Book review*

Derrin, Daniel & Hannah Burrows (eds) (2020) *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*. **Springer.**

During the last fifty or so years, many humour scholars have ploughed a familiar intellectual field. This Palgrave handbook aims to unsettle the associated ruts that have developed and deepened over the decades and to point to new fields of inquiry for humour studies. According to Daniel Derrin (p. 12), who writes the introduction, the discipline has suffered the "overuse ad infinitum" of the three "hazily apprehended" 'theories' of superiority, incongruity, and relief; scholars have "tend[ed] to work primarily with the relatively stable genre of modern jokes"; and they have been "understandably reluctant to explore beyond a certain point" (p. 11) in time. Due to that limited horizon, many scholars have treated humour as an "unproblematic universal category" (p. 11) across time and place. That precept helped determine the deployment of other concepts, such as laughter, which was fastened to humour as its equally unproblematic signifier of what was funny, according to Conal Condren in chapter 2 (p. 19).

This narrowcasting of academic interest reflected in large part the disciplinary dominance of psychology, established after the first academic conference on humour and laughter was held in 1976 in Cardiff, Wales under the auspices of the British Psychological Society (Milner Davis, 2021, p. 183). The problem with that has been that psychology is a "discipline geared to universal traits, proclivities, motivations and pathologies" (p. 22), writes Condren in chapter 2; it does not engage with contextual history. Little really changed over the decades in the methodology of humour studies despite the influx into the discipline of sociologists, folklorists, linguists, computer scientists, and philosophers.

The antidote to the ahistoricity of humour studies is historical studies, but these two disciplines only began randomly meeting in the mid-nineties (pp. vi, 10) with Bremmer and Roodenburg's *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (1997) and "several collections of essays since then" (p. 10). None of these works, however, placed the "theoretical and methodological problems … centre stage" (pp. 10-11) as does this Palgrave handbook with a variety of historical and methodological challenges to the curious juxtaposition of universalising tendencies with limited purview in much current humour scholarship.

The study of humour has generally proceeded without a sense of the complicated and unstable intellectual histories of its central concepts, despite some awareness that humour was once a term of ancient and medieval medicine and had nothing to do with jokes or laughter. The ahistorical nature of humour scholarship was aided by the raiding of a few comments by Hobbes and Aristotle that were taken out of context. This had less to do with historical explanation and more to do with "genealogical tallying" of 'great thinkers' by academics hawking a university

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discipline. What Hobbes wrote was "not of or about superiority per se" and was "at odds with 'superiority theory'", writes Condren in chapter 2 (p. 32).

As valuable as Benign Violation Theory might be in a modern setting, writes Derrin in chapter 7, it "is a universalising theoretical view of 'humour'" that is "insufficient for dealing with other aspects of those historically-distant comic characterisations" (p. 133) such as Falstaff. We misunderstand Shakespeare and ancient understandings of virtue, vice, and prudence if we think Falstaff was a rejoicing, funny, party animal rather than a figure of corruption, cowardice and avarice, a point Condren also makes (p. 26).

Henri Bergson was of the recent past, but still the complexity of his thought was "largely disregarded", writes Jessica Milner Davis in chapter 6. Scholars briefly focused on the "temporary anaesthesia of the heart" (p. 111). But they never appreciated that his work on laughter was "a transitional, pivotal moment in Bergson's philosophy as a whole" nor that he recognised laughter at rigid behaviour was "tantamount to an instinctive recognition of our own limitations and fallibilities" (p. 111). Bergson had a redemptive view of laughter that Milner Davis tests against modern performances of *kyōgen* comic theatre that date from the Muromachi period (1336–1573) in Japan. Milner Davis wanted to trial the ideas of a European in a non-European environment.

The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology is in part another byproduct of what Richard Rorty called the "linguistic turn" of the 1960s in the social sciences and humanities (Norval, 2000, pp. 313-314). Scholars took the view that "our language does not merely mirror the world, but is instead partially constitutive of it" (Norval, 2000, pp. 313-314) in contexts of time, place, and audience. They challenged the anachronistic and contextless assumptions of the grand nation-building narratives; the canons of great authors; and the great philosophers with dateless wisdom and timeless concepts ruminating across centuries over perennial topics of concern.

Thus, Condren in his chapter brings to bear his work in early modern intellectual history, plus Wickberg's (1998) history of the unstable concepts humour and sense of humour as discursive constructs to discuss the delicate hermeneutic challenges of contextualisation, with a particular focus on Hobbes. Condren is aware of the limitations of methodology around issues of context, intentionality, and reception. Nevertheless, it is easy to glibly export our idioms into descriptions of the past. Contextualisation is not only a matter of placing the problematic evidence under study in its context but also understanding how that placement may also shape the context, and lead to more contexts, which may be humorous or non-humorous, that might modify the nature of the original inquiry. This is the interpretive challenge presented by a "bi-conditional relationship between general and particular: each is understood in interplay with the other" (p. 27). In other words, contextualisation is necessary to humour scholarship, but it is not necessarily easy.

Sophisticated probing can reveal that our forebears held quite sophisticated understandings of what we call *humour*. As Jamie Beckett argues in chapter 14, medieval European 'mystery plays' wove comic ideas into accounts of biblical episodes that entertained and challenged illiterate audiences "to explore the depths of their devotional understanding" (p. 276). These dramas were not subversive, as a reductive Bakhtinian framework might suggest (Bakhtin 1984). Nor can superiority theory explain the oft-occurring character of Herod, as some scholars have tried, argues Beckett (p. 276). Herod and other tyrants were presented in mystery plays as comic, entertaining figures who attracted and deceived people with humour until their evil brutality is suddenly and shockingly revealed. Humour and Christian tenets could inform and enhance each other, as Lieke Stelling also demonstrates in her chapter 17 on early modern English mystery plays.

Another point is that humour and religion are not necessarily in opposition as we might think. To be fair, their connection has been neglected by scholars, argues Richard Gardner in chapter 8, because religion has been identified with 'the serious'. But a "greater appreciation of the various ways in which humour and religion have been 'entangled' might well enrich our understanding of both terms" (p. 152), he argues in a critical overview of works on this question.

It is not so much that the three 'theories' are completely wrong, but their deficiencies as universal categories are exposed by the startlingly different attitudes held by people in different times and societies. Aristotle thought laughter was prompted by "a mistake or a kind of ugliness that caused no pain or destruction" (p. 175). So, for Alexandre Mitchell in chapter 9, ugliness is "key to understanding ancient visual humour" (p. 175) on Greek vases. This appeared in caricatures (1) as "a popular and democratic egalitarian tool" (p. 176); (2) of the elderly, dwarves, and foreigners, thereby exposing Greek anxieties; and (3) of the satyr as an ambivalent symbol of a civilised society. This ugliness was understood within a Greek aesthetic ideal for a balanced and ordered world and formed with wickedness and deformation as one part of a binary that contrasted with aspirations for nobility and beauty in assessments of moral character, actions, appearance, and things.

Modern Anglophones currently place "'funniness' and the 'emotion' or feeling of amusement at the centre" (p. 64) of the concept of humour. However, Hannah Burrows demonstrates in chapter 3 that the speakers of Old Norse in Scandinavia and elsewhere before the 14th century placed a form of what we call "'mockery' and perhaps feelings of scorn" at the centre of their "mental analogue" (p. 64). Some of it was so extreme that it is unrelatable to our notions of mirth.

Many medieval writers and clerics took seriously Horace's advice of 'telling the truth while laughing' in their sermons and stories. Sometimes, this was done with the intention of speaking truth to power and deflating grandiosity, but sometimes this was done by women asserting their power, according to Martha Bayless in chapter 13. Renaissance humanists also harkened to ancient authors like Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian "in order to look forward to new and innovative ideas" (p. 72), as Lucy Rayfield contends in chapter 4. Like Condren, she explores the varied rhetorical effects of laughter that results from scorn of ugliness and immorality, the unseemly, the bumpkin, the humiliated rival, or entire nations; from promotion of one's faction, religion, shared social rank, community, or moral lesson. Yet these early modern thinkers were ignored by many scholars who settled on a few words of Aristotle and then jumped to Hobbes after concluding "all early modern laughter theory falls under the category of superiority" (p. 72).

In the eighteenth-century, authors severed humour from connections to ancient medicine and connected it to perception, such as incongruity, as well as to a method of funniness. All well and good to the modern eye but, claims Rebecca Tierney-Jones in chapter 5, key literature of that time demonstrates a conjunction of psychology and culture that is alien to us. The cognitive and affective elements of emotion were "mutually constitutive" (p. 96) in these texts, which undermines binary schemes not only of the Cartesian mind/body split but also of the reified split between discourse and materiality that sometimes characterises post-structuralism.

Guilia Baccini spends her chapter 10 correcting the improprieties of Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century who imposed Western "literary theory and Western histories of national literatures" (p. 201) on Chinese literature. Due to their modernising zeal, they blamed "Confucian decorum" and tradition "for the lack of attention to humour in the Chinese tradition" and introduced the English concept of humour (*youmo*, 幽默) "in deliberate opposition to the native term *huaji* 滑稽 (*funny, comic*)" (p. 202).

As well, pre-modern jokes books were reclassified as folk literature, although these had traditionally been derivative collections compiled by elite literati in a literary, not spoken,

language. Nevertheless, they had been removed from *xiaoshuo*, an ancient category of prose meaning 'lesser sayings' and which now also acquired the meaning of 'fiction', "a genre alien to the Chinese literary tradition" (p. 204). This "confusing legacy" still haunts studies of premodern jokes books. Antonio Leggieri elaborates in chapter 11 on the nuanced discussion of these joke books to confirm playwright Luigi Pirandello's view that humour is a hermeneutic of reflection, empathy, and superiority that is more complex than one-sided superiority and incongruity arguments (pp. 222-223).

Of course, we cannot simply recoil entirely from explorations of past humour because of manifold interpretive thickets. There must be, for instance, twenty-first century interpretations of the eighteenth century *Tristram Shandy*. According to Yen-Mai Tran-Gervat in chapter 23, one French translator overlooked fidelity to the text and opted for the spirit of the text with an "over-enthusiastic Rabelaisian invention" that made the novel hard to recognise (p. 451). By contrast, Michael Winterbottom was very aware of the difficulties with his 2005 film adaption. He embraced metalepsis and plausible anachronisms, such as parodies of cinema and a soundtrack drawn from the music of well-known period films, in order convey the metafictional and reflexive dispositions of a novel about writing a novel.

I cannot do here full justice to the varied and fine twenty-six chapters of this excellent book, except to mention in passing chapters on humour and the Spanish flu epidemic; the issues when curating exhibitions of humour from the past; nineteenth and twentieth centuries Danish jesting songs; and the difficulty of interpreting cartoons of nineteenth century Japan, which differ with structure and content that draw on a rich tradition of punning and four types of scripts. Instead, I have sought to convey the challenges presented by authors to the past simplicities of humour studies and the opportunities they present for future research. You will have to take the time to dip into the chapters yourself.

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