boorish. The addition “much-famed” here is undoubtedly ironic.

Psellus sets some mechanisms in place to make sure these jokes will be favorably received. He first states that he intends John to laugh, and then he reacts, seemingly astonished, as if he had already laughed. Psellus has to fill in the laughter himself here, in the past tense, pretending that John has already laughed before he can read any further. The laughter is inscribed in the letter, thus imposing the desired reaction of his correspondent to his risky mockeries.

In another letter, a long enigmatic story of Psellus’s troubles including (as it seems) some sexually shameful details, Psellus says: “You laugh at these things, but I am closer to tears,” and he concludes the letter by saying that he has turned his situation into a “learned game” so that his (unidentified) friend can laugh at another’s misfortune. Psellus realizes that his account is enigmatic. It is a divination game, where the friend has to guess what event in Psellus’s life is meant by the elaborate imagery, which is for us, as far as I can judge, utterly impossible to disentangle.

I have encountered this strategy particularly in the letters of Michael Psellus, but there are some examples in letters of other writers as well. When Eustathios of Thessalonike embarks on a parody of a fable, he announces that this is meant to elicit a “light smile” from his readers (both the addressee Nikephoros Komnenos and his brother). A perhaps more intriguing case is to be found in a letter of John Mauropous that describes the arrival of an arrogant man in the imperial palace (perhaps Psellus?). Mauropous does not identify the man, and his account is interwoven with many allusions. Mauroposes supposes that his friend is now laughing (“But what are you hiding, as you laugh?”), in which case, Mauropous says, he has probably recognized the identity of the man described. This private joke, or rather, riddle, should thus provide the addressee (and other contemporary readers?) with occasion to laugh.

### Banter Announced

Byzantine letters often announce that they will embark on a piece of lighthearted discourse. They usually call this χαριεντισμός (verb: χαριεντίζομαι), which can refer to “banter” or “facetiousness,” but certainly not to an outright joke or buffoonery. In this way, the verb marks utterances that are not meant to be interpreted literally, but which nevertheless, through indirect means such as hyperbole, ironic inversion, or metaphoric substitution, convey a message.

Thus, Psellus closes a passage in which he has likened Mauropous to an Olympic god, by saying: “This was written in jest rather than in earnest.”

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same sentence, he also uses the word περιττός (literally "superfluous"), which is not easy to translate: it refers to purposeless but amusing speech (and hence, it is surely not an unequivocally positive term). Psellos justifies his joke by saying he introduces it into his letter so as to offer his friend his "favorite games," but, he adds, in a "moderate" manner, thereby toning down the humor.\(^91\) In another letter, when Psellos suggests that Constantine Keroullarios will decide a case in favor of a certain man just because he is called Symeon and is notary of the eidikon, he adds that he is saying this in jest (using the verb χαριεντίζομαι).\(^92\) No doubt this points to a private joke.

Theophylact also identifies playful speech in his letters with the verb χαριεντίζομαι. For instance, he permits himself a pleasantry with the empress Maria of Alania.\(^93\) Theophylact jokes that by going to Bulgaria (he was archbishop in Ochrid, then considered part of the region of Bulgaria) the typical stench that Bulgarians exude has also affected him, so just in case, he has sent a piece of scented wood. As usual, several details elude us: to which fragrant wood exactly does Theophylact allude? Also, he seems to play on the expression "to rot" that Byzantines use for a deteriorating personal situation. In any case, this joke is clearly identified as such: introduced by the verb χαριεντίζομαι ("make a pleasantry") and closed by ἀστεῖαζομαι ("make a joke").

Theophylact also uses the verb χαριεντίζομαι to introduce a particularly enigmatic and colorful passage, in which his friend is gently upbraided for not writing quickly enough and is advised to release a friend of him for notary of the region of Bulgaria) the typical stench that Bulgarians exude has also affected him, so just in case, he has sent a piece of scented wood. As usual, several details elude us: to which fragrant wood exactly does Theophylact allude? Also, he seems to play on the expression "to rot" that Byzantines use for a deteriorating personal situation. In any case, this joke is clearly identified as such: introduced by the verb χαριεντίζομαι ("make a pleasantry") and closed by ἀστεῖαζομαι ("make a joke").

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Lucidly analyzed by Stratis Papaioannou. Michael develops a philosophical argument about how souls can be united by friendship. Making abundant use of neo-Platonic imagery, he arrives at the surprising conclusion that friends in fact should not write letters to each other. Then he makes a dramatic U-turn: “This has been . . . my play to you, my friend,” in order to console Theodore; and he adds: “These are games and toys of your Italikos’s language, not his soul’s beliefs.” After this disclaimer, Michael explains that of course they should send letters to each other. He demolishes his own argument, considering it as nothing more than a rhetorical game, instead of a philosophical pursuit. We may recall here that Theodore was a friend with whom Michael shared much laughter (see above, on letter 25).

For me, there is no doubt that many philosophical digressions in Michael Psellos’s letters share the same element of play. In a letter to his good friend and former pupil Pothos, Psellos gives a definition of the Platonic idea, but it turns out that he only does this to exhort Pothos to be benevolent to a friend of Psellos. If I interpret the transitional passage correctly, Psellos then says that this philosophical digression may sound a bit “extraordinary and recherché” to Pothos’s ears, whereupon Psellos restates his message in more socially practical and “true” terms. There are other instances when Psellos signals that he is not actually writing truthfully, on one occasion exclaiming: “So? Do I speak the truth here in my letter? Not!”

Banter, pleasantries, and playfulness are prominent features in Byzantine letters, adding significantly to the enjoyment of letters. Because these playful passages should not be interpreted literally but rather depend on certain clues (privately shared information, knowledge of ancient texts, acquaintance with implicit prejudices, etc.), they require a more refined interpretive strategy from the reader, and I would add, even more from the modern reader.

**Self-Exegesis**

Among the many odd treasures that Byzantine literature has given us, there is one text that is a godsend when it comes to better understanding the underlying mechanics of interpreting and writing Byzantine letters, although it is underappreciated in this light. This is the *Chiliades* (or *Historiae*) of John Tzetzes, a commentary on his own letters composed in political verse. The *Chiliades* is not really a literary analysis or interpretation; instead, it has a clear didactic goal. Like other Byzantine schoolmasters and commentators, Tzetzes explains all the allusions, mythological stories, and difficult words present in his letters, with occasional remarks on the rhetorical techniques and figures. This includes several instances where Tzetzes identifies jokes, irony, or witticisms.

I will discuss only one example. This is a letter to the monk Eliopolos, who had journeyed to Macedonia. This gives Tzetzes an opportunity to direct some jibes at him:

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ἀλλ' ἔρως σου τὴν καρδίαν κατέσχεν, οἶμαι, διὰπυροῦ, Ἡροδότου τῶν ἐγκωμίων ἀκούσαντος τὰς καθ' Ἡσίοδον "πυγοστόλους" ἰδεῖν θυγατέρας Παιόνων, ἢ τὰς κατὰ τὸν χρυσόγλωττον Ὅμηρον πλέον "πυγοὺς ἀεθλοφόρους, αἳ ἀέθλια πυγαῖς ἀροντοί."
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I gather that you have caught a burning desire in your heart, after hearing Herodotus’s praises, to see the Paeonian daughters, who have, to use Hesiod’s words, “adorned their buttocks,” or, to use gold-tongued Homer’s expression, “who have award-winning derrières, and pick up prizes with their buttocks.”

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I gather that you have caught a burning desire in your heart, after hearing Herodotus’s praises, to see the Paeonian daughters, who have, to use Hesiod’s words, “adorned their buttocks,” or, to use gold-tongued Homer’s expression, “who have award-winning derrières, and pick up prizes with their buttocks.”

The reader has to be well versed in ancient literature in order to appreciate the joke. Paeonians was the name for an ancient tribe, roughly inhabiting the area considered as Macedonia by the Byzantines. Herodotus’s
The “pugous” instead of “pegous” is a paragrammatismos and saying “a game of buttocks” instead of “a game of feet,” is a figure that in technical terms is called a parodia. Both figures are useful for jokes, and they are appropriate for comedy.

Tzetzes acknowledges that he was joking (something he does not do in the letter itself), twice using a word related to asteiotes. Moreover, he expands on some techniques that can achieve comic effect. The term παραγραμματισμός, “switching of letters,” refers to the pun he made by slightly altering words. The term παρῳδία, in turn, is defined here as the modification of a quote of an ancient text so as to create a new meaning (not so far removed then, from our definition of “parody”). Theophylact of Ochrid uses the word in this same sense to refer to a literary quote in his own letter that he slightly adapted to the circumstances, so as to achieve a witty effect. Tzetzes’s comments indicate that Byzantines were very conscious of the use of puns and of clever and oblique allusions in letters, and conscious that these devices were meant to be witty. Hence it is surely worthwhile for us to be alert for these devices when investigating humor in Byzantine letters. The joke is there as a puzzle, a riddle, a challenge to reconstruct a hidden meaning on the basis of erudition. However, it needs to be said that there is of course also a salacious aspect to Tzetzes’s joke, which after all ridicules a monk for going after women because of their attractive derrières. There is a remarkable conjunction of intellectual cerebral enjoyment and irreverent humor, which can also be said to be imbued by gender stereotypes. Tzetzes also attracts attention to devices for wittiness (mostly called by him asteios) elsewhere in the Chiliades, and his letters teem with puns and subversions of normal epistolary etiquette, but a discussion of all these examples would exceed the bounds of this study.
The self-exegesis of Tzetzes may help us detect those features that Byzantine letter writers considered useful to achieve humorous effect. I will briefly discuss an earlier, less elaborate, self-analytic passage that also allows a glimpse into the construction of Byzantine humor. A tenth-century letter of Niketas Magistros to Sergios, an influential monk, begins thus.112

Ἐπαιζόν ὅτε πρὸς οὓς ἦν παίζειν ἐπεστέλλον καὶ παραπλοκάς καὶ παρισώσεις ἐποίουν καὶ κωμικῶν ἐπών ἔχρωμην ῥημάτα, χάριν ὡς ἡδυσμά τι καὶ κάλλος τοῖς γράμμασι μηχανώμενος, ἵνα καὶ ψυχάς καὶ τὰς ἀκοὰς τῶν δεχόμενων βέλη γάρ γράμματα. Ἐπεὶ δὲ νῦν πρὸς ἄνδρα τὴν ἀποστροφήν κατ᾽ ἄνδρα κρίνεσθαι τὴν εὐγένειαν ἀξίοντα, ὡς καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν αἰδοῦντα καὶ τύραννοι, γράφειν τὸν κάλαμον κεκινήκαμεν, ἄλλης, ὦ θυμέ, δεῖ τῆς γραφῆς, ἄλλης τῆς ἀστειότητος τῶν λόγων, καὶ γλώττης, εἰ χρὴ τάλγηθε λέγειν, πεπληρωμένης τοῦ πνεύματος.

I was playing when I wrote letters to people with whom it is appropriate to play, inserting poetic quotes and euphonic effects and using little words from comic poetry. I wanted thereby to create grace, as a kind of sweetener, and elegance in my letters, so that the letters would charm the souls and ears of the recipients. But now I move my pen to write an address to a man who requires that nobility should be judged for each man separately, and whose virtue is respected even by dictators. Therefore, my friend, I need another kind of writing, another kind of urbanity in my words, I need a tongue—to tell the truth—that is filled with esprit.

The Greek terms deserve special attention. The editor, Leendert Westerink, points out that Hermogenes uses the word παραπλοκή (line 2), literally “admixture,” to describe citations of poetry in a prose text; and indeed, this is something that Niketas does remarkably often in his letters. The word παρίσωσις (line 3) is in rhetorical theory used for equal balancing of clauses in a sentence,113 but Eustathios of Thessalonike, for example, clearly and repeatedly uses it to refer to assonances and other effects that are based on similar sounds.114 Niketas may also be thinking primarily of puns or other forms of euphonic effects. The “little words from comical verse” (line 3) may refer to a recherché vocabulary, quotes, or expressions typical for comedy.

Niketas specifies that he will leave aside these kinds of puns and allusions. However, he does not abolish all forms of wit, announcing that he will use another kind of asteiotes. Clearly, the term here again refers to a refined kind of humor, acceptable even to serious people. The chief component is esprit: charming wit. Interestingly, Niketas also draws attention to the fact that humor needs to be adjusted to the addressee, according to the laws of appropriateness. He apparently wanted to excuse himself for his humoristic record in earlier letters to other people. Perhaps Sergios had read those letters, and Niketas wanted to ensure that his reputation with the more severe Sergios was not that of a vapid joker.

How to Proceed?

The observations above cannot be anything but preliminary to a more deeply engaging study of humor in Byzantine letters. Many problems still lie ahead of us. Perhaps one of the more intricate is the status of letters as parts of textual collections, as opposed to standalone documents. If a joke between two friends was based on privately shared information, then why did authors (or perhaps sometimes their pupils) include it in a collection of letters and make it public? Were readers of these collections also supposed to appreciate this sometimes very intimate, or context-based, humor? Were some humorous letters (perhaps especially the more pungent examples) left out when the collection was made? Also, there can be no doubt that the original audience included more people than just the addressee—perhaps a group of common friends or the entire household of the recipient. Were some jokes perhaps intended to be


113 LSJ, s.v. “παρίσωσις.”

What they seem at first sight. An insult or an offense, to give an important example, is not necessarily a sign of enmity, quite the contrary: these were deemed an important element of close friendship. A philosophical argument can be elaborated just as a piece of bravura intellectual display. The obscurantism of which we often accuse Byzantine epistolography was often actually a game meant to provide entertainment. No wonder that we misunderstand letters—even the addressees themselves did. Could the passages written to clear up misunderstandings, to which we have given ample attention, sometimes themselves be just a kind of joke? It may be difficult to analyze or recognize humor, but we should be able to acknowledge that it existed in the first place, and I would argue this is a necessary step in the ongoing reappraisal of Byzantine epistolography.

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Humor is not always an attractive subject to include in literary interpretation because it makes things infinitely more complex. Texts are no longer appreciated primarily by this (still limited) audience? Also, we should take into account the specific social constellation that governed the relationship between sender and recipient: what is the hierarchy between them, what is their common background? And we should gain more insight into the codes and etiquette of epistolary exchange, with all its subtle sensibilities to indebtedness, gratitude, excuses, and so forth.

While I have consciously avoided the question “what made Byzantines laugh,” we can deduce some tendencies from the fragments discussed above. Riddles and other decoding games, including allusions, gave the Byzantines much pleasure and surely counted for them as an example of “witty speech.” Puns are obviously a great source of mirth. But even if much humor can appear cerebral, non-subversive, and relatively innocuous, it is often the case that a more irreverent or taboo subject implicitly lies at the base of the joke: gender and regional stereotypes, food, bodily defects, and sex.

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