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Beard, Mary. *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*. Sather Classical Lectures, 71. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014. Pp. 336. Binding: Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0520277168

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Why do we laugh? Usually it's because we think something is funny, but that's not the only reason. We also laugh because we're nervous or embarrassed, or because we're humiliating someone, or because other people are laughing and "infect" us or we want to fit in; or because someone is tickling us, or giving us nitrous oxide ("laughing gas"), or we've been inhaling marijuana smoke; and so on. In other words, laughter is a physiological reaction that, like weeping, an erection, or an elevated heart rate, can have several unrelated causes and effects.

So many reasons! – some mental, others physical, some psychophysical, others sociocultural. And in the afterword to this, her latest book, Mary Beard adds a new reason to them all. "... I have become increasingly convinced that the reason we can laugh along with the ancient Romans is because it is from them that—in part at least—we have learned how to laugh and what to laugh at."

I cannot decide whether the book that precedes the statement substantiates it or is undermined by it, but the avenues Beard traverses on her way to it are well worth exploring along with her. Based on her 2008 Sather lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, but extensively updated in the interim, Beard's book offers up a number of interesting ideas about laughter and its causes in ancient Rome, typically framed as provocations. By cautioning us against the automatic assumption that laughter is always or usually prompted by humor, she wants to complicate the interpretation of laughter in many passages of canonical Latin and Greek literature in

which it is found. The admonition is well taken and should lead us all to think harder about Roman society.

The text arises from a series of lectures and it shows. Ideas of different kinds are loosely grouped into eight chapters and an afterword, but with significant overlaps and pointers forward and backward. Parts ramble and repeat, and there is an uneven mix of elementary introduction (e.g. to mime) and laconic allusion (e.g. to Evanthius, a Latin commentator on Terence living in Constantinople in the 4th c. AD, who is introduced by name alone). The tone is pleasantly lighthearted and engaging, but overly so in describing the aim of the project. Beard's own thesis statements in the preface, for example, couched in mixed and murky metaphors, do not do justice to what follows:

I am trying to get under the skin of laughter at Rome. This book is...intended to be a series of encounters with—to borrow the Russian poet Velimir Khlebnikov's memorable term—the “laughterhood” of Rome: the jokers and jesters, the gigglers and chortlers, the theorizers and moralizers. It will put center stage some of the less appreciated byways of ancient literature...and it will try to shed new light on Roman culture and some of its best-known classics...by looking through the lens of laughter.

After this she says:

Inevitably, *Laughter in Ancient Rome* reflects my own interests and expertise as a social and cultural historian. I am focusing on laughter as a shifting and adaptable cultural form, whatever its human physiological roots.

“Laughterhood” may be a memorable term, but it is not a very clear one; and if laughter—typically considered a behavior or response—is a “form,” what is it a form of?

To rephrase her goals myself, I would say that in these pages Beard is feeling her way toward writing a first cultural history of laughter in the late Roman republic and early empire. The book seeks, as the Italians say, to scatter some stones rather than to resolve old questions or answer new ones it raises. It does so by engaging piecemeal rather than systematically with recent scholarship on laughter and humor in ancient Rome. The book is conceived of as a timely intervention rather than a monumental *ktema es aei*. It asks us to rethink what it meant when people laughed in ancient Rome.

And indeed, the book has some important points to make. Here are some of the most interesting, original, or productive ones:

- Romans apparently did not smile as much as we do today, and so we go seriously astray when we translate *ridere* (and compounds) as “smile” rather

than “laugh” simply because that is what our own culture calls for in the context. We should instead translate it “laugh” and *then* try to decide what that laughter might mean—because once you uncouple laughter from humor, the range of interpretative possibilities expands enormously.

- Like race or mental illness—to foist two examples on her discussion that she does not consider, and may not agree with—laughter is one of those human things that defy simple binary classification into natural or cultural phenomena.
- Laughter is a defining human characteristic, but one that *in itself* brings us closest to the animal realm. She has much of interest to say about primates in both ancient and modern contexts.
- Romans used laughter to “characterize cultural difference, as well as to define (and occasionally critique) themselves.” This is not surprising, but the general observation leads to several shrewd specific interpretations.
- “Roman discussions tended to look to the human beings who caused laughter, to the triangulation of joker, butt, and laughter—and...to the vulnerability of the joker, no less than of the person joked about.” I have often been struck, but only half-consciously, by this aspect of Roman laughter. Beard’s formulation captures it exactly.
- “We should not assume that Cicero’s jesting “invective” was always an aggressive weapon of social and political exclusion; it might also have been an interactive idiom shared between the orator and his apparent victim.”
- Court jesters (Latin *copreae*, which she translates “little shits”) were present in the Roman imperial court. I would have liked to see a comparison with medieval courtly practices.
- The word *scurra* (typically translated “buffoon,” but famously not coextensive with that concept) “was hardly a simple referential term. It was, rather, a category within the imaginative economy and social policing of Roman laughter: the constructed, and shifting, antitype to the elite male jokester; the jesting transgressor of elite male values of jesting— symbiotically tied to, incomprehensible without, and always...liable to merge with its opposite. *Scurra*, in other words, was a (negative) value judgment on the practices of laughter rather than a descriptor, a cultural constructor (and mirror) of the jocularity of the Roman elite.”

The last chapter ends, riotously enough, with an absurd provocation. By dismissing all counter-evidence and by considering “Roman” the *Philogelos*, the Greek-language joke book par excellence, Beard argues that the Romans invented the concept of the joke. Since she promptly walks this incredible idea back in the afterword there is no point debating her idea in the strong formulation, but the weaker formulations of it—that the Romans invented the notion of the *commodified* joke—deserve to be quoted:

To put it at its starkest, the commodification of joking (into jokes swapped, handed down, collected, or bought and sold) was not some sign of the transgressive will of an autocrat; it seems much more like a Roman cultural norm.... In the Roman world, the joke not only operated as a mode of interaction but existed as a cultural object or a commodity in its own right (or as a noun rather than a verb).

In other words, Beard suggests that ancient Romans—as opposed to earlier Greeks, such as Aristophanes or Menander—were the first to consider a joke “an object of study and theorizing in its own right, as an object with its own value and history, as an object that could be invented or discovered.” She may well be on to something—but that depends on your definition of “Roman.”

Actually, whether *any* of these ideas are right or wrong depends not only on what you consider “Roman,” but also on how far applicable to *individual* Romans any collective statements about “the” Romans or “we” readers will invariably be. Beard takes as evidence of Roman laughter virtually any text written in Latin or Greek after the Roman conquest of Greece. Thus Plutarch, the *Philogelos*, Athenaeus, Dio Cassius, and the notionally Athenian characters in the comedies of Plautus and Terence are as indicative of Roman attitudes as are the works of Cicero, Ovid, Catullus, and Virgil. Her argumentation ranges from (very) old-fashioned philology to the citation and compilation of anecdotes drawn from the full sweep of pagan Latin literature. (Cicero’s *De Oratore* 2, Quintilian, Suetonius, and Macrobius are the obvious mines, but she also brings in relevant passages from Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, Virgil’s *Eclogues*, and some other less obvious texts.) Whether you agree that these anecdotes illustrate attitudes generally held by “the” Romans, and whether those attitudes are similar or different to “our” attitudes today, will thus depend on your views of social identity and collectivities, both ancient and modern. In that respect, Beard’s book takes its place alongside the many other works of cultural history that have suddenly become so popular in classical studies.

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To conclude with a detail: In chapters 4 and 7 she repeats the chestnut that Plautus’ *Persa* 392-5 alludes to “the stereotypical hierarchy of jesting in the Roman world, with “Attic salt” coming out on top, Sicilian with a little way behind.” Much has been made of this passage, but in 2011 I explained Satyrio’s quip about *Siculum* there as a

pun on Latin *sic(u)lum*, “shekel”.¹ If true, the alleged stereotype, and its accessory ideas, evaporates.

M. F.

¹ M. Fontaine, “Tale padre, tale figlia? alcune ambiguità nel *Persa*” in R. Raffaelli, A. Tontini, eds., *Lecturae Plautinae Sarsinates XIV: Persa*. Urbino, 2011, 13-35.