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## Was it you who died, or your brother?

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to apply Christie Davies' target theory to the classical jokebook *Philogelos*, and more specifically its most common protagonist the *scholastikos*, whose central flaw is stupidity caused by his inability to interact with material reality, similar to modern "dotty professor" jokes. This paper seeks to build a model of how *scholastikos* jokes work, how the stereotype is constructed and perpetuated, how this differs from other "stupid" stereotypes used elsewhere in the *Philogelos* (largely ethnic-based stereotypes), and possible social and cultural anxieties bound up in the character of the *scholastikos*. It will explore the relationship between ancient and modern targets in light of Christie Davies' target theory and extend this model of how humor functions to transhistorical case studies.

**Keywords:** Christie Davies, target theory, *Philogelos*, classical humor, jokebook

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Διδύμων ἀδελφῶν ὁ ἕτερος ἐτελεύτησεν. Σχολαστικὸς οὖν  
τῷ ζῶντι συναντήσας ἠρώτα· Σὺ ἀπέθανες ἢ ὁ ἀδελφός σου;  
One of a pair of twin brothers died. So when he met the living twin,  
the *scholastikos* asked: “Was it you who died, or your brother?”<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

This paper will perform a transhistorical test of target theory on the one extant jokebook from the ancient Greco-Roman world: The *Philogelos*, or “laughter-lover.” It has been translated into various languages: English (Baldwin 1983, Berg 2008), Italian (Bracchini 2008), German (Thierfelder 1968) and French (Zucker 2008) among others. This collection of 265 jokes is organized by target, of which the largest groups are the stupidity-based jokes about Abderites, Sidonians and Kymians, along with a more general array of vices such as alcoholics, gluttons and people with bad breath. The ethnic jokes about the stupidity of Abderites, Sidonians and Kymians do conform reasonably well to Christie Davies’ center/periphery model (1997) as all three are on the fringes of the barbarian world (Thrace, Asia Minor and Phoenicia respectively). However, the same is not true of the most popular target in the *Philogelos* – the mysterious figure of the *scholastikos* who features in 112 of the 265 jokes – who challenges both the model and classicists’ cultural understanding of the target constructed.

Davies’ model as it appears in his 2011 book combines his previous assessment of ethnically-based stupidity jokes as told about people on the boundaries or edges of society with two more oppositions to explain other types of stupidity joke. A further opposition is introduced – mind over matter – which builds on this idea of stupidity being linked to having manual jobs which do not really require intelligence and proposes a general theory of stupid and canny jokes. Exceptions such as aristocrats or Soviet leaders, about whom stupidity jokes are told but who do not fit this uneducated/backwards image, are attributed to a monopoly versus competition model; these types of person do not have to compete intellectually, and so can be seen as the opposite of canny jokes (Davies 2011), just like the manual laborers. This threefold model does work for the majority of jokes, but not the key protagonist of the *Philogelos*: the *scholastikos*. It is nevertheless useful in addressing the *scholastikos* in its own right as a target of humor rather than as an etymological problem.

Jokebooks in the ancient world are generally assumed to have a performative function, particularly at dinner parties, where swapping jokes and witticisms was commonplace. This is taken to an extreme in the character of the parasite from ancient comedy, who flatters and simpers and desperately tries to please the host in exchange for free food; two such characters actually refer to their own jokebooks (*Persa* 392-395, *Stichus* 400). Their purpose in using such jokebooks seems to support the contention that these books formed part of a repertoire for use in social situations (Baldwin 1983, Floridi 2012, Hansen 2001, Thierfelder 1968). Macrobius, a Roman author from the fourth or fifth century CE, compiles jokes from famous people (including Cicero), and additionally discusses jokebooks in his work *Saturnalia* 2.1.8-15 (modelled on Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae* or “scholars at dinner”). Suetonius claims (*On Grammarians* 21) that a professor even compiled 150 volumes of jokes. Meanwhile, Quintilian,

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

a noted Roman authority on rhetoric, even recommended using jokes in court for building rapport with the jury. Similarly, Cicero's *On Oratory* (2.217) refers to jokebooks as possible sources of learning. Therefore, a collection of jokes such as the *Philogelos* could be designed to provide a repertoire of basic jokes, which could be elaborated upon and then delivered to variously devastating effect. However, this seemingly Roman-dominated jokebook history has led some to unreasonable claims that the jokebook or commodified joke was a Roman invention (Beard 2014), which I shall also seek to critique in this article.

## 2 The *Philogelos* and common misconceptions

### 2.1 The world's oldest jokebook?

Much of the previous scholarly work on the *Philogelos* has touched on the issues of date and authorship, but contrary to what is often claimed about the *Philogelos*, it is not the oldest jokebook in existence. The Chinese jokebook *Xiaolin* or *The Forest of Laughter* is believed to date from the third century CE (Baccini 2014); the *Philogelos* has been dated anywhere from the third to fifth century CE. The authors as given by some but not all of the manuscripts, Hierokles and Philagrios, cannot be identified with any degree of certainty (Baldwin 1983, Weeber 2006) and so furnish no answer to questions of date. There is also a *Philogelos* attributed to Philistion by the Byzantine encyclopedia *Suda*, which has led to speculation that he is the real author, but again, there is no definite information on any details of his life or any guarantee that his *Philogelos* is the one which has survived (Baldwin 1983, Fornaro 2006).

However, the dating of the *Philogelos* is problematic largely due to the non-specific nature of the jokes themselves, further complicated by the fact that no two manuscripts have exactly the same selection of jokes. The one definite clue to date is the reference to millennial games in joke 62, which took place in 248 CE and has thus been used as evidence of a third-century composition date (Robert 1968). There is also a possible reference in joke 76 to the Temple of Serapis, which, if it refers to the temple in Alexandria (Thierfelder 1968), was helpfully destroyed in 391 CE, thereby giving the end of the fourth century as the latest possible date of publication. Alas, it is not this simple, not least because such jokes can exist for some time afterwards in cultural memory, and neither the Temple of Serapis nor the Millennial Games would provoke a difficulty of understanding; 76 hinges on being at a temple of any kind and 62 on understanding the impossibility of competing at the next millennial games, although this presumably does not predate 248 CE, when they took place. Neither requires very detailed or specific first-hand cultural knowledge to comprehend the joke. This picture is further complicated by the textual history of the *Philogelos* as a collection of jokes transmitted in various manuscripts, none of which is identical, and only one of which contains the 265 jokes collected in the modern edition. These two jokes, the only evidence of set historical dates, both occur only in one manuscript. It is therefore unreasonable to place total faith in these jokes as unimpeachable evidence of its date.

A similarly mixed picture emerges from linguistic analysis. It has been shown that a large number of the words used in the *Philogelos* are unattested before the late Roman or early Byzantine period (Ritter 1955), a date which is supported by the prominence of latinisms within the collection (Andreassi 2004, Baldwin 1983, Baldwin 1989, Eberhard 1868, Thierfelder 1968). However, there is always the possibility that the text of the *Philogelos* has been updated or otherwise edited by Byzantine copyists (Thierfelder 1968), although this would require a large number of changes to account for the proliferation of these later Greek features.

On the strength of this evidence, the *Philogelos* is generally agreed to be a fourth- or fifth-century text (Baldwin 1983, 1989; Andreassi 2004). Therefore, despite being determinedly marketed as the oldest jokebook in the world, it must cede the title to the *Xiaolin*, which is referenced in the seventh century CE and ascribed to a later Han scholar (Baccini 2014).

## 2.2 Position of jokebooks in ancient Greco-Roman traditions

In a recent work on the *Philogelos*, Beard (2014: 209) posits that the Romans were the first to commodify the joke as an item of exchange and thus “invented” the modern joke. This assertion is based on a dismissal of any pre-existing tradition of jokebooks in the ancient world (Greco-Roman specifically; Chinese and other traditions do not feature) and the belief that our modern concept of the joke is at least in part directly modelled on the Roman traditions:

[I]n the Roman world, the joke not only operated as a mode of interaction but existed as a cultural object or a commodity in its own right (or as a noun rather than a verb)...The boldest would be tempted to make much more radical claims, locating the origins of “the joke,” as we now understand it, within Roman culture and seeing it...as one of the most important bequests of the Romans to the history of the West...the Roman period author assumes the [commodified joke] – reflecting the status of the joke in his world, as an object of study and theorizing in its own right, as an object with its own value and history, as an object that could be invented or discovered. That is the sense in which we might conclude that it was indeed “the Romans” who invented “the joke.” (Beard 2014: 207-9).

This suggestion deserves particular attention due to the sheer amount of evidence to the contrary which must be dismissed in order to indulge it.

Firstly, we have the Chinese evidence of the *Xiaolin*, a book designed to entertain and filled with jokes; although it contains some historical characters, these are typified to emphasize certain comic traits or failings (Baccini 2014, Knechtges 1970-71), much like the jokes targeting specific vices in the *Philogelos*, and nameless or generic protagonists also feature. As has been noted, this seems to resemble texts collecting the deeds of famous people (Baccini 2014), also common in Roman and Greek societies. Even though Beard makes a distinction between witty collections tied to famous persons and decontextualized jokes as in the *Philogelos*, this certainly does not exclude all of the *Xiaolin* from consideration; the presence of generic or decontextualized jokes is evidence of precisely the same kind of commodification as in the

*Philogelos*. Such a distinction between the commodified, decontextualized joke and anecdotes, which are so heavily dependent on context, had in fact already been proposed by Davies (2002). This demonstrates the necessity for the inclusion of humor theory in this kind of analysis; whilst the two are in agreement on the distinction, Beard's claim that these collections of sayings are "as close to the traditions of biography as to the traditions of joking" (2014: 202) ignores the potential development of humorous anecdotes into decontextualized jokes. Davies highlights that "jokes often have their origins in anecdotes...which are then detached from that context and shaped and polished so they can stand alone and last" (2002: 208).<sup>2</sup> Although the distinction is a legitimate one, dismissing the role of humorous anecdotes in joke traditions is an oversimplification.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, there are the references to Greek jokebooks; ironically, Beard addresses one of the passages I intend to use but dismisses the idea of Greek jokebooks as "ultimately a figment of [Plautus'] imagination." (Beard 2014: 203). The quotation in question comes from the second-century BCE comic playwright Plautus, many of whose plays are known to be based on Greek models, although the degree of originality in adaptation is debated (Sharrock 2009). It is spoken by a parasite – a character whose sole employment is flattering and amusing rich men in exchange for free food and who was a fixture of ancient Greek and Roman comedies (Damon 1995). When his daughter complains that he has not provided her with a dowry, thus ruining her hopes of marriage, he objects on the following grounds:

Saturio: Indeed! I'll say by virtue of the gods and my ancestors, do not say that you don't have a dowry! What a dowry there is at home: look, I have a hamper full of books. If you care for this well, this thing which we give our labour for, six hundred words will be given to you from them as a dowry, and all are Attic; you will not get any Sicilian ones. With this dowry, you will even be able to marry a pauper.

pol deum virtute dicam et maiorum meum, / ne te indotatam dicas, quoi dos sit domi: / librorum eccillum habeo plenum soracum. / si hoc adcurassis lepide, cui rei operam damus, / dabuntur dotis tibi inde sescenti logi, / atque Attici omnes; nullum Siculum acceperis: / cum hac dote poteris vel mendico nubere. (Persa l.390–396)

Here the parasite is referring to his books of jokes, which are the tools of his trade and the thing he works for (*cui rei operam damus*); these are the tools which enable him to entertain his patrons. Not only is this much earlier than the *Philogelos*, but it refers to specifically Greek jokebooks: Athenian, in fact, seen as superior to Sicilian jokebooks.

Despite the specific reference to books, Beard dismisses these as fictional based on the fact that Plautus never quotes the jokes in his plays and the lack of evidence for jokebooks as a prop for parasites in Greek theatre. To the first objection, why should Plautus quote jokes from a jokebook? His comedies are his opportunity to show off his own wit, not someone else's. Not

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. now Davies 2018 for an expansion of the distinction between humorous anecdotes and jokes and their potentially interconnected nature.

<sup>3</sup> This is particularly relevant to the *Philogelos* as joke 193 appears to be a decontextualized version of a humorous anecdote in Cicero's *De Oratore* 2.275–6, as West (1992) notes. She also highlights that the joke recurs again even later with a different celebrity attached in the sixteenth century CE.

using them is not the same thing as not being aware of their existence. Furthermore, how would this sequence play out if he was making up the entire concept of Greek jokebooks?

To the second objection, that no record survives of Greek parasite characters having jokebooks in their possession onstage, I would point out that Saturio does not have his jokebooks onstage either; he explicitly says that they are at home (*domi*). It seems unlikely that a parasite character feigning impromptu wit would take his books of jokes with him to his patron's house; what would be the point of him, then? If the patron had the jokebook, one might ask, why have the parasite? Whether or not the jokebook was a stock prop of ancient comedy is neither here nor there; the fact that the notion of a jokebook was common enough to feature in a comedy is, if anything, evidence that they did exist in the real world, and that most people were familiar with the concept.

Beard notes that the language is vague and whatever is contained within these books could be anything from witticisms to jokes, which is to some extent true. However, Plautus is not the only ancient author to refer to Athenian and Sicilian books of humorous things – the legendary orator and politician Cicero does likewise in his treatise *On Oratory*, in a section discussing the process of attempting to learn joke-telling:

“Indeed,” he said, “I think that it is easier for a man not without wit to explain anything except humour. So when I saw some books written in Greek about jokes, I entertained some hope that I could learn something from them; and I did find many witty and amusing Greek jokes (for both the Sicilians and Rhodians and Byzantines and the Athenians most of all excel in this type of thing); but those who tried to transmit some rationale and art of this business, thus appear silly, so that there is nothing else to laugh at but their own silliness.”

'Ego vero,' inquit 'omni de re facilius puto esse ab homine non inurbano, quam de ipsis facetiis disputari. Itaque cum quosdam Graecos inscriptos libros esse vidissem de ridiculis, non nullam in spem veneram posse me ex eis aliquid discere; inveni autem ridicula et salsa multa Graecorum; nam et Siculi in eo genere et Rhodii et Byzantii et praeter ceteros Attici excellunt; sed qui eius rei rationem quandam conati sunt artemque tradere, sic insulsi exstiterunt, ut nihil aliud eorum nisi ipsa insulsi- tas rideatur. (Cicero *De Oratore* 2.217 [54])

Again, there is reference to Athenian and Sicilian books of humorous things and here, it is specifically *ridicula*, jokes or jests (Liddell and Scott). It is however worth bearing in mind that this work (although published in 55BCE) is set in 91BCE and uses historical characters as the mouthpieces for various ruminations on the nature of an ideal orator. Although Cicero was not writing about his own contemporary Rome, there is nevertheless good reason to take this reference as at least familiar to his contemporaries; if jokebooks only feature because Cicero and his contemporaries believed them to have existed in 91BCE and the *Philogelos* shows that they existed after this, it seems unreasonable to assume that between 91BCE and 55BCE, jokebooks collectively vanished. If, on the other hand, these jokebooks did not exist at the time in which the work is set, then they must be an anachronistic insertion which necessitates Cicero's own audience being familiar with them from their own time. Nor is the more educated audience of

Cicero's works likely to simply not know whether or not such a tradition existed; Cicero himself studied in Athens, typically for wealthy young men of his time, so it is highly doubtful that he and his audience would not know whether or not the Athenians had jokebooks. In either case, it shows a tradition of jokebooks and specifically Greek jokebooks stretching back to long before the Roman examples.

Thus, there are two completely unconnected authors writing about a century apart in completely different genres, mentioning Greek jokebooks and specifically Athenian ones, as well as a Sicilian tradition closer to home. It seems doubtful that this could be a collective illusion, and even if Plautus could get away with inventing a genre of jokebooks for comic effect, Cicero is unlikely to have the same privilege when writing on rhetoric and philosophy. In addition, the fact that these two passages both show a clear collective impulse – both on the part of parasite and educated Roman – to purchase and collect books of jokes, indicates that the commodification element was already in full flow at these times, and furthermore, that the Greek traditions of jokebooks were already in a commodified form. The fact that these books are ascribed to particular cities and regions shows that their compilation was already a feature of Greek society. Certainly, whilst Athens would typically be ascribed any kind of literary genre, the presence of Sicily on the jokebook scene is unexpected and seems unlikely to be a purely literary invention.

A third branch of literature has also been overlooked in the assessment of pre-existing jokes traditions, and that is skoptic epigram. As has been argued (Nisbet 2003), the Greek tradition of skoptic epigram is essentially one of jokes; these short poems build towards a final point or punchline, much like our modern concept of epigram. Although this is often considered a Roman development and ascribed to Martial, Nisbet demonstrates that Martial is actually copying a pre-existing Greek tradition, and thus these skoptic epigrams could also be seen as forerunners or part of the tradition of the commodified joke. They are short, come in collections, with each forming a self-contained joke which could be trotted out at symposia (Cameron 1995, Nisbet 2003). Much like the Greek jokebooks hinted at in Cicero and Plautus, this is another form of commodified wit, here with a recognizable joke structure.

For example:

Οἱ συναγωνισταὶ τὸν πυγμάχον ἐνθάδ' ἔθηκαν

Ἄπιν· οὐδένα γὰρ πόποτ' ἐτραυμάτισεν.

His fellow contestants set up a statue of the boxer Apis here,

For he never hurt anyone. (*The Greek Anthology* 11.80)

Nor do the similarities to the *Philogelos* end here; skoptic epigrams also tend to be organized by character types and though they do use names, these are types rather than individuals, which distinguishes it from collections of anecdotes about famous people (Floridi 2012). Even the structure of the epigrams is similar to that of jokes as “a situation is set, through a nominative participle agreeing with a subject whose membership in a specific human category is indicated by an adjective or noun; a principal sentence, sometimes accompanied by a dependent clause, follows, to explain the (incongruous) consequences resulting from that situation” (Floridi 2012: 657). Precisely how the lines of influences go is unclear but as Floridi

suggests, jokebooks could be the inspiration for this type of epigram, or as Baldwin notes (1983), this could be a two-way relationship. Certainly, the existence of such similar structures and targets suggests they are part of the same tradition of commodified jokes, and that this tradition is by no means an invention of the Romans alone.

### 3 Defining the *scholastikos* using target theory

The *scholastikos* has long defied translation, but has been rendered variously as: pedant, egghead, Kalmäuser, professor, student, numskull, intellectual and bookworm (Andreassi 2004). It may be preferable to resort to cultural rather than verbal translation and substitute an approximate stereotype mapping such as “humanities student” or “Classics professor .” These variations are possible because the word develops from “enjoying leisure” (Aristotle *Politics* 1322b37) to “devoting time to studying” hence “student” (sometimes pejorative as in Plutarch *Cicero* 5) to “pedant” or “idiot” (Arrian *Discourses of Epictetus* 1.11.39). But this picture is further complicated by the fact that the *scholastikos* is never actually pedantic in the *Philogelos*, has professions such as doctor and teacher in some jokes (3, 61) and yet no clear job in others, only interacts specifically with education in a handful of jokes (54, 55, 61) and has no particular age bracket (Weeber 2006, Thierfelder 1968, Zucker 2008, Andreassi 2004). There is an etymological link to the term *σχολή* (*schole*), which goes from meaning simply “leisure” to mean a “school” or “lecture” (LSJ), but despite various rationalisations for the reputation of the *scholastikos* as stupid (Manuwald 1923, Claus 1965, Löwe 1983), the matter is unresolved (Andreassi 2004) and the *scholastikos*’ identity remains obscure.

However, examining the jokes in the *Philogelos*, a recognizable stereotype does emerge: that of the over-educated scholar, out of touch with reality and devoid of common sense, trying and failing to interact with society and the world as a whole.

For example, from the joke which gave this paper its title:

Διδύμων ἀδελφῶν ὁ ἕτερος ἐτελεύτησεν. Σχολαστικὸς οὖν  
τῷ ζῶντι συνανήσας ἠρώτα· Σὺ ἀπέθανες ἢ ὁ ἀδελφός σου;

One of a pair of twin brothers died. So when he met the living twin, the *scholastikos* asked: “Was it you who died, or your brother?” (*Philogelos* 29)

In this joke the *scholastikos* displays both a complete lack of and an overuse of logical thinking; on the one hand, the situation itself, speaking to an ostensibly living person, provides a clear answer to his question, but on the other hand, the *scholastikos* is applying a normal conversational script of “was it you or your brother who did...” (e.g. launched his own cologne, invaded Greece) but with one of very few verbs that doesn’t work in this context. Thus, the *scholastikos*’ excessive focus on the abstract forms of speech causes him to ignore the concrete situation he is in, which precludes such interaction.

In a similar vein:



Σχολαστικῶι ἀποδημοῦντι φίλος αὐτοῦ ἔλεγεν· Ἄξιῶ σε δύο παῖδας ἀγοράσαι μοι, ἑκάτερον πεντεκαίδεκα ἐτῶν. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Ἐὰν τοιούτους μὴ εὔρω, ἀγοράσω σοι ἓνα τριάκοντα ἐτῶν.

A *scholastikos*' friend was going abroad and said to him: "Please buy me two fifteen-year-old slaves." The *scholastikos* replied: "And if I cannot find such, I'll buy you one thirty-year-old!" (*Philogelos* 12)

This again shows the *scholastikos* misapplying abstract principles – here mathematical ones – to an inappropriate situation. The price of slaves in the ancient world was never cheap, particularly under the Empire, (Hopkins 1978) and so the buyer is looking to get as much use out of them as possible; in no sense are two fifteen-year-old slaves equivalent to one thirty-year-old in financial terms. Nor can the sexual aspect be ignored (West 2017); sexual relationships were common with slaves of either gender (Finley 1980, Harper 2011), so youthful, attractive slaves were also prized on these grounds. The *scholastikos* is therefore doubly failing to fulfil his obligations by this suggestion and could even be held in breach of contract for such a substitution, which could be seen as "exceeding the terms of the *mandatum* [commission]" and so liable to be taken to court for not fulfilling his obligations (Tarwacka 2016: 258). This legal dimension might serve to strengthen the joke, as not only is the *scholastikos* disregarding his friend's financial benefit, but potentially also his own. Here, then, his inability to think beyond abstract principles may have very real, practical ill-effects, which he does not comprehend. Nor is this confusion of the abstract and concrete limited to principles:

Σχολαστικῶι τις ἀπαντήσας ἔφη· Κύριε σχολαστικέ, καθ' ὕπνους σε εἶδον. ὁ δέ· Μὰ τοὺς θεοῦς, εἶπεν, ἀσχολῶν οὐ προσέσχον.

On encountering [a *scholastikos*], a man said, "Learned Sir, I saw you in my dreams." "By the Gods," he replied, "I was so busy I didn't notice you." (*Philogelos* 5, translation Baldwin 1983).

In this joke, he responds as if this were a real event along the conversational script of "I saw you in the [forum, market, some other concrete location] the other day," rather than realizing the implication of the dream: that he was not really there. Again, he privileges conversational maxim and abstraction over the tangible and concrete example in front of him, ironically rendering his response completely inappropriate. This confusion of dreams and reality recurs in a few other jokes, such as 124:

Ἀβδηρίτης κατ' ὄναρ χοιρίδιον ἐπώλει καὶ ἐζήτει δηνάρια ἑκατόν. διδόντος δέ τινος πεντήκοντα μὴ βουλόμενος λαβεῖν διῦπνισε. καμμύσας οὖν καὶ τὴν χεῖρα προτεινάς εἶπε· Δὸς κἂν τὰ πεντήκοντα.

An Abderite dreamt that he was selling a piglet for the price of 100 denarii. He woke up just as someone was offering him 50 denarii and he was refusing to accept. So, keeping his eyes closed and stretching out his hand he says: "Just give me the fifty."

What is notable here is that when a non-*scholastikos* target confuses dreams and reality, the confusion is between reality and their own dream; the Abderite tries in vain to maintain his dream in the hopes of material good in reality, which is a ridiculous but understandable stupidity. Meanwhile, the *scholastikos* confuses someone else's dream for reality and responds in a way which demonstrates he has not fully understood the implications of what they said. This pattern is further supported by the example of joke 15, where the *scholastikos*' friend makes the same mistake:

Σχολαστικὸς καθ' ὕπνου ἦλον πεπατηκέναι δόξας τὸν πόδα περιέδησεν. ἑταῖρος δὲ αὐτοῦ πυθόμενος τὴν αἰτίαν καὶ γνούς· Δικαίως, ἔφη, μωροὶ καλούμεθα. διὰ τί γὰρ ἀνυπόδητος κοιμᾶσαι;

A *scholastikos*, having dreamt that he'd trodden on a nail, began to bandage his foot. His friend asked him why, and when he'd explained, the friend said: "Rightly we are called idiots! Why did you go to bed without shoes on?" (*Philogelos* 15)

This may be seen as composite example of the earlier confusions because the friend's claim that *μωροὶ καλούμεθα* 'we are called idiots' suggests that both men are in fact *scholastikoi*, and that this is a reference to their common reputation for stupidity. Whilst one, the dreamer *scholastikos*, interprets his own dream as real and expects a material effect in reality as a result, much like the Abderite in 124, the other *scholastikos* exhibits this tendency to interpret others' dreams as reality. It appears to be a distinguishing trait of *scholastikoi* to confuse not just their own but also another person's dream with reality, exceeding even the stupidity of the Abderite due to their disconnection from real life. This example is perhaps even more interesting due to the attempted correction of the first by the second *scholastikos*, which draws on the criticism of others but only to then display a fundamental misunderstanding of the basis for such criticism; he does not address the confusion of dreams and reality, which is the obvious stupidity, but instead talks of preventing that harm as though it was real. This demonstrates that he cannot even understand criticism sufficiently to amend his behavior because he has no concept of basic distinctions that any ordinary person would have. Here, as in joke 5, his responses are inappropriate and illogical by normal standards, reflecting an inability to interact not only with the material world, but with those in it, whom he is unable to understand; what benefit is there, they might ask, to such an education?

A more literal example involves confusion of a symbol for the thing symbolised:

Σχολαστικοῦ πλέοντος ἐκινδύνευεν ὑπὸ χειμῶνος τὸ πλοῖον. τῶν δὲ συμπλέοντων ἀπορριπτούντων ἐκ τῶν σκευῶν, ἵνα κουφισθῆι τὸ πλοῖον, κάκείνωι τὸ αὐτὸ ποιεῖν παραινούντων, ὁ δὲ ἔχων χειρόγραφον ἑκατὸν πενήκοντα μυριάδων, τὰς πενήκοντα ἀπαλείψας· Ἴδε, φησίν, ὅσοις χρήμασιν ἐπεκούφισα τὴν ναῦν.

A *scholastikos* was sailing in a ship when it was hit by a storm. The other passengers were throwing overboard any equipment they could to lighten the boat and urged him to do the same. He, taking out a check for a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, rubbed out the fifty and said, "see how many pounds lighter we are now!" (*Philogelos* 80)

Here, the *scholastikos* confuses the abstract concept of money as symbolized by the check for the physical amount of money it represents. This confusion leads him to misapply qualities held by 150,000 pounds to the piece of paper representing that. Here, he misapplies the weight of this amount of cash to the check, thereby indicating a complete detachment from everyday life; to him, everything is abstract, with no distinction between symbol and symbolized. As in 12, the theme of finance can be seen at play in this joke, again emphasizing the *scholastikos*' unfamiliarity with money. This could be a sign of the privileged position which enables him to remain unconcerned with finances but is also a key demonstration of his disconnection from everyday life on even the most basic level, by his lack of understanding of money as a concept. Still funnier may be the potential lack of recognition that he has for his own privileged position; however much money he has, he does not fully appreciate or understand it, which potentially leaves him open to losing it, as he does in this joke by personally obliterating a third of the overall sum! This enables anyone familiar with the realities of life to feel superior to him, however inferior in standing and wealth they might be. Indeed, the connection between financial stupidity and intellectual pursuits suggests that this type of education is not worth much and may even be a hinderance; in addition to the expense of education, the *scholastikos* loses himself money by implementing his lessons. It could even be said that the uneducated have saved themselves money twice over by this logic.

Indeed, given what has already been mentioned about the etymology and meanings of the word, it is clear that by introducing the character as the "*scholastikos*," the jokes are setting up his stupidity as resulting from his education; in these jokes, at least, his learning certainly seems more hinderance than help. When rationalizing his actions in these jokes, the audience can attribute these stupid mistakes to his prioritization of abstract learning over common sense; and learning or education it must be, given both the premise of the word itself and the attention to forms of speech and abstract thought which is indicated throughout. This certainly fits neatly with education of the period, which was focused on logic, philosophy and rhetoric, often as a route to a lucrative legal career. This potential for great financial reward seems at odds with the *scholastikos*' ineptitude with money – he repeatedly exhibits terrible or backfiring sales tactics elsewhere (4, 10) in addition to his apparent lack of understanding of value in the above jokes. The overall effect is to undermine any hopes of future financial success; even if he does make more money in the law courts, there's no guarantee he will keep it.

Such a suggestion is reinforced by his ineptitude extending even in his own supposed area of expertise: rhetoric.

Σχολαστικὸς μετὰ δύο ἐταίρων διελέγετο. τοῦ ἐνὸς οὖν εἰπόντος, ὅτι μὴ δίκαιόν ἐστι πρόβατον σφάζεσθαι· γάλα γὰρ καὶ ἔρια φέρει· καὶ τοῦ ἄλλου εἰπόντος, ὅτι μηδὲ βοῶν προσήκει ἀναιρεῖσθαι γάλα παρέχουσιν καὶ ἀροτριῶσιν· ὁ σχολαστικὸς ἔφη μηδὲ χοῖρον δίκαιον εἶναι ἀναιρεῖσθαι ἧπαρ παρέχοντα καὶ οὐθαρ καὶ βουλβάν.

The *scholastikos* was debating with two companions. One of them said that it was not right to kill sheep, because they produce milk and wool. The other said that it is not right to slaughter cows, because they produce milk and pull ploughs. The *scholastikos* said it was not right to kill pigs, because they provide sausages. (*Philogelos* 103)

This is a typical rhetorical debate, familiar from courts and schools of the time, which the *scholastikos* completely fails to correctly respond to; his own suggestion is modelled in form on the other two propositions but forms a paradox due to his own incomplete understanding of the real-world relationship between animals and their products. The fact that he only seems able to imitate the form, not the actual logic of the others' arguments may also hint at a surface-level, limited understanding which has done little to improve his mind, or based on this exchange, his chances of victory in court. Interestingly, this joke recurs (as many do in the *Philogelos*) but with a different target: a Sidonian rhetorician. The qualification of the Sidonian with the occupation of rhetorician seems to act as justification for the situation and to undermine him by demonstrating his failure in his supposed area of expertise. However, the *scholastikos* is never qualified by rhetorician or any such occupation. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Sidonian needed an occupation to justify his involvement, but that the *scholastikos* does not, so the rhetorical element must already be implicit in the stereotype. This supports the idea that formal rhetorical and logical education is the fundamental basis of the stereotype and provides the reason for his inevitable stupidity: over-education.

#### **4 External evidence for the *scholastikos***

Thus far the etymology and the stereotype within jokes seem to agree – but I would emphasize that the specific humorous stereotype of the *scholastikos* needs to be similar to but not necessarily identical with any non-humorous usages of the word. Davies stressed the methodological importance of first assembling joke texts, then seeking “*independent* evidence concerning the relevant social and historical circumstances” to support them (2002: 5); it is to this second step which we now turn.

Certainly, the association of stupidity and education is not limited to the *Philogelos*; Lucian makes particular mockery of philosophers who are abusing their education for personal gain in his dialogues on *Dependent Scholars* and *Professor of Rhetoric*. He also targets philosophers who are preaching one thing and practicing another, thus only imitating wisdom in his works *The Eunuch* and *Lover of Lies*. Lucian is a Syrian writing in Greek under the Roman Empire, so ironically it is education (more specifically a Greek education) which has enabled him to achieve his own position and status, although he continues to police these boundaries against others. Education was, if anything, a force for limited social mobility in the Empire, as through it even slaves and freed slaves could achieve wealth and power. This can be seen in the *Dinner at Trimalchio's* episode in Petronius' *Satyricon* (26-78), which is an extended satire of a wealthy but gauche freed slave who has pretensions of learning but no real understanding; he makes frequent and painfully obvious gaffes, confusing various mythological figures and muddling up stories which any reader would be very familiar with, such as the Fall of Troy. Here too is a demonstration of the evils of a superficial education, unsupported by real intellectual heft or comprehension.

Although these are earlier examples, they nevertheless indicate similar anxieties about education and possible abuses of it, especially in connection with potential social mobility. Therefore, *scholastikos* jokes could be simultaneously tapping into elite concerns about the

educated but low-born rising through society to compete with them and reassuring the uneducated, who might envy this social power of education, that education isn't really worth much anyway. The latter seems to be reinforced by the repeated links between the *scholastikos* and fiscally irresponsible actions, which demonstrate the literal worth of this education. This is perhaps why the *scholastikos* character is so prominent in the *Philogelos*: universal appeal. No one would identify themselves as a *scholastikos*, and so no one is excluded from the laughter due to identification with its target. Indeed, this may be precisely why the *scholastikos* is so hard to define beyond a basic claim of education; he is deliberately designed to be vague in order to be such an object of hostile anti-identification by educated and uneducated alike.

## 5 Conclusions

The *scholastikos* raises some useful transhistorical questions for the mind versus matter model suggested in Davies' 2011 book *Jokes and Targets*. This model suggests that groups about whom stupid jokes are told are groups without specialist knowledge or skill, who are associated or involved with manual jobs and thus do not have to use their brains. The opposite of this is canny jokes about lawyers, bankers etc, who use their minds but to a material (financial) end and who feature in much more contextually-specific jokes. It is apparent that the *scholastikos* is one of the stupid groups, both from the selection of jokes above, and from the tendency to repeat *scholastikos* jokes but substitute another stereotypically stupid character as the protagonist such as Kymians and Sidonians (e.g. 100=128, 23=130, 4=155, 10=157 etc.). This in particular indicates an affinity or similarity between the *scholastikos* and these ethnic stereotypes which must be assumed to be mutual stupidity. However, the *scholastikos* certainly has no whiff of physicality about him; he is entirely mind over matter, representing the other end of the extreme from rural peasants, and the emphasis in many jokes on his poor financial judgement shows he can hardly be canny. The *scholastikos* is precisely the kind of vague social group which Davies' theory of stupidity-based jokes as a mind-over-matter opposition is designed to cover. He is timeless and placeless to an extent that ethnic-based stupidity targets just aren't; they require contextual or localized knowledge of ethnic stereotypes (Davies 1997).

However, mind over matter is not the only explanation and, as the etymology of *scholastikos* from the word meaning "leisure" suggests, these *scholastikoi* must be sufficiently well-off to afford not to work in order to have leisure to study. This would initially suggest aristocracy, which Davies explains using his monopoly versus competition model, which attributes stupid jokes about powerful groups to their status as a monopoly, such as Communist leaders and aristocrats enjoy. But this is not really an accurate picture of education in the ancient world; whilst the lowest class could not hope to get into education, the higher classes could. Slaves or freed slaves were also able to gain access to this social status marker and many of the educators of the ancient world were in fact Greek slaves, since Greek language and education was highly prized and formed the basis for the Roman system. The Romans were also not above employing or owning Greek slaves to do the intellectual work for them. Especially given the mixed presentation of the employment status of *scholastikoi* in the *Philogelos*, it is hard to see this as a case of an aristocratic monopoly. Nor did teachers and *scholastikoi* have any real power;

under the Empire especially, power was in the hands of hereditary emperors and representatives in the senate were drawn only from senatorial rank citizens, regardless of educational brilliance. Thus, the monopoly versus competition model does not fit the case either.

Perhaps the *scholastikos* is a case of taking a virtue too far, which Davies (2011: 6-7) says is necessary in order to make virtue laughable; the *scholastikos* would then occupy the other extreme of the mind over matter spectrum from manual or unskilled workers, with the ideal (and the audience) being somewhere in the middle. Instead of an opposition between the stupid and the canny, the mind/matter opposition could be two extremes of stupidity. However, the difficulty in fitting the *scholastikos* into the model may be unavoidable, since the bulk of the theory of *Jokes and Targets* is based on a modern, industrialized world with its focus on competition in the marketplace, which just doesn't map onto ancient systems to the same extent. Nevertheless, Davies' theory is of great practical use in demonstrating continuities and discontinuities between out-groups as constructed by ancient and modern times, as well as indicating which oppositions are more persistent across time and culture, and which are more locally constructed.

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## **Bionote**

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