

On the Phallos and Comedy

Matthew Sharpe

Strauss and Lacan: on comedy, and the disconnect of *Physis* and *Nomos*

It is fitting that we should turn to comedy, after a week on tragedy, and before that, many weeks on religion. In the ancient religious festivals, the comedy always followed the tragedy, and completed the festival. Later, we'll see this is arguably important. Moreover, one predominant idea concerning comedy is that it represents the dethroning of the Gods, or of everything higher. The position I'll be considering is close to the German philosopher Hegel's typical twist on this popular thesis, which is central to Alenka Zupancic's *Odd One In*: yes, in comedy, the divine is brought down to the level of human reality, *but this because comedies show us what there is of divinity in the human condition itself*.

Your extract for this week comes from this book of Zupancic's *The Odd One In*. The book provides a theory of comedy, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and German idealist philosophy. There is much material in it concerning the phallos, which might strike you as bizarre, or simply obnoxious. If so, you need not read on, although this is not the attitude of a philosophical student. Alas, it is a Socratic curse that we must at times push through our first gut reactions and responses, or hold them at bay long enough to possibly encounter new sources of understanding. That said, to understand is not always to forgive!

I am presently interested in the theory of comedy in the context of a larger project I am working on, on two of the most controversial thinkers of last century, Leo Strauss and Jacques Lacan—the latter, Zupancic's key source. The book will be a study in contrasts. Lacan is the most famous, most difficult psychoanalytic thinker since Freud, whose most famous students are radicals on the Left. Strauss is a deeply conservative thinker, whose students are famously associated with American neo-conservatism, hence radicals on the Right. Strauss says little on psychoanalysis (there are two exceptions). What he does say evinces a kind of patrician disgust for its vulgar concern with questions of private life: sexuality, the family, not to mention alleged incestuous and parricidal wishes. Psychoanalysis surely views the high from the perspective of the low, reducing all that is noble to the vulgar and base: but it is better to look at the low from the perspective of the high, if not more scientific or philosophical.

Yet Leo Strauss' lasting, mature concern was with the recovery of classical Greek political philosophy, and premodern understandings of the relations between philosophy, political life, religion, and art, literature or poetry. This philosophy begins with Socrates, who brought philosophy down from the heavens into the agora or the polis. The first source of testimony concerning Socrates is the comedian Aristophanes, and his *Clouds* of 422 BCE, in which Socrates is made to look the fool. It is a devastatingly hilarious salvo in what Plato called “the ancient quarrel between the poets and the philosophers”, (*Rep.* 607c) concerning which is the source of theoretical or political wisdom. Strauss' return to classical political philosophy hence saw his lasting engagement with Aristophanes. Yet in Aristophanes' comedies—as readers will know—the “psychoanalytic” matters of sexuality and family life, indeed of incestuous and parricidal impulses, are “stage front and centre”. In this connection, Strauss makes some interpretive comments which look towards a general theory of comedy, and do constitute an intriguing reading of Aristophanes. They mark the closest point of contrast between his work and Lacanian thought.

Just as Alkibiades describes Socrates as a comic satyr in Plato's *Symposium*, the lewd or vulgar exterior concealing the most beautiful thoughts, Strauss suggests that just so, Aristophanes' comedies' vulgar exteriors conceal a serious heart, even a political philosophy. In comedies, what we witness is the "publicization of the essentially private": this is why comedies are so ridiculous. There are many things that are true, but not salutary or edifying to publically discuss. They cannot judiciously be so "raised", except under the sign of comedy. That said, this work of comic publicization shows something of potentially universal pertinence: a point unexpectedly close to what Sigmund Freud had characterized in terms of the *unbehagen* (discontents) in *kultur*. Strauss calls it the "problematic nature of *nomos*" or law, as such:

Above all, Aristophanes has no doubt as to the fact that nature, human nature, is in need of *nomos*. Aristophanes does not reject *nomos*, *but he attempts to bring to light its problematic and precarious status ...*" *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 115 (italics MS)¹

In the quarrel of poetry and philosophy, psychoanalysis is usually situated squarely on the side of the poets. Freud thought that philosophers characteristically overvalued thought. So their speculative systems—cut free from the arduous business of empirical reality testing—resembled nothing more closely than the delusional *Weltanschauungen* of psychotics. As is better known, Freud associated his central psychological theory, that of the Oedipus complex, with two great works of tragic literature: Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannis* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which we looked at last week.² There is scarcely an extended piece by Freud wherein his two favourites German literary authors, Goethe and Schiller, are not cited. Jacques Lacan's lifelong project was what he termed "a return to the meaning of Freud". This return saw him refiguring all of Freud's major concepts, including the Oedipus complex, in the light of insights from structuralist linguistics and anthropology, modern philosophy from Hegel to Heidegger, and tools drawn from a host of other sources (game theory, topology ...). Yet Lacan's detailed engagements with literature: Moliere, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Claudel, Duras, Gide, the list goes on ...: are a constant feature of his *oeuvre*, even more so than Freud's. They are engagements with the poets, as critics have been noted, wherein psychoanalysis is consistently positioned as learning as much or more from these poets, as authoritatively reading the truth of their works or their desire.

One thing that is interesting about Lacan's refiguring of the Oedipus complex, which takes place in the fifth and sixth years of his seminars, however, is that these very seminars see him turn to the meaning of comedy. (His other key literary source in these seminars is *Hamlet*, a modern tragedy which he notes has unmistakably comic features, which we saw last week*). *Seminar V*, entitled *The Formations of the Unconscious*, contains a series of intriguing remarks concerning Aristophanes' comedies, and two sessions devoted to Moliere's comedy *The School for Wives* (18/12/57) and Genet's comedy, *Le Balcon* (*The Bordello*) (5/3/58).

¹ The standard of judgment, despite the *Clouds*, is actually one that gives the lie to Aristophanes' critique of Socrates in the *Clouds*, or shows the greater truth in Plato's presentation of the two men as friends in the *Symposium*: "In brief, Aristophanes does not stop at the sacredness or naturalness of the family. One is tempted to say that his comedies celebrate the victory of nature, as it reveals itself in the pleasant, over convention or law, which is the locus of the noble and the just ... the Aristophanic comedy is based on knowledge of nature and therefore on consciousness of the sublime pleasures accompanying knowledge of nature [i.e. philosophy-MS]." Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 115. Readers of Strauss will know that he delights in revealing how things are not as they first appear, or that there is an exoteric surface beneath which the larger, esoteric truth, is concealed by great writers.

² Then there is the theory of narcissism, which Freud associates with the ancient myth told in Ovid and elsewhere.

Why this is so begins to become clear from the following considerations. Lacan keeps to Freud's claim that the Oedipus complex, and its resolution, is the decisive anthropogenetic ("human-making") episode in the education to culture of men and women. Yet Lacan significantly reshapes Freud's views on this episode. The central claim Lacan makes against Freud is that Freud problematically mistook the central stake in the Oedipus complex to be the penis: the boy's imagined fear of its castration, the girl's lamenting its lack. What Lacan proposes is to revise Freud's theory of desire, emphasising its dialectical or intersubjective component—so the child's Oedipal wish is to usurp or to be the desire of the (m)Other. He also wishes to more solidly establish the stake of the complex's resolution as the child's attainment of Law and Language: what Lacan calls, in structuralist jargon, the "symbolic order" of the "signifier" (roughly, civilization or culture). In these lights, Lacan proposes that what is at stake in the Oedipus complex is the phallos, not the penis: for the child, this is the imaginary object the mother Really Wants, between the lines of her speech and her actions, which the intervention of cultural Law is going to rule off limits to the child. S/he, the child, cannot be That, and the price of not acceding to the Laws governing the relations between the sexes and generations will be severe forms of mental illness.

It is in this context of rewriting the Oedipus complex around the stake of the phallos, that Lacan comes across the ancient comedies. For in these comedies, the phallos was literally centre stage, in lewdly exaggerated, unveiled form, worn by the actors. As Lacan comments in *Seminar VII*:

The sphere of comedy is created by the presence at its centre of a hidden signifier ... that in the Old Comedy is there in person: namely, the phallos. Who cares if it is subsequently whisked away? One must remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate [comedy] in [its] full human dimension ... is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including those that are the most essential ... the phallos is nothing more than the signifier of this flight. Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens. If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives. (*Sem VII**)



As Zupancic comments, Lacanian theory hardly invents this cultural reference of comedies to phallic worship and pagan religion, however distasteful—or simply irrelevant, mildly curious—we may find it to considering the philosophical meaning of comedy. In the early twentieth century, the research of the Cambridge School of Anthropology (people like Francis Cornford) had reemphasized this cultural or genealogical link of the ancient theatre.³ Aristotle in the *Poetics* chapter IV reports that comedy originated in Dionysean or other forms of phallic worship:

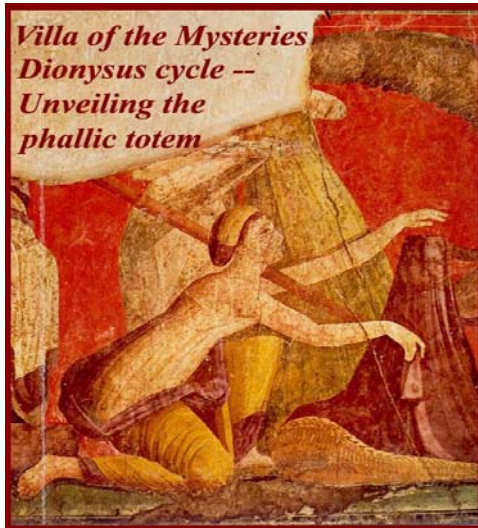
Tragedy—as also Comedy—was at first mere improvisation. The one originated with the authors of the Dithyramb, the other with those of the phallic songs, which are still in use in many of our cities. (Aristotle *Poe.* IV*)⁴

The phallos seems indeed to have been a central object of veneration in pagan mystery cults, as illustrated in the frescoes remarkably preserved in the “Villa of Mysteries” unearthed in Pompeii:

In short, what is striking in the very special function of this object which, for the ancients, beyond any doubt, played the role in the mysteries of the object around which ... there was placed ... the last veils [which initiation lifted]: namely of an object which for the revelation of Meaning, was considered as of final significant value. (23/4/58, p. 12)

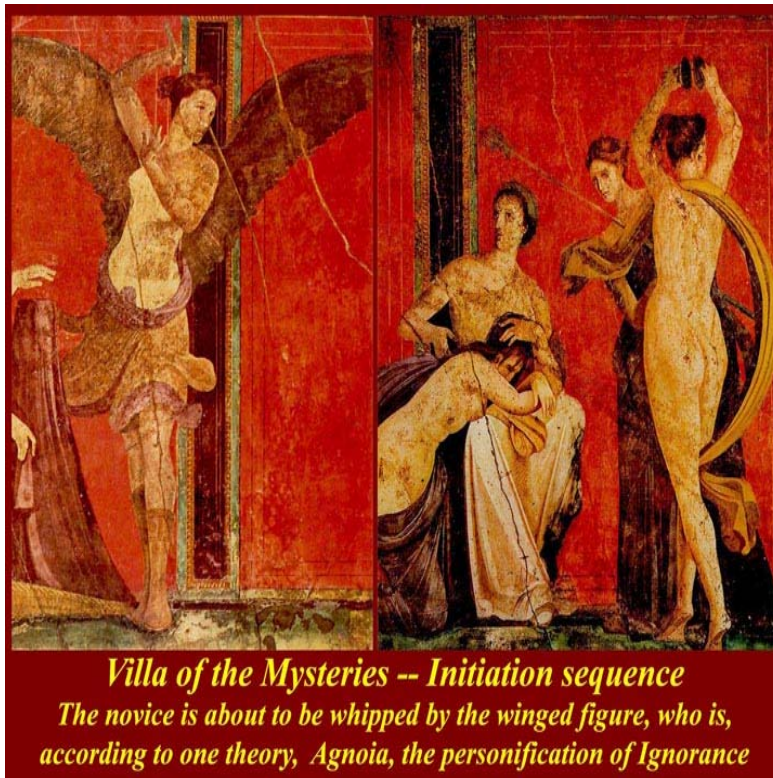
³ “...dramatic genres (along with the dithyramb) had been from the beginning elements of Dionysiac cult, and they demonstrably shared at least some of their central features with it: the use of masks and some standard items of costuming with links to Dionysiac ritual; satyr-drama’s satyrs and silens; the goat-sacrifice that seems to lie behind the word *tragedy*; comedy’s padded and phallic characters, theriomorphic dancers and transgressive obscenity and abuse. Might we not suspect that these and other features of extant drama preserve traces of earlier stages of development when drama and cult were (even) more essentially connected than in historical times?” Cornford, *The Origins of Attic Comedy*, xiii. The manuscripts do not make clear, but it seems that Lacan might well have had Cornford and related texts at hand around the time of *Seminar V and VI*. This point of intellectual history aside, the claims made concerning the subject matter are convergent.

⁴ “Dithyramb is an hymn to god Dionysus, a choric song accompanied by flute. The worship of Dionysus was characterized by many eastern elements and influences from Thrace. As the religion was descending South, some elements of mysticism and orphism are being observed in it. As part of the choric poetry Dithyramb had a chorus. The members of the chorus were disguised in animals (goats) and they were called Satyrs. The Satyrs were daemons of the woods and at first they had no relation to Dionysus. ...According to Plutarch (*Moralia*, 257), dithyramb consisted of songs, with lyrics drawn from Dionysus’ life and his adventures. Some of them were sad, symbolizing the suffering of God (sung during Lenea, in January, when nature mourns) and others funny, symbolizing the joy of God (sung during the Great Dionysia, in March, with the revival of the nature). His followers formed a parade : a satyr holding an urn full of wine and some branches of wine tree was leading, followed by a satyr carrying a goat, then by a satyr carrying figs and at last by a satyr holding a phallus. (All the above mentioned were symbols of Dionysus.) Behind them followed the people singing the dithyramb. The parade ended in a circular threshing floor (precedent of the orchestra), where the goat was sacrificed (Even in the later centuries, in the middle of the orchestra one could find an altar - “*thymeli*”).” From www-site <http://www.greektheatre.gr/origins.html> accessed May 2010.



Yet this venerated totem, in its sacred potency or telic signification, always operated as veiled or hidden in these religious observances. Even in early societies wherein dress is kept to a minimum, Lacan notes, the minimal clothing serves to cover the erection of the phallos: “erection, either during the day or at that time [in the evening, after nightfall] is not seen in public, and does not appear.” (7/5/1958, p.2) Approach to the phallic totem hence attracted all manner of initiatory *askeseis* and punishment in the mystery cults:

... [in the frescoes] of the Villa of Mysteries at Pompeii, it is very precisely just beside the place where there appears the unveiling of the phallos that there arise with a very impressive size... these life size demons, winged, horned,... with a *flagellum*, [who] are beginning to apply the ritual punishment to one of the aspirants, the initiates who are in the image ... (23/4/58, p. 13)



What is remarkable about the ancient comedies, in this context, is exactly that in these ancient forms of the theatre, the hidden/forbidden phallic signifier was put on public display. It is as if in the comedies, the ordinary rules of propriety, religion, and polity were suspended—or turned belly-up, as we might say, with a smile.

So each of these claims needs to be examined. We will need especially to consider Lacan's implied claim that the "same" phallos is at stake in the Oedipus complex, hence in the psychogenesis of each of us *qua* human, as was positioned at the heart of the ancient pagan mystery cults. But you can see for the moment, the first parallel here between what Lacan's theory of comedy will emphasise and Strauss' thoughts on the same topic. Lacan comes across the topic of comedy in his attempt to put on a different, more defensible footing Freud's claims concerning the decisive moment when the child acquires language and Law (the prohibitions on incest and parricide, borne by the paternal function). Strauss, a classical philosopher, does not ask such questions of origin, any more than Aristotle does in his political texts. As Aristotle stresses in *Politics* I, for classical philosophy, one can best understand a thing only in light of its final end, not its original, material and efficient causes. Yet, *as in Strauss's understanding of Aristophanes, Lacan is very interested in how the ancient comedies publicise something which in the usual run of things was kept private*: indeed, in his case, how they paraded the phallic totem at the heart of mystery cults, the publicisation of whose secrets initiates could ordinarily not reveal, on pain of death.

As we will see, there is a second, deeper point of comparison, beneath this first point of contact between the two men's theories of comedy. For Lacan too, *the mysteries that comedy unveils or publicises concern the same, serious or "high," philosophic truth Strauss discerns beneath Aristophanes' "low" or vulgar, comic exteriors. This truth concerns "the problematic nature" (Strauss) of nomos or culture for human beings, and the way we are divided by it, in our loyalties and even our seemingly most natural desires*. There is a "disconnect," as we say today, between the orders of *physis* (nature) and culture (*nomos*), so that humans can only dream of a prelapsarian, blissfully natural condition. As Lacan comments on Aristophanes' comedies:

Of course it is always in ... the supreme moment of distress for Athens ... because of a series of bad choices and by a submission to the laws of the city that seem literally to be leading it to destruction that Aristophanes sets off this alarm. It consists in saying that after all people are exhausting themselves in this pointless war and there is nothing like staying at home nice and warm in one's own house and going back to one's wife. This is not something which is properly speaking posed as a morality. It is [effectively posed as] a restatement of the essential relationship of man to his condition ... without our having to know—moreover—whether the consequences are more or less salutary. (5/3/58, p. 13)

It is this "disconnect" of nature and her lost pleasures, from the demands of our political condition—up to the business of war—that Lacan sees comedies as at once making their play with, and promising for the play's width or length to suspend or resolve. What Lacan brings to the theoretical table, which Strauss' commentaries on Aristophanes do not, is three things. First, there is an emphasis on the religious and even the liturgical function of comedy, underdeveloped in some respects, but central to his position on the matter, such as we have it. Second, there is a full-blown theory of the phallos as the privileged mark or signifier of the comedic "disconnect" that divides our condition as speaking, cultural or political beings who are also animals, hence things of nature. This conception of the phallos, third, forms part of a sophisticated theory of language and its shaping effects on human subjectivity and political life. Although again this is on the horizon of Lacan's comments on

comedy—merely gestured as, as he passes to his wider concerns—this conception of language in particular gives us a way of accounting for the “most exuberant forms” (18/12/1957, p. 14) or “de-forms” of “common sense” that comedy presents for our enjoyment or consumption.

Phallophany: the joke’s on—men

Before we examine these claims in turn, though, let us address straight-away the rightful question we erected, which would seem to cut these inquiries off at the hip: namely, that the phallos at play in the ancient mysteries, and worn by the old comedic actors, surely has nothing more than *the name* in common with Lacan’s post-Freudian account of the phallos?

On one hand, Lacan’s position concerning this apparently so-irrational manifestation of a premodern culture is classically psychoanalytic. By this I mean it is comparable to Freud’s reading of the old Oedipus or Narcissus myths. For Freud, these are not simply exotic stories from a benighted, barbaric culture. Their uncanny power comes from the way they echo, and he argues they give voice, to very deep psychological structures and experiences we all pass through. Just so, Lacan thinks psychoanalysis can provide an enlightened perspective—for in contrast to Strauss, he was a modern, for whom to pine for a pre-secular, still-enchanted world was to pine hopelessly—in which we can retrieve the relevance of ancient religion, even phallic totemism, from the dustbin of modern or monotheistic cultural triumphalism. This is why Lacan says, in his programmatic *écrit*, “the Freudian Thing”, that psychoanalysis is “the discipline which has re-established the bridge linking modern man to the ancient myths” created and staged by the old poets. (Lacan 2006, p. 335/402)⁵

Yet his position, concerning the phallus and psychoanalysis, is actually much stronger than that. It is not that the ancients’ interest in the phallos as a symbol “anticipates” its true meaning, adequately articulated only in the would-be scientific object-language of modern psychoanalysis. *Rather, Lacan takes his understanding of “the signification of the phallos” in the psychogenesis of individuals—to cite the title of another essay of his—from the ancient sources.* Psychoanalysis is less the judge than, ironically, the student here. “Let us look at what the phallus, the *phallos*, originally is,” Lacan instructs, in direct answer to his own query in *Seminar V* as to why he thinks Freud’s emphasis on the psychological importance of the penis in children’s development is mistaken. (23/4/1958, p. 11) What do we see in Aristophanes or Herodotus concerning this *phallos*? (cf. Her. *Hist.* II, 46-50; Aristo. esp. *Acharnians**; *Lysistrata*, 27-29, 109, 1120)⁶ First of all, “that the phallos is in no way identical to the organ as an appurtenance of the body, a prolongation, a member, a functional organ as one might say”. What is it, then? Lacan continues: it is evidently less this male organ—the awful, simple, somatic truth—as it is, paradoxically, a sign, symbol, even a simulacrum or mask:

⁵ The same essay models what psychoanalysis discovers on the mythical Acteon as presented in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, whose glimpse of the naked goddess Dianne sees him metamorphosed into a deer, to be consumed by his own unrecognising hounds.

⁶ Herodotus, “To Bacchus, on the eve of his feast, every Egyptian sacrifices a hog before the door of his house, which is then given back to the swineherd by whom it was furnished, and by him carried away. In other respects the festival is celebrated almost exactly as Bacchic festivals are in Greece, excepting that the Egyptians have no choral dances. / They also use instead of phalli another invention, consisting of images a cubit high, pulled by strings, which the women carry round to the villages. A piper goes in front, and the women follow, singing hymns in honour of Bacchus. The Egyptians have a sacred story as to why these figurines have oversized genitals, and why this is the only part of the body that can move.” (*Histories* II.48 end)

It is always employed in connection with a simulacrum, with an *insignium*, whatever the mode in which it is presented, whether it is a question of a raised staff from which the virile organs are appended, or the question of an imitation of the virile organ, whether it is a question of a piece of wood, of a piece of leather, or of a series of varieties in which it is presented, it is something which is a substitutive object ... it has all the characteristics of a real substitute ... (23/4/1958, p.12)

This is the, antique, origin of Lacan's famous claim in his essay "The Signification of the Phallus", which is so much gobbledygook to most other schools of psychoanalytic thought (and nearly everyone else too!), that the phallus is first of all a signifier:

In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a fantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. Nor is it such an object (part-, internal-, good, bad, etc.) in the sense that this term tends to accentuate the reality pertaining in a relation. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes ... the phallus is a signifier.⁷

But what then does this signifier signify? Again, Lacan's proximate references to answer this question come from the ancients in *Seminar V*. First of all, in the ancient mysteries, it signified what he terms "the signifying manifestation of the fruitful potency of the great goddess". (23/4/58, p. 13). There was an oath and veil of secrecy surrounding these cults given over to the worship of these mysteries. So it is very difficult for us to know what exactly was enacted within them. However, we know they were devoted to the goddesses Persephone and Demeter. We know also they were clearly related to the pagan concern with the cycles of nature, between life and death, death and periodic rebirth. The phallos within these cults, Lacan hence interprets, was the privileged signifier of the mysterious potency and fertility of natural life, manifest in human beings in the sexual drive to reproduce the species⁸:

... what is manifested in the phallos is that which in life is manifested in the purest form in tumescence, as growth ... this privileged object, we might say, of the world of life, which moreover in its Greek appellation is linked to everything which is of the order of flux, of sap,... because it seems that there is the same root [in *physis* (MS add.-manuscript incomplete)] as in *phallos*. (23/4/1958, p.12)

This is the point of "link" Lacan makes with his account of the Oedipal phase in childhood. Here, the phallos is the signifier of desire. In particular, it is the signifier of the desire of the mother, what the child wants above all to decipher so s/he can position her/himself there as the imaginary object that

⁷ J. Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in *Ecrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink. W. W. Norton and Company, London, 2006. p. 579 (original French *Ecrits*, p. 690)

⁸ Consider Freud, "On Narcissism", on the unusual place of sexuality amongst human impulses, against those associated with individual flourishing: "there are biological considerations in [the] favour of [this distinction]. The individual does carry on a twofold existence: one to serve his own purposes and the other as a link in a chain, which he serves against his will, or at least involuntarily. The individual himself regards sexuality as one of his own ends; whereas from another point of view he is an appendage to his germ-plasm, at whose disposal he puts his energies in return for a bonus of pleasure. He is a mortal vehicle of a (possibly) immortal substance—like the inheritor of an entitled property, who is only the temporary holder of an estate which survives him, the separation of the sexual instincts from the ego instincts would simply reflect this twofold function of the individual." (*PFL VII*, p. 71) One might also think here, as Freud also does in his Preface to *The Three Essays on Sexuality*, of Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* on *eros* and the striving for immortality. See 7/5/58, p. 13.

would satisfy all the mother's wishes. The link, it has to be said, is not exact. One point of famous Lacanian emphasis is on how, from the very earliest times, the child's most natural desires are artificially mediated. This is because caught up in an "imaginary" dialectic, shaped by its near-total dependency of fathoming what others want, in a way which clearly differs from the immediate, phallic upsurge of *physis* invoked by Lacan in the immediately preceding. Hence, in "the Signification of the Phallus", Lacan makes a slightly different claim, one which situates the phallos at the uncanny point of linking, "wedding", or perhaps "copulation" of law and life, language and desire:

The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark where the share of the logos is wedded to the advent of desire. One might say that this signifier is chosen as what stands out ... in the real of sexual copulation, and also in the most symbolic ... sense ... since it is the equivalent of the relation of the (logical) copula. One might also say that by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the most vital flow as it is transmitted in generation." (Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus"*)

Human beings are desiring animals by nature. But our desire, from its earliest manifestations, is mediated by language: the need to express what we want to others in a language we learn from them, and in whose signifiers (words) it is urgently incumbent upon us from very early to try to interpret what they want. This cultural demand reshapes our most vital flows and urges: so we are the natural creature which can and does desire and identify with things as 'unnatural' as ideas and ideals, and which finds real satisfaction in the works of science, philosophy and the arts. The phallus in this passage is being raised to the position of signifying this monumental fact about our human condition.

So someone should interject here, as has often been interjected against Lacanian theory: all this talk of *phalloi*, however erudite and sophisticated, surely stands guilty of sanctifying, with ancient authority and modern pretension, what are truly the most ancient, misogynistic prejudices. If the phallos for the ancients was taken as a signifier of the life-force, hence as an object of worship, what is this to modern men and women? Does it not cement, with the authority of nature and biology herself, the ages-old male claim to cultural superiority, by virtue of the organ that happens to be appended to the base of his belly? For, whether the phallos is the brute penis or not, and even if we accept it as a "signifier": surely as such an image or signifier, it irrevocably retains an unmistakable reference to this definitively male, biological appendage. Take the other ancient reference Lacan draws our attention to in Seminars IV and V, in his discussion of what he terms "that which man makes, essentially and primitively, of the phallos". (25/6/58, p.12) The reference is to the great raised phallic standing stones erected by many of the earliest societies, like the following from Avebury in Britain:



These phallic standing stones seem clearly to have marked off for these people culturally and ritually delimited places, over against the surrounding natural environment. In these cultures, that is, the phallos—and behind it the male organ—was erected as the marker *par excellence* of human civilization, over against the natural world. A kind of short circuit was going on here. In this short circuit, nature herself (in the penis) provided the organ which was then taken to signify the very achievements of human cultures which minimally define themselves as set apart from her. Now, it will be said: if psychoanalysis claims not only decipher the signification of such phallic totems, but Lacan wants to claim a kind of universal anthropological signification for them, rooted in universal childhood experience, then the charges of feminist critics against his work are royally justified.

These criticisms are unavoidably truthful—provided that Lacan’s further thoughts on this phallic signifier are fully recounted. Recall we saw above that the phallus in the old religions, strangely, retained its potency and its mystery only as veiled; also, that initiates in the old phallic cults could approach it only at the price of a series of initiations, and invoking the wrath of the demons of ignorance or of shame (pictured above). Lacan wants to go further here. He does so by saying that the phallus in these cults at once invoked the “vital surge” (23/4/58, p.12) in which the initiate wished participation, at the same time as no human being as such could ever possess it without *losing* their own potency:

It is also quite clear that, by all sorts of tests ... that in these ancient cults, it is the very measure that one approaches the cult, namely the signifying manifestation of the fruitful potency of the great goddess, that everything which refers to the phallos is the object of amputations, of marks of castration, or of the more and more accentuated prohibitions, the eunuch character of the priests of the great goddess, the Syrian goddess ... (23/4/58, p.13)

The phallos in the ancient cults, Lacan thus repeats, is not simply the signifier of the vital surge, nature in her bounteous power, or life-force. It is also the signifier of this bounteous nature *as lost to us by the very imposition of culture*. Insofar as we are cultured, linguistic beings subject to prohibition or *nomos*, that is, our desire is minimally non-natural (which is not to say “unnatural”). It is culturally, inter-subjectively, or “politically” mediated. We must find our way backwards or upwards towards what promises to satisfy our deepest needs through our relations with others, using

language to express and cipher our desire, and that of others around us. In an image which has Biblical overtones, Lacan says human beings must pursue our desire “on the inverted ladder of the signifier.” The signifier of the phallos in this register, Lacan will hence specify, is:

... borrowed from the imaginary domain, something in the image of the other ... chosen to carry the mark of a lack which is this very lack through which the living being perceives himself, because he is human, ... because he is in this relationship with language, perceives himself as excluded from the totality of desires, as something limited, local, as a creature, ... a link in the chain of life, as only being one of those through whom life passes, unlike the animal ... (18/6/1958, p.8)

The phallos, that is, is the signifier of symbolic castration, in another of Lacan’s oracular formulae. In other words, it is the signifier of the problematic “disconnect” I mentioned above between language and culture, with nature. On the one hand, to repeat, the phallos evokes primordial nature, harmony between the individual and world, *nomos* and *physis*, and primordial plenitude. On the other hand, it evokes this paradise as forever lost, as “... struck by the signifier, ... this lack of being whose dimension the signifier introduces into the life of the subject.” (18/6/1958, p.9) The closer one gets then to directly unveiling the mysteries, then, the closer one gets to the revelation that beneath his clothes, the emperor is naked. The natural potency lies only, for us, in the very mediations of culture and language which we tend to always perceive as obstacles to be overcome on the path to our enjoyments.

This thought, again one for which Lacan finds an ancient precedent, is at the origin of the difficult Lacanian paradoxes concerning being and having the phallos. On the one hand, yes, what Lacanian theory identifies as phallic signifiers are signifiers of cultural or symbolic potency: the wig of the judge, the garb of the priest, the purple of the throne, men in uniform (or their uniforms *simpliciter!*) generally. Yet on the other hand, Lacan will insist in a way decisive for his thoughts on comedy, that one can nevertheless not directly embody or absolutely command these phallic insignia (we will see this in a moment when we look at Genet’s *Bordello*). This means that indeed the human being who does not have access to these signifiers can be considered as metaphorically “castrated” (excluded from cultural importance). But also it means that “the one who has something which can claim to resemble it” will always be “menaced by castration”, its potential loss. (23/4/58, p.13)

Lacan’s refiguring of the Oedipus complex around the phallus, that is to say, sees him moving towards the position that the human condition is less irrevocably tragic, than comic. (23/4/58, p.15) The phallus is every bit a simulacrum or masquerade for Lacan, as much in our societies as in the ancient cults. This is why there is nothing more ridiculous—or a sure sign that he is losing his edge—than a man who actually has symbolic power parading around and trying to reassure everyone that he actually has It. Indeed, this is a direct consequence of how Lacan believes that the male child escapes the perilous, Oedipal situation. He does so by identifying with the father’s law-giving words, his symbolic authority as certified by the desire of the mother, rather than anything the man more directly is:

It is along the line of satisfaction that the masquerade is established for him, because in the last analysis he will resolve the question of the danger for him, which threatens what he effectively has, by ... the pure and simple identification with the one who has its insignia, with one to all appearances has escaped the danger, namely the father: and, when all is said and done, the man is never virile except by an indefinite series of proxies: these come to him

from all his grandparents and from all his ancestors, passing through the direct ancestor.
(23/4/58, p.16)

But why, the question recurs, does the penis, through its signifying proxy the phallos, still signify all this? “The Egyptians have a sacred story as to why these figurines have oversized genitals, and why this is the only part of the body that can move”, so Herodotus tells us (*Hist.* II.48) The Lacanian answer to this mystery is that, far from being the surest proof of the power of males’ egos, the penis is the one part of their body that is not subject to egoistic, volitional control. On one hand, as in the erection that characterises male dreaming, it “has a mind of its own”. On the other hand, as the always comical phenomenon of male impotence attests, sometimes it will not rise to the occasion, despite the male ego’s characteristic dream of omni-potence. (*Incipiet Viagra*, or what one psychoanalytic critic has termed the penis without the phallos.) Even for male sexuality to be normal, Lacan claims, the male must have identified with a set of phallic signifiers which speak through him, or which he *has* as a custodian, but whose force his ego can never bombastically command. By identifying with the phallic signifiers of authority, he wins his virility. But the unavoidable cost is that he must forego immediate *Jouissance*, and learn to seek it by “playing by the rules” which in his culture, will shape the proper relations between sexes and the generations. The penis thus shows more than any other biological appendage which sticks out from the body just how dependent the advent and destiny of human desire is upon our mediated, cultured condition. This is why the penis becomes the most apposite or telling imaginary figure for the larger, symbolic reality of human castration: the split between our culture and nature. And this is also why, when in comedies the phallus comes out on display, what is at the same time put on show is how comically unable any one of us is to use our culture, language and others instrumentally, to attain everything we desire.

Comedy, from the Bordello to the Communion

So what then does Lacan say concerning comedy? How does it relate to this theory of the phallos, such that Lacan thinks the display of the thing on the antique comic stages is tellingly significant? It has to be said that what we have in the seminars is less a full blooded theory than a series of rich and intriguing leads. Zupancic’s *Odd One In* is much closer to a complete, Lacanian theory of comedy, one which takes its origins from Lacan’s thought, but passes far beyond its letter. Our aim here is in the first instance much more modest. It is to isolate Lacan’s claims concerning comedy in *Seminar V* and elsewhere. These claims, it seems to me, are four. But they are all united under the header of comedy as “linked in the closest possible way to what can be called the connection between the self and language”. In Lacan’s terms we have been developing, comedy is going to show what usually cannot or should be shown, if ordinary sociability is to abide. That is, it puts on display the human being’s usually hidden, peculiar division or “decentering” between culture and nature, which Lacan associates with the signification of the phallos. Let us examine these four claims in turn:

i. “nature up”: comedy stages the timeless individual ambition—that of the scoundrel or would-be tyrant in each of us—to relate to language, law, political life as a “rational” instrument to attain *Jouissance*, to be used to fulfil our most basic, our most natural needs. Lacan’s preeminent example is the *Clouds*. For how else is Socrates presented in the *Clouds*, he notes, if not as the subject who would “take advantage of language”: in Aristophanes’ exact terms, by making the weaker or unjust argument appear the stronger. As Lacan comments:

Aristophanes shows Socrates to us in this form: that all that lovely dialectic will serve an old man to try to satisfy his desires by all sorts of tricks, to escape from his creditors, to arrange that he is given money; or for a young man to escape from his commitments, from all his duties, to complain about his ancestors, etc. (18/12/1957, p.13)

What is at stake in the comic characters, that is, is “the return of need in its most elementary form”. Which needs in particular? Lacan is very specific:

...this emergence to the forefront of what originally entered into the dialectic of language, namely in a special way all sexual needs, precisely all the needs that are usually hidden. This is what you be being presented on stage in Aristophanes, and this goes very far, I would particularly recommend to your attention the plays concerning women and the way in which this return to the character of elementary need as underlying the whole process, what special role is given in this to women ... (loc cit.)

ii. “culture down”: *comic characters put on stage individuals who would, impossibly, would directly enjoy their phallic power over others: “what can it really mean to enjoy one’s state of being a bishop, a judge or a general?”* (5/3/58, p.13) This second claim is analytically separable from the first: here we are not concerned with how the base, usually repressed desires that undergird ordinary social life return to the surface on the comic stage. We are concerned with the elementary, tendentially neurotic fantasy of socialised individuals concerning others who wield symbolic or phallic power: this is that they must enjoy, in their being, this power, so that all the symbolic politesse and good form is but a front. Perhaps there are certain signifiers, insignia, social roles—those associated with power and privilege—which elude the otherwise lamentable fact that, as political beings, we are subject to the forbidding laws of our *poleis*. And perhaps some privileged Others, the objects of our rancour, can attain to this unmediated *Jouissance* that we can only long for. It is to illustrate this point that Lacan turns to a virtuoso analysis of Genet’s *Le Balcon* or *Bordello*. The choice of example could hardly have been better, or more humorous. The play is set, *a la* Aristophanes, in a time of crisis: the French revolution. There is a bordello there. We note that this setting is itself one in which elements of human life usually privatised are given a luminal public sanction. Certainly it provides Genet with the setting to quite directly ask concerning the enjoyment of figures of symbolic, phallic authority. For the girls at the brothel report that men, indeed, when they come in to enjoy, regularly ask to be dressed up as what? Exactly figures of the most august symbolic authority: the bishop, the judge, the general or the statesman. The chief of police is charged with keeping the bordello safe in the times of crisis. But his chief concern with the girls, hilariously, seems rather to be to ask whether any client has come in to ask to dress up as the Chief of Police! There is some important conceptual work to be done here. The police are, it is true, a public authority. However, they are also the point of last resort, whose principal means are those of violence: which lies in what Lacanian theory calls the Real, not the symbolic. It is when the order of the symbolic, of peaceful communication, the words of authority, and the social contract has failed, that the Police will be called in. This is why we should not be surprised that, for the larger part of the comedy, it remains that no one has asked to be the chief of Police. If the Real enjoyment, per the ordinary neurotic’s *fantasma*, is to exploit and enjoy a position of symbolic authority, then acting the Policeman is not sufficient (it would rather indicate a perverse subjectivity). In Lacanian terms, the Policeman does not have the phallos, like the judge whose words alone can strike fear into people’s heart; or the ruler, whose words can move a nation, etc. However, *per impossible*, because it is a comedy, at the decisive moment, everything seems to fall into place for our hero. Because the revolution is so dire, he is asked to form a kind of military-

Police state. What symbol would he like to have on his new uniform, to signify this new Power for public safety? Here is Lacan's comic gloss:

... the chief of police consults his entourage on the subject of the suitability of a sort of uniform, and also the symbol which will be the symbol of his function, and not without shyness in his case: in fact, he shocks the ears of his listeners a little: he proposes a phallus. Would the church have any objection to it, and he in fact bows his head a little and bows to the bishop who shows some hesitation, but suggests that after all if it is changed into the dove of the Holy Spirit, it would be more acceptable. In the same way the general proposes that the figure should be painted in the national colours, and some other suggestions of this kind which make us think that of course we are going to come pretty quickly to what is called on such occasions a concordat. (5/3/58, p. 17)

More than this, at this moment one of the girls bursts in and, in the *coup de theatre*, recounts that one of her regular clients, a plumber, has in fact come in and asked to be dressed as the head of police! Here, that is, we have the comic hero's apogee; and behind it, a kind of tellingly absurd staging of the impossible fulfilment of the neurotic's fantasy: to be or to have, in the real, the phallic Thing, crux of enjoyment and of power. Culture has stooped to nature, or an exception has been made to the founding prohibition of culture, that no one (wo)man can be, in the Real, this phallic Thing. The Chief in the *Bordello*, in Lacan's words, represents "simple desire, pure and simple desire, this need that man has to rejoin in a fashion that can be authenticated and directly assumed his own existence, his own thought, a value which is not purely distinct from his flesh ..." (5/3/58, p. 17)

iii. the impossibility of the direct possession of the Phallus: Lacan's further point, which stands over the entire analysis, is that this is impossible. As beings of *nomos* and of *logos*, we can only dream of directly being or having the fully satisfying Thing, or dwelling in the isles of the blessed, according to Plato's image in the *Republic*. No sooner has the Chief in the *Bordello* attained his apogee, than he is made by the laws of comedy to fall. Lacan comically recounts the moment: "generalised emotion. Tightness of the throat. We are at the end of our troubles. We have everything, up to and including the wig of the chief of Police—which [however] falls off". In other words, at that very moment when "the chief of police was just ready to reach the peak of his happiness", his castration—his being a subject of the signifier and law, like the rest of us—is comically displayed. "How did you know?", he asks the girls, who seem not to be surprised at the demeaning spectacle, nor even that he had a detachable wig at all: "you were the only one who believed that no one knew that you wore a wig." (5/3/58, p.17) To underline the significance of the moment, Genet has another prostitute simulate castrating the man, and throwing in his face "that with which, she says modestly, he will never deflower anybody again." (5/3/58, p.17) Lacan highlights his own point by commenting that what the play's end shows again is the problematic situation of human subjectivity, torn between *nomos* and *phusis*—"comedy manifests by this kind of inner necessity this relationship of the subject, from the moment that he is signified, ... the fruit of the result of this relationship to the signifier ..." (5/3/58, p.11) In this way, the Chief of Police in Genet can only return to anything like even his former inglorious, so humble public legitimacy "when he has passed the test, on condition precisely that he is castrated, namely [in an action] which ensures that the phallus is once again promoted to the state of a signifier, to this something which can or not give or take away, confer or not confer" authority upon its bearer. (5/3/58, p.18)

iv. comedy has a "ceremonial value" as species of "imaginary communion" (5/3/58, p.11; 18/12/57, p.13)) Lacan makes a series of comments in *Seminar V* which situate comedy in its history, emerging

from out of Greek religion. These comments clearly resonate with his reading of the phallus, which we've seen above. However, they have for this reader an ambiguous status, both in their own right, in terms of the account of comedy we have been presenting. The ancient place of comedy in the religious festivals like the Panathenaia was to come third, after the satyr play, and the tragedy. Its ceremonial place there, Lacan comments, he is not the first to compare to that of the mass in Catholic Europe. Indeed, in phenomena like the "*risus pascalis*"—"unseemly ludicrous tales introduced into the Easter services"—Lacan claims that we can see the "trace and shadow" of comedy in Christendom, after the decline of the classical stage. Comedy, Lacan claims:

... is something like the representation of the end of the communion meal by which the tragedy itself had been evoked. It is man, when all is said and done, who consumes what was presentified there in terms of its common substance and flesh and it is a question of knowing what will result from this. (5/3/58, p.11)

Indeed, it is a question for the reader to know what Lacan's precise meaning here, for Lacan's discussion quickly moves to his reading of Genet. Earlier, taking as his object Aristophanes' *Assembly of Women*, which ends in a great feast in the agora to celebrate the comic, new order of absolute *egalite* between the sexes, Lacan comments that:

Aristophanes invites us ... to perceive something that can only be perceived retroactively, that if the state exists, and the city, it is so that one can take advantage of it, it is in order that a feast, in which no one really believes, can be set up in the *agora*, it is so that one can come to be astonished at the contradictions to common sense brought out by the perverse emotions of the city which is subject to all the pulling and dragging of a dialectical process; in order that one should be brought back through the mediation of women, the only ones who really know what men need, ... to common sense ... (18/12/57, p.14)

Here, the "imaginary communion that is represented by comedy" which Lacan intends seems to be nearly identifiable with the desire of the comic heroes: to "take advantage" of political life to attain to private enjoyment. Yet, my sense is that we wouldn't want to jump to that conclusion here—for the invocation of a *common* substance, which each of the participants consumes at this mass-like, public meal, seems to point in a different interpretive direction. Comedy itself, Lacan again comments, "we are told came from a kind of orgy or banquet where man in fact says "yes" to the same meal that is constituted by offerings to the gods." (5/3/57, p.13) There is a definite shift in this comment from the analysis of one comedy, to a comment seemingly on the genre as a whole. Here then, comedy *per se* is compared to the festive staging and eating of a banquet, wherein a community—divided by the competing political and religious demands in ways ancient tragedy so terribly showed—is brought back to a kind of lived horizon of harmony. Lacan here seems very close to the historical observations central to the Cambridge Schools' views on the origin of the genre: amongst these that the Dionysean, phallic parade associated with the great festivals in which the theatre came to be staged ended originally in a circular threshing floor, where a goat was sacrificed on an altar.



[Left is a procession of phallos carriers. Six men are carrying a phallus pole, while a larger figure above them is riding a thicker phallus.]

Yet Lacan interprets the deep force or meaning of this ritual origin of comedy in psychoanalytic terms. At play in comedies' playful raising up and undermining of its heroes, he claims, is the deep human hope—which he says “in the last analysis every process of the elaboration of desire in language” evokes—“that after all this detour [though culture, law, language] is made in the last analysis [we could] get back to *Jouissance* and its most elementary form.” (18/12/1957, p.13)

Clearly, these comments can only be interpreted with a greater or lesser degree of speculation, and squared with the other data of Lacan's position, and the testimony of comedy as we know it. They should also be taken as a contribution to a wider debate, rather than Holy Writ: a debate about the meaning of comedy in which psychoanalysis presents itself as the bearer of an anthropology wherein these ancient religious and cultural manifestations are resurrected, as capable of speaking to us across history insofar as we are speaking/nomic, desiring/natural animals. More particularly, there is clearly some, underdeveloped link between Lacan's claims concerning comedy's liturgical meaning, and his series of intriguing comments concerning love as always a comic emotion, as well as (differently) tying the phenomenon of laughter to the advent of love. (refs*) The underdeveloped nature of these remarks licenses someone like Zupancic, working from Lacanian premises, to go far beyond the letters of what he said towards her own, wider theory.

Let me wager to close that Lacan's inchoate remarks concerning the end(s) of comedy in a sacral feast are to be read alongside the initial quotation from *Seminar VII* we cited:

The sphere of comedy is created by the presence at its centre of a hidden signifier ... that in the Old Comedy is there in person: namely, the phallos. Who cares if it is subsequently whisked away? One must remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate [comedy] in [its] full human dimension ... is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including those that are the most essential ... the phallos is nothing more than the signifier of this flight. Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens. If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives. (*Sem VII**)

Implied here (but, again, no more than that) is a fifth thesis of Lacan's on comedy, hinted at but not developed in *Seminar V*. This is that the comic universe is its own, specific kind of created space: one in which, despite everything we know of real life, “life triumphs” so that the hero, however humbled, always survives. This is why a new “happy ending” always follows. In this created, literary or poetic space, the prohibitive norms of culture—including on proper and improper modes of speech and subjects of conversation; but also even the laws of physical nature—wherein one should try not too often to fall in soup of any kinds—are lifted. This lifting of the norms, however, far from ushering in “nihilism” or any other like spectre of social disintegration, actually serves a very concrete political function, that of reconciling subjects to the otherwise irreconcilable, the problematic and precarious aspects of our all-too-human existence.

List of References:

Lacan, J 2006, 'The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis', in *Écrits*, WW Norton & Co, New York, pp. 334-63.