

Liisi Laineste, Dorota Brzozowska and Władysław Chłopicki (editors), *Estonia and Poland, Creativity and Tradition in Cultural Communication, Volume 1, Jokes and their Relations.* Tartu, Estonia: ELM Scholarly Press, 2012. 284 pages. Euros 19. ISBN 978-9949-490-20-2 (Vol. 1, printed version). ISBN 978-9949-490-22-6 (Vol. 1, web version). <http://www.folklore.ee/pubte/eraamat/eestipoola/>

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the scholarly study of humour has boomed all over Eastern Europe and particularly in Estonia and Poland. It is appropriate that three leading scholars from these two countries have put together this excellent and interesting volume with chapters by several authors. It is a logical collaboration for little, after all, separates the two countries, except perhaps Latvia and Lithuania and the ghost of Immanuel Kant.¹

The crucial link between the two countries is that they both suffered decades of socialist tyranny and Russian imperialism. Estonia was occupied by the Russian army in 1940 and again in 1944 and forcibly incorporated into that prison house of the nationalities, the Soviet Union. Poland was also occupied but then became a satellite country ruled by quislings with a pretence at independence. In both countries the Russians and their supporters tried to destroy the culture and independence of the local people. From this emerged two forms of humour. First, the jokes of the people that mocked the socialist system and their rulers and the Russian oppressor. The content of these has been extensively studied and written about elsewhere but Martin Rebane in *Some aspects of telling political jokes in Soviet Estonia* has introduced us to a new dimension by interviewing Estonian survivors of the *ancien régime* to learn how people would use a joke when confronted with a particular frustration in everyday life. Second, there were humorous periodicals sponsored by the hegemonic state to instruct and control the people. But it didn't quite work out like that. Humorous writers and indeed performers would deliberately break the rules and evade the strict censorship by sneaking in ambiguous pieces of subversive mockery.

Often the censors failed to see the double meaning and readers would keenly examine each issue of a state sponsored humorous periodical to see what might have got through. Even a tiny allusive criticism of the system might well be funnier to the reader than the official humour at the expense of loafers, drunkards and petty-bureaucrats at home and capitalists and war-mongers abroad. In the chapter *Political Correctness and political humour in Soviet Estonia and beyond*, Maarja Lõhmus gives an overview of the content and the heavy censorship of Estonian humorous texts and images from the 1940s to the liberation of 1991. What is striking is that listeners were even more attentive while viewing or listening to serious broadcasts. They were attentive in order to catch the humour between the lines. Thus in a nature programme they picked up on the line "Wolverines have been recently spotted in Estonia. The wolverine is searching for food, having come from Pskov" (a Russian city about 12 miles east of the border with Estonia). This snide reference to the Russians, who came to Estonia, where agriculture was more productive, to buy up locally produced food, would have made the Estonians listener/viewer laugh. But, as official documents from the time reveal, such use of metaphor and ambiguity, once detected, led to increased vigilance by the censors. The radio broadcasts '*From Border to Border*' of news about the Soviet Union consisted of

¹ Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) lived in Königsberg, Eastern Prussia, now Kaliningrad, in a Russified territory nearly as large as Lebanon or Cyprus plus twice Luxemburg, and still belonging to Russia, from which it is physically separated, being ensconced between Poland and Lithuania.

true facts and stories about everyday life in the Empire but it contrived to make the Soviet system look absurd.

It is a measure of the lack of legitimacy of the system that even its trusted broadcasters would, at some risk to their own jobs, introduce ‘errors’ in order to give the listeners an illicit laugh. No doubt the listeners would discuss, share and gloat over every such tiny act of defiance but what was in it for the errant broadcaster? Probably self-respect, the feeling that ‘I may be forced to work as a front man for those quislings to make a living but inside I am a true Estonian and I am going to share this feeling with my audience’. Or it may just have been sheer devilment, as when comedians doing an outside broadcast for the BBC in the 1940s would slip in a blue joke to please the local live audience, even though it would enrage the BBC bureaucrats right up to the Director General and get them suspended.

In the 1980s, the time of Soviet decadence, the humorists became bolder and in 1987, an Estonian cultural weekly published the competition winning cartoon (illustrated), *Just Shit* by Priit Pärn showing a peasant shovelling manure on his field. However, the lumps of manure being shovelled out clearly have the shape of the map of Estonia including its islands. It is the most famous cartoon in Estonian cartoon history. It refers to the Soviet plan, one known about but not openly debated, to strip mine for phosphates in Eastern Estonia, regardless of the pollution and ecological destruction this would cause. It was a characteristic piece of socialism (as we know from the history of Mao’s China as well as the USSR), an economic system in which only that which swells the production statistics matters; the air, the water, the land, the health of the people do not. The meaning of the cartoon was clear – you the Russians and your local stooges treat Estonia like shit. We can be shovelled aside to be fertiliser for your backward collective farms. 1987 was the beginning of the end of a corrupt system but the authorities still managed to pursue and punish the editor. Four years later they were gone and Estonia was free. Lõhmus has told the story very well but I’m not sure there was any point in dragging in a reference to Bakhtin at the end. The idea of a ‘carnival’ is difficult, contested and not entirely clear; its application here is problematic.

Lõhmus also makes interesting use of answers to questionnaires put out by the Estonian broadcasting system to discover what themes listeners liked and wanted more of. Humour always came near the top. In 1989, the year the Soviet satrapies in Eastern Europe, including Poland gained their freedom, the Estonians ceased to want more humour and wanted more news about Estonia instead. In 1989 the wish for more music peaked but with independence in 1991, the desire for music collapsed. In 1989 the Estonians had held vast singing festivals as a display of national unity and to indicate they wanted independence. The Russians, a musically sensitive people, couldn’t stand the cacophony and left. Once the music had achieved its purpose it ceased to have any interest for the Estonians. It is a good example of how to use data collected for a totally different reason and seemingly innocuous in content to measure changes in political opinion.

Gawel Strzadala’s chapter, *Censorship in the People’s Republic of Poland*, tells a parallel story. There had been a somewhat authoritarian government in Poland before World War II but in general the censorship was rather lax. When the Russians and Germans occupied Poland under the terms of the Nazi-Soviet pact, 85,000 libraries were closed and 14 million books from the bookshops were seized. When the Soviets came back in force in 1944, they brought with them Polish communist exiles trained in Soviet censorship methods. All ‘clerical’ and ‘reactionary’ books, indeed entire collections of pre-war literature, were destroyed. The Nazis had burned books in public, the Communists did it clandestinely to try and erase them from public memory. Even a book about carrots was withdrawn because it revealed the advantages of individual farming over collective agriculture. After 1956 censorship was relaxed but by then an entire cultural heritage had been destroyed; such is the legacy of socialism. When new texts were published they appeared with arbitrary cuts and

changes by the censor without any indication that changes had been made as a way of tricking the public into thinking that the author shared the outlook of the ruling party. It was, of course, forbidden to write about censorship. Authors came to practice self-censorship. In such a world humour seeped through the cracks by error and accident, as when Tomasz Szarota, doing the final corrections to his doctoral thesis, discovered that a typo had turned the Polish word for 'ruralisation' into 'russification'. Amusing today only because he was able to correct it at the time.

The courage and determination of the Poles in fighting this Orwellian system is very striking. In the 1960s the satirist Janusz Szpotański even wrote a comic opera, *The Silent and the Gabblers*, a satire on the communist party and distributed it at his own expense. He got three years. It is no wonder that underground political jokes about the regime flourished. Censorship breeds defiance. Socialism is the most hegemonic of all political systems. It enforces the broadest and most oppressive censorship and in consequence produces the most jokes. In his chapter *Polish Political Humour. An analysis of the Problem*, Marcin Poporawa shows how humour changed with the shift to democracy and the decline of censorship. But is it really acceptable that in contemporary Poland satirists now make poisonous, sadistic fun of PiS, the Law and Justice Party that alone still upholds traditional religious and family values?

There are in this book two important chapters concerning jokes about women. Women seem to get everywhere these days. I do not know what the world is coming to. These are Liisi Laineste's chapter *Women in Estonian Jokes* and Dorota Brzozowska's chapter *Family in Polish Jokes*. Both make the important and valid point that jokes are a male phenomenon. Men are more likely to tell jokes than women and it is inevitably men who invent them. Jokes reflect men's, not women's perception of the world.

I can illustrate their point from my own research into the mother-in-law joke. Women are far more likely than men to hate their mother-in-law to the point where they will post their hostile feelings about their own particular mother-in-law on the internet, something men never do. Yet all the jokes about mothers-in-law are about the wife's mother, not the husband's mother. When the woman who posts comments on the hate sites about her mother-in-law wants to illustrate her point with a joke, she reaches for jokes invented by men, which are on websites run by men. The men's websites neither refer to particular women nor provide a vehicle for spleen. There are many jokes that specifically target the wife's mother and many that are ambiguous but none that specifically target the husband's mother. It is proof that women do not do jokes. But why?

Laineste is clearly aware that jokes about mothers-in-law and jokes about blondes are not jokes about women in general (other researchers have failed to understand this elementary point) and excludes them from her analysis. She looks only at jokes about women in general and has searched the Estonian Literary Museum's huge database of Estonian jokes (50,000 jokes dating from 1950 to the present day) using 'woman', 'wife', 'mother' and 'young women' as search terms while omitting terms like 'spinster' or 'prostitute' that are a special sub-set of women with highly specific scripts attached to them.

Dr. Laineste has examined the jokes statistically and found that most are set in the home, particularly the living room or the bedroom. When the woman is outside the home, the jokes refer to her personally communicating with someone she has gone to see — doctor, shopkeeper, official. The people with whom the women within the joke interact most are family members or extra-familial sexual partners. Men are still there at the centre of the joke. Laineste concludes "Men as joke-tellers reflect their own issues rather than focussing on portraying the women and their problems. In the long run, the joke is still more often about the man with his vices and virtues" (43).

None of this surprises the reviewer. It is exactly as expected. It was, though, well worth her doing the research to provide this confirmation; after all, it might have come out differently and forced us to think again.

Where I have doubts is in the analysis of some of those jokes in terms of “the male fear of being laughed at by the woman”. Trying to think of any kind of joke in terms of ‘fear’ or ‘anxiety’ is dangerous. How would you measure it or test any propositions about it? It is true that many jokes mock the failures of others and this would be true of jokes about, say, henpecked husbands who chicken out from standing up to their crowing wives. But would it follow that those who enjoy jokes about men bullied and cowed by their spouses are anxious about one day ending up in the hen-pecked category? To posit a ‘cultural anxiety’ that lies outside the jokers’ minds as a sort of nervous ectoplasm is even more dubious. Twenty or so years ago past I was willing to give credence to anxiety theories, possibly because they were then fashionable. Today I would repudiate them, as I would any explanation based on speculations about feelings as distinct from points of stress in the social order. We have no knowledge of what feelings people experience as the jokes emerge, even though we can identify their social origins. Jokes are a detached form of context-free humour and a means of social detachment and cannot be usefully compared with the humour people use when immersed in an anxious situation, a humour which may have an identifiable purpose and a recognized meaning. When individuals laugh at a joke about, say, a distant and for them unlikely disaster, such as a Finn laughing at an earthquake joke or a Jew laughing about a drunken Irishman coming to grief, we have no idea about what they feel, nor any way of finding out and it is pointless to speculate. Studying the visible use of humour by a Mexican who just lost his house in an earthquake or an Estonian steward on a ferry who has just seen a vodka-inebriated Finn fall overboard provides no clues as to the feelings of tranquil joke-sharers far from all risk. It is time to banish all feeling from our analyses of jokes.

Dorota Brzozowska’s findings are essentially similar. She too notes that “women are hardly ever pictured in their working places”; only those jobs where women are in a very large majority – teachers, nurses, secretaries provide exceptions. The reason for this, I would argue, is that for the men inventing and telling the jokes ‘female’ is a master status which always has the connotations of sex, girlfriend, wife, home that the two authors have so accurately described. To make a crooked lawyer, a crazy psychiatrist or a brutal police officer explicitly female in a joke would be a distraction from the main script, even though many women really are like that. It would bring in other and confusing signals for the listener. If the word bar-maid is brought into a joke then the audience infers that it about sex, so if the joke is only about a non-sexual transaction at the bar the word ‘bar-tender’ is used and we assume said person is male. In English though, the sex of the person at the core of the joke may well not be apparent in the way it is in Polish, where word endings always give the sex away. The use of the unisex English pronoun ‘they’ also enables many more gender-neutral jokes to be told.

We are anyway NOT dealing with stereotypes when we speak of jokes but with scripts. Sometimes the script coincides with what is seriously believed but often it does not. It is time to stop using the word stereotype in discussions of humour as it is misleading.

The reason jokes are masculine in form and origin is not because society is patriarchal or ‘male dominated’ but because women do not invent jokes, even though free to do so in a modern secular society that gives them autonomy, and do not tell them as often as men. There is not that critical mass of wise-cracking women that could lead to a flood of jokes based on a distinctively female perception of the world. During the last hundred years female roles have changed utterly. The position of women in twenty-first century Estonia or Poland is utterly different from that of truly peasant-patriarchal nineteenth century Tsarist Estonia or Poland, so why has the pattern of joking not changed? In a world where there are so many

leading, well-respected female humour scholars why does the masculine pattern of joking still prevail? Why when there is laughter in an all-female group is it most likely provoked by a humorous personal narrative not a joke, while men are more likely to tell set piece jokes.

To some extent the difference lies in patterns of sociability and conversation but the main reason, and the one that is not mentioned by the authors, is that men's and women's brains are wired-up differently. To quote the psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen (2003, p. 1): "The female brain is hard-wired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems." Empathy is about identifying another person's emotions and thoughts and responding to them. Jokes do not require this. Personal narratives do. Jokes such as the men's mother-in-law joke are about distance, detachment and a shift from the personal to the general and thus to the building of little systems. Jokes are by definition systems in which there is a sudden shift between scripts involving a logical mechanism. That is why men are good at them and why they like them so much. Jokes are little bits of machinery that you can take apart and put together in different patterns.

You should never try to memorise a joke anymore than the route of a walk from one place to another. The details are unimportant. Only the structure matters. To go for a walk and not get lost the walker need only note where the sun is, how much time has elapsed, the angle of rotation about a land-mark, a bit of dead reckoning and then keep to a geometric pattern. Just such a mental map is likewise all that is needed for a joke. The rest you invent all over again each time it is told. The people who appear within the joke are constructs not characters. They are chess pieces to be moved around according to the rules of the scripts. Women do not do jokes for the same reason they do not do chess or theoretical physics or elaborate destructive computer hacking or Asperger's syndrome.

A group of male joke-tellers do not need empathy because they are not holding a conventional conversation. They are setting up a mutually agreed set of enjoyable monologues and taking turns. There may well also be an element of competition involved. But the important thing is 'critical mass' – enough men are mindful of jokes, and possess a combination of ability and passion for them to get together to joke and to generate new ones through interaction. Men whose minds do not work like this do not get involved and neither do the great majority of women, even though they may listen and enjoy. It is hardly surprising that the jokes generated have a male outlook. There are individual women who can behave in this way but they cannot form a critical mass of female joke generators because they are never in the majority either in a female or a mixed group. In this way social forces confirm and reinforce what has originally been shaped by nature. It is a pity that the gifted authors in this book are unaware of the recent work on brain differences (Bao and Swaab 2011) that has utterly eclipsed earlier assertions that sex roles are completely culturally malleable. Sometimes they are malleable and sometimes they are not. We now have many good ways of testing which is the case in any particular area of human life, using data both from developmental psychology and comparative sociology. My hypothesis is that the patterns of male joking and the contrast with female personal narrative humour are not malleable and so have remained constant through periods of rapid and massive social change in sex roles. It is a testable proposition. It is now up to others to test it.

There is much else in this book that is interesting and insightful and explores the similarities and contrasts between the two countries. Władysław Chłopicki (Poland) and Liisi Laineste (Eesti) have both provided detailed accounts of the history of 'stand-up' in their two countries and there are two chapters on graffiti, one on each nation.

There are also four studies of internet humour including one on the flaming Poles called "Do poles flame?" by Anna Tereszkievicz and another on Estonian verbal aggressiveness on the internet. Flaming has come to mean the making of uninhibited, heated, emotional, negative and anti-social comments on the internet. The internet is anonymous and the usual social feedback is missing, so verbal aggression has free-rein. Aggression in itself is not

particularly humorous and in fact it is often boring and repetitive but as the authors point out, humour is useful as a means of rendering aggressive comment more palatable, interesting and appealing. There are also two chapters, one from each country on the use and uses of visual humour on the internet.

The distinguished Estonian mathematician Arvo Krikmann has subjected Estonian “three nation jokes” to a statistical and longitudinal (1964–2012) analysis and Dorota Brzozowska has provided a comparative study of *Three Characters in Polish Jokes*.

The book in all provides a very diverse and interesting set of studies of humour from two countries where humour scholarship is clearly thriving. The chapters are written in good and clear English and despite a very diligent search on my part there was a disappointing lack of humorous errors. Only once did I smile at an unintended oddity — at the phrase “The female has traditionally been the subordinate half of mankind”. The editors have even displayed their mastery of English by jointly composing an ode to the goddess Diana in the style of, and with the grasp of scansion and metaphor of, the renowned poetaster William Topaz McGonagall.

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