3rd Trends in Classics-Historiography Conference:
Humor, Comic Elements and Laughter in Classical Historiography

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ABSTRACTS

'A Fellow of Infinite Jest, of Most Excellent Fancy'? The Ethics of Making and Having Fun in Herodotus

Scarlett Kingsley (American College of Greece)

Contemporary scholarship on humor in Herodotus' Histories has focused almost exclusively on laughter and argued that it functions as a historiographical marker of approaching catastrophe and individual hybris (Lateiner 1977; Griffiths 1995; Dewald 2006). On this reading, the laughter of historical actors is a shorthand for moral viciousness – a simultaneous overvaluation of the self and undervaluation of others. However, the hybris-theory of humor is in tension with the narrative's own near-infinite jests with the external audience – through the use of, for example, irony, wordplay, and a penchant for the absurd (e.g. Powell 1937; Rutherford 2018). In an important article on humor and Herodotus, Alan Griffiths has identified this tension between the comic devices structuring the narrative and the cautionary historiographical patterning on laughter and offered only that it represents 'a paradoxical union of opposites' (Griffiths 1995). This paper revisits the ethics of humor in Herodotus, and in doing so expands the semantic field beyond laughter into amusement more generally, a category inclusive of laughter, wit, and mockery. In it, I argue that the Histories espouses no monolithic interpretation of humor as a marker of a malicious individual; it is both morally praiseworthy and blameworthy.

In the first part of the paper, I survey contemporary research in critical humor studies, which demonstrates the way in which humor is both inclusive and exclusive. Laughter, for example, is a means of social bonding (Dunbar 2022), a marker of ethical well-being (Morreall 1983), and an enforcer (Billig 2005) – or disruptor (Bakhtin 1984) – of cultural norms. Far from being a pure involuntary bodily response, it falls under cultural display rules, meaning that it is a learned, social behavior (Trouvain and Truong 2017).

Following this theoretical orientation, I turn to the Histories. Through a series of close readings, I argue that humor in Herodotus does not function primarily as a source of hybristic characterization or narrative prolepsis; rather, it contributes to the depiction of an array of phenomena, including, for example, affiliation (1.90.3, 6.125.5), challenging the status quo (1.129.1), ritual action (2.60.2), ethical recreation (2.173.2), madness (3.29.1, 35.3, 37.3–38.1), intellectual (4.36.2) and cultural (4.79.4) one-upmanship (8.92.2), and moral instruction (9.82–3). The multipolarity of humor works against the position that it

is, fundamentally, vicious. And if this is correct, then the Histories' own indulgence in amusement is less paradox than it is invitation to join the fun.

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Comic Potential in Book 5 of Thucydides

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This paper outlines some narrative strategies of the central sections of Book 5 of Thucydides. These passages portray the struggles of Corinth, Argos, the Boeotians, and others in the period after the Spartan/Athenian peace and alliance of 421. Scholars have had difficulty defining the character of Thucydides' dense presentation. However, Westlake's well-known article on Thucydides' record of this period is subtitled 'A study in political incompetence':[1] this subtitle suggests that the passages contain comic material. Building on Westlake's insights, this paper argues that treachery and duplicity were as important as incompetence for the Greek cities' failures. A closer look at the strategies Thucydides used to show the successive collapses of the cities' plots against one another reveals comic patterns and suggests that one aim of these passages was to offer the kind of moral chastisement that Old Comedy imposed on its comic antagonists.

The paper focuses on three episodes from the post-treaty period, first, the story of how the Corinthians provoke Argos to found a new federation as an alternative to Sparta. Corinth's attempt to push Argos to the front so that it could lead from behind, in the same way and with the same words as it had pushed Sparta to the front at the beginning of the war, soon finds the terrified Corinthians seeking, but not finding,

[1] Westlake, H.D. 1971. 'Thucydides and the Uneasy Peace: a study in political incompetence'. *CQ* 21.2, 315 –25.

protectors at Thebes and Athens. Second, it reviews the scene in which renegade Spartan ephors convince the Boeotians to trap Argos into the Spartan alliance; their complex plan fails, after which not Argos, but Sparta itself is trapped into a secret alliance with Thebes. Finally, the paper reviews Thucydides' record of the consequences of these rapid developments: at Argos, they cause a psychological melt-down that looks like it will lead the Argives to trap themselves into subordination to Sparta after all, since the panicked Argives run to Sparta to beg for protection; however, at Athens, Sparta's secret alliance with Thebes is revealed and causes the quick ascent of Alcibiades, who will torpedo the Argives' Spartan negotiations and claim Argos for an Athenian alliance that becomes his personal instrument.

The Argives of these passages might be said to resemble a wealthy and ambitious ingenue whom greedy and ambitious people are trying to capture for their schemes. But the greedy trip themselves up as they are attempting this and end up suffering the consequences: except of course for Alcibiades, the overall winner. Thus, although the stories are not funny, the reversals, plots, and traps of these narratives display comic patterns, especially since the well-known cities, displaying psychologies predictable from their earlier roles, form the stock characters of the narrative. The cities' errors, hubris, hypocrisy, manipulativeness, and unrealistic ambitions lead to failures and public humiliations such as are important for standard comic plots. Comic humiliations are moral humiliations, and it seems possible that the resemblance to comedy emerges because Thucydides chose to organize his account in order to demonstrate that through their treacherous (and incompetent) behaviors the cities torpedoed their own chances of independence from Athens and Sparta.

Leadership, Loss and Laughter: Seeing the Funny Side in Xenophon's *Anabasis*

Christopher Tuplin (University of Liverpool)

Much of *Anabasis* consists of sober narrative and (sometimes solemn) speeches. But there is humour. The paper's main text principally covers around twenty passages or thematically linked groups of passages of various length that exemplify this. (1) 5.5.7, 5.5.19, 6.1.1-13. (2) 5.1.12, 4.8.26-28. (3) 1.5.8, 1.8.28. (4) 6.1.26-29, 4.6.10-13, 1.3.1-12. (5) 5.7.5-9, 3.2.18,22-25, 3.1.26-32. (6) 2.1.7-23. (7) 1.7.3. (8) 5.4.1-34. (9) 5.3.1-13. (10) 2.6.1-30. (11) 3.1.4-10. Phenomena illustrated include (non-exhaustively):

- humour derived from single words or brief phrases: (1), (3), (5), (6), (7)
- characterisation : (1), (2), (5), (6), (7), (10), (11)
- structural humour: (1), (2), (8), (9), (10), (11)
- deliberately constructed comic scenes: (1), (4), (6)
- literary allusion and literary register (2), (4), (5), (10)
- ethnic stereotypes: (2), (4), (5), (7), (8)
- misdirection: (8), (9), (10)
- absurdity: (4), (7)

Some of the humour may be there to be enjoyed for its own sake and as a small diversion from the predominantly serious narrative. I do wonder, though, whether the rather comic (re-)introduction of Xenophon at 3.1.3-10, the deployment of humour at structurally important points, and the persistent doubt in the reader's mind about the apparently serious text's status as third-person historiographical narrative indicate that narrator intends us, on the one hand, to enjoy and learn from the story it tells about leadership but, on the other hand, be clear that it is an artificial construct about which, in the absence of programmatic framework, we should take nothing for granted..

Subtle Exaggeration as a Form of Humour in the *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia*?
Egidia Occhipinti (University of Palermo)

Some ancient authors have been particularly studied in the perspective of finding humorous features; I certainly refer to Herodotus, Plutarch, Tacitus, and a few more. The anonymous writer of the *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia* has been addressed from a narratological perspective very recently (Occhipinti 2016; s. also Tsakmakis 2022), but nothing has led thus far to see that text as an expression of a humorous narrative. This is probably due to a narrator who has a predominant role: he shows a controlling voice which does not allow the reader to form his/her own opinion; instead, the narrator guides the reader in forming clear cut opinions about what happened; especially digressions are tools through which he persuades the reader and demonstrates the truth of his statements (Occhipinti 2016). However, within this monologic narrative structure, one may well wonder whether statements showing some sort of subtle exaggeration can be considered as conveying implicitly humorous and ironic traits (*e.g.* cynical humour), consciously or unconsciously; and whether some statements produce this effect also in considerations of the reaction, or viewpoint, by the internal audience (there is sometimes a clash between people's expectations, events, and hidden motivations). Clues come from a close comparison with the parallel narrative given by Diodorus, Plutarch (*Life* of Lysander), and, potentially, by Xenophon.

Turning Encomium into Irony: Callisthenes, Alexander, and the Reversal of the Pragmatics of Praise
Vasileios Liotsakis (University of the Peloponnese)

This paper argues that modern scholarship has insufficiently considered a crucial phase in the communicative framework within which Callisthenes' historiographical work was received, particularly by participants in Alexander's expedition. While the encomiastic orientation of Callisthenes' narrative in the early stages of the campaign has been widely examined, far less attention has been paid to the gradual deterioration of his relationship with Alexander and its implications for the reception of his work. Even where this deterioration has been acknowledged, it has rarely been connected to changing modes of readership.

The main point of argument is that Callisthenes' public opposition to the introduction of *proskynesis* constitutes a decisive moment in the pragmatic conditions governing the interpretation of his historiography. By openly contesting Alexander's claims to a special relationship with the divine, Callisthenes effectively exposed the ideological premises underlying his own earlier encomiastic representations. This intervention generated a tension between authorial stance and textual content, thereby reshaping the communicative contract between hiμself and his audience.

Against this background, the paper suggests that readers who participated in the expedition – already inclined, as anecdotal evidence indicates, to treat Alexander's claims to divinity with skepticism or mockery – would have been prompted to reinterpret the deifying elements of Callisthenes' narrative in an ironic light. Moreover, testimonia portraying Callisthenes himself as capable of wit and open criticism reinforce the view that his later opposition functioned as a paratextual frame that encouraged such readings. The resulting pragmatic reversal transforms encomium into a potentially self-undermining discourse. Under these conditions, Callisthenes' work may have ceased to

operate as an instrument of royal glorification, instead becoming susceptible to ironic reception, even ultimately a source of embarrassment for Alexander himself.

Aitolian Humor in Polybios? Dedicatory Inscriptions, Rattling Chains, and Reversals of Fortune
Craige Champion (Syracuse University, NY)

With Herodotus' history as comparative baseline, humoristic devices in Polybius' narrative are few and far between, and much more subdued. The relatively rare occurrences do, however, illuminate important dimensions of Polybian historiography. Cristina Larkin–Galiñanes posits three basic orientations to the study of humor: superiority theory, release theory, and incongruity theory. In surveying the infrequent examples of humor in the Histories, we find that they fall under all three rubrics; indeed, they often overlap in categorization. The catalogue of humorous Polybian passages assembled in this paper invite consideration of authorial motivation and intentionality, and why Polybius uses humor so judiciously. These passages serve to forge unity of outlook, shared by the readership with the narrative voice, and their muted tones do not violate Polybius' self-imposed strictures as pragmatic historian. The result is no small feat in consideration of the historian's frequent historiographical pronouncements and criticisms of rival historians, his own ambiguous cultural identity, his mixed Greek and Roman readership, and his shifting personal political circumstances during the long period of his history's composition.

Ritual Laughter in Diodorus Siculus
Charles Muntz (University of Arkansas)

Diodorus Siculus describes a number of instances of laughter over the course of the extant portions of his universal history, the Bibliotheke. Some of these instances fit into the paradigms that have been observed in historians, such as Herodotus, of laughter displaying an arrogance that leads to defeat, like Xerxes laughing before the battle of Thermopylae. But Diodorus introduces a new context for laughter, the religious ritual. He shows us the importance of ritual laughter by introducing it in the mythological narrative of Osiris, the first of the culture-bringers who spread civilization across the world, at the very start of the Bibliotheke. This association of laughter and religious ritual offers a new way of looking at two notable instances of laughter that Diodorus recounts in the historical books. When Dionysius the tyrant of Syracuse presented his poetry at the Olympic games, it was greeted with laughter, much to his dismay. The tyrant Agathocles, on the other hand, deliberately courted laughter in the Syracusan assembly, which helped solidify his power. Both cases show how complex laughter and ritual can be. Instead of laughing themselves, the two tyrants cause laughter, associating them with the spread of civilization, but one does so unwillingly and the other outside the religious context, undermining that association. By depicting the laughter surrounding the tyrants in this way, Diodorus creates unease and ambiguity around both figures and their characters, an ambiguity with which modern historiography still grapples.

The Last (Caesarean) Laugh
Ayelet Peer (Bar-Ilan University)

Was Julius Caesar a humorous man? We may never know. He likely possessed a sense of humor; however, his commentaries are far from being amusing. Nevertheless, Caesar engages with the theme of laughter, or more precisely, with the theme of mockery, regarding his enemies, in both the *Bellum Gallicum* and the *Bellum Civile*. Caesar depicts his enemies, whether Gauls or more often, Pompeians, mocking and belittling his army. In my presentation, I argue that these descriptions are part of Caesar's "prosaic arsenal" of the indirect description of his foes as arrogant and foolish. Their overconfidence and arrogance lead to their ultimate downfall, and their mockery might also be interpreted as hubris, either against the Roman army (in the *BG*) or against Caesar himself (in the *BC*). They mocked, but it was he who ultimately had the last laugh.

Sallust: The Death of Laughter
Andrew Feldherr (Princeton University)

'Humor in Sallust' is a surprising topic because, with the exception of sarcasm, the historian seems programmatically to distance the realm of laughter and play from the matter of his works. Yet these efforts to keep wit at bay are undermined by the narrative in ways specific to each monograph. Within the *Catiline*, Sempronia's *lepos* and *facetiae* turn out to find a complement in the very wordplay that Sallust uses to characterize her (25). In the *Jugurtha*, the crucial term will be *ludus*, a word that defines a temporal and spatial context for laughter and enjoyment. Foreigners' 'making sport' of the Romans reaches a thematic climax in the massacre at Vaga (66–67). Yet the military revenge that brings down the curtain on that '*ludus*' finds the Romans themselves 'playing the other'. Finally, the resulting destabilization of assumptions about cultural difference allows for a reading of the monograph in relation to a specific comic exploration of how the Romans preserved their distinctiveness through education, Terence's *Adelphoe*.

The Comical Curtius. Puns, Irony and Laughter in *the Historiae Alexandri Magni*
Andreas Ammann (Ludwig–Maximilian University, Munich)

This paper aims to identify and describe various forms of humour in Curtius Rufus' *Historiae Alexandri Magni*. Beginning with simple puns and other forms of wordplay observable in Curtius' work, a selection of notable scenes will then be analysed in which the author either invites the reader to laugh *with* Alexander (e.g. when the king is mocking superstitious priests) or, more crucially, makes us laugh *at* Alexander (especially when the king strives to be seen as a god). In this context, a particular focus will be laid on the device of irony, which Curtius, in a way that often foreshadows Tacitus' literary technique, frequently employs to wry comical effect. In a last step, it will then be asked to what extent Curtius, in ridiculing Alexander, is not only repeating pre-existing Hellenistic traditions of mocking the Macedonian king, but also using this ironical humour to subtly poke fun at the Roman monarchs under whom he lived.

Laughing at the Gauls: Humor, Race, and Identity in Livy
Rachel Love (Harvard University)

The purpose of this paper is to explore what role humor plays in Livy's ethnographic depictions of the Gauls. In many ways, the Gauls that appear and keep reappearing in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* represent an idiosyncratic type of enemy for the Romans: they are Rome's first 'foreign' adversary, the only enemy ever to invade the city itself, and, by the time of Livy, Rome's longest continuous opponent. Livy's ethnographic treatment of the Gauls is complex, spanning several decades and engaging variously with sources such as Polybius, Julius Caesar, and Claudius Quadrigarious to construct versions of Gallic identity that share little consistency between them. This paper will take a deeper look at one element that remains a surprisingly consistent factor in Livy's Gallic ethnographies: humor. After examining key episodes from Books 5, 7, and 38 against models of humor derived from both superiority and incongruity theories, the paper draws on models espoused by Jonathan Miller and Marvin Minsky regarding humor's ability to incite heuristic reassessment to argue that Livy's repeated use of humor in his representation of the Gauls offers his audience repeating opportunities to reassess the exact threat that the Gallic enemy poses to Rome. The paper further argues that this approach to representation is reserved by Livy specifically for the Gauls because Rome's conflict with them is so uniquely long and unstructured. Whenever Livy uses humor to encourage his audience to laugh at the Gauls at radically different moments in Rome's development, he is simultaneously forcing his readers to participate in a cognitive reassessment of the ever-changing heuristics by which they judge a potential enemy of the *res publica.*

Tacitus and the Power of Wordplay: Criticizing Tiberius in *Annales* 1.12
Panagiotis Kourousias (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens)

In *Annales* 1.12 Tiberius professes his intention to share the burden of leadership; However, the senator Asinius Gallus responds in a way that provokes the wrath of the new ruler. At first glance, any humorous element in this brief dialogue remains elusive. After all, the wrath of an emperor is typically a source of fear rather than laughter. Nevertheless, the specific terms used by the two characters and Tacitus' wordplay with them ensure exactly the opposite result. According to Warhover (2021), the historian instrumentalizes humor within his historical works to construct and indirectly convey his views not only on individual emperors such as Nero and Otho, but also on the political regime of the Principate. Aiming to further the discussion on the instrumentalization of humor, this study highlights Tacitus' use of wordplay as a means of exposing Tiberius. More specifically, Tacitus comments on the new ruler's decision to accept the leadership of Rome by drawing upon Augustus' conventions of a dissembled monarchy. Applying Attardo's (2002) Script Opposition theory, this study argues that Tacitus employs Gallus' response as a punchline to unveil Tiberius' affected modesty and his absurd political conventions. As a standalone case, the dialogue between Tiberius and Gallus in the *Annales* 1.12 cannot serve as a definite proof of the existence of humor in Tacitus' works. Nevertheless, this specific episode offers an indication not only of the historian's use of wordplay as a humorous tool, but also of his stylistic variety in expressing his thoughts on Tiberius' accession to power and the establishment of the Principate as a political regime in the early first century.

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Suetonius Comicus? Speech, Comedy, and Humor in *De vita Caesarum*

Edoardo Galfré (University of Palermo)

As a literary genre in many ways complementary to historiography, Suetonian biography tends to provide its readers with a historical account which both focuses on the one and only subject of interest – the single emperor whose life is being narrated – and sometimes offers a less than 'official' version of history. Both of these elements add to the presence of humorous, if not plainly comical, sketches which punctuate Suetonius' *Lives* – in particular, those of bad *principes* such as Nero and Domitian, whose unsuitability for rule is also underscored through their ridiculous behavior. In my paper, I argue that humor in *De vita Caesarum* rests on two hallmark features of Suetonian literary technique: the use of focalization and the biographer's fondness for quotations of the emperors' *ipsissima verba*.

Geopolitical Banter: Can Plutarch's Great Men Crack a Joke?

Christopher Pelling (University of Oxford)

Plutarch recognised that rhetorical persuasiveness was important to any prospective politician (*Advice on Public Life* 801c–4c), and, as he there says, well-timed humour could often be just what was required (803b–e). He frequently includes discussion of a character's rhetoric in his characterisation, and often cites examples of their knowing how to cut opponents down to size. He can use humour effectively himself, especially in the *Moralia*, ranging from sarcastic barbs at the expense of his philosophical opponents to some wry humour at his own expense: despite his deep moral earnestness, he knows how not to take himself too seriously. In everyday polite conversation, we can be sure that he was an amiable companion, and in the *Table Talk* he carefully lays out the correct levels of humour that a genial and tactful host can encourage, or at least permit (620a–2b, esp. 621d–f; 629e–34f, esp. 633e–4f). There are proprieties in public life too, and Plutarch, serious moralist as he is, does not hide his disapproval when figures get things wrong: Cicero in particular often went too far (*Cic.* 5.6 and esp. *Comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero* 1, comparing him with Demosthenes to his disadvantage).

He also had firm views on how history should be written, as the programme mapped out in *Herodotus' Malice* makes clear (855b–d), and Herodotus too becomes the fall guy for some of Plutarch's own sarcastic humour. History is, or should be, a dignified genre: it is noticeable how many more scholarly treatments are devoted to the influence

of tragedy on historical writers than of comedy. But of course biography is different from history, despite the close proximity of the genres (all the more need, perhaps, to raise a boundary fence or so). In the much-quoted preface to *Alex.–Caes.* it is often 'a small matter, a word or a piece of playfulness, that gives a clearer impression of character than battles where thousands die or the sieges of cities' (*Alex.* 1.2), and he says similar things elsewhere. It is worth looking at those 'small matters' and 'pieces of playfulness' in *Alex.–Caes.* itself to see how this plays out. Plutarch is not altogether at ease with the boisterous humour of Alexander's court, but brings out how valuable this can be when his leadership is going well (*Antony* is here an interesting parallel). There are fewer witticisms of Caesar himself in the *Life* than one might expect, but there are some impactful ones towards the end – but delivered by Cicero at Caesar's expense and contributing to his fall.

There are many stories in the *Lives* that bring a smile to a reader's face, and one can imagine Plutarch making the most of these in oral delivery. But there are many that are dropped too, as we can see by comparing the *Apophthegmata* if we assume that these reflect some stage of his preparations. One test-case might be his account of the conference of Nicaea in 198 BCE. Notoriously, Polybius includes some banter of Philip that goes down well with Flamininus, who replies in kind (doubtless rather less well with the Greek envoys, whose states' future is in the hands of these joking geopolitical heavyweights). Livy then suppresses Flamininus' jesting in his version and soberly censures Philip's. What does Plutarch do?

Donald Russell once, as a genial way of introducing Plutarch to an unfamiliar audience, constructed how the writer might have put together a *Life* of Winston Churchill. A final pleasantry here might be to speculate on how Plutarch might have treated those witticisms, many of them improper, delivered by or attributed to the man, ideal Plutarchan subject as he was with all his greatness and all his flaws.

Who Laughs in Arrian?

Dylan James (University of Reading)

When we think of hilarity, we rarely think of Arrian. The sober, restrained voice of the lifelong student of Stoicism has a reputation for being perhaps the least 'humorous' of the extant Alexander sources. Although he does, in fact, have his moments, they must wait for another occasion – in this paper, I want to explore who laughs *within* Arrian's work, specifically, within the *Anabasis*. There is a total of only four references to γέλως or γελάω, restricted to Books 4 and 5. Yet analysing this handful of instances through the lens of Superiority Theory has much to tell us about Arrian's characterisation of Alexander and his army, relations with non-Greeks, and the influence of the classical historians.

Laughing through Fear: Dark Humor in Cassius Dio's *Roman History*

Caitlin Gillespie (Brandeis University)

Irony, wit, and ridicule are endemic to Cassius Dio's *Roman History*. Humor, from pithy epigrammatic statements to narratives that conclude with a sharp violation of expectations, serves both as a characterization technique and as concrete evidence of Dio's rhetorical skill. This paper brings a new approach to humor in Dio by applying relief theory to episodes of dark humor within his text. I first demonstrate that Dio weaves strands of dark humor throughout his history that tinge the atmosphere with a sense of

anxiety and fear. I then consider how dark humor is used to criticize emperors and their principates, centering on humorous incidents involving senators. While few emperors are able to laugh at themselves, Dio and his fellow senators recognize the absurdities of imperial spectacles and courtroom dramas. The bitter amusement they find in select situations exemplifies their powerlessness and ongoing state of servitude to the emperor. Laughter provides relief from fear and the shared emotional response to imperial threats unifies the senators as a community. By making himself an object of ridicule, Dio invites the reader to laugh, but also encourages us to consider the potentially subversive political agenda hiding behind the jest.

The Ironies and Absurdities of Imperial Failure in Herodian's *History*

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Herodian's 3rd century *History* takes a novel form, as it deals with a relatively short amount of time in the recent past and is organized, over its eight books, as a series of imperial biographies, starting with the last days of Marcus Aurelius's life and Commodus's disastrous reign. Herodian begins with a programmatic claim, typical of ancient historiography, that his account lacks bias and has been carefully fact-checked; to this he adds an unusual comment: that he believes future generations will "derive some entertainment from the knowledge of events that are important and compressed over a short span of time." Indeed, the *History* is entertaining – so entertaining that the reader sometimes gets the impression that she is being encouraged to mock the massive dysfunction of the Severan period. There may be a connection between the fact that we know so little about Herodian – for example, the *History* is written in Greek, but we do not know where he is from or whether or not he identified as Greek – and our sense that, when he does use his authorial voice, he is doing so at a winking distance. On a narrative level, Herodian very frequently uses techniques such as ironic understatement, resulting in what we might classify as incongruity humor, in which characters' actions and words are quickly deflated by what follows. This paper presents numerous examples of ironic understatement (focusing on Commodus's story in Book 1, in the interests of time), but also a few subversive elements that run throughout the *History*: for example, Herodian's frequent deployment of *tuche/fortuna*, which was so important to, e.g., Polybius, Diodorus Siculus and Curtius Rufus, but which he renders meaningless; his focus on emperors' and others' theatrical fakery; and the stunning juxtaposition of his cliched commentary on the nature of barbarians throughout the *History* with his presentation of Parthian king Ardashir (Artaxerxes) as the sole non-clueless leader (6.2–6). There are also moments of outright mockery, such as the comments Herodian makes about Commodus's would-be assassin Quadratus, who is killed before he can make the attempt because he can't stop droning on (1.8.6); and the ridiculous busts Caracalla had created with his face on one side and Alexander's on the other (4.8). These elements all contribute to Herodian's radically cynical presentation of the Roman empire, in which even the characters admired by his also-cynical contemporary Cassius Dio, such as Augustus and even the revered Marcus Aurelius himself, are seen in terms of failure.