What does it mean to discuss the function of a thing? Does it mean to describe what it does—that is, the purpose it serves? Or are we talking about a set of interrelated processes that actually make the thing work? In the case of Maria Plaza’s $P$ The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire: Laughing and Lying (2006), now in a new paperback edition (2008) from Oxford University Press, the question of function is central. Since its first publication in 2006, P.’s latest book has generated interest and controversy surrounding an elusive genre.

Earlier reviewers noted the depth and thoroughness with which P. treats the history of scholarship on Roman satire, and noted too the difficulty of such a comprehensive approach.¹ A further point bears repetition as well: P.’s work is truly pioneering in its treatment of a topic that has been under-investigated and underemphasized in critical scholarship. She is the first, in fact, to have undertaken a systemization of humor in Roman satire, and these beginnings are promising. Noteworthy too is P.’s engaging, humorous prose style which serves to keep the reader’s interest in what might otherwise be a tedious formalist critique. One problem, which critics note, however, is that despite P.’s detailed description, the precise definition of what constitutes humor in satire

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remains unclear. In the review that follows, I look at P.’s work in the broader context of humor studies in order to revisit some fundamental questions about the definition and functioning of satiric humor. It is my hope that this broader perspective on the mechanics of humor may help to articulate where P.’s seminal work has led us and in what direction it may point further investigations.

In her introduction, Plaza surveys ancient and modern humor theories and summarizes major interpretive approaches to the study of the satirists over the past fifty years. She aligns her theoretical approach with the persona studies of Kernan, Anderson, and Braund, and her approach to satiric humor with Gustaf Adolf Seeck whose work focuses on the balance between tendentious and non-tendentious elements of the satires. The key strength of this section, to be sure, lies in the careful way in which P. summarizes previous work on Roman satire and situates her own approach vis-à-vis her predecessors in the field of classics. In addition, her discussion of the programmatic provides a clear overview of each author while demonstrating the kind of close reading and specific textual insights which are the hallmarks of this work.

As in any survey of scholarship, however, inevitably, some work is treated only in a cursory fashion or is omitted altogether, and such is the case with P.’s uneven survey of literature in humor theory. In this case, given the dearth of work on humor in Roman satire, the cross-disciplinary research is crucial. Her discussion of Incongruity Theory, with which her approach is aligned, is particularly disappointing. The section begins in promising fashion with a brief but incisive treatment of Aristotle and Cicero as proto-Incongruity theorists. P. then goes on to mention the seminal texts of Incongruity theory from Kant, Schopenhauer, and Koestler. Unfortunately, P. bypasses the bulk of the theory, leaping immediately from Koestler to discuss what she calls “a variant of the Incongruity theory,” in Susan Purdie’s work, Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1993). First, I must take issue with the characterization of Purdie’s work as a variant of Incongruity theory. Drawing synthetically from the structuralist, post-structuralist, and psychoanalytic traditions, Purdie’s theory of comedy is socio-political and seems to me to align more closely with psychological (Freudian) and sociological theories of humor (i.e. the so-called ‘Release’ theories and ‘Disparagement’ theories). The broad brush with which P. paints the theoretical backdrop thus fails to indicate a clear point of departure for her examination of Incongruity in Roman satire. Moreover, P. seems to imply that the lack of clarity rests in the vagueness of Incongruity as a concept and the lack of sufficient research in the area, as she explains, “while these tenets [of Incongruity] seem to present a necessary condition of humour (it is difficult to find examples of the laughable that do not contain some kind of incongruity), they have to be further qualified in order to become a sufficient condition (it is easy to imagine other reactions than humour to incongruity), and no agreement has been reached on such qualifications” (10). P.’s remark is both unnecessarily dismissive and misleading; although many would agree that much work on the precise nature of Incongruity is still needed, her criticism would

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2. See especially Lowe (above, n. 1) and Freudenburg (above, n. 1).