Mock Ritual in the Modern Era

Reginald McGinnis
and
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Mock Ritual in the Modern Era
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REGINALD MCGINNIS AND JOHN VIGNAUX SMYTH
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Introduction

The usual thing happened. Ritual cast out at the door came in again in disguise.

A. M. Hocart, The Life-Giving Myth

In February 2019, a new scandal surfaced in the French media world. A group of young journalists, editors, and publicists, mainly men, had for several years been engaged in online harassment. Their victims, largely women and minorities, had been mocked and humiliated via email and Twitter in an endless stream of jokes, pranks, and personal threats. Ridicule and abuse had pushed one woman to quit her job and left another suicidal. This story was shocking not only in its crudity and violence, but because the members of this group, the League of LOL, worked mostly for progressive and leftist newspapers. The whole affair appeared in contradiction with the values embraced publicly by the harassers.

The story of the Ligue du LOL was reported by virtually all major French media outlets, particularly Libération, which had employed two of the group’s most prominent members. One aspect of this story emphasized by several commentators concerned the return of archaic practices in our digital age. Simon Blin, in an article titled “New Codes of an Old Dominance,” suggested that “by excluding women from Twitter via mockery,” the members of this boys’ club “reproduced a traditional pattern of conserving power.” According to Mélanie Gourarier, the League of LOL was “a textbook case for anthropology and gender studies,” where, as Blin puts it, “masculine solidarity is organized under the guise of a cult of mockery.” For David Le Breton, it was “a long virilization ritual” and “an exorcism” of difference. The laughers in this story, as stated in a further article, “did not come from nowhere.” The League of LOL had a genealogy, with precedents from previous decades in French television and literature; the British fun clubs depicted by
Victor Hugo in his novel, *The Man Who Laughs*; and, more distantly, the aristocratic culture of the court of Versailles.

As our book will show, the journalists who saw remnants of old ritual in the League of LOL were not mistaken. This story is but a recent enactment of a scenario that has played out repeatedly throughout the modern era. Henry Fielding, for instance, denounced the fashion of “roasting,” a form of collective mockery, in eighteenth-century England, which he compared to barbaric ritual, but nonetheless exploited to great comic effect in *Joseph Andrews*. More recently, this subject has inspired films such as Patrice Leconte’s *Ridicule* and Mark Waters’s *Mean Girls*.

The pattern illustrated by the League of LOL is part of a problem we approach here under the larger heading of *mock ritual*, particularly as related to the evolution or, according to some, the decline of ritual in modern societies. Drawing on a variety of primarily though not exclusively European sources, we combine under this heading what we see as several interrelated phenomena. On the one hand, we use it to describe the kind of mocking or parodying of ritual that frequently accompanies modern rationalism, notably of the atheist variety, but also, for instance, of Catholic ritual by Protestants, or pagan ritual by Catholics. On the other hand, however, we also emphasize how such mockery may itself become quasi-ritualized, a *mocking ritual*, and how mockery and laughter generally—often explicitly ritualized, like weeping, in more archaic societies—may exhibit ritualistic features, however well disguised. In addition, and relatedly, we use the term *mock ritual* to describe attenuated or sham rituals such as those in which a figural killing replaces a literal one, or, particularly germane to our subject, in which physical violence is replaced by ridicule. The venerable metaphor of a “killing” joke, or something “killingly funny,” is worth recalling here, not only because it turns literal into figural murder, but because it reminds us that the process can be reversed, that jokes too may kill.

Several aspects of mock ritual as just outlined are illustrated in James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, a work unique in its influence in both literature and anthropology. In a passage on substitute kings, for instance, Frazer considers the custom of regicide and its evolution in different parts of the world. In some places where regicide has been abolished, “the king still abdicates annually for a short time,” he writes, “and his place is filled by a more or less nominal sovereign; but at the close of his short reign the latter is no longer killed, though sometimes a mock execution still survives as a memorial of the time when he was actually put to death.” Working from
the premise that in “rude society,” as he calls it, human beings were “commonly killed to promote the growth of the crops.” Frazer also offers numerous examples from modern rural Europe showing how the person representing the “corn-spirit” is no longer killed, but ridiculed. During harvest, “the person who cuts or binds or threshes the last sheaf,” we are told, “is often exposed to rough treatment at the hands of his fellow-laborers,” or, “if he is spared this horseplay, he is at least the subject of ridicule.” Similarly, “the woman who bound the last sheaf goes herself by the name of the Old Man till the next harvest, and is often mocked with the cry, ‘Here comes the Old Man.’” In the Dutch province of Zeeland the workers take a passing stranger regarded as the personification of the corn-spirit back to the field “and bury him in the earth up to his middle at least jeering at him the while; then they ease nature before his face.”

Frazer’s view of history, influenced by thinkers such as the Marquis de Condorcet, is one in which human societies progress from magic to religious belief and ultimately science; and he presents such transitions from execution to mock execution and from killing to ridiculing not just as improvements, understandably, but as steps on this path. Frazer has been described as “a late-eighteenth-century mind in a late-nineteenth-century setting: Enlightenment anti-clerical rationalism overlaid with late Victorian evolutionary progressivism.” From this perspective, ritual is seen as dwindling, with the growth of civilization, “into mere pageant and pastime,” or as degenerating into “a simple game.” Presented as originating in superstition, ritual often appears, as underlined by Frazer’s critics, more ridiculous than sublime. Stanley Edgar Hyman, for instance, remarked that The Golden Bough could be seen “as a comic or ironic mock-epic of human absurdity.”

Frazer nevertheless presents ridicule, as well as mimic or merely “theatrical” executions, as illustrating how rituals evolve by patterns of both serious and mock symbolic substitution. Though such ridiculous ritual or ritualized ridicule may be scarcely less absurd for him than the original bloody sacrifice of the king, ridicule and mock sacrifice seem at least marginally more enlightened than actual killing. Indeed, since our book also focuses on the relation between ridicule and rationality—that is, on the role of mockery in supposedly enlightened modern societies and modes of thought—Frazer also conveniently exemplifies our problem in another way, by having himself become the butt of derision.

Wittgenstein, for example, has been described as treating Frazer derisively precisely for being himself supposedly derisive toward his subjects,
presenting their rituals essentially “as stupid actions.” According to Wittgenstein, Frazer “cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times with all his stupidity and feebleness.” He even mocks Frazer as “much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century.” And in the twenty-first century, where in many academic quarters, “Frazer’s work is widely dismissed, even ridiculed” (though usually for less “spiritual” reasons), this chain of mockery has only continued, intensified by charges of colonialism, racism, and ethnocentricity of a kind from which Wittgenstein himself was perhaps not immune either.

Here, then, we arrive at another related sense of mock ritual where Frazer—or of course anyone else, including his mockers—may be accused of going through the motions of rational thought or action while in fact reproducing a more or less sham ritual or theatrical performance, “much more savage than most of his savages,” masquerading as science or objective ethnography. Since it concerns one of the main issues of our inquiry, moreover, we suggest that one does not have to be an uncritical reader of Frazer—quite the contrary—to wonder at what point in history, if any, more or less ritualized ridicule of the sort he cites is supposed to have given way to this kind of purportedly rational, nonritualized, and ethical substitute—or by what means or criteria, if any, such a distinction can be made.

While more detailed discussion of Frazer would lead us too far afield here, it is therefore not frivolous to compare him briefly in a way to his own “savage” king. For in slightly earlier times he might certainly have been executed, in several European countries and elsewhere, for heresy. And if he is now ridiculed instead, on supposedly more ethical and rational grounds, this may be plausibly regarded in terms of the way that academic disciplines and intellectual fashions, like political and artistic movements, not to mention religious cults, characteristically evolve: attempting to purge by ridicule, in addition to mere argument, or force, those who now appall or embarrass the latest practitioners, including their own foundational figures.

The question we are outlining here is, in a sense, a question for all of human history. It could doubtless be posed in different terms for different times and places. But from our perspective, the eighteenth century, and more specifically the French eighteenth century, is a particularly relevant place to start, given its emphasis on what would later be called ritual (the rites and ceremonies prescribed by different religions) as an object of critique. In the writings of deists and atheists alike, of Voltaire and the Baron d’Holbach,
for instance, ritual is routinely reduced to superstition, and the progress of human societies is largely viewed as dependent on its elimination. One could say, too, that, for d’Holbach in particular, all ritual is “mock ritual.” There is virtually no ritual, in his atheist critique of religion, that is not a sham and deserving of mockery. In Voltaire similarly, and particularly in texts from the 1760s such as *The Philosophical Dictionary* and *The Philosophy of History*, ritual is repeatedly presented both as farce and a subject of ridicule.

If ritual is often held in derision during the “age of reason,” this is, quite simply, because it is largely viewed as irrational. In Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopedia*, notably, reason is proposed as the principle authorizing the mockery of the “extravagant ceremonies” of the different religions of the world. The *Encyclopedia* is, moreover, among many other things, a kind of catalogue of ridiculous rituals. The word *buffoon*, for instance, is said to be derived from an ancient Greek ritual in which the sacrificer, after immolating an ox, fled the scene leaving his axe to be judged in his stead. “Since this ceremony and this judgment were completely burlesque,” explains the author of this article, the Abbé Edme Mallet, “the words *buffoonish* and *buffooneries* were used for all the other mummeries and farces that appeared ridiculous.” Similarly, one of the other main contributors to the *Encyclopedia*, Louis de Jaucourt, considers the medieval Feast of Fools “so extravagant that the reader would have a hard time believing it.” Evoking “the farcical and rude ceremonies” that were part of this feast, “almost all of which were derived from Paganism, initiated during unenlightened times, and against which the Church often unleashed its wrath to no avail,” Jaucourt is particularly concerned with the process of enlightenment, which specifically involves in this instance the overcoming of ritual: “the revival of Letters contributed more in the space of fifty years to the abolishment of this old and shameful feast than the ecclesiastical and secular powers in a thousand years.”

These articles from the *Encyclopedia* suggest how the perception of ritual as ridiculous is paired with the idea that it should be abolished. The same association is, moreover, widely observed in Frazer. Yet throughout the modern era, the elimination of ritual, understood either as having already occurred or as ongoing, continually gives rise to substitutive rituals, appearing either as vestiges or as part of a critique, and often as both indistinguishably. We trace this pattern roughly from Voltaire to *Charlie Hebdo*, taking our examples from a variety of sources, including historical memoirs, encyclopedias, newspapers, literature, and film.
The film with which we begin, Patrice Leconte’s award-winning *Ridicule*, is concerned with customs at Versailles in the years prior to the French Revolution, and particularly with various aspects of what we are calling *mock ritual*. The mocking of novices is an essential part of courtly life, and the specific rites enacted by the courtiers are visibly patterned on archaic models. That the ritual humiliations in this film take place in elegant salons with fine food and pretty clothes only accentuates their savagery.

The story is set in the final decades of the eighteenth century, reputedly a time of disenchantment. Leconte’s courtiers, including the clerics, are anticlerical rationalists who cynically reenact more or less empty rituals. *Ridicule* is premised on an opposition between science and ritual as a vestige of magical thinking—essentially the same opposition as in Frazer, and which constantly resurfaces in the modern era. This opposition seems to be resolved in the film’s conclusion, where aristocratic wit is replaced by the Revolutionary rhetoric of social and scientific progress. But we would evidently have to be blind to our own world to take this conclusion at face value and assume that mocking rituals had disappeared, in the filmmakers’ view, with the purging of the French aristocracy.

More generally, modern mock rituals may come in all sorts of guises, purportedly rational or otherwise, from parodic ridicule to pornographic mock crucifixions, from university hazings to medical procedures, and from the penal justice system to the presidential pardoning of the Thanksgiving turkey. Indeed, we do not restrict the term to bloodless procedures, since such things as ISIS executions, for instance, or secular dueling, may also be regarded as more or less grotesque parodies of ritual. Droll contemporary examples are cited in a recent issue of the British magazine *Private Eye* concerning a woman in the Dominican Republic who held her own funeral while still alive (“everything [was provided] for the neighbours to cry as if it really was the last day they would see their dear friend”); a bodybuilder in Kazakhstan who “married” (and “divorced”) dolls (“a proud Agalmatophiliac”); and an invisible “work of art” called *Io Sono* (which “finds form in its own nothingness”) that was sold in May 2021 at the Art-Rite auction house in Milan for 15,000 euros.

A recurrent theme in contemporary popular culture, mock ritual appears also in modern philosophy from Friedrich Nietzsche to Georges Bataille, where it occurs, in part, as a response to a loss of traditional ritual connected to the so-called death of God. But perhaps the most striking illustration of the various aspects of our question is found in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*,...
and particularly the portrayal of the novel's anticlerical pharmacist, Homais, whose claims to modern scientific rationality routinely result not in the end, but in an unwitting reinvention, of ritual. When Homais jokes, for instance, that if he were the government, he would have the priests bled once a month, he is effectively proposing bloodletting as a cure for religion, appealing to a medical practice that was still fashionable in the early nineteenth century and that in some ways replicates, as a purgative and cathartic, the kind of so-called superstitious rituals it is meant to replace. Effectively substituting doctors for priests, Homais calls his Voltairean anticlerical stance a “religion,” and routinely uses magical, expiatory, or sacrificial language in his advertisement of modern medicine.

In view of the controversies surrounding the Enlightenment in recent decades (whether “it” was good or bad, or even occurred in the sense commonly assumed), we should state at the outset that our initial linking of the problem of mock ritual with the eighteenth century runs counter to many narratives of progress associated with this period. With the rituals of enlightened French society analyzed in our second chapter we are very far from Jürgen Habermas’s egalitarian and inclusive conception of the public sphere. In addition, Jonathan I. Israel’s division of the Enlightenment into moderate and radical camps seems largely inconsequential for our inquiry. At a time when public schooling in France was mainly religious and when basic subjects were taught between prayers and catechism—which prompted d’Alembert to say that students usually left school more foolish and ignorant than when they entered—both moderate and radical thinkers, to use Israel’s terms, were opposed to church control of education. The objective of substituting philosophy for religion and reason for faith is common to both the so-called moderate and radical camps—exemplified, respectively, by Voltaire and d’Holbach—as is their concern with rites and ceremonies. If anything, the resurgence of ritual is even more evident among radicals than moderates.

Mockery and parody of ritual are of course not in themselves modern or necessarily secular, but assume a distinctive form when religion becomes a generalized target of rationalist philosophy, and when religious rituals increasingly mutate into secular ones. The general problem of mock ritual thus spans the supposed divide or chasm, if any, between Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment culture, while the modern forms of mockery and ritual we highlight can often be considered both the product and antithesis of “Enlightenment,” alternately condemned and a means of condemnation.
We begin in the past to illuminate what ultimately appears as a thoroughly contemporary dilemma.

Although we focus on examples primarily from Europe and the West, our inquiry could also be extended to other cultures. In rituals of the Zinancanteo Indians of Highland Chiapas, for instance, according to Victoria Reifler Bricker, costumed figures are “allowed to mock curing rites, prayer, and change-of-office ceremonies.” The festival of the water, Yarqa Aspiy, in a Peruvian indigenous community studied by Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, is the occasion for parodies of the Mass and performances of mock weddings, baptisms, and benedictions. Among the Akan in Ghana, as Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes, women “take part in cathartic ‘mocking’ rituals intended to release pent-up feelings against powerful personalities.” In Amazonian ayahuasca ceremonies, reinvented to meet the expectations of Western tourists, indigenous specialists are given to ridiculing apprentice shamans. A ritual associated with the marriage of Shiva in Madurai in Southern India exposes deities no less than humans to derisive humor “that cuts as it comes and cuts as it goes.”

Various aspects of mock ritual figure also in Aimé Césaire’s Tragedy of King Christophe, beginning with the prologue, where political rivals are vicariously represented in a cockfight. According to the stage directions, the entire first act of this play set in early nineteenth-century Haiti “is in farcical and parodic style.” The cast of characters includes not only a buffoon but also a buffoonish “master of ceremonies,” whose role is ostensibly to oversee a ridiculous rehearsal for the king’s coronation. We are told, moreover, that this character is a white man sent to Christophe by the TESCO (Technical, Educational, Scientific Cooperation Organization) to provide assistance to underdeveloped regions. Césaire’s TESCO is visibly a parody of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), founded in 1945—an intentional anachronism bringing history into the present and equating mock ritual with postcolonial politics.

While prominent in Césaire’s tragedy, mock ritual is perhaps the very essence of Jean Rouch’s film Les maîtres fous (The Mad Masters). An early example of cinéma-vérité, this film documents an important annual ritual of the Hauka of the West African city of Accra. Featuring scenes of spirit possession and animal sacrifice, The Mad Masters was alternatively viewed at the time of its release as a mockery of colonial military authorities and a caricature of traditional African customs, as a form of political resistance and as perpetuating racial stereotypes. The varying interpretations of Rouch’s
documentary reflect an ambivalence that is seemingly inseparable from its subject, as evidenced repeatedly in our European examples. The mock (or mocking) ritual of the Hauka is, moreover, presented by Rouch as a “violent game” that mirrors modern Western civilization.

The Hauka ritual in many ways lends itself to comparison with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival laughter. It may be seen, for instance, according to Diane Scheinman, “as a carnivalesque, community rite of political resistance and cultural renewal.” The same could be said of scenes from Césaire’s play depicting “the popular frankness of the marketplace,” use of “abusive language” and “insulting words or expressions,” as well as a burlesque ceremony rehearsal. Presented by Bakhtin as ambivalent, “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding,” carnival laughter is often understood as purely festive and unifying. Our own view is closer to that of Michael Billig who, while partially agreeing with Bakhtin, questions whether there is ultimately a clear distinction between “good” and “bad” laughter, and regards laughter as potentially either unifying or divisive. The problem of laughter as a source of either unity or division, which arises particularly in our chapter on Charlie Hebdo, is captured by a headline in the New York Times from December 2020: “Once a Slogan of Unity, ‘Je Suis Charlie’ Now Divides France.”

What we call the ambivalence of mockery may be viewed as related to the origins of laughter itself. In Violence and the Sacred, for example, René Girard suggests that the “serious” expulsion he saw in sacrificial ritual must have always been accompanied by “an act of expulsion based at least in part on ridicule.” But his emphasis on the probable antiquity of such rituals of derision is counterbalanced by an equal or greater stress on a still more primitive model of laughter, like that of Konrad Lorenz, in which the laugh is not the aggressor but the potential or symbolic victim. Lorenz proposed that “laughter probably evolved by ritualization of a redirected threatening movement” in animals, and that “our human laughter in its original form was [. . . ] an appeasement or greeting ceremony,” the very opposite of aggressive. Similarly, beginning with behavior that precedes speech in children, Girard presents the laughing mock victim in tickling as “one of the most primitive, if not the most primitive form of laughter.” Stressing that such laughter usually only occurs when there is a clear distinction between serious and mock aggression, he nevertheless also underlines how laughter is greatly intensified when the laugh is the mock victim of a threat that is symbolically maximal. Just as “Tickling is mock total warfare on the other’s body,” so,
according to Girard’s perspective, “comedy is intellectual tickling,”56 a kind of mock warfare of the mind. Such a “perilous balance” (as his essay title puts it) between the mock and the serious doubtless illuminates how the one can turn so easily into the other, and why, as has often been observed, “even he who no longer fears anything else in the world fears ridicule.”57

In Girard’s account, laughter itself (like crying) is incarnated in a quasi-ritualized, because essentially figural, behavior of the body, which reacts as if under physical threat, convulsing as if trying to expel an object from its eyes or stomach or lungs. According to him, “Laughter seems closer than tears to a paroxysm that would turn it into actual convulsions, to a climactic experience of rejection and expulsion.”58 In this respect the physiological origins of laughter discussed in “Perilous Balance” echo, at an even more fundamental level, the expulsion-by-ridicule or laughter mentioned in Violence and the Sacred. Observing, in addition, that “in the modern world our everyday, very much diluted forms of social ostracism are generally based on ridicule,” Girard also claims that “much contemporary literature is explicitly or implicitly based on this phenomenon.”59 Several parts of our book explore this intuition.

Our work has a number of precedents in classical anthropology, philosophy, and ritual studies. Though distant from us in his approach, we may mention Hans-Georg Soeffner’s chapter from The Order of Rituals titled “Rituals of Anti-Ritualism.”60 More direct is the influence of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno who, in Dialectic of Enlightenment, propose, for instance, that “the history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice,”61 and that such introversion takes a particularly deceptive form in Enlightenment claims to have transcended sacrificial ritual via rationality.62

As mentioned previously, the problem of mock ritual could doubtless be approached from different angles, drawing on different sources than ours. One might consider, for instance, the ritualized performances of early Dada,63 or the rituals of Surrealism64 and Acéphale.65 Our own choice of materials follows from our initial linking of modern mock ritual with the Enlightenment—a period associated with the idea of a fundamental break with the past.66 Beginning with a film set in the eighteenth century that spawned comparisons with late-twentieth-century society, we then proceed chronologically from Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopedia to the twenty-first century with Charlie Hebdo. Each of our chapters is either devoted or directly refers to the eighteenth century. We emphasize Flaubert because his
elaboration of the problem of mock ritual in many ways anticipates our own. The chapter on post-Enlightenment dueling offers an exemplary historical illustration of the relation between official ritual and unofficial mock ritual we discuss throughout the book. In addition, while writing chapters concerned with the past, we often reflected on aspects of ritual and the role of mockery in contemporary secular society. As teachers in American universities who were brought up respectively in Canada and Scotland, the examples that came to mind for us were mainly British and American rather than French. Some of the fruits of our reflection appear in our postscript.

Our exploration of mock ritual can be considered as an extension of the study of ritual per se during the period when the meaning of the word evolved, according to Talal Asad, from “a script for regulating practice” to “a type of practice.” Starting from the premise stated by Asad and others that the very concept of ritual is intimately related to modernity—at once the site of its invention and the reflection of an antiritualism associated with secular societies—we attempt to trace the evolution of mock ritual, in various forms, throughout the modern era. We use the word ritual without rehearsing or refining its ordinary dictionary definitions. The examples of expiations, initiations, and baptisms we draw from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, for instance, will be easily recognized by readers; and we use the term, moreover, in accordance with any number of twentieth-century and contemporary authors we cite, from Mary Douglas to Michael Taussig, from Erving Goffman to Gaye Tuchman, and from Jessie Weston to David Lodge. When Goffman, for instance, observes that “the person in our urban secular world is allotted a kind of sacredness that is displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts,” and that “profanations are to be expected, for every religious ceremony creates the possibility of a black mass,” he effectively describes both a form of secular ritual and its susceptibility to parody.

Our emphasis on the resurgence of ritual forms within what appears as an ongoing process of rational elimination recalls A. M. Hocart’s observation that since it is “in a state of perpetual flux,” “ritual may become the negation of ritual” or equally, as we argue, vice versa. As secular substitutes have replaced religious rituals in modernity, so these too, vulnerable to similar treatment, proliferate. Our study of this process is interrogative and exploratory rather than prescriptive: we draw no final conclusions about what should or should not be mocked, for example, or the degree to which rational behavior can be satisfactorily distinguished, at least in principle, from ritual and the sacred, whether religious or secular in conception.
Deconstructions of ritual, from Asad and Catherine Bell to Philippe Buc, have helped shape our thinking without moving us to significantly revise our vocabulary. Rationalist attempts to purge the practice of ritual are not without potential analogies to critical attempts to dismantle the concept and get rid of the term altogether. In her first book, devoted largely to questioning assumptions and practices associated with ritual, Bell nonetheless foresaw the many difficulties entailed in discarding it, for instance “eventually find[ing] that the disgraced presuppositions of the abandoned term had resurfaced in a newly deployed set of categories” or “end[ing] up simply repackaging older problems in new jargon.” Similarly, while cautioning, in *The Dangers of Ritual*, against using “the concept, and even the term, of ritual” for the historiography of the Middle Ages, Buc ultimately acknowledges having been unable to avoid doing so himself. He endorses Bell’s deconstruction, but in the same breath faults her “alternate concept, that of ‘ritualization’” as being “very much open to the same criticisms that she levies against ritual.” Indeed the immediate reintroduction of the putatively purged concept seems evident in the terms themselves.

If applying the word *ritual* to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought is anachronistic, it is only marginally so. While she follows Asad in underlining a shift in the meaning of *ritual* from “a script for regulating practice” in the earliest editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (from 1771 to 1852) to “a type of practice” in the 1910 edition, Bell notes that “the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a more complicated picture of the evidence that Asad deduces from the *Britannica*.” Her comment is, to say the very least, understated. The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains several examples of definitions other than scriptural from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, specifically “the prescribed form or order of religious or ceremonial rites,” and “a ritual act or ceremonial observance.” Decades prior to the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, for instance, Henry Stebbing wrote that “sects or heresies may be formed about rituals as well as about points of doctrine.” And we could add examples not cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, including Herman Melville’s evocation in *Typee*—first published in 1846 during the period when ritual was still defined as a “book” in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*—of a space “set apart for the celebration of the fantastical religious ritual” of the Marquesan Islanders.

Our own retention of the term is consistent with usage in the field of ritual studies as represented by Ronald L. Grimes, Ute Hüsken, and Barry Stephenson. With the spirit of openness characteristic of ritual studies
from its beginnings, Grimes writes, in *Fictive Ritual*, of a need to attend to “the ways ritual is imagined both in specific works of literature and in popular culture generally,” and to “theories that enable scholars to shuttle between the study of ritual and literary criticism.”81 We had sometimes feared that our work would be too “literary” for students of ritual and too “ritualistic” for literary critics.
1

Ridicule

Often, the less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Chosen as the opening film at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival, and recipient of several awards, including for Best Film in France and Best Film not in the English Language in England, Patrice Leconte’s *Ridicule* was one of the most successful French movies of its decade.1 While much of the commentary focused on its artistic quality, critics were also led to wonder what a film ostensibly concerned with the past might tell us about the present.2 The following pages are devoted to Leconte’s depiction of ritualized mockery as a social ill and the question of how what was relevant to the eighteenth century may remain so today.

*Ridicule* tells the story of a country nobleman, Grégoire Ponceludon de Malavoy, and his adventures at the court of Louis XVI. Distressed at seeing the local peasants dying of fever, Ponceludon goes to Versailles to request assistance for a project to drain the pestilent swamps on his estate. At court, his simple manners and humanitarian objectives are met with indifference. Only wit will gain him recognition.

A quotation from the Duke de Guines displayed as an intertitle at the beginning of the film—“In this country, vices are without consequence, but ridicule can kill”—sets the tone for everything that follows. One character commits suicide because of his repeated humiliations. Another is so wounded by a remark after falling on the dance floor that he goes into exile. Parties and gatherings are punctuated by well-turned insults. And when one rival finally succumbs in a duel, this is only an extension of a verbal contest that is part of daily life.

In a review published in *New York* magazine, David Denby asked, “Can we believe it? Is any of it true? Did these people do nothing but sit around
uttering pompous epigrams and playing tricks on one another?" 3 Similar questions were raised, if not regarding Stephen Frears's 1988 film, *Dangerous Liaisons*, to which *Ridicule* was almost invariably compared, then about Choderlos de Laclos’s novel from 1782 on which Frears's film was based. Presented as a collection of letters from actual correspondence, the work is preceded by a fictive publisher’s note questioning its authenticity. But the publisher’s primary argument, that the work’s immoral characters could not possibly have lived in Laclos’s philosophical age, is visibly false. And Laclos’s imitation of social reality is so convincing that the novel was, until relatively recently, widely taken to be based on genuine correspondence. 4

The interplay of fiction and reality is equally complex in *Ridicule*, parts of which, including the story of the Chevalier de Milletail who leaves for America after being humiliated at a ball, are drawn from the *Memoirs of the Comtesse de Boigne*. 5 But the film’s success cannot, of course, be attributed entirely to its historical accuracy, particularly given the insistence of reviewers on the story’s relevance to the late twentieth century. Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, compared the eighteenth-century milieu of *Ridicule*, “insincere, obsessed with appearances and armed with well-developed systems of humiliation,” to today’s Hollywood. 6 And, according to Mireille Rosello, Ponceludon’s dilemma, as to whether he must play dirty to succeed, “is narrativized in ways that are almost uncomfortably too close to current cultural debates.” 7

Set in the early 1780s, *Ridicule* depicts a way of life and a form of amusement that would, in principle, disappear during the French Revolution. The question of the erosion of comedy, or at least of cruel comedy, by social progress is, however, no less relevant today than then. In a recent interview with *Le Figaro*, for instance, writer and director Francis Veber reflects on the hobbling of comedy by political correctness. 8 Veber’s own films, including his award-winning 1998 comedy, *Le dîner de cons (The Dinner Game)*, 9 are generally defiant of modern taboos. And in spite of Leconte’s observation that he found *Ridicule* “rather politically correct” on a first viewing, 10 it actually has much in common with *The Dinner Game*. In Veber’s comedy, a prominent publisher, Pierre Brochant, attends a weekly dinner with a group of Parisian businessmen to which each of the guests brings an “idiot” for them to make fun of. The setting is no longer the court of Louis XVI, but late-twentieth-century Paris. But, as in *Ridicule*, comic effect is created at the expense of a victim, and social distinctions are based on wit.
As with *Ridicule* again, *The Dinner Game* is based on reality. In an interview from 1998 with the online magazine CINOPSIS, Veber stated that the idiots’ dinner “really existed” and that he knew people who took part in it.\(^\text{11}\) And just as reviewers of *Ridicule* were drawn to the film’s resonance with current social issues, it is easy to find historical precedents for *The Dinner Game*. An article published on the French citizen journalism website *AgoraVox* displaying the poster for Veber’s film invites a comparison with the adventures of eighteenth-century author Antoine-Henri Poinsinet, “repeatedly the victim of what today would be called ‘idiot’s dinners.’”\(^\text{12}\) The story of Poinsinet, which dates from the 1750s, was widely told in the following decades and published in an appendix to Jean Monnet’s memoirs in 1772. But if Poinsinet was notoriously a victim of idiot’s dinners, he was by no means the only victim of what had, by the time Laclos wrote *Dangerous Liaisons*, become a well-established feature of Parisian life. The scene from Stephen Frears’s film where the Vicomte de Valmont writes a letter to Madame de Tourvel using his mistress, a prostitute named Émilie, as a writing desk, for instance, takes place in Laclos’s novel following a dinner where Émilie and a group of friends make fun of a wealthy Dutchman. One may also think of the dinners organized by Valmont’s rival, Prévan, to ridicule his mistresses, and by the Marquise de Merteuil to ridicule Prévan.

A dinner, called not an “idiots’” but a “wits’ dinner,” is also featured in *Ridicule*. Following a scene where the Comtesse de Blayac and the Abbé de Vilecourt are caught cheating by Ponceludon at “bouts-rimés” (a poetic game), Vilecourt is worried that Ponceludon will ridicule him in front of the king. The Comtesse, however, has a plan to make sure that Ponceludon never sits at the king’s table: “I’ll have a dinner. . . . And serve Ponceludon de Malavoy a dish of ridicule.” This scene has been compared by critics to an “execution.”\(^\text{13}\) And while Ponceludon is, of course, not literally “executed,” the dinner does, however, result in a social execution akin to that of Milletail who, we may recall, had gone into exile after being humiliated at a ball. As a result of the dinner, Ponceludon goes back to his marshy estate. Only when a young boy he had promised to help dies from the fever does he resolve to return to Versailles.

The Comtesse de Blayac’s dinner is a kind of comedy, largely scripted, and with all of the guests playing their part. The Comtesse begins by observing that there are thirteen of them and that to avoid such an unlucky number, they must either have a servant come to sit with them or have someone leave. The idea of a servant sitting at the table being judged unacceptable, the
Abbé de Vilecourt proposes a contest in which the person who has shown the least wit when the soup arrives will go. The ensuing conversation follows a preestablished order, with Vilecourt responding to a question from the Comtesse and the other guests speaking in turn. Throughout the exchange of witticisms, the Comtesse distracts Ponceludon by caressing and sexually arousing him, so that when finally he speaks, after everyone else and only when he is prompted, as if awaking from a daydream, he misquotes a line from Voltaire. Suddenly aware of the Comtesse’s treachery, Ponceludon acknowledges defeat and takes his leave.

Everything in this scene is conducted according to the protocol set by the Comtesse, whose husband, the Comte de Blayac, was responsible for the humiliation of Milletail. While this dinner is, in a sense, as Virginie Gournay and Yves Le Troquer have said, an execution, it may be more specifically termed a sacrifice. The unlucky number thirteen, which is the pretext for the contest, is reminiscent of the number present at the Last Supper. And by virtue of his comparing the Comtesse to Judas for betraying him, Ponceludon implicitly compares himself to Jesus Christ. The sacrificial character of the scene is suggested, moreover, by the Chevalier de Saint-Tronchain’s response to the concern over there being thirteen of them at the table: “Que le moins titré d’entre nous se sacrifie.”

In this scene as elsewhere, the sacrificial vocabulary disappears from the English subtitles. “Que le moins titré d’entre nous se sacrifie” becomes “He of lowest rank [must leave].” Later, when Ponceludon is tripped on the dance floor, “Qui sera la prochaine victime?” is translated as “Whose turn is next?” The same tendency is visible in modern English translations of Les Liaisons dangereuses where Laclos’s sacrificial vocabulary is often replaced with more neutral expressions. In Helen Constantine’s 2007 Penguin translation, Valmont speaks of “put[ting] off” writing a letter, Prévan of “giving up” his box at the theater, and Merteuil of “giv[ing] up” the idea of bringing Danceny with her to her country house. Douglas Parmée’s 1995 Oxford translation similarly offers alternatives to “sacrifice,” notably in passages where the word is used in the libertine sense of “giving up” a lover for someone else.

Attenuation of Laclos’s language may be motivated by a variety of different reasons. These could be stylistic, to avoid what may appear as undue repetitions, or “cultural,” having to do, for instance, with our sense of greater distance from religion. What is certain, though, when modern translators attenuate Laclos’s usage of sacrifice, is the loss of continuity between its metaphorical and literal senses. If the usage of the word, particularly in the
first half of the novel, is mostly metaphorical—for instance, when Valmont speaks of “sacrificing” his time to stay in the country with his aunt, Madame de Rosemonde—it becomes more literal toward the end. According to their arrangement, Merteuil is to be the “reward” for Valmont’s seduction of Madame de Tourvel. When finally Madame de Tourvel “capitulates,” the Marquise reneges on her promise, evoking the “sacrifices” she would demand of him and that, she says, he would be unable to make. The powerful ending to the novel hinges largely on the confusion surrounding these statements. Initially understood by Valmont as a demand for him to give up Cécile Volanges, the Marquise’s words in fact refer to Madame de Tourvel. But the ambiguity regarding the identity of the victim is coupled with a further confusion as to the nature of the “sacrifices.” With both Cécile and Madame de Tourvel, the prospect of being “given up” is part of a larger, more sinister scenario. Merteuil, who has set herself up as a “Divinity, with blind mortals vying in their prayers to [her] while she never change[s] [her] immutable decrees,” conspires with Valmont to “turn [Cécile] into a real disaster.”

Pregnant by Valmont without knowing it, Cécile suffers a miscarriage, is publicly disgraced when the correspondence between Merteuil and Valmont is circulated, and ends up committing herself to a convent. Similarly, after receiving a letter from Valmont, but dictated by Merteuil, explaining that a woman whom he desperately loves is insisting that he “give her up,” Madame de Tourvel falls gravely ill, becomes delirious, and dies in the midst of deep spiritual torment, unable to survive her shame and her misfortune.

The sacrifice of Cécile and of Madame de Tourvel is part of the novel’s tragic denouement culminating in the death of Valmont and the ostracism of the Marquise. The components of the tragedy are, however, first presented in a comic mode. The coupling of sacrifice and ridicule that we find in Leconte’s film is equally prominent in Dangerous Liaisons. As the Marquise explains to him, Valmont “sacrifices” Madame de Tourvel because he himself is afraid of ridicule: “You would have sacrificed a thousand more rather than be laughed at.” Similarly, Madame de Tourvel, prior to receiving the letter where Valmont announces he is leaving her, writes in despair to Madame de Rosemonde, saying that she has been “sacrificed” by Valmont after being publicly ridiculed by Émilie, whom she encounters by chance next to him at the Opera: “What you will scarcely believe is that this same girl, who had apparently an odious knowledge of who I am, did not leave the carriage window, nor stop staring at me, and was attracting everyone’s attention by laughing quite openly.”