

We tried to show that the sense of humour and the comicality of things are, all thing considered, no laughing matter. We hopefully made it plausible that comicality is at the heart of our human predicament, of our cultural precariousness and of our essential instability. We tried to make clear that on this basis a theory can be outlined that is anthropologically general yet, at the same time, specifiable culturally. And we indicated that the play we took as example seems to confirm the universality of the characteristics of comicality, however specific the semantics turns out to be. Moreover, we have given some idea of its possible integrative force. We have, however, been obliged to skip not only argument but even proof. We had to make jumps all the time, if not 'unlawful matches of things'. We hope they were not really that unlawful and that our suggestions can nevertheless point the way. Articles after all are, if not simply laughing matter, in any case bad intellectual poetry. And, indeed, philosophy most of the time is no more, no less. Consequently, there is, especially concerning theories of humour and comicality, reason for cautiousness, but, as far as humour goes, none for despair. And if, on the contrary, there are such reasons, we hope to have shown they can be laughed away.

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Notes

- ¹ This article is a summary and an extension of "Laughing Matters or Comoedia Naturalis", published in: *Philosophica*, 38 (1986), nr. 2, pp. 5-26.
² Italicizations by the editor
³ Cf. Karel Boullart, *Vanuit Andromeda gezien. Het bereikbare en het ontoegankelijk*. Een wijsgerig Essay, VUB-Press, Universiteit Gent, Werken uitgegeven door de faculteit van de letteren en wijsbegeerte, Brussel, 1999, 586 pp.
⁴ Cf. Laughing Matters or Comoedia Naturalis, op.cit.
⁵ Lenin El-Ramly, *In Plain Arabic*, a play in two acts, translated by Esmat Allouba, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 1994.

COMEDY BETWEEN PERFORMATIVITY AND POLYPHONY The Politics of Non-Serious Language

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Everybody knows that Aristotle characterizes tragedy as an (serious?) imitation of a serious (*spoudaios*) action, which achieves a catharsis through pity and fear. It is not at all clear, however, what an Aristotelian theory of comedy would look like. He does characterize comedy as an (non-serious?) imitation of a non-serious or laughable (*geloios*) and ugly action; but through which emotions, and with what ultimate effect? To begin with, he explicitly states that the ridiculous is painless and has no harmful effects; by implication, comedy can hardly function through pity and fear as tragedy does (*Poetics* :1449a35). Leon Golden has argued that on an Aristotelian approach, comedy functions through indignation (*nemesan*) rather than pity and fear.¹ This leaves the question of what comic catharsis amounts to: it may be a quasi-medical purgation; or a kind of pleasure; or a more intellectual clarification, as Golden argues. Moreover, it is equally possible to write a comedy about the lofty people typical for tragedy as it is to write a tragedy about the base characters from comedy: it seems we still have to distinguish serious and non-serious imitations. In the absence of the second book of the *Poetics*, then, and in the wake of the god-fearing monks in Umberto's *Name of the Rose*, we can only speculate; but in any case, as I have argued elsewhere, Aristotle's understanding of fifth-century Greek drama is already very different from what we can reconstruct of that period's self-understanding.²

In the wake of the September 11 assaults, there is new room for alternatives to the still widespread humanist, depoliticized readings of literature for which Aristotle provides an antecedent or prototype. These humanist approaches treat literature as a quasi-religious sacred sphere in which everything can be said, and which should be protected from social and political interference (witness the attitude of contemporary novelists like Salman Rushdie and Orhan Pamuk). The price for this protected status would seem to be a status of *l'art pour l'art*, or as mere entertainment for private pleasure rather than public education: literature, in other words, is not taken seriously in politics. This liberal-humanist view of literature is to a large extent mirrored in the *prima facie* plausible theoretical notion of fiction as non-serious, pretended language usage.³ The liberal and

humanist talk of depoliticized artistic freedom is oblivious, however, of the colonial background against which modern humanist conceptions of literature and liberal conceptions of politics were first formulated, and introduced to the Arab world and elsewhere. Marxist-inspired approaches, by contrast, do thematize this liberal-humanist hegemony in terms of class conflict and more recently of colonial and imperial domination, but they risk reducing third-world literature, in particular comedy, too mechanically to either a reproduction of this hegemony, or an expression of subaltern or oppositional voices.

1. Speech Act Theory and Bakhtinian Poetics on (Comical) Fictitious Language

Here, I use as an alternative approach the discourse-critical work of authors like Michel Foucault and Mohammed Âbid al-Jabri, combined with Speech Act Theory as developed by J.L. Austin and John Searle. This approach does not presume concepts like culture (*thaqâfa*), tradition (*turâth*), and civilization (*madaniyya*) as given or neutral; instead, it looks at how discourse (*khitâb*) may be constitutive of those concepts and indeed of the very (social) realities they are about, and at how statements may performatively constitute or change the world they seem to merely describe or represent. For example, someone saying "I baptize this ship the *Fairouz*" is not *describing* a fact; he is *creating* one. In recent years, the concept of performativity has gained ground as a key notion in the human sciences, but some intriguing questions remain when it comes to comedy. According to Austin, pretended speech such as that recited on a stage is *parasitic* or secondary with respect to ordinary, serious language usage.⁴ A quoted or recited sentence, that is, is pretended or fictional; according to this approach, it can by definition never be true, or more generally felicitous: one cannot perform any genuine action by uttering it. But this leaves it a mystery how non-serious speech acts can have serious effects at all. In other words, the problem is: if a speaker does not mean what he says, how can his words have any effect outside of literature? Significantly, Searle, who gives an extended analysis of fiction as involving pretended speech acts, explicitly concludes: "there is as yet no general theory of [how] serious illocutionary intentions are conveyed by pretended illocutions".⁵

Deconstructivist writings on speech acts call attention to the phenomenon of *iterability*, the possibility of using or quoting an expression out of its original or literal context, and liberated from the original and serious intentions of earlier speakers.⁶ In this perspective, non-serious language usage such as ridicule and parody becomes the very condition of possibility of serious and literal language

usage. Judith Butler famously takes up Derrida's undermining of the serious-non-serious opposition in her analysis of gender identity as performatively, and possibly parodically, constituted, and – more directly relevant here – in her more recent discussion of hate speech as words actually capable of hurting or wounding human beings by calling them names, and thus performatively constituting them as specific kinds of subject.⁷ It is not clear, however, in how far this deconstructivist problematization of all oppositions, like those between serious language and parody, between use and mention or quotation, between literal and figurative, and between conventional illocutionary act and actual perlocutionary effect, helps in the actual analysis of dramatic texts from historically quite distinct traditions. At the very least, it needs to be supplemented by an account of how the language usage of, say, comedy, fits in with other contemporary discursive and non-discursive practices, and with historically variable institutions like its setting in specific rituals, in theaters or at courts, etc. At first blush at least, hate speech is serious business, whereas comedy is not; the relation between the two therefore remains to be elaborated more explicitly.

Generally, these questions concern the *politics of fictional language usage*; the political use of non-serious language usage turns out to be rather more widespread, and has more radical implications, than is often acknowledged. Thus, even John Searle acknowledges that the *American Declaration of Independence* (1776) was uttered by speakers who did not strictly have the right to do so, but who pretended they did. The most powerful nation on earth, that is, was founded on a fictional or pretended speech act. Pretended speech acts, that is, may have serious effects after all: linguistic fictions may well become political realities.

At first blush, Marxist or Marxist-inspired approaches appear more promising, with, for example, Gramsci's distinction between hegemonic ideology and subaltern culture or Bourdieu's between dominant and subordinated forms of cultural expression. Both would tend to analyze comic utterances, and perhaps more generally the non-serious language usage of fiction, in terms of counter hegemonic folk culture, or of dialect and slang as subordinate, dominated forms of language. In this context, the fact that Athenian old comedy largely employs coarse registers rather different from the lofty language of tragedy, and that modern Arabic comedies tend to be written in dialect (*'âmi*) rather than Modern Standard Arabic or *fusha* would seem to confirm this suspicion. A problem for such analyses, however, is the fact that Aristophanes' language, as vulgar and obscene as it often is, is as literary and artificial as that of tragedy, and that Aristophanes himself often appears to belong to the ruling elites rather than the common people.

Mikhail Bakhtin's famous analysis of comedy as carnival appears better equipped for the analysis of comedy, humor, and drama in general. This approach is widely seen as taking comical literature to involve a temporal, carnivalesque reversal of the social order (in which, for example, women or slaves briefly become the masters), after which everything returns to normal; this would make the effect of comedy merely negative, and wholly utopian or indeed impossible.⁸ In fact, this is not what Bakhtin himself argues in his book on Rabelais⁹; rather, he calls attention to the positive (and indeed revolutionary) potential of a true culture of laughter, which he sees as ambivalent and not merely negative. However, Bakhtin's ideal-typical (if not essentialist) opposition between serious high culture sanctioned by the state and the church and the carnivalesque and oppositional culture of humor of the lower strata of the population faces serious problems when trying to account for Athenian old comedy. In fact, Bakhtin is remarkably – not to say astonishingly – silent on Aristophanic comedy, which cannot easily be classified as either the ideological self-congratulation of a state or ruling class or as the subversive oppositional counterculture of the masses. Classical Athens knew neither church nor state as distinct from society; and the often wildly obscene if not sacrilegious old comedy formed an integral part of the official Athenian city Dionysia, at which also tragedies were performed.

Von Möllendorff is aware of such difficulties, and consequently proposes to treat Aristophanic comedy in a Bakhtinian vein as dialogical or *polyphonic*, that is, as not based on acts of an individual consciousness or intentionality.¹⁰ This analysis would reduce the need for discussing in how far the author, or any one of the speaking characters of his play, actually meant what they said; but it leaves unanswered the question of precisely when and how a specific comedy, or part of a comedy, is or is not taken seriously. Von Möllendorff also makes much of the allegedly unrealistic or utopian character of Aristophanes' political comedies: the fantasies and proposals offered there, he argues, present the audience with a radically Other world, and should be seen as *impossibilities* or utopias rather than as serious proposals for policy change. Remarkably, however, the political advice Aristophanes gave in the *parabasis* or intermezzo of the *Frogs* (404 BCE), at the end of the Peloponnesian war, was far from utopian; in fact, it was taken seriously by the contemporary Athenians: the playwright was even richly rewarded for the political council he gave in a non-serious comedy. Even the most outrageous of Aristophanes' fantasies, like that of the women assuming power in *Women in Parliament* (*Ekklesiazousai*), do not simply express utterly unreal and non-serious utopias. Just a few decades later, a similar utopia was sketched by a supremely serious author, who had a great dislike for the comic and other poets: none other than Plato suggested in his *Politeia* that women should take part in public life, and

should have broadly the same opportunities and privileges as men.

In the end, then, Marxist views like Bakhtin's are no better equipped to account for the possibly serious effects of comedies like Aristophanes' *Frogs*, which were performed, like the tragedies of his time, at the city Dionysia, - a yearly carnival in celebration of the might of Athens. The least we need in light of this fact, it would seem, is a further subdivision between the serious non-serious language of tragedy and the non-serious non-serious language of comedy.

2. Parrhèsia – Poetic Licence or Performative Truth-Constitution?

Another Marxist, if not romantic, survival in Bakhtin's view of the revolutionary potential of the carnival is his belief that carnivalesque humor unmask the unvarnished truth: it reveals an objective and unadorned truth, which, he argues, can also be reached through (Socratic and other) critical dialogue rather than by the monological discourse of any one authoritative voice. This way of putting things overlooks the fact that the 'truths' of comedy, or the subversive utterances of the lower classes, are as much historically, socially and indeed discursively constituted as the dominant ideology of the ruling elites. This discursive and non-discursive constitution of truths, norms, and concepts, takes center stage in discourse-critical or genealogical approaches like Michel Foucault's.¹¹ I have no time to elaborate this approach in detail here; suffice it to call attention to one aspect of Foucault's analysis that is of particular relevance in this context. In a series of lectures discussing, among others, several tragedies by Euripides, Foucault takes the ancient Greek notion of *parrhèsia* or free speech (literally, 'saying everything') as a relation between a speaker and what he says: it amounts to an act of speaking the truth, often with risks for oneself.¹² He further distinguishes monarchic and democratic *parrhèsia*, which amount to, respectively, the ability to speak freely towards a king who has the power to decide over the speaker's very life; and the rather different free speech of a free citizen in a democratic assembly like that in Athens, where speaking did not generally carry such extreme risks.

Next to these, however, we should distinguish a specifically comic *parrhèsia*: Foucault does not discuss any comedies, but they might well lead to a modification of his argument; for whatever restrictions there were on free speech in classical Athens were given up in the context of comic performances. As Halliwell makes clear, the rare occasions that are suggestive of legal proceedings initiated against individual comical playwrights do not point to any institutionalized legal constraints on, or threats against, comical free speech.¹³

Yet, ancient comedy was far from a playful diversion from more serious everyday concern; on the contrary, as Henderson argues, the often savage ridicule of existing persons was an integral feature of the agonistic sovereignty of the Athenian *dêmos* or citizen population.¹⁴ By calling important persons names, the comic poet could hope to performatively affect their standing among the Athenian citizens. Ancient comedy may not have been serious, but it certainly could have political effects.

3. Varieties of the Comical, Varieties of the Political

In the light of these considerations, a comparative confrontation between ancient Greek and modern Arabic comedy may be of interest, not only in clarifying the radical differences between two visions of the comical and the political, but also in exposing some of our modern-day liberal, humanist or modernist assumptions. I will illustrate my argument with Aristophanes' *Frogs* from 404 BCE and Lenín El-Ramly's *In Plain Arabic* (*Bi'l-'arabi al-fasîh*), first staged in 1991 CE. These two plays share a number of features: both were performed in the face of a humiliating military defeat, and both explicitly involve the themes of the carnival, in which things can be said that cannot normally be said, and of the staging of a dramatic performance which turns out to have all kinds of unforeseen, and uncontrollable, effects and consequences. Another, perhaps more obvious comparison, could be made between Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* and Ramly's recent *al-salâm al-nisâ'* (the title of which has been rendered as *A Peace of Women*), an adaptation of the former set against the background of the 2003 Iraq war; but my main theme here is not war and sexuality but the politics of language, and this theme appears much more explicitly in the plays under discussion.¹⁵

Aristophanes' *Frogs* (*Batrakhoi*)

Classical Athenian democracy was not based on a distinction between the state and society or on a notion of 'the people' (*dêmos*) as defined by a shared culture. Even the famous distinction between Greeks and barbarians was hardly politically active. That is, it did not involve any romantic notion of the (sovereign) people as defined by a culture, nor of any irreducible clash of cultures or civilizations. Moreover, the conception of the political presupposed in Aristophanes and his contemporaries is not 'democratic' in the sense of being based on orderly debate for all people living in the state; unlike modern liberal nation states, classical Athens was not imagined as being based on a social contract or on a shared culture of

agreed upon norms and values. Rather, all of social, cultural, political, and even family life is depicted both in comedy and tragedy as pervaded by internal conflict or *stasis*. Here, conflict is not so much seen as a temporary and exceptional state of war that is finished by the establishment of civil society; rather, it is seen as the normal (if deplorable) state of affairs. But *stasis* should not be seen in the Marxist terms of class conflict, either: the sovereign people or *dêmos* may be distinct from the archaic elites or *aristoi*, but this distinction should not be identified with that between the people and the rulers, or between the workers and the feudal or proto-capitalist owners of the means of production.¹⁶

Instead, it might be argued that Athenian democracy was defined by a near-total *parrhêsia* or free speech. There was no 'state' as the locus or institution of censorship and repression of the population; censorship of political, sexual and religious matters was societal rather than political or legal in nature. That is, it was simply considered unworthy of free male citizens to use obscene expressions or make dirty jokes in public. This is precisely the kind of language, however, one finds in old comedy. We may thus speak of a specifically comic *parrhêsia*.¹⁷ In the *Frogs*, and elsewhere, it is argued that it is the very licentious character of comical language usage by which the city may be instructed:

"ton hieron khoron dikaion esti khrêsta tòi polei/xumparainein kai didaskein

It's right and proper for the sacred chorus to help give good advice and instruction to the city" (*Frogs*, 686-7)

In between the laughs, that is, the play argues that it aims at creating both serious and non-serious effects:

"kai polla men geloia m' eipein, polla de spoudaia

And let me say many laughable things, and many serious things, too" (*Frogs*, 393-4)

The question then becomes which parts of a specific comedy one should take seriously, and how one can know one is entitled to do so. For ancient Athenians, the answer seemed relatively clear: the assumption seems to have been that in the *parabasis* or intermezzo, the playwright generally spoke his own mind through the mouth of the chorus leader directly addressing the audience. Present-day literary theorists will immediately warn us that we should not confuse the statements made in the play with the opinions of the author; but the Athenian audience apparently had no such qualms. Specifically, it took the *parabasis* of the

Frogs as the sound advice of the playwright himself, rather than as a fictional utterance by a fictional chorus. Thus, the question of who is speaking and what effect those words have is at times decided by the reaction of the audience as much as by the intentions of the speaker.

Moreover, Aristophanes claims a *political* function for such non-serious, unbecoming language. By their very obscenity, his plays are meant to give advice and instruction to the city: the poet's task, he claims in the *Frogs*, is nothing less than to save the city in wartime. The laughter he provokes, one might say, is laughter at the contingency and the non-serious foundation of the political practices that are considered most sacred by the Athenians. Or is it? Importantly, Aristophanes attacks individuals rather than whole groups, let alone the city as such; moreover, he considers it a point of honour not to attack a man when he is lying down. In other words, his comical utterances do not undermine the city or its practices and institutions, but merely raise the general question of who is worthy to take part in them. The comical answer to this question seems to be that no one is. J. Henderson has looked at the dramatic effect of the obscene jokes about leading politicians in Aristophanic comedy¹⁸; but their political effect is at least as interesting: they expose these politicians, and more in general the politically active population of free male citizens, as the unmanly slaves of unbecoming appetites and sexual desires. Strictly speaking, *nobody* is fit to govern, or even has the right to speak up in public. Aristophanes was not a radical or revolutionary author, though: he seems to have been a conservative democrat rather than a subversive activist. By his use of obscenity and ridicule, he appears to reflect a more generally agonistic society, in which individuals were challenged continuously to prove their worth and honour, and in which they could hardly count on the support of the law or the state's repressive apparatus.

Lenin El-Ramly's *In Plain Arabic* (*bi'l-'arabi al-fasîh*)

A confrontation of this classical Greek view of the political role and effect of comedy with a modern Arabic comedy reveals interesting differences and convergences. I focus on Lenin El-Ramly's *In Plain Arabic* (*bi'l-'arabi al-fasîh*) from 1991.¹⁹ To begin with, this play presupposes a wholly different kind of politics than does Aristophanes. First, the state is taken as a repressive institute, especially through censorship, the attempt to control or restrict the words spoken in society. Indeed, Arab censorship, or self-censorship, is a main theme of the play.²⁰ Second, it involves a concept of the nation as based on a shared culture, that is, on a consensus of shared norms and values. Third, politics involves a

radical opposition between civilizations, whether this is expressed as a clash between imperialism and the third world, between West and East, or between Christianity and Islam. This discourse (*khitâb*) is common to both the Arab world and the (neo-) liberal West (which are thus 'divided by a common language'); it distinguishes both from the discourse of classical Athenian democracy.

It should be kept in mind that *In Plain Arabic* was staged a mere few months after Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent war against Iraq, a series of events that led to unprecedented splits among the Arabs. The fact that most Arab countries, including fierce rivals or enemies like Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, joined in the international coalition against the Iraqi invaders, more than ever before exposed the notion of Arab unity as largely an outdated fiction. The play discusses this fiction, as well as other forms of Arab self-deceit, taboo and shame, in a joking manner. Significantly, it is set at *Eid*, the end of Ramadan, which can be seen as a carnival of sorts. In a nested fiction, it represents a movie being made about a theatre play staged by a group of Arab students in London. The play is intended to be about an Arab tribal youth (standing for the Palestinian cause) who is abducted by an English imperialist. But when the Palestinian member of the group is actually abducted, fiction becomes inextricably confused with reality (or, more adequately speaking, two levels of fiction becomes hopelessly mixed up). Ramly's characters are willing to "speak the truth," as they call it: they denounce the idea of Arab unity as an illusion, and likewise ridicule the emptiness of the rhetoric about Arab solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and about the struggle against Western civilization. They are unwilling, however, to vent these criticisms in public, or on television: "It can be said among ourselves, but not broadcast" (p. 13), for fear of losing face or playing into the hands of the enemy. Moreover, many if not all of their statements are made in a patently non-serious, and indeed fictional way. Early on, one character states that: "We decided that the best way to express our unity as Arab brothers would be a play" (p. 20)

Much as in Aristophanes' comedies, a good many of Ramly's jokes are difficult if not impossible to grasp for an audience not familiar with the cultural and historical context of its first performance. Indeed, by reading the play in translation, one already misses two essential elements: the performance element and the language varieties employed. First, much of the play's comical and other effects appear from the actual performance: thus, the Iraqi character Antar appears on stage speaking with a thick Iraqi Bedouin accent, and parodying the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's martial body language; likewise, all other characters (which, I am informed, were originally played by an all-Egyptian cast) are distinguished in performance by use of mimicked regional dialects and by

other joking references to the stereotypical traits of the different Arabs (thus, the Saudi is rich and rather bigoted, the Lebanese a shrewd and less than entirely honest tradesman, and the Sudanese is drunk throughout the play). Interestingly, Mieke Kolk (p.c.) informs me that a small European theatre group considered staging *In Plain Arabic*, but eventually decided against it, out of fear that it would only serve to strengthen local racist stereotypes about Arabs.

Thus, the theatrical convention of using dialect for Modern Arabic comedy is here exploited to the full. Indeed, the conventional division of labor between Standard Arabic as a medium for serious literature and dialect as a vehicle for comedy becomes thematized in the very title of the play. *Fasîh* may mean 'clear' or 'unadorned,' but also 'flowery;' moreover, it is etymologically related to *fusha*, the term for standard Arabic (which is precisely the language variety *not* employed in this comedy). Other allusions may be equally difficult for non-Arabs to grasp. On repeated occasions, the comical scenes of the play allude to tragic, or at least sinister, developments in the Arab world, for example in the scene where the Iraqi, Antar, hits Khuzan from the Gulf with a plate. Few Arabs at the time will have failed to recognize the allusion to the incident when Iraqi foreign minister, Tariq Aziz started throwing plates at his Kuwaiti counterpart during Arab League talks just prior to the 1991 Gulf War. One comical argument of the play is that consensus, and the unity of the Arab nation, can only be achieved at the cost of censoring all sensitive topics of debate, which include religion, sexuality, and even soccer (p. 17). Soccer becomes a taboo subject that may be detrimental to Arab unity when the Tunisian and the Egyptian character almost come to blows over a world cup qualifying match, and are restrained by, of all people, Antar, the Iraqi character. It is not too far-fetched, I think, to see in this scene an allusion to events surrounding Egypt's qualification for the soccer world championships in December 1989: especially in Iraq, celebrations of this qualifications turned ugly when an unknown number of Egyptians were wounded or even killed by local Iraqi thugs, at the obvious instigation of the Iraqi regime.

There is one major difference with Aristophanic comedy, however. Although Ramly's comedies often treat sexual themes, they cannot be qualified as obscene in anything like Aristophanes' sense. Ramly's jokes about the political confrontation between the Arab and the Western world are often articulated in terms of sexual relations, primarily between Arab men and Western women, as in the grandiose plan to attempt a large-scale seduction of foreign women as a way of taking revenge on the West (p. 55). However, they hardly involve 'foul language', such as explicit references to sexual acts, defecation, or other bodily functions; nor are existing politicians mentioned by name, nor are insinuations made about their

sexual behavior. Sexuality, that is, appears much more strictly regulated and disciplined than in Aristophanes; my impression is that this much more restrictive attitude reflects the strict regulation of gendered national identity that accompanies the modern nation state, but I have no room to argue this point in detail.

Restrictions on free speech, whether on stage or in politics, are not only a main preoccupation, but indeed a major theme of the play. Mighwar, the Moroccan character, suggests that democracy needs a minimum of discipline; and discipline is precisely what the play's characters lack. It is repeatedly suggested that democracy cannot simply be imported to the Arab world: one attempt at democratic *parrhêsia* or free speech quickly deteriorates into a comical cacophony, in which no agreement can be reached on either of the topics to be discussed or even the procedures for granting each voice a fair hearing. This scene may be a parody of the unthinking import of western democracy, but it is at least as strongly reminiscent of the chaotic and often violent character of the meetings of the Arab League, especially in the run up to the 1991 Gulf War.

But also, free debate among and with Arabs is depicted as being blocked by misguided notions of taboo, sin, honour, self-esteem and the perceived need to close ranks against a common enemy, Western civilization. Thus, the Arab students try to regulate a debate between a European and an Arab team in advance by excluding politics, religion, sex, history and nationalism from the list of admissible topics (p. 89). Freedom of speech within and between cultures is subordinated to hypocritical, and indeed fictional, sensitivities, such as a preoccupation with national and individual honour: "what is a human being but a good name?" (p. 47). For example, it eventually turns out that all male characters have been to the brothel, the Pleasure Palace, but do not dare to admit it. Mustafa then asks whether they do so out of shame, or out of fear for each other (p. 94). In pleading guilty to crimes they have not committed rather than admitting they have spent the night in a brothel/night club, the male characters of *In Plain Arabic* show they prefer Western fictions to sordid home truths. In the end, the only Arab unity is one of deceit: "we are all alike in one respect: we all deceive each other" (p. 97). More generally, theatrical fictions become political realities, and convenient lies become uncomfortable truths, - or vice versa. No wonder that at one point, the characters themselves become confused as to what is mere acting and what is serious speech:

Sayf (Saudi): Acting is sinful and discussion always ends in disaster.

Antar (Iraqi): You are still arguing? We said no more acting!

Announcer: I'm not acting now. I'm speaking my mind! (p.83)

The play falls just short, however, of suggesting that the mere altering of the perception of the Arabs may affect their realities, as it explicitly opposes image and reality (p.97). Ramly, in other words, appears rather less sanguine about the capacity to change social realities by speaking words. In the end, then, *In plain Arabic* amounts to a fictional critique of the fiction of Arab unity. However, El-Ramly's play, like Aristophanes's, does not transcend or radically question the discourse of its time; rather, it exposes the foundations on which the latter rests as itself non-serious, and the people who employ this discourse as laughable.

Although it does not emphasize the performative dimension of language, the play does betray a detailed awareness of language as a form of social action, and of its potential consequences. Virtually every character in the play seems obsessed with controlling the interpretation, or perlocutionary effect, of words, images, and actions. Likewise, in the course of the play, the very use of the word 'Arab' comes to be used, and to be taken, as in itself an insult (cf., among others, p. 21). In a sense, the whole play is about how serious language of honour and dignity, solidarity and unity, is but a lie or a fiction, whereas non-serious language usage, like jokes or theatre plays, may succeed in not only conveying the truth but in performatively, if unintentionally, constituting and indeed changing social realities. But Aristophanes' and Ramly's means are rather different: where the former revels in uncontrolled obscenity, the latter is confined to much more narrowly circumscribed forms of ridicule.

Conclusion

Every social practice, whether it is politics, literature, or drama, may be seen as a specific game with its own rules. Crucial to each practice is what Pierre Bourdieu calls *illusio*²¹, that is, a 'feel for the game', the belief that this particular game is serious and worth playing.²² What comedy does is not so much criticize dominant ideas or ideologies, but expose the game-like character of our most serious practices. This should be distinguished from Bakhtinian carnival, or from Brechtian techniques of epic theatre²³, which aim at keeping the audience's revolutionary consciousness awake: it need not lead to a radical, subversive or revolutionary questioning of the social world we live in; but it may well do so.

The distinction between fiction and seriousness is important here, in so far as it allows the comic author more room for saying things that otherwise might cause offence: comedy is no hate speech. Typically, the festive occasion of a comic performance will lead the audience to react with laughter rather than with

indignation. Hence, comic ridicule of individuals should not be conflated with smear tactics or attempts at character assassination of political opponents or enemies. After all, as noted, they were performed on special carnivalesque occasions where things could be, and were, said that would not otherwise be tolerated. Yet, as Halliwell notes, the laughter produced by old comedy was ambivalent between the humorous and the insulting.²⁴ In classical Greece, old comedy had its comical effect precisely because of the ambivalence between non-serious ridicule and serious assaults upon other people's honour, as nobody could control the linguistic, social, or political effects of uncontrolled laughter. Likewise, Ramly is aware of the potentially fateful ambivalence of laughter. As one of his character notes: "it all started as a joke, but it ended in disaster!" (p. 90). Equally ambiguous is the uptake or reception of his work: what an Arab might see as benign jokes or effective political satire may strike a culturally sensitive European elite audience as racist smears. The comic author, that is, is no more able than his characters to control the effects of his own or others' words. Speaker's intentions can no more restrict what effect a comic performance will have than the initially obvious delegation of comedy to the realm of non-serious and fictional language with no effects on the outside world. For political change or subversion, more is usually needed than a playwright's jokes; but they may well be a starting point.

Notes

- 1 Leon Golden, "Aristotle on Comedy", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 42 (1984), pp. 283-290.
- 2 Michiel Leezenberg, "Katharsis, Greek and Arabic Style: On Averroes's Misunderstanding of Aristotle's Misunderstanding of Greek Tragedy", *Documenta*, 22, (2004), nr. 4, pp. 300-315.
- 3 John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), pp. 319-332 (Reprinted in *Expression & Meaning*. Cambridge, 1979).
- 4 J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (2nd ed.), Oxford, 1975 [1962].
- 5 John Searle (1975), p. 332.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, "Signature événement contexte", in: *Marges*, Paris 1972.
- 7 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, New York, 1997.
- 8 Jeffrey Henderson, "The *dèmos* and the Comic Competition", in: J. Winkler & F. Zeitlin (eds.) *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, Princeton, 1991.
- 9 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (tr. H. Iswolsky), Indianapolis, 1984 [1965].
- 10 Peter von Möllendorff, *Grundlagen einer Ästhetik der alten Komödie: Untersuchungen zu Aristophanes und Michail Bachtin*. Tübingen, 1995.

- 11 Genealogical and archaeological approaches that take discursive practices as constitutive of social realities rather than as ideological distortions of an allegedly more objective underlying reality have also appeared in Arabic, or discussing Arabic material: of these, Mohammad Abid al-Jabri's critique of Arab reason is probably the most famous; in my opinion, though, Aziz al-Azmeh's highly sophisticated archaeology of the Arab sciences (1986) and of classical discourse about royal power (1997) are rather more successful exercises along the same line.
- 12 Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, Los Angeles, 2001 [1983].
- 13 S. Halliwell, "The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture", *Classical Quarterly*, 41 (1991), pp. 279-296.
- 14 Jeffrey Henderson (1991).
- 15 For reasons of space, I have also had to omit a planned discussion of Molière's *Tartuffe* here. A confrontation with the courtly concept of the political and the 'domestication' of comedy in Molière would have been revealing, particularly in the light of the subsequent French colonial instrumentalization of classical French comedy as a means of replacing, or domesticating, local and potentially oppositional forms of comical theatre like the *Bssat* tradition in Morocco, in what Khalid Amine (p.c.) has called the "molièrization of Bssat."
- 16 Nor, incidentally, should Aristophanic comedy be seen as a form of lower-class entertainment as opposed to the loftier tragedies: both kinds of drama drew substantially the same audience. Aristophanes is not even as unambiguous a source of colloquial Athenian as he has been made out to be: often, his language is highly artificial, involving fantasy words, bizarre onomatopoea, and pastiches of the high-blown language of both tragic poets and philosophers.
- 17 S. Halliwell (1991).
- 18 J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, New Haven, 1975.
- 19 Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the Arabic text of this play was not available to me. I have had to rely on Esmat Allouba's translation, published by the American University in Cairo Press.
- 20 In more recent years, censorship in Egypt has increasingly become the prerogative of religious authorities. Thus, reprints of classical literary texts like Ibn 'Arabi's *Meccan Revelations* and the *Thousand and One Nights* have recently been proscribed by the Azhar University leadership because of, respectively, their allegedly heretic and obscene contents.
- 21 Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques*, Paris, 1998.
- 22 Incidentally, here and elsewhere, Bourdieu pays surprisingly little attention to non-serious social action, or more specifically to the subversive or counterhegemonic potential of comedy, parody, ridicule and the like.
- 23 Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater: Über eine nicht-aristotelische Dramatik*, Frankfurt, 1989.
- 24 S. Halliwell, "Comic Satire and Freedom of Speech in Classical Athens", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 111 (1991a), pp. 48-70.

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