

Valenzen des Lachens in der Vormoderne (1250-1750), ed. Christian Kuhn and Stefan Bieβenecker. *Bamberger Historische Studien*, 8 (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2012), 463 pp.

Albrecht Classen*

Cultural-historical approaches to the phenomenon of laughter have gained in importance over the last decade or so, and the question what laughter has meant in the past is attracting ever new responses worldwide today (see *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. A. Classen, 2010). While older scholarship still tended to assume that laughter was basically banned in the Middle Ages, this myth, which was powerfully propagated by Umberto Eco in his famous novel *The Name of the Rose* (1986), no longer has any valence despite the continuance of spurious claims publicly. The contributors to the present volume, who had originally presented their papers at a conference held at the University of Bamberg in January 2009, here explore the theme of laughter in the premodern world (1250-1750) from a large variety of perspectives.

There are three groups of papers dealing with laughter, first a section offering theoretical reflections, then a section with studies on laughter in different medieval and early modern texts, thereupon a section with a rather mixed bag of topics pertaining to the early modern time, and finally a section with articles addressing medieval and early modern texts and laughter dealt with therein. It seems to me that the grouping could have been done somewhat differently to create more content cohesion, insofar as the second section tries to focus more on laughter as a means to establish meaning, while the last one explores laughter as a way to acquire or maintain power. There are also major chronological jumps and thematic leaps, despite the umbrella concept of laughter.

Gun-Britt Kohler revisits the theories on laughter developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, summarizing the main points, and offering some valuable criticism of the specific applications as suggested by this Russian intellectual insofar as literary scenes with people laughing are often determined by a much

* Dr. Albrecht Classen University Distinguished Professor, Undergraduate Advisor, Department of German Studies, University of Arizona.

more curious ambivalence hard to decode today than assumed by Bakhtin. Might it be even possible to identify humor according to national characters, such as laughter in the Slavic world, as Kohler implies? The result of that paper hence remains rather inconclusive, though the theoretical reflections highlight some of the most critical issues of this topic as explored by Bakhtin.

Gerrit Walther analyzes various situations in world history where people laugh about the mighty ones, and he identifies those as reflections of still uncertain power conditions. The opposite, however, can also very much be the case, since laughter can destroy power and so would indicate the decline of a government, quite contrary to Walther's opinion. Also, whether laughter introduces a more open-minded attitude and hence leads to a form of tolerance (70), seems rather questionable.

Theresa Hamilton offers a critical summary of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, which she identifies as the most influential linguistic contribution to humor studies in recent times. However, it all seems to boil down to the textual framework in which humor develops, situating the funny scene within two textual fields, or scripts. I am not quite convinced that this simplistic concept, naively based on cultural-historical differences which in a way level all approaches can really achieve the desired goal, especially since this theory is supposed to make understandable why we still laugh about the same jokes as, for instance, medieval listeners/readers did. I would warn in general about any global theory that wants to explain humor or laughter in universal terms, especially since many jokes from the past appear simply as dead today because the context and value system supporting them seem to have changed so much since their first formulation.

This finds, curiously, extensive confirmation in most of the subsequent contributions where concrete literary episodes or cultural-historical events are analyzed as to their meaning in that specific context. Stefan Seeber illustrates, for instance, the unique conditions that create laughter in the *Tristan* versions by Eilhart von Oberg and Gottfried von Straßburg. Here, however, I would want to discriminate further than Seeber does because there can be passages where people clearly laugh, and others where the audience is indirectly invited to laugh. Humor and comedy are

not always expressed by laughter alone. And the gamut of humorous scenes and phenomena is almost limitless, so we would have to be very careful in our modern assessment of these literary examples. There can be misunderstandings, as he points out, then deliberate fooling around, masquerading, simple happiness and joy, even *Schadenfreude*, etc. I cannot quite see, however, why Seeber suggests that here laughing has been identified with new semantics, as if these two authors were operating with innovative strategies to trigger laughter within and outside of their texts about Tristan (Tristrant) and Isolde.

Andrea Grafestätter discusses laughter evoking episodes in late-medieval Arthurian and heroic epics, such as The Stricker's *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône*, and the works by Hans Rosenplüt. To her credit, she is trying to employ the linguistic theory of GTVH, referring to the oppositional scripts of each text, but this all can be simply reduced to the need to have contrast in the narrative development or in speech acts in order to realize a break of the norm; otherwise laughter would not erupt. Sebastian Coxon analyzes the important function of laughter in the jest narratives about Till Eulenspiegel in the eponymous collection of tales (first 1510), but this has been done already so many times that it almost seems futile to try identifying new layers of meaning beyond what scholarship has unearthed over the years (see Albrecht Classen, "Transgression and Laughter, the Scatological and the Epistemological: New Insights into the Pranks of Till Eulenspiegel," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 33 [2007]: 41-61; here not consulted).

Subsequently we learn about the laughing in the early modern world, especially in Renaissance literature, as illustrated by Arnold Becker in his study on the *Epistolae obscurorum virorum* with their strong element of satire, and on the role of Erasmus of Rotterdam. Although the humanists might appear at first as a cohesive community, the function of laughter in their texts quickly deconstructs such a perspective and reveals the deep fissures and tensions, often compensated by, if not aggravated through, laughter (much of recent scholarship has not been properly consulted here; see, for instance, Barbara Könneker, *Satire im 16. Jahrhundert*, 1991). Anja Grebe pursues this topic further by examining the role of humor in Albrecht Dürer's extravagant self-portraits showing him with his unusually long, wavy hair, perhaps in close analogy to Christ. It seems

rather elusive as to what this article really has to do with the overall theme of this volume, even though Grebe briefly refers to the culture of irony in the circle of friends including Dürer (209).

Sebastian Kühn then investigates humor culture among the intellectuals of the early modern age, which often involved strategies to ridicule, perhaps even to belittle and to insult colleagues. At the same time learned people were often the target of public laughter, which might actually find a number of parallels in the modern world. Laughter was, as the author underscores, an agonal experience and relied very much on the participation of the individual members of a group. Harald Bollbuck investigates how much laughter, ridicule, and the employment of pasquilles mattered in Martin Luther's discourses, such as in his Table Talks—certainly a well-established and hardly new topic. However, he extends the discussion to exploring the various genres that were involved in this public exchange of jokes, witticisms, satires, and ironic comments.

From here we have to jump, with no preparation, to a study on jokes in classical Arabic literature, especially by al-Ġāh.iz (d. 869), whom Hans Peter Pökel studies from a universal perspective, arguing that laughter is an anthropological constant. We would have to agree in general, but what about cultural differences, as all other contributions indicate? At any rate, Pökel emphasizes how much this famous Arab author insisted on the balance between the serious and the funny, without which a proper approach to all matters human would fail.

From here we have to jump to sixteenth-century France where a major conflict erupted among the medical doctors about the true properties of vinegar in the treatment of ill people. This discourse heavily relied on satire, sarcasm, and irony, that is, mockery of the colleagues. Susanne Lachenicht (I cannot help but wonder whether her name, which means 'do not laugh,' is a deliberate pun here, or sheer happenstance) turns to seventeenth-century England where the political battle between Protestants and Catholics was waged by means of satire and caricature, which are not automatically the same as laughter, and vice versa.

Eckart Schörle tries to suggest that a new culture of laughter set in since the middle of the sixteenth century, originating in England (Shaftesbury) and from there spread to Germany, and this in allegedly marked opposition to the Middle Ages. While this historical perspective proves to be highly speculative and positioned behind the current level of research (see the reference above),

the discussion of the emergence of new social activities involving laughter as a positive value brings to light an important aspect in cultural terms insofar as laughter was openly and intensively discussed particularly in scholarly and more public journals and magazines since then, even though the tradition, by that time obviously ignored, extended well into earlier centuries.

Hereupon the articles return to the Middle Ages, beginning with Georg Jostkleigrewe, who offers a critical engagement with Jürgen Habermas's famous argument, first formulated in 1962, that a true sense of a public culture emerged not until the seventeenth century, or so. This, however, can now probably be rejected because we have so much evidence to the contrary already since the Middle Ages, even though book printing was not invented until ca. 1450. Symbolic communication, apart from the manuscript culture, also served very well for the development of a public discourse at that time, in which many different aspects of comedy and laughter came into play. Even within such large organizations as the Catholic Church can we discover some types of public verbal exchanges over vast distances, as illustrated, for example, by the debates about the investiture privileges. In that public life many forms of laughter were in operation, but considering how much we know already about laughter in medieval literature, it is somewhat unclear what the novelty of this study then might be.

Following, we have to accept another huge leap in the study of laughter by Heinrich Lang on Cosimo de' Medici *il vecchio*, who obviously knew well how to operate successfully with satire and irony in the political affairs of his days, particularly because at his court there was a strong awareness about the usefulness of jokes in the ordinary sphere but also in the high-stake discourses in the political arena. Reinhard Hennig pays close attention to the kings' laughter in the Old Norse *Konunga sögur*. As to be expected, but here clearly spelled out, laughter can always assume a wide range of functions, such as expressing simple happiness, heroic courage, stupidity and ignorance, if not even arrogance, lack of reason (mental disturbance), or prophetic abilities.

Hiram Kümper concludes this volume with an article on medieval narratives where the discussion of sexuality, violence, and laughter emerges as a powerful expression of patriarchal structures. Laughter about a sexual victim proves to be quite common in medieval literature, and at times we even encounter examples (such as in the *Carmina Burana*) of rape which the male singer idealizes

as a male dream having come true, as reflected by the public laughter about the woman's abuse (see now my monograph on *Sexual Violence and Rape in the Middle Ages*, 2011; here not yet consulted).

The volume offers many interesting and insightful observations and invites the reader to explore highly different cultural-historical aspects. It is a bit difficult to put all the various pieces together, since the authors move, almost randomly, from classical Arabic to early-modern French medical discourse and from there back to medieval laughter in European literature, and so forth. The introduction provides some cohesion, while an index and a list of brief biographies are missing.