

## 2

# SCOFFERS AND MOCKERS

If bathos describes a trajectory from high to low, so in a different sense does the so-called superiority theory of humour. The argument – that humour springs from a gratifying sense of the frailty, obtuseness or absurdity of one's fellow beings – is an ancient one. It can be found as early as the Book of Solomon, where Yahweh laughs at the calamities he has in store for the wicked. It is one of only a handful of instances of divine risibility in the Hebrew scriptures, most of which are scornful rather than affable. There is also an Augustinian tradition for which God laughs mockingly at the sinners in hell.<sup>1</sup> Barry Sanders notes that the first laugh in Western literature occurs in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, when the gods mock the limping gait of Hephaistos, god of fire.<sup>2</sup> Plato writes in the *Philebus* of comedy as arising from malicious mockery. Aristotle also treats humour as mostly abusive, though he