

**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.**

### **Edwin Rabbie**

*Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.*

From the preface (p. ix) of *Laughter in Ancient Rome* it can be gleaned that both Mary Beard herself and her audience had a great time when she delivered the 2008 Sather Lectures in Berkeley, which form the basis of this book. I must say that from time to time, when reading the book, I wished I had been there among her audience. If even talking about laughter can be a lot less funny than laughter itself, as the Romans themselves knew all too well (cf. Cicero, *De oratore* II, 217, quoted on p. 28), what shall we say about reading about it? That being said, I found this book entertaining enough; what is more, it is a testimony to the author's impressive scholarship. The book discusses a large number of passages from ancient literature (both Latin and Greek) that show Beard's philological skills as an eminently competent, original and sensitive interpreter of classical texts. Apart from these primary sources, a truly impressive amount of secondary literature has been used and digested. Nevertheless, the book is eminently readable.<sup>1</sup>

It is by no means possible within the limits of this review to give even a rough outline of the rich contents of the book. I will therefore confine myself to a survey of the contents, thereby discussing in somewhat more detail a number of passages that interested me particularly.

The book is divided into two main parts, which are approximately equally long (chapters 2-4 and 5-8, respectively). The first chapter, which is a general introduction to Roman laughter, takes as a starting point two ancient texts, a passage from the historian Dio Cassius, 73 (72), 21 – about an incident in the Colosseum in 192 CE, where the behaviour of the emperor Commodus was such that the author, who was present at the show, almost burst into laughter – and Terence, *Eunuch* 422ff.; 494ff. – in both passages the word *hahaha* is found, make it certain that the character is laughing, but why? The chapter shows the dangers and pitfalls that threaten the modern interpreter of ancient texts that deal with laughter and introduces the 'big questions' the book is addressing: "what prompted the Romans to laugh?"; "how did laughter operate in Roman elite culture?" and "how far can we now understand or share the Roman culture of laughter?" (p. 4).

Chapters 2-4 discuss some of the general questions that "hover over any history of laughter" (p. ix), first of all (in chapter 2) the ancient and modern theories of laughter. I found the section on "Aristotle and 'the classical theory of laughter'" particularly illuminating. Beard is, I think, rightly sceptic towards attempts to (re)construct a theory of laughter by Aristotle; her conclusion that "there is no such thing as 'the Aristotelian theory of laughter'" (p. 35) is, in my view at least, entirely correct. This of course does not mean that Aristotle did not entertain and express all kinds of ideas on laughter, to be found at various places in his surviving works, but, as Beard rightly stresses, that is not the same thing as a coherent theory. Likewise, Beard is in my view right to stand sceptical towards the attempts to 'reconstruct' an Aristotelian theory from the so-called *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a tract that forms part of a Greek manuscript now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I wonder, though, what reading public Beard has in mind; it seems overly optimistic that someone who has to be told that Plautus was "the major predecessor of Terence, writing in the late third or early second century BCE" (p. 56) will be able to read the book with any profit.

<sup>2</sup> In this connection I may be forgiven for uttering the following wish: can scholars please stop referring to Demetrius of Phaleron's tract *Peri tou geloïou* as an intermediate source between Aristotle and Cicero's theories

Chapter 3 is about "The History of Laughter". It addresses a number of fundamental problems, e.g., the question how to distinguish between the familiar and the unfamiliar elements, and how to know whether the Romans laughed at something or not. Beard clearly illustrates these problems by pointing to the famous *cave canem*-mosaic from Pompeii, which one modern art historian has interpreted as meant to prompt laughter, while others have strictly denied this. The remainder of this chapter contains some pertinent criticism of the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and his followers, e.g., his view of the *Saturnalia* (a Roman festival, celebrated in December), which the Russian scholar considered a forerunner of the modern carnival. Beard ends this chapter with some convincing remarks about the difficulty – if not impossibility – to discover and describe the changes in Roman laughter through the ages.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Roman Laughter in Latin and Greek". After an introduction that points out the paucity of Latin terms that describe laughter (as opposed to, e.g., Greek and English), Beard in the subsequent section (pp. 73-76) postulates that the Romans "by and large" did not smile. Her arguments can be summarized as follows: the Latin language has no word for 'smiling' and in Roman literature no distinctions are found between laughing and smiling. Thus, Beard supports Jacques Le Goff's suggestion that smiling as we understand it is an invention of the Middle Ages. The thesis looks alluring, but I must confess I am not fully convinced of its rightness. Beard is right to state that there are no places in Latin literature that mention the curling of the lips that we call smiling. However, her dismissal of (at least) *subridere* as a Latin term for smiling is in my view unconvincing. To start with, her statement that *subridere* "technically means a 'suppressed or muffled laugh', even a 'little laugh'," is, I think, questionable: what does "technically" mean, and where in Latin literature are these meanings found? Rather, there is a considerable number of passages in Latin authors where *subridere* is combined with a verb that denotes speaking, e.g., Seneca *Dial.* 11, 13, 7 *subridens ait*. I am rather convinced that here and elsewhere<sup>3</sup> *subridere* denotes something that can be seen, but not heard, therefore smiling rather than laughing out.

On the other hand I found the subsequent discussion (pp. 82-85) of the famous final lines from Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* most stimulating, even if perhaps not completely convincing. Her opinion deserves serious consideration, instead of taking it for granted that Virgil's little boy recognizes his mother with a smile rather than a laugh.

As is well known, many literary texts from the Roman Empire are written in Greek. The question as to which texts written in Greek can be used when discussing Roman laughter and a phenomenon that Beard calls the Roman side of Greek laughter – the interaction between the two – are addressed in the remainder of the chapter (pp. 85-95). Among many other fine observations Beard points out here that the well-known term "Attic salt" is in fact a Roman characterization of a Greek phenomenon, which is not found in Greek literature itself; only in the second century CE does Plutarch, writing in Greek, refer to the wit of two *Greek* comedians (Aristophanes and Menander) by using *hals*, the Greek word for salt.

The remaining chapters (5-9) focus on "particular key figures and key themes in the story of Roman laughter". Chapter 5 is on the orator, and it is naturally focussed on that greatest of Roman wits, Cicero. The chapter contains a long and important section in which Beard nuances Antony Corbeill's theory<sup>4</sup> that Cicero's use of laughter was a mechanism of exclusion and persuasion. Beard rightly notes that "there was much more to it than that" (p. 107); she then concentrates on Cicero's extensive discussion of laughter in his major work on rhetoric,

---

on the laughable? There is not a shred of evidence that a book by that title ever existed. Even Beard (p. 35) is too cautious when styling the book "possibly nonexistent".

<sup>3</sup> A large number of such passages in Gudeman's note on Tacitus, *Dialogus* 11,1, some of them with *ridere*, others with *renidere*.

<sup>4</sup> *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic*, Princeton, N.J., 1996

*De oratore*. Her characterization of the section in *De oratore* is a bull's-eye: "a characteristically Roman cultural product: Roman practice and tradition, theorized by a Roman intellectual in dialogue with his Greek predecessors" (p. 110f.). At p. 121f., Beard discusses various solutions to the questions why there seems to be such a large discrepancy between the moderation in joking that is recommended in *De oratore* and the "aggressive humor" in Cicero's speeches. Although I still find it likely that the treatment in *De oratore* is in fact a kind of self-justification by Cicero, whose poking fun of his adversaries was not undisputed, Beard's explanation that some of the joking in the speeches is less aggressive and more playful than is usually assumed might well be right. Besides, the two explanations do not seem to be mutually exclusive. Cicero was not so much censured for aggressive joking as for cracking jokes too much and in the wrong places (cf. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* VI, 3, 2-3). That there is no direct evidence that the section in *De oratore* was meant as a self-defence does not seem to carry much weight; what we do know is that it was one of Cicero's original contributions to the theory of rhetoric and that he was proud of that.

I merely mention the titles of chapters 6 ("From Emperor to Jester", "in what particular ways was laughter related to Roman power?", p. 129) and 7 ("Between Human and Animal – Especially Monkeys and Asses") and conclude with a few remarks on the final chapter, "The Laughter Lover". It is about a late-antique collection of some 265 jokes in Greek under the title *Philogelos*. Although I must confess that I consider myself (in this connection at least) "risk-averse" (p. 208) and therefore not convinced that Beard is right when she is inclined to locate the origins of the joke within Roman culture, the way she reaches this conclusion is a model of scholarly reasoning. My problem is rather with the premise that is at the basis of it, viz., that the *Philogelos* is a Roman rather than a Greek text. Earlier, Beard had stated that she considered the book to be "on the Roman side" because of its "specifically Roman subject matter and context (such as the names, currency, and events that form part of the background to the gags)" (p. 89). This is elaborated further on (p. 188f.), where we are told that "there are passing references to Rome, the river Rhine, and Sicily", that of the four personal names mentioned two are Greek and two Roman and that, although transmitted in Greek, "several of the gags are set against an explicitly Roman cultural background" (i.e., *denarii* are mentioned as currency in six instances and there is a joke situated at the Millennium Games of Rome, 248 CE). But, if I see rightly, this simply won't do: as opposed to the two instances where Rome is mentioned, there are entire sections on Abderites, Sidonians and Cymeans; Sicily, too, would rather point to a Greek than to a Roman background. Apart from *denarii*, Greek currencies (i.a. drachms) are likewise mentioned more than once. The names of the authors to whom the book is sometimes ascribed (Philistion, Hierocles, Philagrius) are all Greek. And what could be more Greek and less Roman than the standard nitwit of the collection, the *scholastikos*? Other types, the *duskolos* and the *alazon*, are known from Greek comedy.

These few critical remarks are by no means meant to detract from the book's great merits; they should just testify to the interest with which I read it. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of that elusive phenomenon, laughter.

The layout of the book is impeccable. Misprints are very rare; I only noticed p. 248 n. 52 "*De or. 2.2.*"; read: "*De or. 2.217.*"

Address correspondence to Edwin Rabbie, at [rabbie@zomnet.nl](mailto:rabbie@zomnet.nl)