

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.

Maria Plaza

Department of Romance Studies and Classics, Stockholm University, Sweden.

In the winter of 2015, after a deadly attack on caricature artists in the heart of Europe, Mary Beard's statement that “[n]o discussion of laughter is ever neutral” (p.77) rings as topical as ever, though she utters it in connection with ancient Roman discussions of laughter. Laughter's lack of neutrality is one of the central ideas in her broad study of Roman laughter, which developed from the Sather Lectures she gave on the topic in 2008. Other important concerns of the book include a dedicated wish to problematize laughter in a variety of ways (“to make it a messier rather than tidier subject” p. 42), and an application to “the ‘laughterhood’ of Rome” (p. x) of the notion that the laughable is mind-opening.

B. explicitly turns away from attempting a comprehensive survey of Roman laughter (p. x), and her relaxed, non-technical explorations move over the realms of literary study, cultural criticism, ethnography and history (in a way not rare within classics, but perhaps less familiar to students of laughter and humour in other fields). She begins by setting up a frame for her material by quoting two Roman instances of laughter, that of the scripted, and commented, “hahahae” of Terence’s parasite in *The Eunuch* (161 BC), and Cassius Dio’s story about how he himself almost cracked up when watching the inept but highly threatening antics of the emperor Commodus during his theatrical performance, and only saving the situation by chewing hard on some bay leaves from his wreath (the event took place in 192 AD and was taken down in Dio’s *Roman history* about a decade later). One of these instances is early, fictional, written in Latin, and features in comedy, while the other is late, reported as a historical event, retold in Greek, and appears in a context where death is an imminent threat – and the chasm between them is indicative of the wide variety of Roman laughter as treated by B.

Next, the first main part of B’s work (chapters 2 – 4) deals with theory and the question about how to approach laughter, both generally, and specifically in the case of a foreign culture. Both here and throughout her study, B. is keen to point out the peculiar feature of laughter which makes its appearances in other times and places seem by turns immediately graspable and divided from us by an unbridgeable gap. She is fairly consistent in concentrating on laughter as an act – usually described in language, occasionally in pictures –, up to the final chapter, where she turns wholly to the laughable, in studying an ancient joke collection. Given her scepticism of the term “humour” (p. 105, 109, implicit *passim*), and her treatment of the Superiority, Incongruity, and Freudian groups of theory as theories of *laughter*, this is somewhat surprising.

At the end of the first part, B. makes a convincing case for not maintaining a waterproof division between Roman laughter in Latin and that appearing in Greek texts. As she embarks on the second part of her book, this decision, together with B’s wide learning, allows her to include a line of understudied but relevant descriptions of laughter. These range from those in Macrobius’ fictional banquet, the *Saturnalia*, where wit is a prominent topic (Latin), through Galen’s scientifically-minded comments on monkeys as comically imperfect imitations of humans (Greek) and the notorious gossip about Elagabalus’ cruel jokes in the *Augustan History* (Latin), to stimulating enquiries into what lies behind Plutarch’s *geloios* – the Greek for “laughable” – in his recording that Cato the younger thus branded Cicero, or Cicero’s report that his contemporary Zeno called Socrates “an Athenian *scurra*”, complete with the

Latin word for cheeky joker (the relationship between Latin and Greek).¹ More generally, her readiness to bring together evidence from areas not usually compared is refreshing and illuminating, as when she ties together Ovid's mock-didactic advice on pretty laughter for girls with a discussion of the lewd, theatrical laughter typical of mime actresses which is mentioned by Catullus, when he ridicules "a foul tart" laughing at him, and by Petronius, when he describes the threatening behaviour of a Priapus priestess in his novel.²

The second part of B's study consists of four chapters, arranged around Roman laughter's relationship to oratory, power, animals, and the joke (as exemplified by the Roman-empire, Greek-language, late antique jokebook *The Laughter Lover*). Particularly in the first and third of these (chapters 5, "The Orator" and 7, "Between Human and Animal – especially Monkeys and Asses") many fine arguments are found. In connection with oratory, for instance, B. rightly lifts Cicero as "the most infamous funster, punster, and jokester of classical antiquity" (p. 100). Carefully re-reading his exposition of *ridiculum* for speakers,³ she stresses such aspects as his closeness to an Incongruity theory and the fact that he pronounced *mimicry of the ugly*, not the ugly as such, to be laughable. In chapter 7, B. takes as her starting point animal caricatures – including the fascinating Pompeii frieze which depicts Roman national hero, the pious Aeneas, with his elderly father and small son, as apes – to reflect on Simon Critchley's idea that humour comments on boundaries, such as that between human and animal.⁴ As for the last chapter, that on the joke collection, I have already hinted that it sits oddly in a book avoiding the concept of humour, and B's suggestion that the Romans were the first to view jokes as a commodity is not altogether convincing.

B's style is lively and lucid, and contributes to the accessibility of the book. While subscribing to the commonplace that analyses of laughter make dull reading, B. is not quite content with this and does occasionally say things merely for stylistic reasons. This is so when she asks whether a recent suggestion about the location of laughter in the human brain is "any more believable, or at least any more useful" than Pliny the elder's ideas about such a gelastic location (p.29),⁵ or when she comments that many modern scholars' approach to Ciceronian laughter as very aggressive is itself "frankly not very funny" (p.106).

Nevertheless, the work is more balanced, and more wary in making claims, than its bold tone might suggest. Apart from its insistence on laughter as cognitively important for the culture where it occurs, the most thoroughgoing trait of the book may be its stress on how we depend on translation, and occasionally even textual editing, for our information about laughter in ancient Rome. Let us look closer at this. When B. sets out to question the common translation of a line about the messianic child in Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* (vv. 60-3) – that the boy should begin to smile at his mother – she states that the manuscripts which have come down to us actually read a slightly different line. Scholars have emended the line in the light of secondary (though ancient) evidence and arguments about what Virgil would have thought about infants divine and human. The text altered, the meaning becomes that the child should greet his mother with laughter, because those who have not greeted their parent with laughter are not deemed as fit company for gods. The Latin words specify laughter in both noun and verb (*risu cognoscere matrem,... qui non risere parenti*). It is only when the translators' notions of mythical, divine babies' manners sets in that we get smiling, B. convincingly

¹ Beard pp. 102-3, 152-4. Plutarch *Comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero* 1, and quoted in *Cato Minor* 21; Cicero, *On the nature of the gods* 1.93.

² Ovid, *The Art of Love* 3.279-90, Catullus 42, Petronius, *The Satyricon* 16-26.6; Beard pp. 157-72. "Foul tart" is B's translation of *moecha putida* at v.19 in Catullus' poem (Beard p.159).

³ Cicero, *On the Orator* 2.235-90.

⁴ Pp. 158-72, reference to Critchley on p.159. B. is generally influenced by the ideas in Critchley, Simon. 2002. *On Humour*. London – New York: Routledge.

⁵ The neuroscience article referred to is Fried, Itzhak, Wilson, Charles L., MacDonald, Katherine A. and Behnke, Erik J. 1998. "Electric Current Stimulates Laughter". *Nature* 391: 650.

concludes. She dismisses the Madonna-like image no doubt present in the minds of Virgil's commentators, and points out that it is precisely by accepting that Romans behave differently from us that we can begin to understand their behaviour (B. pp.41-5).

Connected to this, and based on a similar line of reasoning, is B's claim that the Romans' did not employ smiling as a semiotic sign (pp. 73-6). That is, they did perform the facial movement, but it did not mean much in their culture. She contends that since *ridere*, at least as a first choice, should be translated with "laugh", that leaves almost no words in Latin for "smile". The words which are usually thus translated are *sub-ridere* (a compound literally meaning "laugh a muffled laugh", "laugh surreptitiously") and *renidere* ("beam"). She underlines that the linguistic paucity points in the same direction as the fact that we find no pointed distinctions between laughter and smiling in the extant Roman literature. Still, it would not be surprising to find an exception in the form of some writer fond of this near-laughter, and using it as that sign which the smile was later to become, or as some aspect of that sign. The many cases of *renidere* in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* might well constitute just such an exception, and a rare example of Roman supercilious smiling, as Robert Kaster has argued.⁶ So when B. insists that the many times *renidere* crops up in Macrobius, it is *not* a smile, since "the defining feature of this gesture seems to be the facial 'glow' ...rather than the oscular curve", I believe she shows the confidence she herself elsewhere criticises.⁷ Yet on the whole, it seems to me that B. is right in her claim that "by and large, in our terms", the Romans did not smile (p. 74).

Laughter in Ancient Rome offers a rich and exciting picture, and B's inclusion of evidence in both Latin and Greek, along with her firm grasp both of the ancient material and of the modern scholarship on it, makes it a valuable state-of-the-art overview of Roman laughter, complete with its ambiguities, anxieties, and neutrality-upsetting challenges.

Maria Plaza is associate professor of Latin at the Department of Romance Studies and Classics, Stockholm University. Her research interests include humour and laughter in Latin Literature, as mirrored in her PhD thesis *Laughter and derision in Petronius' Satyricon* (2000) and the monograph *The function of humour in Roman verse satire: Laughing and lying* (2006). She is currently working on a study of how morals are presented in the writings of Caesar and Sallust.

Address correspondence to Maria Plaza, at maria.plaza@su.se

⁶ Kaster, Robert. 1980. "Macrobius and Servius: *Verecundia* and the Grammarians Function". *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 84: 219-62.

⁷ As she in fact acknowledges risking, at same page (74), though with reference to the whole claim about Romans not laughing.