

INTRODUCTION

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The idea for this book sprung from a desire to investigate how different researchers approached humour in the Middle Ages, and was developed in a series of panels at the International Medieval Congress 2020 in Leeds, and the International Congress on Medieval Studies 2021 in Kalamazoo. The problematic nature of the topic was immediately obvious: although humour has been researched and discussed since antiquity, we are still to come up with an acceptable definition for it. For the purposes of this book, humour has been defined as this stimulation, verbal or visual, that intends to provoke laughter. Following a long line of historical research on humour, this collection aims to contribute to our better understanding of medieval societies and audiences.

Scholarly Debts

The shadow of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* falls heavy on any discussion on medieval humour. In this seminal work, Bakhtin contributed a periodisation of laughter and connected it with the city and the public sphere, creating the concept of a “culture of laughter” and discussing humour's effects and function in this social context.¹ He described a society divided between two culture groups: the learned, serious culture of the literate, and its opposite, the popular culture of the illiterate, which was one of carnival and laughter. He understood humour

¹ Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 88.

and laughter as a liberating, rebellious manifestation of the less learned social class, one to which the official Church was generally opposed.

Although this was an undeniable breakthrough in medieval humour studies at the time of publication, many of Bakhtin's arguments do not stand to scrutiny. Firstly, the assumption of a division between learned and unlearned cultures and the pernicious influence of the Church can be dismissed.² Popular and humanist culture were not as separated: citizens were part of the same community, their cultural background was similar, and it included the Church.³ Moreover, there is enough evidence against the Bakhtinian notion that the Middle Ages were a sombre and sad time, and that Renaissance was liberated by laughter. Among the medievalists who argued the opposite was Jacques Le Goff, who presented several examples of medieval laughter across the social spectrum.⁴ Further in opposition, Aaron Gurevich correctly pointed out that carnival developed within medieval cities in the later Middle Ages, and that Church was not opposed to humour and laughter, as it was using it extensively in exempla and sermons.⁵ It is now widely accepted that "when actual historical contexts are addressed, Bakhtin's abstract conception of social structure can break down."⁶

Bakhtin's insightful understanding of humour as a culturally-specific and community-specific topic is indisputable, yet his work should be read in context: it was written within a specific political and social environment and Bakhtin may have projected his own social reality to his analysis of the past.⁷ However, his work initiated a scholarly discussion on medieval humour, and the criticism of his contribution highlighted a series of issues that emerge when researching humour historically.

² Bremmer and Roodenburg, *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, 5-6.

³ Barbara C. Bowen, *Enter Rabelais, Laughing* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 71.

⁴ Jacques Le Goff, "Laughter in the Middle Ages," in Bremmer and Roodenburg, *A Cultural History of Humour*, 40 - 51

⁵ Aaron Gurevich, "Bakhtin and his theory of Carnival," in Bremmer and Roodenburg, *A Cultural History of Humour*, 56 -57.

⁶ Daniel Derrin and Hannah Burrows, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7.

⁷ Vivienne Westbrook and Shun-liang Chao, eds., *Humour in the Arts: New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2018), ix-x.

The most prominent of these emerging issues are the already mentioned lack of a universally accepted definition of humour, and its culturally specific character. In *A Cultural History of Humour*, Bremmer and Roodenburg attempted to address these questions by presenting an account of humour and laughter from antiquity to the present day, exploring the ways humour changed from culture to culture and providing important insights on the social changes of each period. The authors defined humour as “as any message [...] intended to produce a smile or a laugh,” a definition which allows investigations across time and across cultures.⁸ They then highlight humour’s culturally specific nature, discussing “national styles of humour” and rejecting the idea of an “ontology of humour,” insisting that it is culturally determined.⁹

The same problems of definition, function, and historical attitudes towards humour and humour research dominated subsequent scholarship. The essays included in *Risus Medievalis*, that specifically addressed medieval laughter, offer valuable insight into the social conventions, the mechanics and functions of laughter in medieval society, as well as the different attitudes and scholarly positions on humour.¹⁰ Le Goff’s contribution to the laughter of Kings and laughter in monastic settings was a valuable contribution in our understanding of illicit laughter, and was treated in greater detail in *Le rire dans la société médiévale*, where he explored the Church’s attitudes towards the same topic.¹¹ Referring to a slightly later historical timeframe, Bowen’s *Enter Rabelais, Laughing* presented different types of laughter in late medieval and early Renaissance France, giving examples of different types of humour and the ways it was encountered in different social settings.¹² In her *Humour and Humanism in the Renaissance*, the same author discussed how changes in culture affected humorous expression and the appreciation of humour, presenting examples of salacious humour that were popular among the erudite of the period.¹³ Similar topics were

⁸ Bremmer and Roodenburg, *A Cultural History of Humour*, 1.

⁹ Bremmer and Roodenburg, *A Cultural History of Humour*, 2-3.

¹⁰ Herman Braet, ed., *Risus Mediaevalis: Laughter in Medieval Literature and Art* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Jacques Le Goff, ‘Le Rire Dans La Société Médiévale’, in *Un Autre Moyen Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 1343–68.

¹² Bowen, *Enter Rabelais, Laughing*, xi.

¹³ Barbara C. Bowen, *Humour and Humanism in the Renaissance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 137-148 and 409-429.

considered in *Parody and Festivity in Early Modern Art: Essays on Comedy as Social Vision*, which brought together parody and festivity as concepts deeply embedded and interconnected in the early modern experience.¹⁴ In *Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender: Historical and Cultural Perspectives*, humour was approached historically and within the cultural descriptions of gender, since both humour and gender are performative and both depend on external “recognition and affirmation.”¹⁵ *Humour in the Arts: New Perspectives* reiterated that any humorous experience, verbal or visual, is closely linked to its cultural context, emphasising the importance of background, creator, and original audience.¹⁶ The individual essays examined how humour functions in different cultural and historical contexts, and investigated humour as a phenomenon that stems from each culture and engages with every aspect of social life, as well as with ethical ideas and practices.¹⁷ In the most recent *Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*, the focus was more on the methodology of researching humour historically, and the mechanics and functions of humour in different cultural contexts.¹⁸

The contributions in this book may seem disconnected and heterogenous in comparison to the aforementioned scholarship, however it is not the aim of this collection to offer a complete methodology for historic humour studies or comprehensive statements on humour in the Middle Ages. Each essay discusses different types and manifestations of humour as an individual study, making contributions towards our knowledge about the period in question and highlighting key methodological issues as they arise.

New ideas and the question of method

Donncha MacGabhann’s inspiring connections reveal an original reading of the word-image relationship in the Book of Kells and allow for a wider range of overlapping interpretations that stem from close observation and a thorough understanding of the scribal hands.

¹⁴ David R Smith, ed., *Parody and Festivity in Early Modern Art: Essays on Comedy as Social Vision* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

¹⁵ Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist, *Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender: Historical and Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁶ Westbrook and Chao, *Humour in the Arts: New Perspectives*, p. i-ii.

¹⁷ Westbrook and Chao, *Humour in the Arts: New Perspectives*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Derrin and Burrows, *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*, p. 13-15.

Peter Jones applies feminist humour and critical humour theories to analyse aspects of Bernard of Clairvaux's personality and works, offering a deeper understanding of one of the most important figures of medieval culture.

Lucie Doležalová identifies nonsense humour in scribal closing remarks, and demonstrates the humorous intention that inhabits their liminality.

Mark Truesdale presents four neglected late-medieval comic tales from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, and investigates their features focusing specifically on the use of magic. In doing so, he brings out the ways humour was generated and explores the cultural attitudes of the audiences that enjoyed them, arguing that the conservative perspective served as an instrument of social control.

Anne Lister-Purbrick discusses how, in her practice as a storyteller, she discovered the limits of her academic approach when presenting the Occitan Arthurian romance of *Jaufre* to a contemporary audience. Using live performance to inform her literary analysis, she identifies instances in the text where audience reactions suggest humorous moment, and discusses the issues that arise with humour reception and changing audiences.

My own contribution juxtaposes a, sadly limited, selection of the visual cycle of the *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* manuscript with the woodcuts of the early printed edition. The comparison draws conclusions on the ways humour has been treated for two different audiences: a private patron and the wider public.

Different types of humour are discussed in each essay. MacGabhann's examples involve parody, wordplay, and strong interactions between word and image. Jones discusses self-deprecation humour and its potential functions. Doležalová returns to wordplay in its guise as nonsense humour and double entendre. Truesdale's comic tales are connected with romance and its parody, and with the french *fabliaux* where adulterers get poetic punishments. Purbrick presents performative humour, mostly lost to researchers and revealed through performance and audience interaction: it is the humour of the unexpected, and it includes some parody of known Arthurian themes. The humour in the *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* is infamous for its bawdiness, and the visual cycles of both manuscript and printed edition aim to convey a similar effect.

Alongside the variety of humour types, each contribution identifies a series of problems in researching humour historically. How do we research humour historically? How do we know that the things we identify as amusing were also understood as such in the past? How successfully can we recreate historic personalities through their sense of humour, and what perspective can we gain on the role of humour in medieval political and social life? How do we deal with changing sensibilities that, in many cases, have changed so much that medieval humour is not recognisable as such today?

Twentieth-century scholarship has labelled the most popular theories of humour as Superiority, Relief and Incongruity Theory.¹⁹ The most recent research has remarked that these labels function better as explanations, rather than theories of humour.²⁰ Instead, one of the most prominent humour theories is the General Theory of Verbal Humour, which understands humour based on the core idea of script opposition: the joke in question is compatible with two distinct scripts, and the two scripts are in opposition to each other in a special way.²¹ Getting the joke means understanding both of the opposing scripts and the relation between them, which happens through the “Logical Mechanism” by which the joke text puts forward the opposing scripts.

The more psychologically-oriented Benign Violations Theory proposes that the concept of humour consists of “benign violations,” suggesting that “three conditions are jointly necessary and sufficient for eliciting humor: A situation must be appraised as a violation, a situation must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur

¹⁹ For an overall discussion on theories of humour, see Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1913); John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); Michael Clark, “Humour, Laughter and the Structure of Thought,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 27, no. 3 (1987): 238–46; John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Arthur Asa Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* (London: Routledge, 2017). For a comprehensive literature review on theories of humour see Barba Barbara Plester, “Theorising Humour”, in *The Complexity of Workplace Humour*, ed. Barbara Plester (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 17–37; Lauren Olin, “Questions for a Theory of Humor,” *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 6 (June 2016): 338–50.

²⁰ Derrin and Burrows, *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*, 12.

²¹ Salvatore Attardo, ed., “The General Theory of Verbal Humor,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

together.”²² A violation is benign when it is not perceived by the audience as dangerous or threatening, and this can be due to a number of reasons, the most frequent of which is probably emotional distance: the violation happens to someone else, it happened a long time ago, or it is so absurd that it does not threaten the audience’s reality. Alternatively, in the event when the violation is against a norm, a belief or a conviction, then it can be benign if the audience is not particularly committed to that conviction: gender humour will not offend people living in a misogynist society. Alternative interpretations of events can also account for the absence of threat. In this case, reality counteracts the violation and re-establishes the expected order of things.²³ Once the violation is perceived as Benign, the audience is amused instead of frustrated. The implication is that laughing together both suggests and builds community: it means that the people who partake in the humorous experience share both the same values in order to understand the violation, and the same sense that the violation was benign.

In essence, what this means is that humour should be read in context, and this is what each essay aims to do. Each author presents the specific landscape that informed the humour of their study. As a final note, it is important to acknowledge the seriousness of changing social sensibilities. Violent humour and jokes relating to disability, sickness or trauma can have significant and potentially harmful consequences, as they demean and humiliates the victims.²⁴ Despite the Bakhtinian notions of laughter as an act of rebellion, humour can be - and often is - used to perpetuate oppressive and cruel stereotypes and it rarely challenges the status quo.²⁵ Arguably, these jokes served the same function at the time of creation, since they may have allowed for the release of some social tension but at

²² A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, “Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010): 1141-1149, 1142.

²³ Warren & McGraw, “Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny,” 14-15 and McGraw et al., “Too Close for Comfort, or Too Far to Care?,” 1216.

²⁴ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Laughter* (London: Sage, 2005), 22.

²⁵ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Laughter*, p. 206; Mary Crawford, “Gender and Humor in Social Context,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 35, no. 9 (September 2003): 1413–30, 1419-20.

the same time confined that release in the context of humorous discourse.²⁶

This book is not presenting medieval humour for purposes of entertainment, but for scholarly dissection that will ultimately result in a deeper understanding of our cultural past. As Gioviano Pontano wrote in his *De sermone*, one of the first treatises on joking, after presenting an obscene story: “[...] although it was grossly done and obscenely replied and narrated, still for the time and the hearers, it was not disagreeable.”²⁷

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²⁶ Olga V. Trokhimenko, “Women’s Laughter and Gender Politics in Medieval Conduct Discourse,” in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Albrecht Classen, *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 243–64, 244.

²⁷ Quote presented as found in Bowen, *Enter Rabelais, Laughing*, p. 86.

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