THE POWER OF LAUGHTER AND SATIRE IN EARLY MODERN BRITAIN

Political and Religious Culture, 1500–1820

EDITED BY MARK KNIGHTS AND ADAM MORTON

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List of Abbreviations

EEBO	Early English Books Online
BL	British Library
BM	British Museum
BM Satires	Frederic George Stephens and Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, 11 vols, London, 1870
ELH	*English Literary History*
LP	*Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII,* ed. J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R. H. Brodie, 1862–1910
NPG	National Portrait Gallery, London
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
SP	State Papers Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, the National Archives, Kew
STC	*A Short-title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475–1640*, 2nd edn, revised and enlarged, 1976–86
TNA	The National Archive
Wing	*A Short-title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America, and of English Books Printed in other Countries, 1641–1700*, Donald Goddard Wing
WMS	Bodleian Library, Oxford University, MS J. Walker

Introduction
Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain 1500–1800

MARK KNIGHTS AND ADAM MORTON

This volume argues that laughter and satire played significant roles in political processes and social practices in a range of historical contexts in early modern Britain. Their role was contradictory and ambiguous: laughter and satire both defined or solidified communal boundaries by confronting those who breached social mores *and* offered potent ways to challenge and corrode those boundaries. Satire did not necessarily provoke laughter, and not all laughter was satirical, but the two were often closely intertwined even though they had slightly separate histories and purposes: both raised questions about when they were appropriate and, as a result, both occupied a highly ambiguous and contested space. Both could foster common identities whilst at the same time being capable of dividing, attacking and subverting those identities, cultural assumptions or political and religious positions. Indeed, this vibrant duality, constructive and destructive, and the fundamental ambiguity about when laughter was appropriate, are reflected in the linguistic inventiveness of the early modern period, when new words to describe types of laughter were forged or when old words acquired new meanings.

To understand what past cultures laughed at, and why they found certain types of laughter objectionable in certain contexts, is to open a window onto the social mores and assumptions of those cultures: to understand in what ways they are both familiar and unfamiliar to us. Because laughter is an instant reaction, it speaks to the heart of those mores. In the words of Robert Darnton: 'When you realise that you are not getting something – a joke, a proverb, a ceremony – that is particularly meaningful to the natives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it.'[1] Getting the joke helps us to 'get' at fundamental assumptions in a given society or culture.

[1] Robert Darnton, 'Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin', idem, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 2001): p. 78.

The Problem of Laughter

Early modern approaches to laughter are generally divided into five (sometimes overlapping) concepts: *superiority*, in which to laugh is to celebrate one's superiority over the object of laughter, who is mocked and derided by our doing so (laughing *at someone or something*); *sociability*, in which laughter entertains and brings together or bonds groups and communities (laughing *with someone*); *reforming*, in which laughter and satire played a key role in exposing error, hypocrisy and vice; *incongruity*, which sees laughter as a reaction to the surprise found in perceiving something incongruous, whether that be logical impossibility, an absurdity or something irrelevant, inappropriate or unconventional; and *relief*, which primarily understands laughter in a physiological sense or as a means of releasing repressed energy, whether as an aspect of psychology or social and cultural group dynamics.[2] Tracing the history of these approaches to laughter tells us much about how laughter was understood differently at different moments in the past, and about the ambiguous and contested nature of each of these categories.

Superiority

In the earlier half of the period that this volume considers (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) the superiority theory was often given a large place by commentators. This is generally associated with the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who, despite giving this theory its most powerful articulation, essentially reworked ideas inherited from classical culture (as Adam Morton shows in this volume, Chapter 5).[3] For Hobbes, laughing was an aggressive by-product of humanity's innately individualistic and competitive nature. In any society, humans are prone to seek signs of their standing and ways of enhancing that standing. Laughter is a means of doing both. Winning makes us feel good and losing makes us feel bad, and laughter is the result of us perceiving our superiority over someone else and – as an aggressive act of mockery – a way of marking that superiority socially. It is, simply put, the 'sudden glory' or pleasure taken in perceiving our superiority over someone who has said, done or experienced something to make them ridiculous.[4] Hobbes's contemporary René Descartes posited a similar explanation for laughter in his *Passions of the Soul* (1649), in which he depicts laughter as the 'joy mingled with hatred' that accompanies the expression of scorn and ridicule towards another.[5] Collapsing laughter into an act of aggression bent on vaunting ourselves over others does not resonate easily in the twenty-first century. Objections to the superiority

2 Up to eight major types of laughter have been suggested. Patricia Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues', *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, ed. J. H. Goldstein and P. McGhee (New York, 1972).

3 Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, 2nd edn (London, 1969): p. 42.

4 See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civill*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, 1996), chapters 14 and 15, quotation at p. 92.

5 René Descartes, 'The Passions of the Soul', *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge, 1911), vol. 1, 178th Article.

theory in modern treatments of laughter rest on noting that a range of other motivations and prompts lay behind laughter, most of which do not rely on us comparing ourselves with the cause of laughter: we may laugh at something that surprises us, at the dexterity of physical comedy, at odd combinations of words, or we may laugh at ourselves. None of these examples involve enjoying 'sudden glory' over others.[6]

What matters for this volume, however, is that aggressive superiority was seen as the most prominent component of laughter for much of the early modern period. The early modern words used to describe this type of laughter were numerous: besides medieval coinages such as 'scoffing', 'jesting', 'mocking' and 'scorning' there were early modern innovations such as 'smirking at' (c.1500), 'railing' (OED, 1507), 'taunting' (OED, 1529), 'deriding' (OED, 1545), 'jeering' (OED, 1553), 'drolling' (OED, 1654; adj, 1623), 'jibing' (a mid-sixteenth-century innovation), 'bantering' (1677), 'ridiculing' (OED, 1680; noun, 1658), 'sneering' (OED, 1680) and 'roasting' (OED, 1710). This inventive profusion of terms underlines how ubiquitous 'superiority' was; how it was growing across the first half of our period as society fractured into groups laughing at each other, necessitating new words to catch all its subtle nuances; and also how, whilst Hobbes and Descartes may be best known for talking about 'superiority' laughter, this type was far from being the preserve of intellectual discourse but was readily and commonly available to all. This pervasiveness sharpened the danger in laughter, for it was a widely shared means of belittling social status, authority and belief, and hence became a potent weapon of polemical protest. These themes are considered in many of the chapters in this volume.

Descartes and Hobbes developed the association of laughter and mockery that they inherited from the classical and Christian traditions. In classical literature, laughter was generally understood as a public derision of the ridiculous, or other aberration. Plato posited laughter as a malicious blend of pleasure and pain taken in perceiving the ridiculous. The ridiculous were those who displayed vice, the worst of which was self-ignorance. Those whom we laugh at imagine themselves to be better (more virtuous, intelligent, attractive) than is the case – in laughing at them we delight in something evil (self-ignorance), which makes laughter's malicious pleasure morally abhorrent. As something that displayed pleasure in perceiving vice, laughter was an emotion that overrode the faculty of reason, and was therefore something to be avoided as a source of social enmity (the object of laughter may react violently) and madness (by overpowering reason), a point on which subsequent stoic philosophers agreed.[7] In the ideal state, Plato consequently urged that laughter was to be policed. Aristotle accepted that wit was a valuable part of civil conversation, but agreed with Plato that laughter – as an educated form of ignorance – primarily expressed scorn. Where tragedy deals with the heroic, comedy deals with those of lesser virtue or the ridiculous whom the audience looks down upon; and jokes were

6 Lambert Deckers, 'On the Validity of a Weight-Judging Paradigm for the Study of Humor', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 6 (1993): pp.43–56; John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester, 2009), chs 1 and 5.

7 *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, 1982), *The Republic* 3.388: pp. 632–4; *Laws* 5.732 and 11.935: pp. 1318–19, 1485–6.

a form of abuse that induced pain.[8] In both cases laughter expressed hostility and, consequently, was ethically problematic. Laughter was also equated with hostility and derision in the Christian tradition. In the Bible, God only laughs with hostility (Psalm 2:2–5); and his prophets equally resort to laughter to ridicule and scorn. Elijah mocks the gods of the prophets of Baal before having the latter slain (1 Kings 18); and mocking the prophet Elisha is met with punishment by death (2 Kings 2).[9] Both the classical and Christian traditions, then, bequeathed the early modern period a concept of laughing at, rather than with, and understood laughter as an act concerned with asserting authority over its object in order to publicly diminish it and proclaim one's superiority over it. For this reason, laughter was understood by some to be socially corrosive and/or riotous – something vulgar or impolite that was best avoided and in need of policing.

Sociability and its Limits

The idea of laughing *with*, of engaging in social bonding through laughter, was nevertheless very much alive in the early modern period. The adjective 'merry' was an Old English coinage, but 'merriment' – denoting participation in amusing and enjoyable activities – was a late-sixteenth-century innovation and reflected the idea both of a joke (a seventeenth-century word, first emerging in 1656 but only popularised later in the century)[10] and a comic or dramatic entertainment that was designed to be shared. In the later seventeenth century the 'Penny Merriment' was born – a cheap, humorous or scurrilous publication that was capacious in its range. Samuel Pepys, before his death in 1703, collected 115 small books or *chapbooks*, *histories*, *amorous tales*, *jests* and *accounts of rogues and fools*.[11] These often served to construct social norms as much as subvert them. Pepys's collection was clearly intended for shared enjoyment and entertainment. Similarly there were spaces in which bonds were forged through sociable laughter. Mark Hailwood's work has shown how tavern culture reflected a rumbustious 'good fellowship'.[12] Indeed, laughter's constructive role can be discerned in the developing terminology. Although the verb 'amuse' had a much earlier origin (to delude, to cheat), its meaning 'to divert, please with anything light or cheerful; tickle the fancy' was an early seventeenth-century development (OED, 1633). 'Amused' (1600), 'amusement', in the sense of tickling the fancy (1698), amusing, in the sense of 'engaging the mind or attention in a pleasing way' (1712) all emerged in these years.

8 *Rhetoric* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols (Princeton, 1984), vol. 2, bk. 2, sect. 12; *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *ibid.*, vol. 2, bk. 4, sect. 8.

9 I. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (New York, 1997): pp. 24–5.

10 *The Academy of Pleasure* (1656) promised, in its subtitle, to teach readers how 'to retort, quibble, jest or joke'. OED gives first usage as 1671.

11 Pepys arranged his ballads into four categories, one of which was 'Penny Merriments'. *Samuel Pepys' Penny Merriments: Being a Collection of Chapbooks, Full of Histories, Jests, Magic, Amorous Tales of Courtship, Marriage and Infidelity, Accounts of Rogues and Fools, Together with Comments on the Times*, ed. R. Thompson (London, 1976).

12 Mark Hailwood, *Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2014).

Moreover, both the classical and Christian traditions contained justifications of allowable laughter, a latitude that exposed and perpetuated an essential ambiguity about how laughter was conceptualised and thereby rendered laughter a contested matter, especially when negotiating the boundaries of licit and illicit laughter in the religious sphere. Thus in an acceptable form, set out in Isaac Barrow's 1678 sermon on Ephesians 5:4, there was a role for jests: 'jocular discourse' could be profitable and pleasurable, and Barlow admired surprising conceits, 'a nimble sagacity of apprehension, a special felicity of invention, a vivacity of spirit', word play and witty allusions. He even allowed a certain indefinable quality in humour: 'often it consisteth in one knows not what, and springeth up one can hardly tell how'.[13] But for many religious commentators, including Barrow, there were limits and constraints. Jests were tolerable, he thought, where they were 'innocent and reasonable, conformable to good manners (regulated by common sense and consistent with the tenour of Christian Duty, that is, not transgressing the bounds of Piety, Charity and Sobriety)'. But he and others admitted that negotiating those boundaries was often really hard. James Ferguson wrote, when glossing St Paul, 'it is a task of no small difficulty to keep within the bounds of lawfull and allowed mirth and recreation, especially when recreating our spirits by pleasant and delightfull discourse, so that we exceed not either in matter or manner; considering that what is inoffensive at one time and place, and to some persons, may be irritating and offensive at, and to others'.[14] As Jennifer Richards has demonstrated, the boundaries of acceptable jesting often chaffed ideals of moderate discourse and behaviour.[15]

These lines became particularly contested in politico-religious disputes when polemic fostered bonds within one group but did so at the expense of others. Such disputes usually generated heat not just over the substance at issue but also over the manner in which the debate took place and, in particular, over the role of laughter in the verbal parrying. The Marprelate controversy of the early 1580s, for example, brought this home. The polemical persona, Martin Marprelate, proclaims: 'I jested because I dealt with a worshipful jester, Dr Bridges, whose writings and sermons tend to no other end than to make men laugh.'[16] Yet his critics saw 'Martin' as engaged in improper *ad hominem* invective.[17] As Francis Bacon put it, in a work only published in 1641, 'To search and rip up wounds with a laughing countenance; to intermix Scripture and scurrility sometime in one sentence; is a thing far from the devout reverence of a Christian […] the majesty of religion and the contempt and deformity of things ridiculous, are things as distant as things can be.'[18] The ambiguous role of laughter in relation to religion, both creating communities and

13 Isaac Barrow, *Several Sermons Against Evil Speaking* (1678), sermon two: p. 45.
14 James Ferguson, *A Brief Exposition of the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (1659), ii. 330–1.
15 Jennifer Richards, 'Health, Intoxication, and Civil Conversation in Renaissance England', *Past and Present* (2014), Supplement 9: pp. 169–86.
16 Martin Marprelate, *Oh Read Over Dr. John Bridges* (Fawlsey, 1588): p. 2
17 Thomas Cooper, *Admonition to the People of England* (London, 1589).
18 Francis Bacon, *A Wise and Moderate Discourse* (London, 1641) p. 7.

undermining others, is apparent in several chapters in this volume. Murray (Chapter 1) and McCall (Chapter 4) explore types of anticlericalism; and Knights (Chapter 9) examines religious parody. Each of these sees the construction or bolstering of a group identity (Protestant, Church of England and Radical) by laughing with them, at others. Each of these groups were also reformist, our third way of thinking about laughter, which will be dealt with in the section on satire that follows after the exploration of 'incongruity' and 'relief', since it also draws on both of these.

'Incongruity'

The 'superiority' concept of laughter was challenged by the suggestion that laughter was instead provoked by 'incongruity': that is, the perception of something that breaches our expectations or conventions.[19] Systematic thinking about this was most evident in the eighteenth century. Francis Hutcheson's *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* (1750) posited that feelings of superiority are neither a sufficient nor a necessary cause of laughter.[20] Comparison with the object of laughter is not a prerequisite for laughter – we may laugh at odd figures of speech, for example. Moreover, acknowledging our superiority over someone – a beggar, for example – is not in itself sufficient for laughter (self-comparison in that example may evoke pity instead). Hutcheson argued that the incongruous was a more common cause of laughter.[21] In 'Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition' (1779) James Beattie stressed that laughter arose 'from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage', the surprise or absurdity of something that does not fit our conventional or expected patterns of thought.[22] Beattie thus focused on what was ludicrous or ridiculous, though he distinguished between them: the former excited 'pure laughter' whereas the ridiculous excited 'laughter mixed with disapprobation or contempt'.[23] Thus even the 'incongruity' theory contained within it seeds of the 'superiority', though Beattie denied this a prominent role because he saw abhorrence and risibility as opposite passions – incongruity ceased to be ludicrous (and hence to provoke laughter) when it excited emotions such as disapprobation, indignation or disgust.[24]

Although the incongruity theory reached maturation in the eighteenth century, it nevertheless had much older roots. 'Incongruous' was itself an early

[19] M. Clark, 'Humour and Incongruity', *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, 1987): pp. 139–55; W. Martin, 'Humour and the Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities', *ibid.*: pp. 172–86; John Morreall, 'Enjoying Incongruity', *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 2 (1989): pp. 1–18.

[20] Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* (Glasgow, 1750).

[21] Ibid.: pp. 5–9, 11–13, 19–22 in particular.

[22] James Beattie, 'Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', *Essays*, 3rd edn (London, 1779): p. 318.

[23] Ibid.: pp. 302, 326.

[24] Ibid., ch. 3, esp. pp. 334, 344, 416, 424. Although he did not use the term 'incongruous', Kant's position on laughter was comparable to Beattie. See I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 2007): pp. 135, 160–1.

seventeenth-century coinage (OED, 1623), with 'incongruity' shortly preceding it (OED, 1597). Similar meanings were attached to humorous attributes of 'absurd' ('causing amusement or derision', OED, 1716) and 'ludicrous' (OED, 1619 – though in its humorous sense later in the seventeenth century). Indeed, 'incongruity' was apparent in several other keywords (as the discussion of 'wit' will shortly explain) and genres that predated the eighteenth century's focus on its importance. One was parody, a form used in classical antiquity but not given an English verbal coinage until 1607. Parody played on congruity and incongruity: the genre both sought to emulate and to subvert by producing an outcome at odds with the original. In the early nineteenth century the satirist and anti-corruption campaigner William Hone planned a history of parody and collected materials for it, with the earliest pieces stretching back to the sixteenth-century Reformation, with Martin Luther's parodying scripture and the ferment around the Civil Wars helping to establish the interplay of congruity and incongruity.[25] The joco-serious or 'jest in earnest' explicitly placed the humorous and the serious together to produce incongruity.[26] 'Jest in earnest' was a well-known phrase by the late sixteenth century, and many proverbs – known to be circulating in the seventeenth century – carried varieties of the jest-in-earnest incongruity.[27] The joco-serious style was adopted in periodicals such as Marchmont Nedham's *Mercurius Politicus* (which announced that it had to be written 'in a Jocular way, or else it will never bee cryed vp').[28] Indeed, Heraclitus, the philosopher known for his weeping, and Democritus, the laughing philosopher, often gave their name to periodicals – Heraclitus was frequently styled 'ridens' in titles to make him both weep and laugh. Both parody and the joco-serious provided platforms for satire, which was often concerned with incongruities, mismatches between appearances and reality. Consequently, both parody and the joco-serious were, on occasion, highly contentious modes of writing.

Physiology and Relief

Early modernity saw laughter as a bodily function but also as shaped by the make-up of the body. We can see this embedded in two slightly different ways of describing laughter. The first focused on 'humours'. As Louis Cazamian showed, the modern sense of 'humour' as intimately associated with laughter grew out of a classical notion of 'the humours', the balance in the body of the four humours that was the foundation for much early modern thinking about medicine.[29] The shift in the meaning

[25] On Hone, see Chapter 9, this volume.

[26] Raymond Anselment, *'Betwixt Jest and Earnest': Marprelate, Milton, Marvell, Swift and the Decorum of Religious Ridicule* (Toronto, 1979). Early references to this can be found from 1612. See Thomas Delaney, *Thomas of Reading* (London, 1612), sig. B3. 'Joco-Serious' is first used in 1641. See Roger L'Estrange, *The Relaps'd Apostate* (1641), sig. B3v.

[27] *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Morris Palmer Tilley (Ann Arbor, 1950): pp. 95, 168, 346–7, 529, 545.

[28] Joad Raymond, *Making the News: An Anthology of the Newsbooks of Revolutionary England, 1641–1660* (Moreton-In-Marsh, 1993): p. 335.

[29] Louis Cazamian, *The Development of English Humor*, 3 vols (New York, 1930–52; reprinted 1965).

of 'humour' occurred over the course of the seventeenth century. A significant development was the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century idea, apparent in many of Ben Jonson's plays, that a dominant humour, when it exaggerated and distorted someone's behaviour, mood, temperament and outlook, rendered the person comical. But it was not until the mid- to late seventeenth century, according to the OED, that 'humour' emerged in the modern sense of being able to appreciate or express what is comical and amusing. That shift owed much to the link between laughter and wit, which will be examined below. For now, we can acknowledge that 'humour' acquired a new, initially character-based, meaning of comedy – and that, moreover, Sir William Temple thought this humour was peculiarly English: the notion was 'hard to be expressed in any other' language and he believed the nation displayed 'more sharpness of wit, more pleasantness of humour, more range of fancy, more penetration of thought' than its European neighbours.[30]

A second way in which laughter was rooted in the body was in the idea of physical relief and release: laughter does in the nervous system what a pressure-relief valve does in a steam boiler. Descriptions of laughter making the subject weep or laugh 'heartily', or erupting out in a 'burst', are commonplace. Rather than an aggressive assertion of superiority, then, laughter was also seen as a physical action primarily concerned with relieving psychological and physical strain. This approach to humour found expression in Shaftesbury's *An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1709). Shaftesbury's point of departure was a commonplace of contemporary natural philosophy, which stated that the brain was connected to muscles by the nerves and that the latter animated the muscles by carrying animal spirits. As a physical act, then, laughter was the release of excess animal spirits that had built up pressure in the nervous system.[31] This understanding had many points of contact with the models of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) almost two centuries later. In 'On the Physiology of Laughter' (1860) Spencer suggested that laughter was the product of emotions taking physical form in a nervous energy released by the motion of the muscles produced during the action of laughing. Mental agitation, Spencer argued, produced surplus energy that had to be expended for an individual's psychological health.[32] In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) Freud argued that this energy was primarily caused by the repression of sexual and hostile urges that were released through the muscles by laughing, which could, in turn, be a form of psychological salve, a means of treating an emotion-inducing situation in a non-serious manner.[33]

Although these understandings of laughter are not accepted in modern psychology, when we turn from the individual to the social, the notion of release

30 William Temple, *Miscellanea: The Second Part* (London, 1690), 'Essay IV: Of Poetry' (composed 1690): p. 335.

31 'Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour', *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols (London, 1737), 1: pp. 37–94.

32 Herbert Spencer, 'On the Physiology of Laughter', *Essays on Education, Etc.* (London, 1911).

33 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconcious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1974); idem, 'Humor', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 9 (1928): pp. 1–16.

has proven useful.[34] Studies of rituals of inversion and the world-turned-upside-down that figured prominently in medieval and early modern European carnival, for example, have often been interpreted as a form of social pressure-release. This period of licensed misrule before the austerities of Lent permitted – at least in the eyes of some – mockery of authority as a means of releasing discontent in a non-threatening manner. The absurdities of inversion – women ruling men, boys elected as bishops – ultimately reaffirmed the status quo by permitting the release of social and cultural tensions.[35] But when such release was allowable, and how far it could go in challenging authority, was fluid, context-dependent and hence contestable.

Laughter was thus ambiguous. The educated and the pious seem to have regarded it with tolerance but also with suspicion; lower down the social scale – and yet the ballads conveying this also appealed to gentry collectors such as Pepys – it was embraced for its constructive role in creating good fellowship, but its very appeal to the populous also made it potentially dangerous and subversive of authority. The alehouse could be both a scene of laughter-induced community and one in which cruel, mocking or inappropriate laughter threatened a sinister subversion of society at large. This ambiguity is, like other words associated with laughter, reflected in early modern language. 'Prank', a word introduced in the 1520s to mean a malicious trick, had transformed by the 1570s into something essentially harmless, a practical joke, a lark or humorously foolish act. Pranksters often laughed at the stupidity of someone or tricked someone for the entertainment of others – but also created communities of laughter in more or less harmless fun. Similarly a 'sham' (OED, 1677) derived its etymology from 'shame' but became a humorous trick or fraud played on an unsuspecting victim – shams could have a sharp edge of ridicule that shamed their victims but they could also entertain and give merriment.[36] Ambiguity is also recognised in definitions of the word 'laughter', which acknowledged both its positive and negative connotations. Thomas Wilson's *A Complete Christian Dictionary* (1655), for example, said 'laughing signifyeth both rejoicing and mocking or scorning'.[37] Excessive or foolish laughter also resulted in buffoonery, another early modern term: 'buffoon' was a late sixteenth-century innovation and Cotgrave's 1611 dictionary of French and English included the terms 'buffoonism' and 'buffoon-like', though the OED does not find the first use of 'buffoonery' itself until 1780.

By teasing out the ambiguities within understandings of laughter in sixteenth-century dialogues, Cathy Shrank's contribution in this volume (Chapter 2) shows laughter's richness and demonstrates that the theory and practice of laughter did not

[34] The notion that laughter releases pent-up energy or repressed urges is met with scepticism. See Hans Eysenck, 'Foreword', *The Psychology of Humor*, ed. J. Goldstein and P. McGhee (New York, 1972).

[35] Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984); Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), chs 3 and 4; Jennifer Vaught, *Carnival and Literature in Early Modern England* (Farnham, 2012); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd edn (Ashgate, 2009): pp. 255–84.

[36] Kate Loveman, *Reading Fictions, 166–1740: Deception in English Literary and Political Culture* (Ashgate, 2008).

[37] Thomas Wilson, *A Complete Christian Dictionary* (1655): p. 358.

always add up. In the sixteenth century, laughter was an ambiguous but ultimately corrosive phenomenon – it was simultaneously humanising (a principle characteristic separating humans from animals) and dehumanising (mockery expressed bestial cruelty). Reducing its object through derision, laughter was principally a public expression of scorn, which necessitated using it with caution. Turning to instances of laughter in dialogues, Shrank shows a much richer and more complicated picture of how laughter was received. Dialogues demonstrate laughter facilitating pleasure and sociability, expressing moderation and diffusing hostile situations rather than (as the theory went) inflaming them. Although undoubtedly problematic, laughter clearly elicited positive as well as negative emotions: it regulated social interactions, but it did not do so purely as a vehicle of shame (as classical philosophy posited).

Satire as a Mode and Expanding the Canon

The different ways of thinking about laughter outlined above – as socially constructive, as based on a sense of superiority or incongruity, as embedded in character and as a means of relief or release – all found their way into notions of satire. In its ideal form, satire thrashed vices, hypocrisy or corruption out of its object with the aim of reformation. It was therefore moral (where raillery – insult for insult's sake – is immoral) and conservative (because it hopes to restore social and cultural norms that its object has broken).[38] This was justified by recourse to the classics, scripture and by the demands of polemical exchanges in the post-Reformation era, when zeal for 'truth' justified attacks on error; but it also found support in the seventeenth century's increasing hostility to irrational enthusiasm and hence found a place in Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), which argued that 'the true Raillery should be a defence for Good and Virtuous Works, and should only intend the derision of extravagant and the disgrace of vile and dishonourable things'.[39] Isaac Barrow nicely summarised contemporary belief in laughter's potential to reform: 'Many who will not stand a direct reproof, and cannot abide to be plainly admonished of their fault, will yet endure to be pleasantly rubb'd, and will patiently bear a jocund wipe.'[40]

The difficulty lay in how to draw the line between reforming and destructive satire, as Morton's contibution in this volume demonstrates (Chapter 5). Cicero had argued that laughter was a useful potential weapon against an opponent, and allowed 'pleasantly-abusive' arguments, but also thought it needed to be used cautiously. Wit should not, seventeenth-century authors agreed, become abusive. Drawing in part on a distinction many contemporaries made between the gentleness of Horace's satires and the bitterness of Juvenal's, Richard Flecknoe in 1658 thought there was:

> much difference betwixt *Raillerie* and *Satyrs, Iesting* and *Ieering, &c.* as betwixt *gallantry* and *clownishnesse;* or betwixt a *gentle Accost* and *rude Assault.* And if I would

[38] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957); Robert Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, 1960).
[39] Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* (London, 1667): pp. 418–19.
[40] Barrow, *Sermons*, second sermon: p. 51.

> habit them in their several properties, I would cloath *Satyr* in hair-cloath, *jeering* in home spun-stuff, *jesting* in motley, and *Raillerie* in silk. It being a gentle exercise of wit and witty harmlesse *calumny,* speaks ill of you by contraries; and the *reverse* or tother side of complement, as far beneath as that above reality. There's nothing in it of abusive, and only as much in it of handsome invective and reproach as may well be owned without a blush: publishing those praises of you without shame, which flattery would make you ashamed to hear. It differs from *Gybing* as gentle smiles from scornfull laughter, and from rayling as Gentlemens playing at foyls, from Butchers and Clowns playing at Cudgels.[41]

Satire was most dangerous when it was applied to religion. Many satirists, from Marprelate to Milton and Marvell, argued that satire was necessary to ridicule clerical folly, pride, ambition and self-gratification; but their critics worried that biting satire was inappropriate to religious dispute. As the later Stuart divine John Tillotson wrote, the proper use of laughter was 'to expose the Vices and Follies of men, such things as are in themselves truly ridiculous; But if it be apply'd to the Abuse of the greatest and most serious Matters, it then loses its Commendation'. Tillotson and others grew increasingly worried about 'scoffing at religion', which shaded into irreligion and atheism.[42] These debates were literary but also politicised (not just because Dryden and Swift were engaged in political battles but also because partisan polemic inherently raised these questions), running across poetry and drama as well as prose pamphlets. This suggests that – as many recent studies have noted – there is considerable merit in approaching satire as a *mode* rather than as a *genre*.[43] Where formalist approaches to literature were concerned with defining satire as a specific form relating to a specific content, and with focusing on a canon of received 'masters' of the genre, historicist literary scholars have stressed that this emphasis does not pay due attention to either the way in which cultural and political context shaped a given satirist, or the diverse body of texts that might be conceived as *satirical* in intention – if not properly *satire* as it is defined formally. Consideration of the satirical mode stresses the richness and variety of satire's contribution to a given cultural or political context, and emphasises its protean nature, its ability to shape-shift, which is missed in overrigid conceptions of it as a genre. As Christiane Bohnert explains: 'satire reconstitutes itself by transposing the basic trait, the attack upon

41 Richard Flecknoe, *Enigmaticall Characters, All Taken to the Life from Severall Persons, Humours and Dispotions* (London?, 1658): p. 30.

42 'The Folly of Scoffing at Religion', *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson* (1696): p. 40.

43 Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe, eds., *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism* (New York, 2003); Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658–1770* (Baltimore, 2013); Elizabeth C. Mansfield and Kelly Malone, eds, *Seeing Satire in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2013); Aaron Matz, *Satire in an Age of Realism* (Cambridge, 2010); Andrew McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State* (Cambridge and New York, 2004); Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment 1660–1830: Stress Points in the English Augustan Tradition* (New Haven and London, 2000); Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790–1822* (Oxford, 1994).

cultural norms inimical to its own culture, into each new cultural environment.'[44] Satirists often inhabit multiple genres (the mock heroic, comedy, dystopia and so on) or twist localised conventions of writing to their own ends. As such, satire's form or genre is less significant than the perception of a particular body of material being perceived as satirical in a particular context by particular people. Political satire has three principle characteristics: it is, above all else, a means of attack (to protest against corruption, the misuse of authority or to otherwise censure vice); it is founded on wit and humour to enhance the appeal of that attack (and to bind author and audience together); and it uses elements of fiction and/or fantasy as a form of drapery to avoid descent into pure invective.[45] Whatever its form, this mingling of humour and attack with the aim of exposing and/or reforming vice is the satirist's intention.

This turn to focus on the satirical mode has caused scholars to move away from a literary canon to consider wider cultures of satire and the effect of satire in contexts in which it was previously thought marginal. Steven E. Jones, for example, has argued that satire was a potent force during the Romantic period. Jones notes that fear of satirists was ubiquitous in the eighteenth century and that satire remained an important moral voice in this period. Recognising this must force us to decentre the literary canon for the period (Romanticism was not a monopoly), challenge conventions about its prevailing values of the period (sentiment, the sublime and nature were not uncontested ideals) and to accord a host of non-canonical satirical material an important place in literary history. Indeed, satire, Jones argues, helped to invent the Romantic: the latter defined themselves and their ideals against the former in an age that saw a prevalence of both.[46]

Focusing on the satirical mode over satire as a genre opens up a wider body of source material to our consideration. Particularly significant here has been the growing focus on the satirical capacities of visual and material objects. This has expanded the range of sources through which historians can access the public's attitudes and gauge political sensibilities. Helen Pierce and Kevin Sharpe have stressed that visual materials – portraits, book illustrations, graphic satires – played central roles in the culture of representation by which authority was both legitimised and contested in the early seventeenth century.[47] Similarly, Tim Harris has shown the

[44] Christiane Bohnert, 'Early Modern Complex Satire & the Satiric Novel: Genre and Cultural Transposition', *Theorizing Satire – Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe (New York, 1995): p. 152.

[45] On this, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957): p. 31; Dustin Griffin, 'Venting Spleen', *Essays in Criticism*, 40 (1990): pp. 124–35; Don L. F. Nilsen, 'Satire – The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions – Some Preliminary Observations', *Studies in Contemporary Satire*, 15 (1988): pp. 1–10; Stephanie Barbé Hammer, *Satirising the Satirist: Critical Dynamics in Swift, Diderot, and Jean Paul* (New York and London, 1990): p. 12.

[46] Steven E. Jones, *Satire and the Romanticism* (Houndmills, 2000); idem, ed., *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period* (New York and Basingstoke, 2003).

[47] Helen Pierce, *Unseemly Pictures: Graphic Satire and Politics in Early Modern England* (New Haven, 2008); idem, 'Anti-Episcopacy and Graphic Satire in England 1640–45', *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004): pp. 809–48; idem, 'The Devil's Bloodhound: Roger L'Estrange Caricatured', *Printed Images in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Michael Hunter (Farnham, 2010): pp. 237–54; Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths*

extent to which a wide range of visual material that might be termed 'satirical' contributed to the ways in which politics moved out of doors at the Restoration, with visual satire playing an important part in the print culture by which political representation expanded in the long eighteenth century.[48] And Diana Donald has demonstrated that, towards the end of that century, graphic satire made a substantial contribution to politics. Donald argues that the expansion in the visual vocabulary of satire matched both an expansion of audience (satirists routinely reached most social classes) and in the public's ever-deepening familiarity with day-to-day matters of Parliament and politics.[49] Attending to the satirical can thus transform our understanding of political processes. In this volume, chapters by Knights (Chapter 9), Morton (Chapter 5) and Philp (Chapter 8) build on these developments, showing not only that graphic satire made important contributions in a range of political contexts, but that in order to understand that contribution they must be integrated alongside more traditional sources.

Attending to one body of non-canonical satirical material – the libel – has proven particularly revealing. These scandalous, derisory poems circulated across the social hierarchy of seventeenth-century society – in villages, cities and the court – using defamation as an expression of popular politics in the decades before the Civil Wars.[50] Acknowledging the political sensibilities of libels has led to a criticism of revisionist accounts of the Civil Wars, which had denied that either long-term ideological disputes between absolutist and constitutional parliamentarianism or structural changes (such as the rise of the gentry) played significant roles in causing those wars. Revisionists argued that ideals of harmony and consensus, not a polarisation of court and country, were more typical of early seventeenth-century political culture and undercut Marxist readings of a strident gentry being agents of parliamentarianism,

in England 1603–1660 (New Haven, 2010); idem, '"So Hard a Text?": Images of Charles I, 1612–1700', *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000): pp. 383–406; idem, 'Representations and Negotiations: Texts, Images and Authority in Early Modern England', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999): pp. 853–81.

48 Tim Harris, *London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II: Propaganda and Politics from the Restoration until the Exclusion Crisis* (Cambridge, 1987); see also, Mark Knights, 'Possessing the Visual: The Materiality of Visual Print Culture in Later Stuart Britain', *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices 1580–1730*, ed. James Daybell and Peter Hinds (Houndmills and New York, 2010): pp. 85–122.

49 Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Age of George III* (London, 1996). For a critique see Eirwen E. C. Nicholson, 'Consumers and Spectators: The Public of the Political Print in Eighteenth Century London', *History*, 81 (1996): pp. 5–21.

50 See www.earlystuartlibels.net. Alastair Bellany, '"Raylinge Rymes and Vaunting Verse": Libellous Politics in Early Stuart England, 1603–28', *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (Basingstoke, 1994): pp. 285–310; Thomas Cogswell, 'Underground Verse and the Transformation of Early Stuart Political Culture', *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern England*, ed. Mark Kishlansky and Susan Amussen (Manchester, 1995): pp. 277–300; Pauline Croft, 'Libels, Popular Literacy and Public Opinion in Early Modern England', *Historical Research*, 68 (1995): pp. 266–85; Andrew McRae, *Literature, Satire and the Early Stuart State* (Cambridge, 2004). Steven W. May and Alan Bryson, eds, *Verse Libel in Renaissance England and Scotland* (Oxford, 2016), demonstrate that libel is not a wholly Stuart phenomenon, demonstrating its importance to Tudor culture.

by depicting that gentry as parochial in its political outlook – not agents of political unrest showing signs of long-term ideological conflict with the Crown.[51] Libel challenges the revisionists' emphasis on the consensual, non-ideological nature of politics. Scurrilous verses reveal their local authors and audiences to have been concerned with national politics.[52] And far from ideologically neutral, they show that a considerable body of the population was hostile towards royal policy and state authority. Representations – languages, images and performance – were vital in shaping political perceptions, making ideas palatable or unpalatable and contesting power.[53] As the Crown asserted power through a display of magnificence, so its power was contested through other representational language in a range of polemical genres as a routine part of political culture. Scandalous, violent discourse was a vital means of expressing attitudes towards authority, and reveals early seventeenth-century society to be ideologically diverse, and to contain friction and strain.[54] Libels delegitimised opponents in power struggles at court, denigrated royal favourites and the policies or agents of state.[55] In this material, we see that demotic laughter was central to political discourse.

This centrality was demonstrated by the concern with which libel was met by the

51 The historiography is vast, but see: Conrad Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621–49* (Oxford, 1979); Kevin Sharpe, ed., *Faction and Parliament: Essays on Early Stuart History* (Oxford, 1978). For critiques, see Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, 'Introduction: After Revisionism', *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics 1603–1642*, ed. R. Cust and A. Hughes (Harlow, 1989), 1: p. 46; Peter Lake, 'Retrospective: Wentworth's Political World in Revisionist and Post-Revisionist Perspective'. *The Political World of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, 1621–1641*, ed. Julia F. Merritt (Cambridge, 1996): pp. 252–83.

52 Richard Cust, 'News and Politics in Early Seventeenth Century England', *Past and Present*, 112 (1986): pp. 60–90.

53 See Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, eds, *The Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007); Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake, *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (Basingstoke, 1994); Kevin Sharpe, 'Remapping Early Modern England: From Revisionism to the Culture of Politics', *Remapping Early Modern England: The Culture of Seventeenth Century Politics*, ed. Kevin Sharpe (Cambridge, 2000): pp. 3–37; idem, 'Representations and Negotiations: Texts, Images and Authority in Early Modern England', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999): pp. 853–81.

54 Andrew McRae, ed., 'Railing Rhymes: Politics and Poetry in Early Stuart England', special edition of *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 69 (2006); David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics 1627–1660* (Cambridge, 1999).

55 Alastair Bellany, 'A Poem on the Archbishop's Hearse: Puritanism, Libel, and Sedition after the Hampton Court Conference', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995): pp. 137–64; idem, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660* (Cambridge, 2002); Andrew Cambers, 'Reading Libels in Early Seventeenth Century Northamptonshire', *Getting Along? Religious Identities and Confessional Relations in Early Modern England: Essays in Honour of W. J. Sheils*, ed. Nadine Lewycky and Adam Morton (Farnham, 2012): pp. 115–32; Pauline Croft, 'The Reputation of Robert Cecil: Libels, Political Opinion and Popular Awareness in the Early Seventeenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series (1991): pp. 43–69; Andrew Gordon, 'The Act of Libel: Conscripting Civic Space in Early Modern England', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 32 (2002): pp. 375–97; James Knowles, 'To "Scourge the Arse/Jove's Marrow So had Wasted": Scurrility and the Subversion of Sodomy', *Subversion and Scurrility: Popular Discourse in Europe from 1500 to Present*, ed. Dermot Cavanagh and Tim Kirk (Aldershot, 2000): pp. 74–92.