2 Aristotle (348–322 B.C.)

Aristotle agreed with Plato that laughter is essentially derisive and that in being amused by someone we are finding that person inferior in some way. To find someone's shortcomings funny, he added, we must count them as relatively minor; otherwise we would be disturbed by them. Though Aristotle did not go along with Plato's recommendation that we should suppress laughter generally, he did think that most people overdo joking and laughing. The moral ideal is to avoid the extremes of the humorless boor and the "anything for a laugh" buffoon: it is to be ready-witted but tactful. Besides his view of laughter as derision, Aristotle hinted at the later theory that laughter is a reaction to many kinds of incongruity, and not just human shortcomings. In the *Rhetoric* (3, 2) he mentions that a speaker can get a laugh by setting up a certain expectation in the audience, and then jolting them with something they did not expect. His example is from an unknown comedy: "And as he walked, beneath his feet were—chilblains." Jokes can work this way, too, he notes; consider those that involve word play or a change of spelling. This observation that surprise can make us laugh was not developed by Aristotle or followers like Cicero, however. It was not until Kant and Schopenhauer that the Incongruity Theory of laughter was worked out in any detail.

Poetics, ch. 5, 1449a

Comedy, as we have said, is an imitation of people who are worse than the average. Their badness, however, is not of every kind. The ridiculous, rather, is a species of the ugly; it may be defined as a mistake or unseemliness that is not painful or destructive. The comic mask, for example, is unseemly and distorted but does not cause pain.

Nicomachean Ethics, Book IV, ch. 8

Since life includes relaxation as well as activity, and in relaxation there is leisure and amusement, there seems to be here too the possibility of good taste in our social relations, and propriety in what we say and how we say it. And the same is true of listening. It will make a difference here what kind of people we are speaking or

listening to. Clearly, here, too, it is possible to exceed or fall short of the mean. People who carry humor to excess are considered vulgar buffoons. They try to be funny at all costs, and their aim is more to raise a laugh than to speak with propriety and to avoid giving pain to the butt of their jokes. But those who cannot say anything funny themselves, and are offended by those who do, are thought to be boorish and dour. Those who joke in a tactful way are called witty, which implies a quick versatility in their wits. For such sallies are thought to be movements of one's character, and, like bodies, characters are judged by their movements. The ridiculous side of things is always close at hand, however, and most people take more fun than they should in amusement and joking. So even buffoons are called witty just as though they were fine wits. But it is clear from our discussion that they differ from the witty person, and to a considerable extent.

Tact also belongs to the middle state, and a man is tactful if he says and listens to the sort of thing that befits a good and well-bred man. For there are some things that are proper for such a man to say and to hear in joking, and there is a difference between the joking of a well-bred and a vulgar man, and between that of an educated and of an uneducated man. We can see this difference in the old and the new comedies: for the writers of old comedy it was indecent language that was ridiculous, while those writing new comedy prefer innuendo. Between these two there is quite a difference in propriety. Can we then define the man who jokes well as the one who says nothing unbecoming a well-bred man, or as one who does not give pain in his jokes, or even as one who gives delight to his listeners? Or is that definition itself undefinable, since different things are hateful or pleasant to different people? The kind of jokes he will listen to will be the same, for the kind of jokes a person can put up with are also the kind he seems to make. There are, then, jokes he will not make, for a joke is a kind of abuse. There are some kinds of abuse which lawgivers forbid; perhaps they should have forbidden certain kinds of jokes.

Such, then, is the man who follows the mean—he being as it were a law unto himself—whether we call him tactful or witty. The buffoon, however, cannot resist any temptation to be funny, and spares neither himself nor others if he can get a laugh. He says things that no cultivated man would say, and some which he would not even listen to. The boor, by contrast, is useless in such social

relations, for he contributes nothing and takes offense at everything, despite the fact that relaxation and amusement are a necessary element in life.

3 Cicero (106–43 B.C.)

Though best known as an orator and statesman, Cicero was also keenly interested in philosophy, and believed that philosophy and rhetoric should be combined. In his work *On the Orator* he examines the use of humor in public speaking, discussing such techniques as exaggeration, sarcasm, and punning, and such philosophical topics as the nature of humor and the ethics of its use. In large part he follows what Aristotle had said, but he adds at least one new idea of some theoretical importance, the distinction between humor in what is being talked about, and humor arising from the language used. This distinction is similar to that made today between the comedian, who says funny things, and the comic, who says things funny.

On the Orator, Book II

Ch. 58

The seat and province of the laughable, so to speak, lies in a kind of offensiveness and deformity, for the sayings that are laughed at the most are those which refer to something offensive in an inoffensive manner. . . . But very careful consideration must be given to how far the orator should carry laughter . . . for neither great vice, such as that of crime, nor great misery is a subject for ridicule and laughter. People want criminals attacked with more forceful weapons than ridicule, and do not like the miserable to be derided, unless, perhaps, when they are insolent. You must also be considerate of people's feelings, so that you do not speak rashly against those who are personally beloved.

Ch. 59

There are two kinds of jokes, one of which is based on things, the other on words.