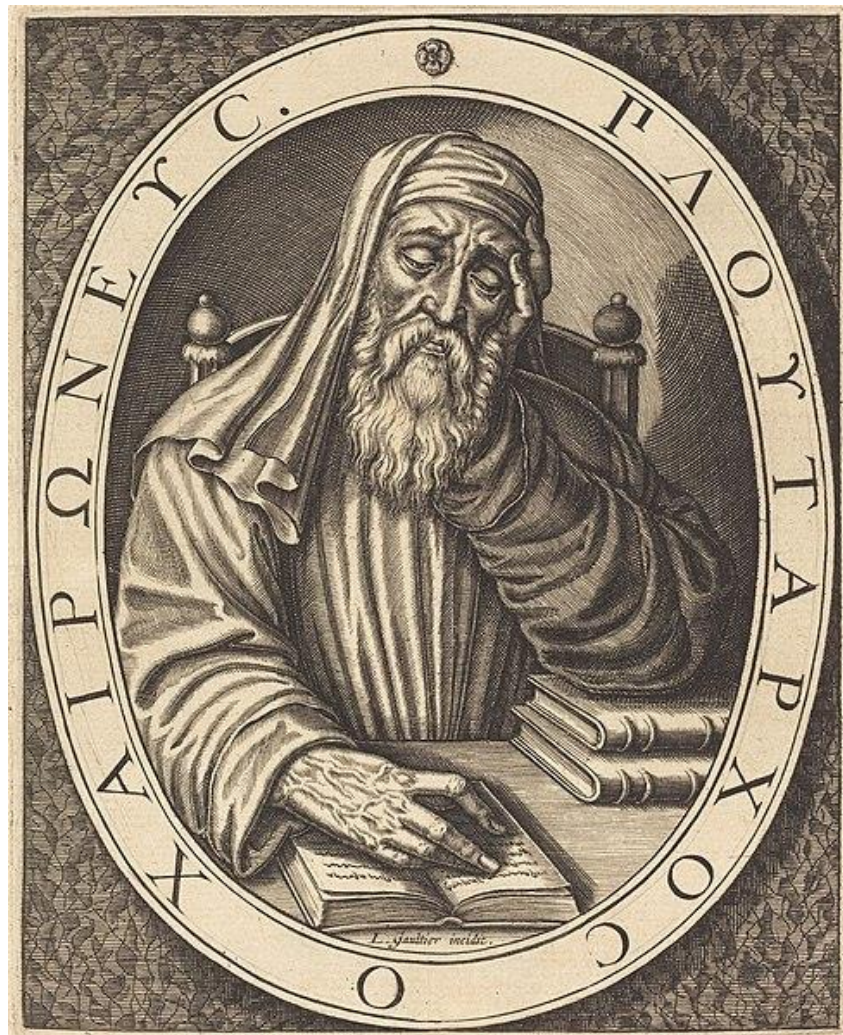


# BELLARIA LX



The Chaironean, Plutarch (engraving, Léonard Gaultier, d.1641)

## PLUTARCH V

### On superstition: *peri deisidaimonias*

#### Introduction

In this essay, Plutarch contrasts atheism, which is seen as a foolish intellectual error, with *deisidaimonia* ('fear of divinities', cf. Desdemona), a far more serious mistake because of the emotional trauma and abject terror it brings with it. The word *daimôn* meant originally 'one who allots', so also 'luck, destiny' and one's personal guardian angel. That seems harmless enough but Plutarch's point is that *fear* of such an entity reduced one to jabbering helplessness. As Plutarch says at the start of this essay 'He who fears god fears everything—earth, sea, air, heaven, darkness, light, sound, silence, dreams'. Even death brings no relief, for that too is full of monstrous terrors.

For Plutarch, a palpably decent and fair-minded man, whatever one believed about death—how could one be certain?—the one thing you could rely on was the fairness and goodness of god. So *daimones* were nothing to be feared. That general

belief, of course, left him with a lot of work to do in making sense of the massive heritage of Greek myth and legend. He turned, as most thinkers did, to allegory: myths were not factual statements but sources from which 'one must adopt from each what is appropriate, on the principle of *likeness*'. This made it possible to integrate myth with philosophy, in which morality, propriety and reason held sway. Return to that, and superstition would be no more.

There is something of an intellectual battle behind all this. Epicurus's gods were indifferent to mankind, and were therefore nothing to fear. Plutarch's theology asserts that the gods are indeed nothing to fear but far from being indifferent, are kindly and good.

### The joy of sleep



**166B** But the comedian, not unpleasantly, said somewhere to those that adorned their beds with the ornaments of silver and gold:

‘Since the only thing the gods have given us free is sleep, why do you make that so costly for yourself?’

**166C** It is also possible to say to the superstitious: ‘Since the gods have bestowed sleep on us, as a rest and a forgetting for our sorrows, why will you make it a continual, painful torture, your wretched soul being unable to fly to any other sleep?’

**166B** ἀλλ’ ὁ γε κωμικὸς οὐκ ἀηδῶς εἰρηκὲ που πρὸς τοὺς καταχρυσοῦντας τὰ κλινίδια καὶ καταργουῦντας

ὅτι μόνον ἡμῖν προῖκ’ ἔδωκαν οἱ θεοὶ  
ὑπνον, τί τοῦτο πολυτελὲς σαυτῷ ποιεῖς;

**166C** ἔστι δὲ καὶ πρὸς τὸν δεισιδαίμονα εἰπεῖν ‘ὅτι τὸν ὑπνον οἱ θεοὶ λήθην κακῶν ἔδωσαν ἡμῖν καὶ ἀνάπαυσιν, τί τοῦτο κολαστήριον σαυτῷ ποιεῖς ἐπίμονον καὶ ὀδυνηρόν, τῆς ἀθλίας ψυχῆς εἰς ἄλλον ὑπνον ἀποδρᾶναι μὴ δυναμένης;’

### Bad dreams





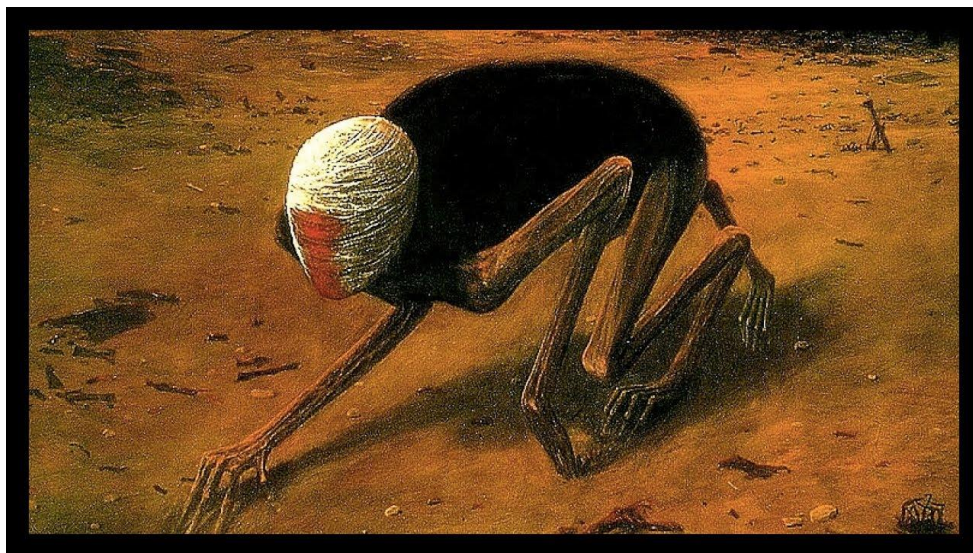
**166C** Heraclitus said there is a world in common amongst the awake; but each of the asleep are retired into their own private world. But for the superstitious there is no world either in common with others or in private to himself; for awake he does not use his reason, nor asleep is he free from his fears; but his reason sleeps, his fear is always awake; there is no escape, no relocation.

**166C** ὁ Ἡράκλειτος φησι τοῖς ἐγρηγορόσιν ἓνα καὶ κοινὸν κόσμον εἶναι, τῶν δὲ κοιμωμένων ἕκαστον εἰς ἴδιον ἀναστρέφεσθαι. τῷ δὲ δεισιδαίμονι κοινὸς οὐδεὶς οὐδ' ἴδιός ἐστι κόσμος· οὔτε γὰρ ἐγρηγορῶς τῷ φρονοῦντι χρῆται οὔτε κοιμώμενος ἀπαλλάττεται τοῦ ταραττοντος, ἀλλ' ὄνειρώπτει μὲν ὁ λογισμὸς, ἐγρήγορε δ' ὁ φόβος αἰεὶ, φυγὴ δ' οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲ μετάστασις.

**166C** Polycrates was a formidable tyrant at Samos, and so was Periander at Corinth; but **166D** no man ever feared them when they had relocated to a free, democratic city. But he that dreads the rule of the gods as a grim, implacable tyranny, where should he move to, where flee, what land, what sea should he find where god is not? Cowering in what corner of the world and hiding yourself from view there, miserable creature, will you believe you have evaded him?

**166C** ἦν φοβερὸς ἐν Σάμῳ Πολυκράτης τύραννος, ἦν ἐν Κορίνθῳ Περίανδρος, ἀλλ' **166D** οὐδεὶς ἐφοβεῖτο τούτους μεταστὰς εἰς πόλιν ἐλευθέραν καὶ δημοκρατουμένην. ὁ δὲ τὴν τῶν θεῶν ἀρχὴν ὡς τυραννίδα φοβούμενος σκυθρωπὴν καὶ ἀπαραίτητον, ποῖ μεταστῆ, ποῖ φύγη, ποῖαν γῆν ἄθεον εὕρη, ποῖαν θάλασσαν; εἰς τί καταδύς τοῦ κόσμου μέρος καὶ ἀποκρύψας σεαυτὸν, ὦ ταλαίπωρε, πιστεύσεις ὅτι τὸν θεὸν ἀποπέφευγας;

### Fearful visions



Zdzisław Beksiński (Polish, d. 2005)

**166D** There is a law for slaves, despairing of their freedom, to demand a sale, and to change for a kinder master. But superstition grants no change of gods; nor could he find a god he would not fear, that dreads his own and his ancestors' guardians, that quivers **166E** at his saviours and trembles in terror at gentle gods, from whom we ask wealth, plenty, concord, peace, and guidance to the best words and actions...

**166D** ἔστι καὶ δούλοις νόμος, ἐλευθερίαν ἀπογνοῦσι, πρᾶσιν αἰτεῖσθαι καὶ δεσπότην μεταβάλλειν ἐπιεικέστερον. ἡ δὲ δεισιδαιμονία θεῶν ἀλλαγὴν οὐ δίδωσιν, οὐδ' ἔστιν εὐρεῖν ὃν οὐ φοβήσεται θεὸν ὁ φοβούμενος τοὺς πατρώους καὶ γενεθλίους, ὁ φρίπτων τοὺς **166E** σωτῆρας καὶ τοὺς μειλιχίους τρέμων καὶ δεδοικώς, παρ' ὧν αἰτούμεθα πλοῦτον εὐπορίαν εἰρήνην ὁμόνοιαν ὄρθωσιν λόγων καὶ ἔργων τῶν ἀρίστων...

## Hell



Zdzisław Beksiński

**166F** Why speak at length? 'The termination of life for all mankind is death'. But not of superstition; it extends those limits beyond the grave, making fear longer than life and attaching to death the thought of never-ending evils and when there is an end to troubles, appearing to be the beginning of troubles that never cease.

**166F** τί δεῖ μακρὰ λέγειν; 'πέρας ἐστὶ τοῦ βίου πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ὁ θάνατος.' τῆς δὲ δεισιδαιμονίας οὐδ' οὗτος, ἀλλ' ὑπερβάλλει τοὺς ὅρους ἐπέκεινα τοῦ ζῆν, μακρότερον τοῦ βίου ποιοῦσα τὸν φόβον καὶ συνάπτουσα τῷ θανάτῳ κακῶν ἐπίνοιαν ἀθανάτων, καὶ ὅτε παύεται πραγμάτων, ἄρχεσθαι δοκοῦσα μὴ παυομένων.

**167** Some deep gates of hell open up, rivers of fire all together and offshoots of the Styx combine; darkness is filled with ghastly, fantastic spectres, offering up dreadful visions and piteous cries, judges and tormentors, pits and caverns, groaning with countless evils. So does wretched superstition, with its excessive



efforts to avoid everything suggestive of horrors, fail to see how it exposes itself to the very horrors of every description that it is trying to escape.

**167** Ἄιδου τινὲς ἀνοίγονται πύλαι βαθεΐαι, καὶ ποταμοὶ πυρὸς ὁμοῦ καὶ Στυγὸς ἀπορρῶγες ἀνακεράννυνται, καὶ σκότος ἐμπίπλαται πολυφαντάστων εἰδώλων τινῶν, χαλεπὰς μὲν ὄψεις οἰκτρὰς δὲ φωνὰς ἐπιφερόντων, δικασταὶ δὲ καὶ κολασταὶ καὶ χάσματα καὶ μυχοὶ μυρίων κακῶν γέμοντες. οὕτως ἢ κακοδαίμων δεισιδαιμονία, τῇ περιττῇ πρὸς ἅπαν τὸ δοκοῦν δεινὸν εὐλαβεῖα, λανθάνει ἑαυτὴν ὑποβάλλουσα παντοίοις δεινοῖς.

### Distorted vision



Zdzisław Beksiński

**167** Atheism is attended with none of this. True, such incomprehension is dangerous: to be blind and to see amiss in matters of such **167B** importance is a great misfortune for the soul, as if it has been deprived of the most enlightened and authoritative of its many eyes, the knowledge of God. Yet the emotion associated with this [i.e. superstition] (as has been said) is ulcerous, disordering, and instantly overwhelms one's judgement...

**167** τούτων οὐδὲν τῇ ἀθεότητι πρόσσεσιν, ἀλλ' ἢ μὲν ἄγνοια χαλεπὴ καὶ τὸ παρορᾶν **167B** καὶ τυφλώττειν περὶ τηλικαῦτα συμφορὰ μεγάλη ψυχῆς, ὥσπερ ὀμμάτων πολλῶν τὸ φανότατον καὶ κυριώτατον ἀπεσβεσμένης τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ νόησιν. ταύτη δὲ τὸ ἐμπαθές, ὥσπερ εἴρηται, καὶ ἐλκῶδες καὶ ταρακτικὸν καὶ καταδεδουλωμένον εὐθὺς πρόσσεσι τῇ δόξῃ ...

## Atheism



Richard Dawkins

**167D** Well then, does not the experience of the atheist as against the superstitious rest on the following difference? Atheists see no gods at all, the superstitious believe that they exist and are evil; the former overlooks them, the latter judge their kindness as terror, their paternal affection as tyranny, their benevolence as cruelty, and their slowness to anger as savagery and brutality.

**167D** τί οὖν; οὐ δοκεῖ σοι καὶ τὸ τῶν ἀθέων πρὸς τοὺς δεισιδαίμονας πάθος ἔχειν τοιαύτην διαφορὰν; οἱ μὲν οὐχ ὀρῶσι τοὺς θεοὺς τὸ παράπαν, οἱ δὲ κακοὺς ὑπάρχειν νομίζουσιν. οἱ μὲν παρορῶσιν, οἱ δὲ δοξάζουσι φοβερὸν τὸ εὐμενὲς καὶ τυραννικὸν τὸ πατρικὸν καὶ βλαβερὸν τὸ κηδεμονικὸν καὶ τὸ ἀμήνιτον ἄγριον εἶναι καὶ θηριῶδες.

## Jove



Jove

**167D** Again, they believe workmen in copper, stone, and wax when they make the gods in human shape; for so they form, draw and **167E** worship them. But they

despise philosophers and statesmen presenting the majesty of god accompanied with goodness, magnanimity, kindness and concern.

So the one has no sense of or belief in gods that can help him, and the other feels dread and fear in the face of the gods that can help him. In a word, atheism is an absolute insensibility towards the divine, with no concept of the good; while superstition is a multiplicity of impressions, imagining the good to be evil...

**167D** εἶτα χαλκοτύποις μὲν πείθονται καὶ λιθοξόοις καὶ κηροπλάσταις ἀνθρωπόμορφα τῶν θεῶν τὰ εἶδη ποιοῦσι, καὶ τοιαῦτα πλάττουσι καὶ **167E** κατασκευάζουσι καὶ προσκυνοῦσι· φιλοσόφων δὲ καὶ πολιτικῶν ἀνδρῶν καταφρονοῦσιν, ἀποδεικνύντων τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ σεμνότητα μετὰ χρηστότητος καὶ μεγαλοφροσύνης καὶ εὐμενείας καὶ κηδεμονίας.

περίεστιν οὖν τοῖς μὲν ἀναισθησία καὶ ἀπιστία τῶν ὠφελούντων, τοῖς δὲ ταραχὴ καὶ φόβος πρὸς τὰ ὠφελούντα. καὶ ὅλως ἢ μὲν ἀθεότης ἀπάθεια πρὸς τὸ θεῖόν ἐστι μὴ νοοῦσα τὸ ἀγαθόν, ἢ δὲ δεισιδαιμονία πολυπάθεια κακὸν τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὑπονοοῦσα. ...

### Lamentation



**167F** Come now, first examine the atheist on matters undesired by him and recognise the attitude, if he is a reasonable sort of man, of one who handles his current situation in silence, and provides himself with remedies and palliatives. But if he is overwrought and lives off his nerves, **168** [his attitude is of one who] directs all his complaints against fortune and chance, crying out that nothing happens in accordance with justice or as a result of providence, and that all human affairs are confused and disordered, chaotic and irrational.

**167F** φέρε δὴ πρῶτον ἐν τοῖς ἀβουλήτοις σκόπει τὸν ἄθεον καὶ καταμάνθανε τὴν διάθεσιν, ἂν τᾶλλα μέτριος, χρωμένου σιωπῇ τοῖς παροῦσι καὶ πορίζοντος αὐτῷ βοηθείας καὶ παρηγορίας, ἂν δὲ δυσφορῇ καὶ περιπαθῇ, πάντας ἐπὶ τὴν **168** τύχην καὶ τὸ αὐτόματον ἀπερειδομένου τοὺς ὀδυρμούς καὶ βοῶντος ὡς οὐδὲν κατὰ δίκην οὐδ' ἐκ προνοίας ἀλλὰ πάντα συγκεχυμένως καὶ ἀκρίτως φέρεται καὶ ταραττεται τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων.



## All his own fault



**168** This is not the way of the superstitious; but if the tiniest thing goes wrong for him, he sits himself down, constructing on his grief a vast mountain of intractable, inescapable calamities, loading on himself terrors, fears, suspicions, and upheavals, lacing everything with howls and groans. He blames neither man, nor Fortune, nor the **168B** times, nor himself, but lays it all upon god, and from there he says that a demonic flood of disaster is coming pouring down at him; and thinks of himself as one not only unfortunate but a human hated by the gods and being punished and giving satisfaction and suffering fittingly, and all his own fault.

**168** τοῦ δὲ δεισιδαίμονος οὐχ οὗτος ὁ τρόπος, ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ μικρότατον αὐτῷ κακόν τι συμπεπτωκός ἐστιν, ἄλλα κάθηται πάθη χαλεπὰ καὶ μεγάλα καὶ δυσάπλλακτα τῇ λύπῃ προσοικοδομῶν, καὶ προσεμφορῶν αὐτῷ δείματα καὶ φόβους καὶ ὑποψίας καὶ ταραχάς, παντὶ θρήνῳ καὶ παντὶ στεναγμῷ καταπτόμενος· οὔτε γὰρ ἄνθρωπον οὔτε τύχην οὔτε καιρὸν οὔτε ἑαυτὸν ἀλλὰ **168B** πάντων τὸν θεὸν αἰτιᾶται, κάκειθεν ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἤκειν καὶ φέρεσθαι ῥεῦμα δαιμόνιον ἄτης φησί, καὶ ὡς οὐ δυστυχῆς ὢν ἀλλὰ θεομισῆς τις ἄνθρωπος ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν κολάζεσθαι καὶ δίκην δίδόναι καὶ πάντα πάσχειν προσηκόντως δι' αὐτὸν οἶεται.

## The calm atheist



Paul Henri Tiry, an 18<sup>th</sup> C atheist



**168B** When the atheist falls sick, he reckons up and looks back on his excesses, binges, irregular habits, periods of extreme hard work, or unaccustomed changes of airs and places, and likewise his failings in public administration, and loss of popularity in the eyes of the mob or in disrepute with a superior he searches for the causes in himself and those about him, and asks,

Where have I crossed the line? What have I done wrong?

What should I have done, but did not?

**168C** But for the superstitious man, all weakness of body, loss of money, deaths of children, and failures and dereliction in public life, are said to be 'strokes of god' and 'assaults of an evil power'...

**168B** νοσῶν θ' ὁ ἄθεος ἐκλογίζεται καὶ ἀναμιμνήσκειται πλησμονὰς αὐτοῦ καὶ οἰνώσεις καὶ ἀταξίας περὶ δίαίταν ἢ κόπους ὑπερβάλλοντας ἢ μεταβολὰς ἀέρων ἀήθεις καὶ τόπων, ἔπειτα προσκρούσας ἐν πολιτείαις καὶ περιπεσῶν ἀδοξίαις πρὸς ὄχλον ἢ διαβολαῖς πρὸς ἡγεμόνα τὴν αἰτίαν ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν σκοπεῖ πῆ παραέβην; τί δ' ἔρεξα; τί μοι δέον οὐκ ἐτελέσθη;

**168C** τῷ δὲ δεισιδαίμονι σώματος ἀρρωστία πᾶσα καὶ χρημάτων ἀποβολὴ καὶ τέκνων θάνατοι καὶ περὶ πολιτικὰς πράξεις δυσημερίαὶ καὶ ἀποτεύξεις πληγαὶ θεοῦ καὶ προσβολαὶ δαίμονος λέγονται ...

**171** Moreover, the atheist is in no way responsible for superstition; but superstition both provided the source from which atheism began and once it began, gives it its cover, not a true or noble one but not short of a degree of justification. For it was not through any fault that atheists found in the heavens or stars or the seasons of the year or in those revolutions of the moon or motions of the sun about the earth 'that make the day and night', nor yet by observing any mistake or disorder either in the breeding of animals or the production of fruits, that they so made the case for godlessness in the universe,

**171** καὶ μὴν ὁ ἄθεος δεισιδαιμονίας οὐδαμῆ συναίτιος, ἡ δὲ δεισιδαιμονία τῆ ἀθεότητι καὶ γενέσθαι παρέσχεν ἀρχὴν καὶ γενομένη δίδωσιν ἀπολογία, οὐκ ἀληθῆ μὲν οὐδὲ καλήν, προφάσεως δὲ τινος οὐκ ἄμοιρον οὔσαν. οὐ γὰρ ἐν οὐρανῷ τι μεμπτὸν οὐδ' ἐν ἄστροις οὐδ' ἐν ὥραις ἢ περιόδοις σελήνης ἢ κινήσεσιν ἡλίου περὶ γῆν, 'ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς δημιουργοῖς,' ἢ τροφαῖς ζώων ἢ καρπῶν γενέσεσι πλημμυλὲς καὶ ἄτακτον ἐνιδόντες οὕτως ἀθεότητα τοῦ παντὸς κατέγνωσαν,

## The nightmare



Henri Fuseli (1781)

**171** but it was the absurd activity and fanaticism arising out of **171B** superstition, its words, gestures, magic, magian doctrines, processions around cities, drummings, filthy purifications, foul purgations, and her barbarous and criminal penalties for and abuse of priests—it was these that gave occasion to many to affirm that it would be better if there were no gods at all, than that they should exist and accept all such stuff and rejoice in it, gods so degrading, so petty and so easily offended.

**171** ἀλλὰ τῆς δεισιδαιμονίας ἔργα καὶ πάθη καταγέλαστα, καὶ ῥήματα καὶ κινήματα **171B** καὶ γοητεῖαι καὶ μαγεῖαι καὶ περιδρομαὶ καὶ τυμπανισμοὶ καὶ ἀκάθαρτοι μὲν καθαρμοὶ ῥυπαραὶ δ' ἀγνεῖαι, βάρβαροι δὲ καὶ παράνομοι πρὸς ἱεροῖς κολασμοὶ καὶ προπηλακισμοί, ταῦτα δίδωσιν ἐνίοις λέγειν ὡς μὴ εἶναι θεοὺς ἄμεινον ἢ εἶναι, τοιαῦτα μὲν δεχομένους τοιοῦτοις δὲ χαίροντας, οὕτω δ' ὕβριστάς, οὕτω δὲ μικρολόγους καὶ μικρολύπους.

**Next week:** a period of reflection in which to recover from the above. *Bellaria LXVI* will appear on 5 August 2021, a one-off on the Olympic Games.