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HUMOUR IN VIRGIL

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Perhaps the most striking quality of Virgil's poetry is his 'sadness at the doubtful doom of human kind': yet not every passage in Virgil is tinged with melancholy. He does in fact have a sense of humour, though he keeps it strictly in control and subordinates it to his artistic purpose. One must not, however, go as far as M. P. Richard, whose booklet entitled 'Virgile, Auteur Gai', greatly exaggerates the gaiety of the Aeneid, which is actually regarded as a succession of comic adventures.

Other studies of Virgilian humour to which I am indebted are H. J. Rose's Chapter on 'molle atque facetum' in his Sather lectures on the Eclogues, A. Sidgwick's remarks on the humour of the Georgics on pp. 39 - 40 of his introduction and particularly 'Le Sourire de Virgile', a recent article[1] by M. E. de St. Denis, who reacts against Richard's exaggerated views. I have also been helped by commentaries on individual books by Professors Austin and Maguinness and Mr. R. D. Williams.

One hears so much about the 'gravitas' of the Romans that one can easily underestimate their sense of humour. However even the most superficial acquaintance with authors such as Plautus, Cicero, Catullus, Horace, Ovid and Martial is sufficient to convince one that the Romans did have a sense of fun. No doubt the humour of the early Italians was unrefined and perhaps seldom in evidence except on holidays which might provide an occasion for Fescennine verses, 'saturae' and Atellan farces. Plautus' success on the comic stage must have owed a great deal to native Italian humour as well as to Greek models. However, as Rome became more Hellenised, her citizens began to acquire a greater and more refined sense of fun, even if Terence's comedies met with but mixed success. By 91 B.C., the dramatic date of Cicero's De Oratore, humour had become so much a part of the standard equipment of the advocate that a leading exponent of humour in the courts is made by Cicero to discourse at great length on various aspects of 'risus' in that dialogue[2]; in other words the Roman knights who formed the juries at that time could be relied on to appreciate an advocate's wit. A generation later Cicero's famous humour, though distasteful to Cato Uticensis, was appreciated by Julius Caesar and many others. About this time too, the time of Virgil's boyhood, Catullus of Verona, Virgil's fellow countryman, was producing poetry full of wit and humour. Virgil was about 30 when began his close friendship with Horace, who is with good reason described by E.K. Rand[3] as 'Rome's foremost expert in laughter'.

One might therefore reasonably expect Virgil to have had a sense of humour, and indeed Suetonius in his Life of Virgil bears witness to it in two passages. He tells us that, when Virgil was writing the Georgics, he composed a large number of lines in the morning and spent the rest of the day reducing them to a very small number. This, says Suetonius, Virgil wittily called 'producing after the manner of a she-bear and licking into shape'. Later Suetonius gives Virgil's retort to those who accused him

of borrowing from Homer. 'Why don't my critics try the same thefts? They'll find it easier to steal his club from Hercules than a line from Homer'.

Let us now examine the humour of Virgil's poetry.

A word first about the minor poems. There is humour in the Culex ('The Song of the Gnat') and the Moretum ('The Song of the Salad'), as both poems can be called mock epics and devote noble hexameters to humble themes, though it is doubtful whether either poem is by Virgil. Nor is the coarse humour of the Priapea likely to have emanated from the poet who was nicknamed Parthenias for his virginal purity. The poems of the Catalepton proper can be described as epigrams. They are clearly modelled on Catullus and show a certain amount of wit. One attacks a rhetorician who uses strange Greek forms. Another seems to be a defence of the reputation of a dead man who, it is claimed, did not die of drink. Another, attacking one Noctuinus and his father-in-law, aptly quotes Catullus' line[4] about Caesar and Pompey,

'Gener socerque perdidistis omnia'.

The most amusing poem of the collection is the parody of Catullus' 'Phaselus ille'. Catullus' yacht is replaced by 'Sabinus ille', a local upstart who began his career by driving mules. Virgil knew his Catullus[5] well. The poet of Verona must have been all the rage at Mantua, Virgil's birthplace, at Cremona, where, Suetonius tells us, Virgil spent his early years and at Mediolanum, where he moved when 15, according to Suetonius. The epigrams of the Catalepton could, therefore, have been by Virgil; to say that they are is another matter.

The Eclogues do not of course have the humour of Theocritus, whose shepherds show on the whole a greater wit and sharpness in repartee[6]. The Eclogues are however not without humour, though most of it is concentrated in three poems.

In Eclogue 2 the unsuccessful lover Corydon is modelled on Theocritus' amusing Polyphemus. Perhaps Corydon's best touch is when he applies city standards to himself and decides 'Rusticus es, Corydon', 'you're nothing but a country bumpkin, Corydon'.

In Eclogue 3 Damoetas and Menalcas end their singing match with amusing riddles. Damoetas bids Menalcas

> Dic quibus in terris - et eris mihi magnus Apollo -
> Tres pateat caeli spatium non amplius ulnas.

Menalcas retorts with his riddle:

> Dic quibus in terris inscripti nomina regum
> Nascantur flores et Phyllida solus habeto.

The answer to the second riddle was clear enough to the ancients; the flower referred to was what Theocritus calls ἁ γραπτὰ ὑάκινθος [7] which was thought of as having petals marked with AI to denote AIAI (alas) or AIAS (Ajax) or perhaps with Upsilon to signify Hyacinthus. Damoetas' riddle, however, has puzzled the commentators. The best suggestions are that one has to be looking at the sky or its reflection from the bottom of a well, or that Caelius is a name, perhaps of a man who owns no more than six feet of earth, in which he is or will be buried. Palaemon, with charming Socratic

irony, refuses to give a verdict, saying,

> non nostrum inter vos tantas componere lites.
> et vitula tu dignus et hic - et quisquis amores
> aut metuet dulcis aut experietur amaros.

Perhaps, as Rose suggests, he has been preoccupied with his own problems, no doubt those of love. In any case he hasn't bothered to find out what the stake is. Before his arrival the competitors have agreed to compete for a pair of drinking-bowls, but[8] Palaemon assumes it is a calf, which he says both men deserve and indeed anyone else who fears love when sweet or who finds it bitter, and perhaps includes himself in one or other of these categories.

In Eclogue 5 Menalcas suggests to Mopsus that they should both sing a song. Menalcas compliments the younger man, Mopsus, by saying that his only rival in these hills is Amyntas. This annoys the conceited young Mopsus, who retorts that Amyntas will be rivalling the songs of Phoebus next. Mopsus is not a Theocritean name, but has, I suggest, been chosen by Virgil to mean something like Shakespeare's 'Sir Oracle'; Mopsus was the name of two legendary seers, both of whom came to an untimely end despite their prophetic skill, but Virgil is probably thinking of the one who was the seer of the Argonauts, and making a learned joke, as Apollonius describes the Argonaut Mopsus as a protegé[9] of Apollo's. In any case Mopsus now says he will sing a song that Amyntas will never be able to rival. Menalcas then says

> lenta salix quantum pallenti cedit olivae
> puniceis humilis quantum saliuncula rosetis,
> iudicio nostro tantum tibi cedit Amyntas.

Menalcas must surely have his tongue in his cheek to indulge in such fulsome flattery. Suitably mollified, Mopsus then favours Menalcas with his lament for the death of Daphnis. Menalcas immediately bursts into paeans of praise.

> tale tuum carmen nobis, divine poeta,
> quale sopor fessis in gramine, quale per aestum
> dulcis aquae saliente sitim restinguere rivo.

This effusive praise from Menalcas is reminiscent of the stream of ironical compliments[10] paid by Aeschylus' Clytemestra in welcoming Agamemnon back to Argos, though of course Menalcas, unlike Clytemestra, speaks with a smile.

These passages excepted there is little humour in the Eclogues and small wonder when one is reminded by Eclogues 1 and 9 of the background of land confiscations against which the poems were written. Virgil could in the Fourth Eclogue[11] hope for better things to come, but just then he had little heart for joking.

In <u>Satires</u> I, 10 Horace praises Virgil with the words

> molle atque facetum
> Vergilio adnuerunt gaudentes rure Camenae.

As this satire was published about 35 B.C., when Virgil was only just beginning to write the Georgics, Horace must almost certainly be referring to the Eclogues which were published about 39 B.C. The natural translation of 'molle atque facetum' is 'gentle humour', and this, as we shall see, is precisely what Virgil shows in the

Georgics. Horace may be thinking of Virgil's personal qualities rather than those which he shows in the Eclogues, or his affection for Virgil may have led him to exaggerate the humour of the Eclogues; it is also just possible that he is referring to the 'Culex' or the 'Moretum', always assuming that they are by Virgil. Quintilian, however, is probably right in his interpretation of the passage, when he says[12] that the word 'facetus'[13] need not only apply to what raises a laugh, but that Horace uses it here rather to refer to 'grace' and 'polished elegance'. Quintilian then quotes a lost letter of Cicero who records Brutus as giving the epithets 'faceti' and 'molles' to a lady's feet as she goes daintily on her way. One could also quote Horace, Satires 1.2.26, where 'facetus' is applied to a man who thinks it elegant to wear his shirt very short. Horace is probably praising Virgil's style; he could, however, be referring to Virgil's metrical skill. Brutus' epithets are used of human feet; the application of the same adjectives to metrical feet is not impossible, when one thinks, for instance, of the various terms used to describe limping iambics, and 'mollis' is in fact used of a metrical foot in Ciris 1.20

> et gracilem molli libeat pede claudere versum.

On the evidence of the Georgics, M. Richard's description of Virgil as 'auteur gai' is fully justified. Many passages of the Georgics are full of playful wit, because Virgil as a patriot and lover of the countryside is able to write about what he loves - Italy. He has to curb his enthusiasm,

> singula dum capti circumvectamur amore. (3.285)

His reference (3.41) to the Georgics as the 'haud mollia iussa' of Maecenas is playful, whether it means difficult task' or 'stern bidding' as it does in Aeneid 9, 804. One of the Latin words[14] for 'humour' is 'sales', salt, the seasoning which makes food taste better. Virgil, realising that the fare served by Hesiod, Aratus and presumably Nicander in his lost work on Bee-keeping, was not particularly palatable, wisely seasons his poem with humour, even though his intention is quite as serious as Hesiod's and far more so than that of the Alexandrian dilettanti.

Much of the humour of the Georgics stems from Virgil's application of terms from the world of men to animals and insects. Take for example Georgics 1, 181-6:

> tum variae inludant pestes: saepe exiguus mus
> sub terris posuitque domos atque horrea fecit,
> aut oculis capti fodere cubilia talpae,
> inventusque cavis bufo et quae plurima terrae
> monstra ferunt, populatque ingentem farris acervum
> curculio atque inopi metuens formica senectae.

The mouse has his own apartments, and his own granary: the ant, like humans, takes out an insurance policy against old age. Note too the humorous effect of 'exiguus mus' with the heavy monosyllable at the end of the line; this gave Horace the idea for his more famous line (A.P. 139)

> parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.

Cattle are described like humans; they too have their romances (venus), and wedding-days (hymenaei); the bullock, when charging, 'signa movet'; the crows are an army

in marching order. In particular, the bees are human in everything except size. They like men have their 'patria', their 'urbs', their 'penates' and their 'thalami'; the bee citizens are 'Quirites', obedient to mighty laws and governed by a 'rex'. They too have their spell of sentry duty, they too are beset by civil war and have to follow 'magnanimi duces' into battle, spurred by 'Martius ille aeris rauci canor'. When battle is joined, the bees

> ingentes animos angusto in pectore versant.

Virgil has a literary precedent for the 'Battle of the Bees' in the Greek mock epic 'The Battle of Frogs and Mice', but Virgil's humour is seldom unkind or derisory; this is because he really does sympathise with all living creatures, just as though they are human. One of his most touching references to the hardships of this life is introduced without preamble in a passage about cattle (3. 66-68)

> optima quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi
> prima fugit, subeunt morbi tristisque senectus
> et labor et durae rapit inclementia mortis.

Here Virgil is saying that the farmer must let his bullocks have access to the heifers as soon as possible, before it is too late. 'Mortalibus' in this passage must mean 'all creatures liable to death' and must certainly include cattle as well as men. Again, when discussing disease among bees, Virgil says

> casus apibùs quoque nostros
> vita tulit.

Compare Robert Burns'

> 'The best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley'.

Burns like Virgil knew the hardships of a farmer's life, and could sympathise with the sufferings of men, animals and flowers. 'The Cottar's Saturday Night' is similar in spirit to the Georgics. Burns too had a sense of humour; but I must not press my comparison too far; Burns was no 'Parthenias'.

Virgil tells us that battles among bees are easily stopped.

> haec certamina tanta
> pulveris exigui iactu compressa quiescunt.

Sidgwick takes this as a humorous reference to a storm in a teacup. Such humour would, I think, be too unkind for Virgil. Rather are the lines full of pathos and sympathy. 'Pulveris exigui'[15], 'a handful of dust', makes the reader think of burial and death. The great efforts of the bees are all to come to nothing. Quite the most amusing passage in Georgics 4 is the playful simile likening the heavy manual labour of the tiny bees to that of the giant Cyclopes in their forge under Etna.

> fervet opus, redolentque thymo fragrantia mella.
> ac veluti lentis Cyclopes fulmina massis
> cum properant, alii taurinis follibus auras
> accipiunt redduntque, alii stridentia tingunt
> aera lacu; gemit inpositis incudibus Aetna;

illi inter sese magna vi bracchia tollunt
in numerum, versantque tenaci forcipe ferrum.
non aliter, si parva licet componere magnis,
Cecropias innatus apes amor urguet habendi,
munere quamque suo. (169-178)

The tradition of the epic simile permitted it to be realistic[16]; it was often commonplace, e.g. flies buzzing round a milk-pail, or even coarse, as when Odysseus is likened to a man impatiently cooking a black pudding, but it was not deliberately used for comic effect, as it is here. Virgil therefore, still with his tongue in his cheek, adds the words

si parva licet componere magnis,

as he pokes fun at the traditionalists who will be offended at such a piece of literary sacrilege. Pope missed the point when he defended the passage against the charge of exaggeration.

Despite the humorous effect here, Virgil was so pleased with his description of the forge of the Cyclopes that he decided, and rightly, to use several lines again in a serious passage in Aeneid 8, 449 seq., when Aeneas' shield is being forged. He also used the description of the eager activity of the bees again, when, in Aeneid I 430 seq., the bustle of the Tyrians building Carthage is likened to that of bees.

One of the most attractive passages of the Georgics is 4. 125 seq., the description of the old Cilician who settled at Tarentum and made a most successful garden out of the poorest of soil. His roses were the first of the spring, his apples the first of the autumn, and he was able to pick the 'hyacinthus' from his garden, while winter's frosts were still cracking the rocks and the rivers were still frozen solid; but even this was not good enough, for he would still complain that summer was late that year and the Zephyrs slow in coming.

Georgics 3. 294

nunc, veneranda Pales, magno nunc ore sonandum

is an amusing mock-heroic line. Pales is the goddess of flocks and this line occurs early in Virgil's description of sheep-farming and goat-farming. In the previous lines Virgil has been saying that he realises the difficulty of his task in putting this topic into Latin verse and in lending honour to so humble a theme. He then goes on to claim originality in traversing virgin areas of Parnassus. All this is an echo of Lucretius' claim to fame, as having overcome the 'patrii sermonis egestas', in reproducing Greek philosophy in lucid Latin verse and in being original. I take these lines as an echo rather than a parody of Lucretius, whom Virgil holds in the greatest respect in all except his lack of religion. No real disrespect to Pales is intended; Virgil merely smiles at the humble province of Pales, rather than at the goddess herself, who is asked to share in the joke. This passage need not contradict the impression I for one have that Virgil was a deeply religious man who rejects the Epicureanism of Lucretius and Siro when he says

felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas

and expresses his own religious convictions in the next line

fortunatus et[17] ille deos qui novit agrestes.

'Felix' could be a polite way of saying 'no thank you, not for me', like the Greek ἐπαινεῖν or Virgil's own 'laudato ingentia rura'.

Before leaving the Georgics, we must pause to consider an apparent inconsistency in Virgil's attitude. In many passages he is gay and light-hearted; yet elsewhere he is melancholy and depressed. Virgil, like Horace, is a poet of mood; he isn't really inconsistent but takes his mood from his subject matter. He is often gay in the Georgics, because he loves the Italian country-side and believes in a divine providence. He cannot, however, help showing his tender sympathy for the farmer whose 'labor actus in orbem' is never done, except perhaps at the Bacchanalia and other festive occasions. He does, nevertheless, realise that providence is being cruel to be kind. As a result of his unremitting toil, the farmer, unlike the sophisticated city-dweller and man of affairs, does at least gain 'secura quies et nescia fallere vita'. Italy is 'iustissima tellus' and rewards'labor improbus' with 'facilem victum' (an uncomplicated, unworried life), so that Virgil can, in all sincerity, say,

o fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint,
agricolas.

Yet, when he comes to describe the hard work of the farmers, his tender heart sympathises with them more than is really necessary. Nor can Virgil's kind heart properly understand why providence permits unnecessary or undeserved suffering; that is why in his description of the cattle plague he cries out in protest

quid labor aut benefacta iuvant? quid vomere terras
invertisse gravis?

and stresses that these were no dissolute city dwellers.

We turn now to the Aeneid. Virgil's purpose in composing the Aeneid was to produce a patriotic, religious and artistic epic poem, to combine the literary qualities of Homeric epic with the spirit of Naevius and Ennius. Clearly the Aeneid is poetry with a purpose, and equally clearly humour has no large or obvious part to play in fulfilling that purpose. M. Richard's statement that the Aeneid is a series of comic adventures is therefore to be rejected at once. It is closer to the Pilgrim's Progress than to the adventures of Don Quixote or Baron Münchhausen. Virgil had an instinctive feeling for what is appropriate, τὸ πρέπον, the 'decorum', and realised that gratuitous, pointless comedy was out of place in a serious, didactic epic

Humour does, however, occur when appropriate. There is broad humour of a Plautine type in the Games in Book 5, because the occasion is suitable, and, no doubt, also because its literary precedent, the Funeral Games of Patroclus in Iliad 23 is so full of comedy. Elsewhere the humour of the Aeneid is subtler and based on careful characterisation. Virgil's first aim is to make his characters realistic,to make them act naturally in any given situation. He has no objection to their acting humorously, provided they act in character. For this reason I think the humour of the Aeneid is akin to that of Terence, who, you will recall, was awarded first prize by a Roman critic for his characterisation. This realism in characterisation extends also to the anthropomorphic Olympian gods; Venus is a devoted mother, Juno a woman with a grudge, and Jupiter a kind, but rather overworked 'paterfamilias'. They are

not meant to cut a particularly comic figure, but only to act in character. I shall also discuss the cruel taunts and jeers which Virgilian warriors hurl at each other. These may simply be a legacy from Homer; I prefer to think of them as Virgil's commentary on the ugly effect which war has on human character. I shall also say something about the irony of fortune, the cruel jokes which she plays on men in the Aeneid.

The broadest humour of the Aeneid occurs where it is most appropriate, in the games of Book 5; the accounts of the boat race and the foot race are particularly amusing.

In the boat-race, Gyas' craft, the Chimera, shoots into the lead, closely followed by Cloanthus, who, by steering close to the rock round which they had to double, overtakes Gyas, who, angry with his steersman Menoetes for taking too safe a course, throws him overboard. The Trojans laugh instinctively, as men do, at this dangerous cruel act, but go on laughing with a clearer conscience when they see that the old Menoetes can swim. Needless to say, Gyas' efforts at the helm are anything but an improvement and he soon drops to third place. Meanwhile Menoetes' caution is partially vindicated by the fate of Sergestus, who steers too close to the rock, runs aground, but finally brings his ship limping home amid derisory jeers. Cloanthus just wins from Menestheus, because he remembers to pray to the deities of the sea, so that Portunus and the Nereids push his ship on faster. Compare this harmless intervention by gods in answer to a prayer with the events of the chariot race of Iliad 23, where Apollo, smarting over a past grievance, dashes the whip from the hand of Diomede who is overtaking the leader, Eumelus. Athena however restores his whip to her favourite Diomede, and, for good measure, wrecks Eumelus' chariot.

There is humour too in Virgil's footrace. Nisus is leading Salius by a long way, when he slips on a patch of blood where oxen had been sacrificed. But he remembers his dear young friend, handsome Euryalus, who is in third place, and deliberately fells Salius, enabling Euryalus to win. After the race Salius complains so vociferously that Aeneas gives him an extra prize. Then of course Nisus complains as well, and the sight of his limbs covered in filthy slime is too much for Aeneas, and he laughs for the one and only time[18] in the poem, and gives Nisus a prize too. Compare this with the footrace of the Iliad. Ajax is leading, closely followed by Odysseus, when Athene, in answer to Odysseus' prayer, makes Ajax slip on cattle dung. After the race Ajax grabs second prize, spits out the dung and exclaims (I quote Rieu's racy translation)

> 'Damnation take it. I swear it was the goddess tripped me up, the one who always dances attendance like a mother on Odysseus'.

Once again we see Homer's gods in a much less favourable light; Virgil's gods don't interfere in his footrace. As we shall see, the gods of the Aeneid, though amusingly human at times, are, with the possible exception of Juno, much less capricious and much more respectable than their Homeric prototypes.

Though amusing, Aeneid 5 has considerably less comedy than Iliad 23. One reason is that Virgil's gods are staider, but another is that Aeneas has to be the centre of interest in this book as throughout the Aeneid. The Iliad on the other hand is not really an Achilleid, and many heroes besides Achilles figure prominently in Iliad 23, heroes whom we have already grown to know and love. In particular there is Nestor,

that Polonius of the Iliad, who gives his son, Antilochus, a long briefing before the chariot race, wise though Antilochus was, says Homer. Antilochus deprives Menelaus of second place by dangerous driving and also by threatening his horses with death. Antilochus goes on to show himself a briefer and more effective speaker than his father. First he resists Achilles' suggestion that the second prize which he had earned should go to Eumelus whose chariot had been wrecked; he tactfully suggests an extra prize for Eumelus. Then he placates Menelaus, who is angry at his dangerous driving, by flattering him and offering him second prize. However, Menelaus, now that his wounded pride is healed, allows Antilochus to keep his prize. Then, after the footrace, Antilochus talks his way into an extra prize by flattering Achilles and saying that only he could have beaten Odysseus. This is in sharp contrast to his loquacious father Nestor, who, on being awarded an extra prize by Achilles, made a long speech recalling the athletic feats of his youth. Then there are Idomeneus and the lesser Ajax who quarrel over a bet. These illustrations from Iliad 23 will suffice to show that Virgil, by making Aeneas overshadow the other Trojans so completely, left himself less scope for humour. However humour, though appropriate in Aeneid 5, was not one of the primary purposes of the poem as a whole.

We turn now to Virgil's subtler, more Terentian humour, the humour which arises out of characters acting in a natural but amusing way.

First let us examine Virgil's favourite character, young Ascanius. Just before the momentous hunting expedition which ends with the meeting of Dido and Aeneas in the cave, we have a light humorous sketch of young Ascanius:

> at puer Ascanius mediis in vallibus acri
> gaudet equo, iamque hos cursu, iam praeterit illos,
> spumantemque dari pecora inter inertia votis
> optat aprum aut fulvum descendere monte leonem. (4, 156)

He wishes to join in the hunt, and fancies himself as a big game hunter. Any young boy would act in this way. The chronology of the Aeneid is confused and inconsistent, lacking the poet's 'ultima manus', but Ascanius is presumably eight or nine, as this is the seventh summer since he was a toddler escaping from Troy, when

> dextrae se parvus lulus
> implicuit sequiturque patrem non passibus aequis.

Imagine the scene. Aeneas has Anchises on his back, and Creusa is following behind. Whether 'non passibus aequis' refers to 'uncertain' or 'tiny' steps, the picture is most realistic. In other circumstances such a description of a toddler could be humorous; here it touches the heart. Aeneas is not speaking to Dido with a twinkle in his eye, but is renewing an 'infandum dolorem'. I once heard a cynic remark that Aeneas renews an unspeakable grief for two whole books; 'infandum' at the beginning of Aeneid 2, however, means not 'unmentionable' but 'unspeakably great, indescribable'. Ascanius, then, is quite a big boy, when at Carthage. We don't hear very much about Cupid's impersonation of him. Probably Cupid does his damage to Dido at the end of Book 1, and then departs unsung. Presumably we hear so little about Cupid, because he was the half-brother of Aeneas and must not be allowed to disgrace the 'gens Iulia'. Remember how in Apollonius' Argonautica, Book 3, Aphrodite describes him as a mischievous, disobedient boy quite out of her control. When Dido is distraught with love (4.83), she sees and hears Aeneas even when he's not there,

aut gremio Ascanium genitoris imagine capta
detinet.

Notice the word 'detinet'; such a big boy who likes hunting wouldn't want to sit on a lady's lap. He has to be kept there by force. This description too could be humorous but for the circumstances; this particular passage is full of pathos, whether the forcible detention happens in reality or only in Dido's fevered imagination. Ascanius cannot be very much bigger when he takes part in the 'lusus Troiae' in Sicily along with the other boys. They are understandably nervous, but the onlookers encourage them and say to each other, 'Isn't he like his father?' or 'He takes after his mother'.

excipiunt plausu pavidos gaudentque tuentes
Dardanidae, veterumque agnoscunt ora parentum. (5. 75-6)

Shortly after they have reached Italy, Ascanius makes a momentous jest. Food is short; they eat fruit off cakes of meal, and then eat the cakes too, whereupon Ascanius exclaims

heus etiam mensas consumimus! (7. 116)

and Aeneas realises that this is the promised land.

Now we turn to Dido. The end of Book 1 is amusing, when she keeps asking questions about Troy long into the night. Then in 4. 133, when all are mustering for the hunt, Virgil describes Dido as 'thalamo cunctantem'. This could be humorous; she could be exercising a woman's prerogative of keeping everyone waiting[19], as she lingers before her mirror; or she could be showing something like a bride's hesitation on her wedding day. Perhaps Virgil deliberately leaves the meaning ambiguous[20]. Dido, like her patron, Juno, has a sarcastic tongue. After Aeneas has told her that he must leave Carthage at the gods' bidding, she snarls at him

scilicet is superis labor est, ea cura
quietos sollicitat. neque te teneo neque dicta refello.
i, sequere Italiam ventis, pete regna per undas. (4. 379)

'A likely story!', she says. 'Of course we all know the gods don't concern themselves with human affairs'.

Dido's epicureanism contrasts unfavourably with the 'pietas' of Aeneas. It also illustrates something else. Even if Virgil's gods are rather comical, the poet does not make them so with an Epicurean motive. He isn't in other words making his picture of gods who interfere in human affairs so ridiculous as to be incredible. Nor yet is he a Platonist believing that god should be perfect, and for that reason introducing with a superior smile ridiculously wicked gods who are not to be taken seriously. Richard says that Virgil has made Olympus 'une scène de comédie', a comic stage. I admit that Virgil's gods are realistic humans, that in Olympus, as in New Comedy, we have a mirror of life. But there is one essential difference between the Aeneid and a play of Menander or Terence; the comic poet, unlike Virgil, produces a plot specifically designed to place the characters in comic situations. This Virgil does not do.

To me the significant thing is not that Virgil's gods are rather comical at times,

but how much less comic, how much more respectable and responsible they are than Homer's gods. The author of the treatise On the Sublime remarks with much justification that Homer has made his men gods and his gods men. The gods of the Iliad are indeed greater scoundrels than the men and are often quite ridiculous. Zeus of the Iliad is irresponsible. He allows the gods to take part in the fighting, and sits back to enjoy the fun. He is a violent bully, who strings Hera up in mid-air with anvils round her ankles. He throws Hephaestus out of heaven for coming to his mother's help. He allows himself to be beguiled by Hera who is an unscrupulous liar. Aphrodite is wounded by Diomede and runs off in tears to Zeus, while in the Odyssey she is exposed to the gaze and ridicule of the gods as she lies adulterously in bed with Ares, a tale sung by the bard Demodocus and greeted with laughter by the men who heard it. The war-god himself is worsted by the mortal Diomede. Athene is a perpetual source of trouble, encouraging Diomede to fight gods and Pandarus to shoot his treacherous arrow.

Homer's Olympians had become part of the epic tradition, and Virgil had to accept them, particularly as they had figured in the epics of Naevius and Ennius. But he intended the Aeneid to be an exceedingly religious and moral poem about a hero renowned for his piety. And so Virgil had to compromise, making his gods imperfect, yet morally superior to Homer's gods. This would be in keeping with the idea I suggested that Virgil believed in a providence that is good but not perfect. Thus he depicts Jupiter as good but not ideally good, and his control of the other gods as satisfactory on the whole, but not perfect. He permits himself to ask early in the poem

tantaene animis caelestibus irae?

and in 12.503

tanton placuit concurrere motu,
Iuppiter, aeterna gentis in pace futuras?

Providence is good, but all is not 'for the best in the best of all possible worlds'.

Jupiter is, then, a good paterfamilias; he is indeed called 'Iuppiter optimus', but he has his faults and weaknesses and amusing they are at times. In particular he finds it difficult to control his womenfolk, the spiteful and sarcastic Juno and Venus, the doting mother of Aeneas. Jupiter seems to have let events at Carthage slip out of his control till his son Iarbas prays to him, 'Jupiter omnipotent, do you see what's happening? Dido prefers Aeneas to me, your son. All our prayers and offerings to you seem to be a waste of time'. Virgil then records that Jupiter omnipotent did something about it and sent Mercury down to bid Aeneas leave Carthage. Iarbas uses the words 'Iuppiter omnipotens' in his prayer out of sarcasm or perhaps flattery; but Virgil, I think, uses the term in all seriousness. Jupiter may have been rather remiss up till now, but now he acts for his own good reasons, and not simply because of what Iarbas has said. Despite Virgil's testimony, however, Jupiter is not quite omnipotent. Apart from his rather confused relationship with fate, which this isn't the time to discuss[21], he can't control Venus and Juno properly. An amusing instance of this is in Aeneid 10, where between a speech of ten lines by Jupiter and one of 45 lines by Venus, Virgil makes the explicit comment,

Iuppiter haec paucis, at non Venus aurea contra
pauca refert.

Venus' speech is followed by one from 'regia Iuno' who confines herself to a mere 33

lines. Virgil need not be sneering when he applies the epithets 'aurea' to Venus or 'regia' to Juno; 'regia' simply stresses the fact that Juno is a proud woman acting in character. 'aurea' could be taken as a sneer and imply that Venus is far from perfect; I prefer to think of it as a stock Homeric epithet, though rather an unfortunate one, which Virgil would surely have removed if he had lived to revise the passage and complete the following line. After hearing the long speeches of Venus and Juno, Jupiter is forced to admit that he will be impartial hereafter, and leave fate to take its course.

rex Iuppiter omnibus idem.
fata viam invenient.

Marouzeau and de St. Denis think that Virgil is smiling at a comic shirking of his responsibilities by Jupiter: it is better, however, to take the lines as serious. Jupiter would have like to facilitate the workings of fate; instead he is compelled by his bickering women to let things take a course which may be rather more unpleasant than necessary. Jupiter teases Juno rather gratùitously 'ultro' on one occasion (10.606), when she isn't getting her own way. Then towards the end of the poem, when he has expressly forbidden her to interfere any more, but she remains loyal in her defence of her Latins, he remarks with a kindly smile

es germana Iovis Saturnique altera proles;
irarum tantos volvis sub pectore fluctus. (12.830-1)

'You really are my own true sister; you have such a temper'. After teasing her, however, he does agree to a compromise. He is indeed a much kinder figure than Zeus, the bully of the Iliad, who laughs when Hera shivers at the memory of the time he strung her up in mid-air.

Juno is the villain of the piece. She is proud ('Me be stopped by the fates? Me give in? Me who walk in majesty as Jupiter's sister and wife?'); she indulges in constant sarcasm, sneering about 'Venus' peerless son' or the magnificent victory which two gods, Venus and Cupid win over one poor defenceless woman, Dido; she is spiteful, cunning and treacherous; she stoops to bribery, offering Aeolus fourteen beautiful nymphs in return for his help; she acts in fact just like a nasty woman with a grudge, and consequently is the most comical of the Olympians. Virgil doesn't want to make his gods bad, but, without Juno's bitter enmity, there could be no trials and tribulations for Aeneas, no Aeneid. With great economy, therefore, Virgil, concentrates most of the divine viciousness in one character, Juno, but even so allows her to retain a certain amount of the reader's sympathy as she struggles loyally in defence of her Italians, in her role of 'Saturnia Iuno'.

Venus, as one would expect from the foundress of the 'gens Iulia' emerges with a great deal more credit than Juno, but she is still a woman and an amusing one. She too can occasionally be sarcastic and proud, as when she resents the interference of Iuturna, a mere nymph. She is loquacious, as Virgil expressly tells us. She gets what she wants from Neptune by flattering him and insinuating that Juno has interfered in his realm. Perhaps her most amusing scene is when she asks Vulcan for a shield for Aeneas, her son by another. Vulcan at first hesitates, but then she shamelessly exercises her feminine charms on him and when Vulcan yields, Virgil archly comments

sensit laeta dolis et formae conscia coniunx.

One further reason why Juno and Venus are so ridiculous at times is that they are the major female characters of the Aeneid, and Virgil held a rather low opinion of women, though perhaps de Saint Denis goes too far in calling him a misogynist.[22]

We turn now to the cruel sardonic humour which Virgil puts into the mouths of his characters. We have already mentioned the sarcasm of Juno, Dido and even Venus; but males can be guilty of cruel, unattractive jests in the battle scenes. Virgil follows Homeric precedent in making his fighting men try to unnerve their opponents κερτόμιοις ἐπέεσσι. One of the few reasonably certain things about Mycenean warriors is that they were less loquacious fighters than Homer makes them. However the talkative, jeering warriors of the Iliad and the Aeneid can be justified on the ground that they make the narrative more vivid. For example Liger from the chariot driven by his brother Lucagus taunts Aeneas

> non Diomedis equos nec currum cernis Achilli
> aut Phrygiae campos; nunc belli finis et aevi
> his dabitur terris. (10.581-3)

Liger apparently knows his Iliad and refers to two occasions[23] when Aeneas was rescued by divine intervention, but boasts that his horses and chariot are superior to those of Diomede and Achilles. Aeneas then sends Lucagus toppling down from the chariot with a mortal wound, telling him that the horses of which he has boasted haven't let him down, but that he himself has deserted his post. Then, despite Liger's pleas for mercy, Aeneas kills him too, saying

> haud talia dudum
> dicta dabas. morere et fratrem ne desere frater.

'You've quickly changed your tune. Die and remain loyal to your brother'. Aeneas' cruel jests[24] can perhaps be justified in that he is angered by the death of Pallas and that they are merely counter-jests.

Other vivid taunts against opponents are those of Turnus to the phantom Aeneas

> quo fugis, Aenea? thalamos ne desere pactos;
> hac dabitur dextra tellus quasita per undas. (10.649-50)

and that of Aeneas to a frightened Turnus

> quae nunc deinde mora est? aut quid iam, Turne, retractas?
> non cursu, saevis certandum est comminus armis. (12.889-90)

Even when their opponents are dead or dying, the Homeric and Virgilian warriors still continue their cruel taunts. For example, Turnus, as he kills a Trojan, gloats

> en agros et quam bello, Troiane, petisti
> Hesperiam metire iacens: haec praemia, qui me
> ferro ausi temptare, ferunt, sic moenia condunt. (12.359-62)

Aeneas, as he kills Mezentius, asks

> ubi nunc Mezentius acer et illa
> effera vis animi? (10.897-8)

Aeneas is still angry about Pallas, and has presumably a natural antipathy to the impious Mezentius, but one might have expected him to show some sympathy for the father who has just lost a dear son. Aeneas may also be indulging in a cruel joke right at the end of the poem when he tells Turnus that it is Pallas who is killing him.

Then there is Messapus, the Trojan, who angry at the treacherous violation of the truce, kills a Tuscan king at the altar with words reminiscent of the gladiatorial shows,

> hoc habet, haec melior magnis data victima divis. (12.296)

But most savage and shocking of all is the humour of the sacrilegious Pyrrhus, who kills Priam's son, Polites, beside the altar and, terrible crime to Virgil, before his father's very eyes. When Priam tells Pyrrhus that he is a disgrace to his father Achilles, Pyrrhus kills Priam too, telling him to take the message of his son's degeneracy down to his father Achilles in Hades.

Cruel humour of this kind is hardly what one would expect from the gentle, kindly Virgil. As Professor Maguinness puts it 'These callous jibes at fallen enemies derived from Homer tend to jar on the reader of Virgil because of their contrast with the compassionate spirit that breathes throughout the work'. This is indeed so, but Virgil must have a purpose in introducing these cruel jests. He does not simply follow Homeric precedents without good reason. He may think it lends realism to the scenes. He is also, I suggest, showing the ugly effects which 'horrida bella' have on human behaviour, and registering a deliberate protest and warning against the grimness of war, now fortunately replaced by the 'pax Augusta'.

Then there is the irony of Fortune who, with cruel humour, can play nasty tricks on men. As in Homer there are the heroes whose divine ancestors cannot save them from death; the seers who cannot foretell their own doom or wrongly promise themselves a long life; the identical twins upon whom Pallas brought 'dura discrimina' by cutting the head off one, the hand off the other; there is Cretheus, the companion of the Muses, whose perpetual delight it was to sing of steeds, arms and battles, but here he is among steeds, arms and battles, falling a victim to Turnus. Dido with Cupid on her lap doesn't know how mighty a god she has sitting there. But above all there is the irony of Turnus' fate. He had taken the belt of the dead Pallas and, when he met Aeneas in the final conflict, he, in Virgil's words,

> inimicum insigne gerebat.

In Turnus' eyes the belt is 'inimicum' in the sense that it belonged to an enemy, but the belt itself is also Turnus' foe, because it seals his death warrant.

In conclusion, though the most noteworthy feature of Virgil's poetry is his tender, melancholy sympathy for all creatures that suffer, though 'pius Aeneas' is a humourless character, Virgil himself has a highly developed and civilised sense of humour. The poet of the Eclogues, however, just like the hero of the Aeneid, had little enough to laugh about. Virgil was a happier man when he wrote the Georgics, which consequently have many gay passages. The Aeneid, however, was much too serious an undertaking to merit a playful approach, though occasionally, where it seemed appropriate, Virgil did allow himself a gentle, good-natured smile at the foibles of human nature, whether in men or gods, males or females. The humour of the Aeneid is

unobtrusive, and as gentle and refined as that of Terence; it has no 'vis comica'; what it does have is 'urbanitas' which Quintilian (6.3.107) defines thus:

> illa est urbanitas in qua nihil absonum, nihil agreste, nihil inconditum, nihil peregrinum neque sensu neque verbis... possit deprehendi.

All those qualities are to be found to the full in the Aeneid of Roman Virgil.

1. Latomus 1964, p. 446 seq.
2. De Oratore 2.216-290.
3. The Building of Eternal Rome, p. 81.
4. 29.24.
5. See C.J. Fordyce, Catullus, p. xxii.
6. e.g. 4.55, 5 passim.
7. 10.28; for its identity see Gow's note.
8. The text is doubtful, but this reading and interpretation seem to make the best sense.
9. Argonautica I, 65-66.
10. Agamemnon 895-901, and 901 in particular; she speaks with a sneer, but perhaps also hopes that her praise will excite the φθόνος of the gods against Agamemnon.
11. Some people, wrongly, I think, see humour in 11. 43-44.
12. Inst. Or. 6, 3, 19-20.
13. See H.J. Rose, op. cit., and W.J.N. Rudd, 'Libertas' and 'Facetus', Mnemosyne, 1957, pp. 319-336, and in particular pp. 328-332; I am grateful to Mr. Currie for drawing my attention to Rudd's article.
14. It is virtually impossible to draw adequate distinctions between the various Latin words for 'humour' and 'humorous'; see Cicero, loc. cit., Quintilian, op. cit., 6, 3, Rudd, loc. cit.
15. Cf. 'pulveris exigui ... parva munera' in Horace's (presumably later) Archytas Ode. All Archytas' mathematical studies are now as nothing, says Horace.
16. See M. Coffey, The Subject Matter of Virgil's Similes, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, 1961, pp. 63-75.
17. Reading 'at' for 'et' helps my interpretation.
18. Though he is 'laetus' on occasion.
19. Cf. Cicero, Pro Milone, 28.
20. Cf. the ambiguity of 'ulularunt vertice Nymphae' a little later (4.168).
21. See the chapter in C. Bailey, Religion in Virgil and H.L. Tracy, Fata Deum, Greece and Rome 1964, pp. 188 seq.
22. Against passages like 4.569-570 can be set e.g. 8.407 seq..
23. 5.311 seq., 20.290 seq..
24. The Aeneas of the Iliad is also a sardonic warrior; cf. 16.617.