

‘Hahahae’: listening for Roman laughter

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Response essay

Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*. (Sather Classical Lectures, Volume 71.) Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014. x + 319 pages. ISBN 978-0-520-27716-8.

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1. A New History of Laughter?
2. *Laughter in Ancient Rome*: Structure and Contents
3. Laughter as Insight: Insights on Laughter

1. A New History of Laughter?

“There is ... a long history to the history of laughter”, observes Mary Beard, some way in to her own contribution to the genre (p. 49). But this is not strictly true. There is a long history to the *topos* of *considering* writing a history of laughter, and then falling back abashed at the complexities of the topic: this reluctance is then narrated, in what classicists would refer to as a *recusatio* (“refusal”). The *topos* seems to date back to an aside of the exiled Russian journalist Alexander Herzen in 1858, when he wrote that “it would be extremely interesting to write a history of laughter”, which was then used as an epigraph by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* (1968).

But what does “history of laughter” even mean? And why would writing it be considered desirable? What, indeed, would it mean to pin down in writing one of the most effervescent and evanescent of human behaviors? History may not need a *telos*, an overarching goal to which a group of events tend, but does it not need a detectable pattern or set of organizing principles in the narration of those events? Where is that pattern in the case of laughter? How can one instance of laughter be related to another even in the present moment, never mind in the past?

Beard continues, “Are we dealing with a history of the theory of laughter, and its protocols and rules...? Or are we focusing on the much less manageable, much more elusive subject of the practice of laughter in the past?” (pp. 49–50). A history of the theory of laughter seems a relatively easy proposition: the historian would be stringing together interpretations of something already expressed in words. The results would be repetitive – because, whatever the historical variations in laughter itself, theories of laughter have been remarkably consistent in their objects of concern – but they would be relatively accessible, susceptible to thematic organization. But “the practice of laughter”: does not laughter, by its very nature, express something that extends beyond and outside mere words? What, then, can usefully be said about it?

What one can do, and what Beard does do in this volume, is take individual accounts from the past of when laughter happened, and try to understand their dynamics. She launches her book, however, with two examples which show clearly quite how difficult – and, indeed, open-ended – a project that is. The first is drawn from the Roman historian Cassius Dio, who was writing in the early third century CE. He was sitting with other senators in the front rows at the games when the brutal emperor Commodus – who had been performing in the arena – moved towards them and threatened them with a severed ostrich head. The result, as Dio is at

pains to report, was not fear, but hilarity: so as not to be seen to be laughing at the emperor, he pulled laurel leaves from his garland, stuffed them into his mouth, and chewed energetically. What exactly prompts the laughter? Why was the laurel leaf ruse successful? Why did Dio narrate the episode in this way – or at all? Beard turns all these round to the light, and shows that one can merely suggest possibilities; she particularly focuses on the vexed dynamics between laughter and power. One of the possibilities she does not suggest revolves, not around the laughter as such, but around the fact that laurel leaves are poisonous: they contain hydrogen cyanide. Did Dio know this? Is the covert message of the account not the bravado that Beard detects, but the notion that it was better to risk death than to be caught laughing at the emperor?

The other instance of laughter that prefaces Beard's book comes from Roman comedy. In *The Eunuch*, written by Terence in the second century BCE, there are two places where laughter is actually scripted: "hahaha". It is uttered by a parasitic, caustic flatterer: his flattery is directed towards a boastful soldier, Thraso, who is supporting him. In response to a joke – a good one? a weak one? almost certainly an old one – by Thraso, Gnatho utters the "hahaha"; about seventy lines later, the sound is written again, and Gnatho claims to have suddenly recalled the same joke. Once again, Beard turns over various possibilities, and places the instance of laughter in the nexus of power relationships on display: "This *hahaha* is not a spontaneous reaction to a hilarious one-liner but a well-practiced response to [Gnatho's] patron's verbal posturing masquerading as a spontaneous reaction" (p. 12). Within the multiplicity of available interpretations, she does not consider what seems to me the most likely one: that this is not a "real" laugh (or an actor pretending really to laugh), nor a well-practised masquerade of a laugh, but a sound that the patron Thraso does not recognize at all. His response to Gnatho's first laugh is translated as "What's the matter?", but the Latin is simply "Quid est?" – "What is it?" This indeed means "What's up?", but it also means "What is it?" in the sense of "Can you identify that thing for me?" This would suggest that the "laughter" is scripted here precisely because it is *not* laughter, just a set of sounds that Gnatho makes in inept imitation of laughter. (What use is a parasite who cannot muster an intelligible laugh at his patron's jokes?) By the second occurrence, Thraso recognizes the sound *hahaha*, and asks, not "Quid est?", but "Quid rides?" – "Why are you laughing?" The joke could just as well be on the ineptitude of Gnatho as on the pompous stupidity of Thraso. And the consequence is that the one instance where we seem to be able to overhear someone laughing may be precisely the instance in which laughter is unrecognizable.

I offer these extra interpretations not to criticize Beard – who offers a remarkable number of her own – but to illustrate how complicated and inconclusive a discussion of even a single instance of laughter narrated from another time and culture must be. This is an exciting and challenging book. Its publication is, in fact, an event in the discipline of classics and beyond. But – inevitably, given its subject matter – it is a book of suggestions, not of conclusions.

2. *Laughter in Ancient Rome: Structure and Contents*

The structure of the book is simple. After the introductory examples of Gnatho and Dio, the book is divided into two sections: three chapters that explore the methodological and theoretical issues in writing about historical instances of laughter, and then four that engage different themes drawn from Roman texts. Beard is suspicious of laughter theory: she clearly finds it reductive and insufficiently open-ended. Thus, while she reviews laughter theorists both ancient and modern (Freud [1905, 1950], Bergson [1900], Bakhtin [1968] – not Plessner [1961]), and while she looks at some of the anthropological accounts of laughter, it is mostly with an eye to their limitations for the purposes of her historical project. In this first section, Beard also has much of interest to say about the language of laughter, in both Latin and

Greek. For example, she remarks on the huge vocabulary for laughter in Greek, as opposed to the very limited one – basically, just the verb *ridere* and its compounds – in Latin: this is a commonplace; but she supplements it with the fascinating observation that there are far more words in Latin than in Greek for the combination of words and wit that may prompt laughter. “To list just some: *iocus*, *lepos*, *urbanitas*, *dicta*, *dicacitas*, *cavillatio*, *ridicula*, *sal*, *salsum*, *facetiae*” (p. 76). And this is not to include physical or visual prompts to laughter. A good joke was *salsus*, “piquant” – literally, “salted”; a bad joke was *frigidus*, just as unflattering as the English cognate suggests. I can’t help wondering whether *frigidus* was coined, not in opposition to *salsus*, but as part of its own joke: there would be a pun on its opposite *calidus*, warm, with *callidus*, clever.

Beard also asks, in this preliminary exploration, whether there were really the concept of a smile in ancient Rome, given the lack of vocabulary to differentiate smiling from laughing: provocative but inconclusive. Greek differentiates quite clearly between the two: what, then, did Roman readers understand when they came across the Greek word for smiling?

The final four chapters are the meat of the book, and contain a plethora of examples and discussions that show Beard’s familiarity with an extraordinary range of Roman literature. She has made life difficult for herself by excluding, for the most part, genres designed to provoke laughter – comedy, satire (by the early middle ages, lumped together as a single genre) – but this proves a productive difficulty: instead of searching fruitlessly for the answer to the question of what the Romans found funny, she can instead focus on situations or words that are narrated as producing laughter, and then discuss the dynamics in play.

Chapter 5 discusses laughter and orators, and especially Cicero’s *De Oratore* (*On the Orator*): Beard points out, with the quiet pride of a Romanist, that this work contains “the most substantial, sustained, and challenging discussion of laughter, in any of its aspects, to have survived from the ancient world” (p. 107). (The comparison being silently made is with the immense amounts of ink spilt speculating about the contents of the lost book on Comedy from Aristotle’s *Poetics*.) Provoking laughter was a risky strategy for an orator: it might get the audience on one’s own side; but one might equally misjudge the moment and be laughed at oneself. Above all, one should avoid looking like a *mimus*, a common actor. This balancing act is summed up in the ambiguities of the Latin word *ridiculus*, which covers the provocation of laughter either *with* or *at* the speaker. “[L]aughter, in other words, risks being an own goal” (p. 120). Chapter 6 asks, “in what particular ways was laughter related to Roman power?” (p. 129) – and the answer may be paraphrased: often unpleasantly. Beard has already observed that “Roman power relations of all kinds were displayed, negotiated, manipulated, or contested with a laugh” (p. 6). This chapter takes on the figure of the *scurra*, a sort of lower-class jokester, “the déclassé antitype to the elite orator” – who in fact represented not a fixed social role, but “a category within the imaginative economy and social policing of Roman laughter” (pp. 129, 154). Anyone could be accused of being a *scurra*; and sometimes, the mud stuck.

The next chapter places the physicality, especially the animality, of laughter at its centre: the way in which animals can cause laughter; the way in which laughter brings humans closer to animals. Beard cites Simon Critchley [2002]: “If humour is human, then it also, curiously, marks the limit of the human” (p. 159). And finally, Beard discusses the *Philogelos*, a collection of Roman jokes (despite the Greek name) probably dating to late antiquity. Reading the collection as a whole leads her to doubt the “almost ... truism” that “laughter is a marker of areas of disruption and anxiety” (p. 196), and instead she argues that the creation and analysis of jokes makes us into “domestic anthropologists” (p. 197), people looking at our quotidian lives as if from the outside. This fits for much of the collection: there are the expected topics of death, inheritance, incest taboos, but also jokes that turn on confusing reality and dream or on apparently disrupted personal identity. Beard is puzzled by the large percentage of jokes that relate in some way to number: the manipulation of numbers, the

relationship between numerical symbols and their actual properties, and so on. But if we accept the notion of a late antique origin for these jokes, the obsession with number seems culturally coherent. It was, after all, a great age of numerological analysis, whether in the pagan, Jewish, or Christian traditions: we may think of the extensive passages of numerology in Macrobius' commentary on the Dream of Scipio, or the numerological interpretations scattered through Midrash. The "domestic anthropologists" notion works here, if we suppose that the significance of number was a preoccupation in everyday life; the "disruption and anxiety" thesis may work too, if we consider the supranumerical – indeed, often religious – significance accorded to number. In the end, we see once again how an apparently simple phenomenon – for what, on some level, could be more simple than a book of little jokes? – opens out to prompt an extraordinary range of more or less unanswerable questions.

3. Laughter as Insight: Insights on Laughter

Early in her book, Beard quotes her fellow-historian Keith Thomas, who wrote in an influential lecture of 1976 that "to study the laughter of our ancestors is to gain some insight into changing human sensibilities" (quoted, p. 50). I started working on my own book on laughter [2013] at around the time that Beard started work on the Sather lectures, on which the current volume is based. At the beginning, I thought of the project in exactly Thomas's terms: that studying laughter would somehow give me a sort of back-door access to the age and culture I was looking at (in my case, the Christian culture of late antiquity); that laughter would provide a heuristics of obliquity. I soon abandoned this approach: I came to feel that it proposed an impossible uniformity of culture, as well as a preposterous omniscience on the part of the researcher. But Beard has somehow managed to keep a version of the approach while refusing to elide the complexities of the texts she is discussing. Indeed, she says that "[o]ne of the aims of this book is ... to make [laughter] a messier rather than a tidier subject" (p. 42). And she succeeds. Sometimes the effect is a little confusing, because one has to accept that in the ancient world, as in the contemporary one, different people laughed at all sorts of things, from within all sorts of different economies of power – AND we can rarely reconstruct with any certainty exactly what they were laughing about, anyway.

For all the determined messiness of its (non-)conclusions, there are some hugely important insights that one can take away from this book. Of these, I would particularly excerpt three: one is of particular relevance to the Roman historian, one to the Western historian, one to the theorist of laughter.

The first is one of those brilliant insights that is more or less unprovable but that may, notwithstanding, change the way we read our canonical texts. It comes at the end of the chapter on laughter and asymmetrical power relations. Beard reads Prudentius' poem on the martyrdom of St Laurence; she points out that "[t]he Christian writer has appropriated and revalued the role of the *scurra*, as the joking, jesting hero of the tale", and then asks, "[w]ho knows if centuries earlier, long before the conflicts between 'pagan' and Christian, *scurrilitas* was something in which those outside the corridors of power took pride?" This opens up an extraordinary sense of possibility. The Roman underclasses are notoriously invisible – they have left us no written records (bar some graffiti), only scattered epigraphic records, and very few traces in the writings of the elite. But once we think of *scurrilitas* as a talent that a certain social stratum might desire and value, a witty subversive critique of the elite by the underclass, then we can read its occurrences quite differently. It was already apparent that *scurra*, used as a term of abuse by the elite, carried derogatory class connotations; but perhaps we can now get a positive sense of what those playing the role of the *scurra* valued.

Parenthetically, I might observe that Herzen – he who thought that a history of laughter would be "extraordinarily interesting" – was clearly himself a *scurra* of sorts: not because of

his social background, which was aristocratic though illegitimate, but because of his exclusion from the Russian power structure. Certainly, he used the techniques of a *scurra*. The remark I quoted earlier comes from a letter to his own subversive political journal, *The Bell*, of which he wrote in its opening manifesto, “The comical and the criminal, the evil and the ignorant – all of these come under *The Bell*”: a good paraphrase of the scope of *scurrilitas*. (My source for this is Parthé’s *A Herzen Reader* [2012].)

The second insight is based on a provocative claim at the end of the book, in the chapter on the *Philogelos*. Beard flings out the notion that the Romans invented the joke, and almost immediately retracts it. (In any case, it is undercut by her recognition of the “long tradition of Jewish joking”, p. 213.) But she nuances her opinion with the suggestion that the Romans invented, not the joke itself, but the “commodified joke” (p. 209): an economy of joking, in which wit was used as something to be traded – for dinner, say, or a favour. This seems an idea for the Western historian to play with, whether to challenge or confirm; certainly, Otto’s book on the figure of the jester in history, *Fools are Everywhere* [2001], situates its chronological starting point in a rather cursory look at Rome. (This book also prompts the question: does one need a court culture, or at least a severely inegalitarian one, for the “commodified joke” to flourish? If so, when may we see the revival of the court jester?)

Finally, there is one insight that seems to me to redraw the history of theories of laughter. Beard observes, “By a nice paradox, the most stringent mechanisms of cultural control are sustained by the powerful myth that laughter is an uncontrollable, disruptive force that contorts the civilized body and subverts the rational mind” (p. 44). That the uncontrollability of laughter is a myth becomes a leitmotiv throughout the book. “Laughter is as much about memory, and about the ways we have learned to laugh at certain cues, as it is about uncontrollable spontaneity” (pp. 15-16). “[W]e laugh because we are determined to” (of the *Philogelos*, p. 212). Exploding the myth of laughter’s uncontrollability has significant consequences: for it opens up the question, what strategies of control – and of whom – are being masked by this claim? If laughter *is* controllable, then where is the fear that the subject may be out of control situated? This should prompt a complete rewriting of theories of laughter – and a far more sceptical reading of those that have previously been promulgated.

I began this essay with remarks on the topos of writing the history of laughter. One of the interesting things about this book is that it simultaneously engages the topic head-on, and shows us its impossibility. In the end, *Laughter in Ancient Rome* is less about laughter than it is about the anxieties and indeterminacies of writing history at all, which has been a longstanding preoccupation of Mary Beard. *Laughter* just proves to have been an excellent way of exploring the theme.

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