

George Fredric FRANKO

Mockery and Reintegration: The Endings of Menander's *Dyskolos* and Homer's *Odyssey*

Mockery, though it may seem pointlessly cruel, can serve as an effective psychological and dramatic device. The physical and mental torture of old Knemon in the final scene of *Dyskolos* and the mental torture of old Laertes in Book 24 of the *Odyssey* shock the subjects out of their self-imposed misery and thereby facilitate their reintegration into society. Comparison of the two oft-condemned scenes reveals significant similarities and suggests that both Menander and Homer understood that ridicule can be a healthy and necessary precursor for ensuring a joyous, harmonious ending.

The deep depression of the old men requires strong medicine. Both have withdrawn from the town and live in the country attended by an elderly female slave. Knemon is estranged from his wife and has exiled himself from society. Even though his farm is worth about two talents, he works the land himself and thus abuses himself and his family needlessly. Laertes, once a king and now a widower, tends trees in foul clothing, as if a slave. He degrades himself and worries his family by living the life of a hermit far from the royal palace. Both men have lived outside society for years, thereby deeply ingraining their isolation. The mockery to which the old men are subjected focuses upon the relevant symbols of their isolation, thereby reopening wounds in order to heal them. Knemon abuses visitors who knock on his door and ask to borrow implements. In the final scene, two slaves pick at this sore spot by repeatedly banging on his door and asking for things. Knemon has also attempted to isolate his daughter and, contrary to the desires of Pan, will only allow her a husband like himself. The two slaves make him embrace his daughter's marriage by forcing him into a festive wedding dance that involves the linking of arms, a symbolic entwining that draws him back into society. Laertes suffers from the absence of his son, whose memory he cherishes through horticulture. Odysseus decides to tease his father by complimenting the plantation and asking about the welfare of Odysseus. These gibes reopen Laertes' wound and thereby prepare the old man for the arboreal tokens of recognition by which Odysseus can conclusively prove his identity.

Malicious laughter can have restorative powers, as Henri Bergson argued ("laughter is, above all, a corrective" and "it is the business of laughter to suppress any separatist tendency"). Our joy at the reintegration of such characters as Knemon and Laertes rings hollow unless we are convinced that these individuals have first been purged of their anti-social tendencies. Mockery is only a first step in this catharsis, as Odysseus himself claims, but a necessary first step if a full recovery is to be made.