

# When Homer ceased laughing: epic humour and the means of its apology in antique allegorism and symbolism

**Fedor Shcherbakov**

Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, Russia  
[fkrylov@mail.ru](mailto:fkrylov@mail.ru)

## Abstract

*Since the very beginning of its proliferation, the Homeric epic has been subject to various ways of interpretation and modes of understanding. Particular attention has been paid to those passages from Homeric poems in which the gods commit obscene, absurd, or comical actions. In the opinion of critics of Iliad and Odyssey, such myths were not worthy of the appropriate faith in the Greek gods. Therefore, my article focuses on the third, “comical” group of these Homeric grey areas, and deals with the following questions: how and why did Homer’s comical passages move from a discourse of the ridiculous and the funny to a discourse of the serious by means of philosophical interpretation over the centuries? I will try to uncover the general principles and conditions of that hermeneutical mechanism which made it possible to translate Homer’s comical plots from the language of Olympic “domestic” nonsense into the language of the most important physical, ethical, and metaphysical truths. To achieve this task, my article will conditionally distinguish two ways of transition from the comical to the serious: the first, which was carried out in ancient allegorism, was to directly produce a translation, and to declare that the “superficial” meaning of the myth is false, and its deep level is true. The second way – ancient symbolism – was to turn the comical into the serious through the immediate translation of comical myths into the religious discourse of the sacred, which did not imply a stark contrast between the comical and the serious but, on the contrary, harmonized them.*

*Keywords: allegory, ancient laughter, Homer, symbol*

## 1. Introduction

It has long been noted in scholarly literature on ancient laughter that, in Greek culture and mythology, tears and crying were the inheritance of mortals, and laughter and fun were the inheritance of the gods. In particular, Alexey Losev writes, “you shouldn’t be puzzled that divine humour often means the most real tragedy for mortals. It’s like that only for mortals. And for the gods themselves, the meaning of all this is only humour” (Losev 1996: 364). Viktor Bychkov agrees with Losev: “The perfect life (the life of the Olympians) in Homer is a life of

fun, warmed by endless jokes, conversations, and divine sagacity. In contrast, the lives of people (the heroes of his epic poems) involve difficulties, dangers, death, and, as a rule, there are neither jokes, nor humour” (Bychkov 2009: 213). As Robert H. Bell writes on the Olympians, “heartless, egocentric and self-seeking, gods rarely fathom anyone’s subjectivity; life is merely a procession, potentially entertaining” (Bell 2007: 100). Stephen Halliwell remarks: “The anthropomorphic traditions of Greek religion left no doubt that laughter (and smiles) had an important place in the divine realm; a deity incapable of laughter was the exception, not the rule” (Halliwell 2008: 3). Therefore, according to the observations of this scholar (Halliwell 2008: 51-52), it should be listed the most relevant passages of the divine laughter:

- 1) the gods on Olympus (Il. I, 571-604): this passage was commented upon in Her. Hom. Qu. 26-27; Ps.-Plut. De vit. Hom. 214; Procl. Comm. in Remp. I, 128 Kroll;
- 2) the conflict between the gods (Il. XXI): Theagenes of Regium 8, 2 D.-K.; Corn. Theol. Graec. 21; Her. Hom. Qu. 52-59. However, in these passages, allegorists have analyzed only the battle of the gods, the divine laughter per se was disregarded;
- 3) in Demodocus’ song about Hephaestus’ revenge against the adulterous Ares and Aphrodite (Od. VIII, 266-366). This passage was commented upon in: Aristotle Polit. B9 1269 b 27-31; Corn. Theol. Graec. 19; Her. Hom. Qu. 69; Ps.-Plut. De vit. Hom. 214. See also: Eustath. Comm. ad Il.1244, 40 sq;

Also, taking this opportunity, we should indicate cases of the mortals’ laughter:

- 4) the Thersites episode (Il. II, 243-270): this character was interpreted as an allegory of the worst and most disgusting man (Ps.-Plut. De vit. Hom. 214; also, Irus the Beggar from Od. XVIII, 1-110 was understood by Pseudo-Plutarch in approximately the same way;
- 5) the encounter between Hector and Andromache (Il. VI, 369-529): it is not known whether any allegorical commentaries on this passage have been written;
- 6) the funeral games (Il. XXIII, 287-897): it is not known whether any allegorical commentaries on this passage have been written.

However, we will not further consider cases of the mortals’ laughter, since we are mainly interested in the laughter of the gods and its other-speaking interpretation.

So, take the beginning of Iliad (Il. I, 599-600):

ἄσβεστος δ’ ἄρ’ ἐνῶρτο γέλωσ μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν  
ὡς ἴδον Ἥφαιστον διὰ δώματα ποιπνύοντα.

And unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods, as they saw Hephaestus puffing through the palace.

(Homer 1999b: 59)

And one more (Il. XXI, 388-391):

ἄϊε δὲ Ζεὺς  
ἦμενος Οὐλύμπῳ: ἐγέλασσε δὲ οἱ φίλον ἦτορ  
γηθοσύνη, ὅθ’ ὄρᾳτο θεοὺς ἔριδι ξυνιόντας.

And Zeus heard it where he sat upon Olympus, and the heart within him laughed aloud in joy as he beheld the gods joining in strife.

(Homer 1999b: 433)

So, ἄσβεστος γέλωσ (‘unquenchable laughter’) is one of the most important and permanent attributes of Olympic gods: as a rule, Homer’s gods had some constant subjects for their laughter. At the same time, in some cases, the citizens of Olympus could become objects of laughter themselves, although this was done very mildly: it is enough to recall the passage about the lame Hephaestus (Il. I, 599-600), where he clumsily spills nectar, or the alcove scene

of Mars and Aphrodite's love (Od. VIII, 267-369). Nevertheless, it is not only to the modern reader that the comical elements in ancient myths cause some perplexity. The earliest generations of Homer's and Hesiod's readers were often repelled by the behaviour of the Olympic gods (Brisson 2004: 9-14). For example, Xenophanes of Colophon, one of the Homer's first philosophical critics, wrote that both Homer and Hesiod "expressed as many unholy deeds as possible of the gods: stealing, committing adultery, deceiving each other" (F18 D.-K.; the English translation by D.W. Graham is cited from *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy* 2010: 109).

In my opinion, the question of the philosophical assessments of divine laughter by ancient readers was closely connected with the attempts to create systematic theological teachings in the Hellenistic and late ancient philosophical schools: Stoicism, Middle Platonism, Neo-Pythagoreanism, and Neo-Platonism. Originally, in Ancient Greece, the primary attempts to build well-founded pagan theologies had to be carried out mainly by philosophers, and they were based more on artistic-aesthetic material (i.e. the epics of Homer and Hesiod) than on strictly religious material (i.e. sacred scriptures or rituals). But the creation of any theological system demands a very strict and serious (*σπουδαῖος*) attitude on the part of the exegete for the interpretation of sacred scriptures: the presence of any comical plots there in it was ultimately undesirable. It seems that the very nature of laughter (i.e. its psychological and aesthetic features) constantly discouraged the building of such theological systems. But why? In order to answer this question, I should define the main principles and indications of laughter and the comic. Consequently, I have divided my article into three parts:

- 1) part 2, in which I define the psychological and aesthetic principles of laughter;
- 2) part 3, in which I briefly recount the history of allegorical interpretation and cited philosophical reflections on the laughter of the Homeric gods;
- 3) part 4, in which I endeavour to demonstrate how ancient symbolism, as opposed to ancient allegorism, could harmonize the discourses of the funny and the serious.

## **2. Some psychological and aesthetic principles of laughter**

At first, it is necessary to address the main concepts and ways of judging the comical in the history of western thought. (It should be noted here: it may seem inappropriate and even indiscriminate to consider the main concepts of comedy and laughter at the same time but, in fact, any study of comedy always finally appeals to the problem of laughter, and any theory of laughter tacitly implies a certain understanding of comedy. Therefore, in our opinion, the joint consideration of the theories of laughter and comedy is more fruitful and deeper). So, all we can do here is to list only the main theories among them. Aristotle stated in *Poet.* 1449a30-35:

Comedy, as we have said, is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful.

(Aristotle 1999: 45)

Furthermore, the medieval treatise entitled "Tractatus Coislianus", which has been dated approximately to the 10th century (Tatarkiewicz 1977: 143), gives the following definition of comedy (allegedly from Aristotle's lost work on the subject): "Comedy is a representation of an action that is laughable and lacking in magnitude, complete, [in embellished speech,] with each of its parts [used] separately in the [various] elements [of the play; represented] by people acting and [not] by narration; accomplishing by means of pleasure and laughter the catharsis of such emotions. It has laughter as its mother" (Aristotle 1987: 43-44). However, as

Władysław Tatarkiewicz notes, it is hardly possible to acknowledge this ridiculous and laughable forgery as an authentic statement by Aristotle (Tatarkiewicz 1977: 143).

Nevertheless, it is only in modern times that the issue of laughter has been developed to its fullest extent. As such, a number of key positions either for or against it were developed in classical German idealism and the subsequent philosophical-aesthetic conceptions of the 19th century. Immanuel Kant highlighted the element of something ridiculous as *conditio sine qua non* for the presence of the comical, and defined laughter as “an effect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing. This very reduction, at which certainly understanding cannot rejoice, is still indirectly a source of very lively enjoyment for a moment” (Kant 2007: 161). For Kant, an object of laughter is always “mere play of representations” (Kant 2007: 161) which gives some pleasure from the funny when its recognition is delayed. Friedrich Schlegel understood the true task of the comical as the “violation of restrictions” (Schlegel 1983: 53), which, at the same time, is done “only seemingly and does not contain anything bad and ugly, and nevertheless its freedom is unconditional” (Schlegel 1983: 53). For Friedrich Schelling, the substance of comedy and the comical is in the overturning (*Umkehrung*), and the zenith of comedy is reached when “the original relationship between freedom and necessity is that in which necessity appears as the object, freedom as the subject” (Schelling 1989: 263). Georg Hegel wrote about the creation of false visibility of some substance, which collapses with a comical situation and turns into nothing along with it (Hegel 1988: 67-68). In addition, “the comical as such implies an infinite light-heartedness and confidence felt by someone raised altogether above his own inner contradiction and not bitter or miserable in it at all: this is the bliss and ease of a man who, being sure of himself, can bear the frustration of his aims and achievements” (Hegel 1975: 1200).

Arthur Schopenhauer considered the comedic more in the context of his own theory of knowledge than as an actual phenomenon of aesthetics: “in every case, laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (Schopenhauer 1969: 69). Henri Bergson and Sergey Averintsev insisted on the dynamic character of laughter and the exit of a laughing man’s consciousness in a comical situation from the usual forms of his strongly intellectual understanding, and defined the comical as “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (Bergson 1911: 37; Averintsev 1992: 2). According to Olga Freidenberg’s theory on archaic laughter, it was an acting metaphor for life’s revival and for the flowering of power in all the fullness of human existence; at the same time, laughter was a metaphor for some transitive state between life and death, the “state of thresholdness” (Freidenberg 1997: 93). Vladimir Propp’s theory also echoes this understanding of the phenomenon of laughter: ancient laughter was a kind of life-giver, a principle of the constant re-actualization of vital forces, and, therefore, it is logical to link all the corresponding attributes of life’s completeness with it (Propp 1989: 184). By these attributes, I mean life’s power, wealth, strength, suppression, fertility, and rampant sexuality.

Summing up these and other conceptions about laughter, Marina Ryumina postulates a rule of “laughability”: according to Ryumina, a comical situation, which creates a kind of artificial twin, symbolically collapses both the real series of actual events and its reduplicated imaginary side. Indeed, that is what the annihilating nature of laughter relies upon: something which is symbolically laughed at goes into a kind of nothingness, is replaced by something new and young, which is yet able to laugh (and it is here that the life-giving and life-saving nature of laughter manifests itself, according to Propp (1976: 211-213)). Almost the same thing was said by Mikhail Bakhtin: in the human’s carnival laughter (which, by the way, goes back to ancient religious practice), the world recreates and regenerates itself by turning itself upside down and self-separating into a perfect-spiritual top and a material-corporeal base (Bakhtin 1984: 370). Thus, the inert and shabby forms of the old order of things go away and, in this

sense, laughter could be compared to some symbolic spring of the world. By that I mean the permanently refreshing and vitalizing quality of laughter which was so inherent to the Homeric gods – those forever young, immensely mighty, and inexcusably laughing beings. Based on the above theories, M.T. Ryumina (2010: 9; 74-78) has rightly drawn the main qualities of the comical (the funny) as follows:

- 1) ambivalence;
- 2) marginality;
- 3) the state of thresholdness;
- 4) semantic incongruity;
- 5) the principle of the carnival;
- 6) the principle of the game;
- 7) the deceptive gap between reality and fiction;
- 8) the creation of the false.

It is immediately noticeable that all the aforementioned principles of the nature of laughter reconcile very reluctantly with the theological ideal of exact, reliable, demonstrable, and pious knowledge about gods.

### **3. Homer's laughter in the mirror of allegorical interpretation**

So what was the reason for the application of the myths' allegorical hermeneutics, i.e. the translation of mythological stories into the language of philosophy? Undoubtedly the best way to defend the dubious acts of the Homeric and Hesiodic heroes before the court of philosophy was to present them as an expression of philosophical truths (Brisson 2004: 10-14). At the same time, as Jon Whitman has noted, "any critique of allegorical interpretation is also an implicit commentary on the critic's own interpretive positions" (Whitman 2000: 7). Therefore, according to ancient pagan allegorists, the mythology of Homer was a specific mode of philosophical knowledge, which was deliberately covered by its author in the form of poetry and various symbolic "riddles". The allegorists believed that "Homer was a divine sage with revealed knowledge of the fate of souls and of the structure of reality, and that Iliad and Odyssey are mystical allegories yielding information of this sort if properly read" (Lamberton 1: 1989). Many of Homer's and Hesiod's comical, obscene, and unworthy stories were theologically "sterilized" by means of allegorical interpretation in order to dispel any suspicion among the Greeks (naturally, such theological sterilization was not the sole purpose of the ancient allegorists: their hermeneutic efforts were founded on very different intentions). This tendency was probably more peculiar to late antiquity, although it could perhaps have existed earlier: the deplorable and very fragmentary state of preservation of the earliest allegorical treatises (6th century BC – 1st century AD) prevents us from making a more definite judgment.

In this way, the method of the allegorical interpretation of myths implied that any doubtful actions on the part of the gods are specific expressions of hidden philosophical truths in the physical, the ethical, or the cosmological sense. It is traditionally considered that the first allegorist was Theagenes of Regium (6th century BC), who explained the Homeric "Theomachy" from Iliad as a clash of natural elements (Ford 1999: 34-35; Domaradzki 2011: 211). He suggests that "Homer outlines their [sc. elements] battles, calling fire as Apollo, Helios or Hephaestus, water as Poseidon and Scamander, etc. In a similar way, he sometimes gives names to the gods and states of [the human soul]: Athena is the name for reason, Ares is recklessness, Aphrodite is lust, Hermes is speech, and Homer assigns names to each of them. That is the way for justifying the gods by Homer from the side of his style. It was a very ancient and original method, beginning from Theagenes of Regium, who was the first to write on Homer" (8, 2 D.-K.). Additionally, Pherekydes of Syros, the semi-legendary teacher of

Pythagoras and possible founder of the teaching on metempsychosis, talked about the sacred marriage of Zas-Eaet (Zeus) and Chtonía-Earth, and also Chronos-Time, who was allegorically interpreted as these gods' coitus, in his lost treatise entitled "Seven Subsoils" (Ἡπτάμυχος). One century later, ethical interpretations of divine characters had become commonplace: in particular, Anaxagoras was the first to write a book of ethical interpretations on Homer, understanding his poems as a dispute between valour and justice (Diog. L., II, 11). Metrodorus of Lampsakos presented two models for understanding the Homeric divine characters in his allegorical interpretation apparently based on Hippocratic philosophy (Torshilov 2010: 115): this philosopher represented the gods as parts of the body, and heroes as celestial stars. In turn, Democritus, the sophists, and the cynics have made ethical allegoresis their predominant paradigm for the interpretation of myths (Brisson 2004: 37). Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient information about philosophical reflections on divine laughter from the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods.

Heraclitus the Grammarian seems to be the first author of allegorical interpretations of comical episodes in Homer's text. It should be noted that he, as the most ancient of allegorical commentators, did not distinguish precisely between comical, obscene, and impious passages, as he interpreted both comical and unworthy passages at the same time and as an inseparable whole. First of all, for Heraclitus, any "doubtful" passage from Homer's text must be defended from the point of view of religious piety (τὸ εὐσεβεῖν; τὸ πρέπον) (Her. Hom. Qu. 1; for instance, see also: Corn. Theol. Graec.35; Sallust. De diis 18; Procl. Comm. in Remp. I, 72 sq.). He wrote thus about the love of Ares and Aphrodite primarily reproducing the usual accusations towards Homer. His haters were typically saying:

He (sc. Homer) has given immorality citizenship in heaven, he has felt no shame about attributing to the gods a crime punishable by death in human societies, adultery: The love of Ares and garlanded Aphrodite, and how they came together in Hephaestus's house. And then the binding, and the gods' laughter, and Poseidon's plea to Hephaestus! If such are the failings of the gods, there is no longer need for human wrongdoers to be punished!

(Heraclitus 2005: 111)

But Heraclitus objected to them:

My own view is that, though this song was sung to the Phaeacians, a people dominated by pleasure, it nonetheless has some philosophical relevance. Homer seems here to be confirming Sicilian doctrine (the views of Empedocles), calling strife Ares and love Aphrodite. He therefore represents these old adversaries as giving up their former contention and coming together in concord. Naturally, therefore, the child born of these two is Harmonia because the universe is unshakably and harmoniously put together. That the gods should laugh and take pleasure in all this is also probable because the original forms are not destructively separated but maintain concord and peace.

(Heraclitus 2005: 111)

As Donald Russell writes, "despite the fact that the story is told to the pleasure-loving Phaeacians, Heraclitus maintains that it is not just fun, but conceals a philosophical lesson, more precisely the Empedoclean theory of Strife and Love, represented by Ares and Aphrodite, now brought together in harmony" (Russell 2003: 223).

Furthermore, when Heraclitus allegorized Hephaestus in another passage as earthly fire, he evidently wanted to represent this god in a respectful and non-comical way, and to rid him of any obscene connotations, since they seemed to be an obstacle to any explanation of the true theological knowledge about this god:

Critics also charge Homer in regard to the “throwing down” of Hephaestus, first because he represents him as lame, thereby mutilating his divine nature, and secondly because he came near to danger of death. For he says “all day I fell, and as the sun went down landed on Lemnos, not much breath left in me” (Il. I, 592-593). Homer conceals a philosophical idea in these lines too. It is not because he wants to delight his audience with poetical invention that he has told us of a lame Hephaestus — not of course the son of Hera and Zeus whom we know from mythology: that would indeed be an improper tale to tell of the gods. No: the substance of fire is of two kinds; ethereal fire, as we said just now, is <suspended> in the highest <region> of the universe, and lacks nothing for perfection, whereas the substance of the fire that we possess, being terrestrial, is destructible, and is repeatedly rekindled by the matter that feeds it. This is why Homer regularly calls the most brilliant fire “Sun” or “Zeus,” and the fire on earth, which is readily kindled and extinguished “Hephaestus.” Compared with perfect fire, this fire can be plausibly regarded as “lame”.

(Heraclitus 2005: 49-51)

Proclus (412-485 AD), an exponent of the Athenian Neo-Platonic school, offered perhaps the subtlest understanding of Olympian laughter in all antiquity. Let us take a passage from his “Commentary on Plato’s Republic” (I, 128 Kroll):

To put it briefly, the laughter of the gods should be defined as a generous energy directed at everything, and this is the reason for the order of that which is in the world. Therefore, this pro-thinking is incomprehensible, and the gods’ genius of all benefits is inexhaustible; and it must be acknowledged that the poet (sc. Homer) rightly calls it their unquenchable laughter. Myths say that gods do not cry but irresistibly laugh, as tears, for them, relate to fishing about things of mortals and exposed to rock, being existing or non-existent signs, and *laughter refers to the universal and forever identical moving completenesses (πληρώματα) of the universal energy* [author’s emphasis]. Therefore, I think, when we distribute demiurgic actions to gods and people, we will give laughter to the generation of gods, and tears – to the condition of people or animals.

(Losev 1996: 367-368)<sup>1</sup>

#### **4. Harmony between the funny and the serious in ancient symbolism**

Furthermore, we would like to draw a boundary in relation to this passage between pagan allegorism and symbolism, but it must be done very conditionally and ad hoc. Besides the distinction between philosophical allegoresis (as the interpretation of texts in other words) and symbolic interpretation (as the interpretation of symbols as parts of material, significant, and generally non-textual phenomena of environmental reality), another distinction can be drawn between them in the context which is relevant for us here. That is to say that if allegorism tends to reveal only one alternative meaning in a text and, at the same time, it eliminates the superficial meaning of a myth as something false, then symbolism (especially, after Iamblichus) can, in fact, have an unlimited number of philosophical meanings, and all of them are true but in different ways.

The same symbol can highlight and recall philosophical truths which lie on different levels of being (the logical, the mathematical, the metaphysical, the mystical, etc.), and so the task of a theurgist is to correctly recognize them. As Ansgar Friedl wrote:

Due to the principle of analogy, for interpretation there is an additional possibility of a prosperous transition from one stage of interpretation to the next one, so that gradation emerges from the physical to the ethical and from the mathematical to the metaphysical, which gives great possibilities to an interpretation. Some individual steps may be omitted, but the metaphysical interpretation remains its highest goal. At the same time, it is possible to choose such gradation

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s translation into English from Russian translation by A.F. Losev.

that ἀπορίαι be solved without any difficulties. And if one passage of myth can be explained at one of the stages, then another passage can be elucidated at another stage, and actually this factor may contain some difficulties.

(Friedl 1932: 41)

Before Iamblichus, this understanding of the symbolic “multicolour” of interpretations had already been addressed by many thinkers, including the platonic Plutarch, who is usually considered to be an allegorist. There is his famous statement about the nature of myth:

Just as the rainbow, according to the account of the mathematicians, is a reflection of the sun, and owes its many hues to the withdrawal of our gaze from the sun and our fixing it on the cloud, so the somewhat fanciful accounts here set down are but reflections of some true tale which turns back our thoughts to other matters.

(Plutarch 1936: 51)

As Roman Svetlov notes (Svetlov 1996: 110), Plutarch gives at least three versions of understanding the same myth about Osiris and Isis: the agrarian one (De Os. et Is. 32), the physical one (De Os. et Is. 45), and the metaphysical one (De Os. et Is. 56). Such multiplicity can be found in the allegorical interpretations of the Sun by Julian the Emperor (Ad Sol. 133a-d). His teacher, Sallustius the Philosopher, found five types of interpretation of myths (De diis. 4). Proclus writes directly that “shameful images in the literary interpretation correctly depict near-material demons and, in the alternate interpretation, it depicts gods” (In Remp. I, 3), i.e. even obscenities from the life of gods tell some truth about them. From these examples, it is now clear why we have divided the whole other-speaking tradition of myth interpretation in antiquity into allegorism and symbolism: if philosophical allegoresis translates all forms of a god’s dishonesty from the discourse of the obscene and the funny to the discourse of the serious, then the late-antique symbolism does not even have to do the same thing. Many obscene myths become sacred by being placed in the well-shaped theological systems of Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, which were developed and extended to such an extent that some niche was always there for the comical. This can be seen in the example of the above passage from the commentary on Homer by Proclus: the symbol of “unquenchable laughter” is not cancelled by him as a superficial meaning (as would happen in allegorism), but, on the contrary, it immediately received the sacred status of the highest “covered” knowledge. Thus, we see that philosophical symbolism, as opposed to allegorism, allowed philosophers to combine the aesthetic (i.e. the funny and the serious) and the religious (the sacred) discourses at the same time, and to harmonize them without either causing any damage to the other. Indeed, both funny and serious interpretations in Neo-Platonism seemed to coexist peacefully with each other without contradicting themselves. It can be concluded that antique symbolism protected classical mythology by indirectly moving it into the discourse of the serious, immediately carrying it in to the mythological-religious discourse of the sacred. In turn, antique allegorism only required the category of the serious because it made a quite hard distinction between the falseness of a myth’s superficial meaning and the truth of its deeper meaning. In this way, ancient philosophical theology could not tolerate any ambivalence or interplay between fiction and reality in the antique culture of laughter.

As it seems to me, the point is that the translation of the comical into the serious discourse was necessary because the most influential ancient philosophical schools in Late antiquity were attempting to build their own projects of theology (such as the Stoics, the Middle Platonists, the Neo-Pythagoreans, and the Neo-Platonists). Theological knowledge requires self-identity, invariability, the exact fixation of divine substances and acts. If theology is dealing with material that is fluent and slippery, then it must make it more fixed by means of using various hermeneutic procedures, and must perform some aesthetic alteration on it for its substantiation.



For the allegorists to leave ancient myths hostage to antique laughter meant to plunge them into fundamental ambiguity (we have already said above that laughter is a marginal and contradictory phenomenon). Thus, the main problem faced by the first theologizing philosophers concerned how one can build a logical systematic knowledge about the gods if they themselves constantly eluded any theoretical knowledge (placed as they were in the comical discourse) and, in their divine playfulness, deliberately confused reality and fiction? Theology does not tolerate a constant grin or the ambiguity of ancient myths – they were no more beneficial than the narrated murders, castration, and incest of the divine fathers. Therefore, in my opinion, their theological considerations demanded the translation of ancient mythological traditions into the discourse of the serious, i.e. a discourse that had a clear logical and semantic substance, so that it would be impossible to bring it out from its own self-identity by simple mocking, which usually happens at the literary mode of reading.

## **5. Conclusion**

Let us summarize the results. The allegorical interpretation of myths sought to achieve their transition from comical discourse into serious discourse through the recognition of the superficial level of meaning (which was often wicked, obscene, or comical) as false, and to uncover the deeper level of mythological truth. The main motive for this transition was the necessity to build a consistent and a well-founded theological system on the basis of classical mythology. As has been said, a systematically developed and accurate knowledge about the gods does not tolerate ambiguity and requires certain and self-evident material which denies any ambiguity, and sets clear boundaries between reality and fiction. In order to obtain such knowledge, different forms of alternative interpretation were necessary. But only in late antiquity, when the power of pagan religious feeling had waned, did it become possible to acknowledge some comical plots as sacred by translating them into the serious discourse of pagan religion and the Neo-Platonic theurgy. This transition took place within the framework of established philosophical-hermeneutic symbolism, and corresponded closely with the worldview which had prevailed in the Neo-Platonic school of the post-Iamblichian period. This account implied the simultaneous presence of several meanings of the same symbol at different levels of being. Therefore, Proclus did not allegorize the unquenchable laughter of the gods because, for him, it was already the symbol of mighty divine energy: in that decomposition of meanings, it does not matter whether the gods are revealed in a non-serious light or not. Thus, the symbolic multiplicity of understanding returned the ancient divine comicality in a reconsecrated form into the pagan culture of late antiquity but, this time, the ancient laughter received a truly profound theoretical dimension.

## **Notes**

1. The reported study was funded by RFBR according to the research project № 19-011-00749 “Symbol between the ridiculous and the serious in the Byzantine exegetics”.
2. I do realize that the psychological and aesthetic principles of laughter do not always coincide but I contend that, for the purposes of this article, their separation is not significant.
3. Naturally, in antiquity, there existed the great convention to divide being in general into purely philosophical, religious, artistic, and aesthetic discourses. In final and separate form, they will probably arise only in Modern times. I use this later terminology here in order to make my thought’s exposition clearer, and by no means am I inclined to absolutize the distinction drawn.

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