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# The Paradoxes of Early Modern Laughter: Laurent Joubert's *Traité du Ris*

Indira Ghose

Laughter was of absorbing interest to Renaissance medical scholars. The treatise on laughter published by the French physician Laurent Joubert in 1579 crystallizes a number of early modern debates about the nature of laughter. For Joubert, laughter finds its origin in the heart and is induced by a paradoxical mixture of emotions: joy and sorrow. What triggers laughter is the ugly. Joubert draws on the classical notion that laughter is an expression of derision – a notion that also shaped the thought of early modern writers, who considered laughter above all as a social corrective. As regards new developments in medicine, Joubert's treatise is not particularly innovative. What is remarkable about his text is the Neoplatonic spirit it is imbued with. At the same time, his work is influenced by the early modern shift towards a culture of civility, which set a premium on corporeal control. This apparent paradox emerges as illusory: both a Neoplatonic celebration of the quest for knowledge and the movement towards greater self-control were rooted in an evolving notion of the individual as self-determined and inspired by the aesthetic imperative to cultivate the self.

In his *Treatise on Laughter*, published in 1579, the French physician Laurent Joubert recounts an anecdote about a monkey that helped to cure his master. The man in question was very ill, and surrounded by people waiting for his death. The more ill he became, the bolder they grew, grabbing whatever item caught their fancy:

Le Cinge voyant ce remuëmant de menage, prind pour sa part le chapperon rouge fourré, que son maitre portoit aus actes solamnels: duquel il s'affula d'une telle grace devant luy, que le patient print si grand plaisir à contempler

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toutes ces cingeries, qu'il fut contraint de si fort rire, que cette emocion par tout le cors expanduë, emeut tellemant nature . . . qu'il an recouvra la santé.  
(334)<sup>1</sup>

The monkey, seeing all this movement in the household, took for itself the furred red hood that its master wore on solemn occasions. It put the hood on before the patient with much grace, and the patient took such pleasure in contemplating all these monkeyshines that he was forced to laugh so violently that the commotion, spreading throughout his entire body, moved nature so much . . . that he recovered his health. (127)<sup>2</sup>

Joubert concludes, "Donques la dignité & excellance du Ris æt fort grande, puis que il ranforce tellemant l'esprit, qu'il peut soudain changer l'etat d'un malade, & de mortel le randre guerissable" (335); "The dignity and excellence of laughter is, therefore, very great inasmuch as it reinforces the spirit so much that it can suddenly change the state of a patient, and from being deathbound render him curable" (128).

The notion of the therapeutic value of laughter reaches back to the Hippocratic corpus, and has been assiduously recycled ever since. Similarly, most of Joubert's findings have their roots in classical ideas on laughter or are premised on the Galenic physiology that dominated Western medicine until the discovery of the circulation of blood by William Harvey in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, Joubert's treatise is of interest as a compendium of contemporary thought on laughter. It crystallizes a number of early modern debates on the topic.

Laughter was a leading concern of Renaissance science. There were lively arguments about whether laughter originated in the heart, the spleen, or the brain (Screech and Calder 220). A further vexed issue was the relation of laughter to the passions. Early modern thinkers were at pains to pinpoint precisely which emotions were activated in laughter (Skinner 143). For Joubert, the source of laughter is ugliness: "Ce que nous voyons de laid, difforme, des-honneste, indessant, mal-seant, & peu convenable, excite an nous le ris, pourveu que nous n'an soyons meus à compassion" (16); "What we see that is ugly, deformed, improper, indecent, unfitting, and indecorous excites laughter in us, provided we are not moved to compassion" (20). He reiterates the classical definition that Aristotle provided in the *Poetics*: "the laughable comprises any fault or mark of shame which involves no pain or destruction" (5.1449a). The risible was defined as all that appeared unseemly or distorted, so long as it did not arouse pity in the viewer. Even though the

<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Peter Frei for his help in partially modernizing the French original.

<sup>2</sup> I draw on the English translation by Gregory David de Rocher (1980).

*Poetics* had only been recovered in 1498, Aristotle's views on the ridiculous were circulated in other works, in particular in the writings of Cicero and Quintilian. What triggered laughter was directly linked to the emotions involved. Joubert sees laughter as paradoxically bound up with two opposing passions, joy and sorrow. As he explains:

la chose ridicule nous donne plaisir & tristesse: plaisir, de ce qu'on la trouve indigne de pitié . . . tristesse, pour ce que tout ridicule provient de laideur & messeance: le cœur marry de telle vilainie, comme santant douleur, s'etressit & resserre. (87-88)

laughable matter gives us pleasure and sadness: pleasure in that we find it unworthy of pity . . . sadness, because all laughable matter comes from ugliness and impropriety: the heart, upset over such unseemliness, and as if feeling pain, shrinks and tightens. (44)

Since the seat of the passions was the heart, laughter provoked powerful cardiac movements – involuntary dilations and contractions of the heart. In terms of humoral pathology, in joy the heart expanded, pouring forth great amounts of blood and humours into the face. By contrast, in sorrow, the humours drained from the face and retreated towards the heart. The distensions of the heart warmed the body, while the constrictions cooled it. These movements were transferred to the diaphragm, which caused the breath in the lungs to be expelled in laughter, by analogy with a bellows. In addition, the humours in the face activated the opening of the mouth, the stretching of the lips, and the widening of the chin. Interestingly, the facial distortion through laughter was the same as in weeping. In his version of the physiology of laughter Joubert elegantly offered a solution to a further conundrum that exercised his colleagues: why both laughter and sadness produced tears (Screech and Calder 221). As he points out:

Touchant aus larmes que jettet les rieurs, il faut savoir qu'on pleure de marisson, quand la douleur presse de contrainte les yeus, . . . epraignant leur humidité. Au contraire, la joye dilate & ouvre leurs pores, d'où peuvet couler & choir les humeurs an maniere de pleur. (118-119)

Concerning the tears that laughers shed, it is necessary to know that one weeps of sadness when suffering presses the eyes, . . . squeezing out their humidity. Joy, on the other hand, dilates the pores, from which the humors are able to flow and fall in the form of tears. (56)

The humours, meeting with the coldness of the eyes, thicken into tears – which explains why tears are cold. Joubert's ideas are cited by the

English physician Timothy Bright, who in his *Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) refers his readers to the treatise of his colleague, lauding it as “not inferiour to any of this age” (152).

Not all colleagues agreed with Joubert. For Nicolas Nancel, another French doctor who wrote a treatise entitled *De risu* (1587), it was the agitation of the brain, not the heart, that produced laughter (and tears) (Screech and Calder 220-21). By contrast, the widespread notion that the seat of laughter was the spleen is reflected in a number of references in Shakespeare’s plays. In *Twelfth Night*, Maria, announcing the arrival of Malvolio in carnivalesque yellow stockings, promises her fellow conspirators, “If you desire the spleen, and will laugh yourselves into stitches, follow me” (3.2.64-65). In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella appeals to the authority of the angels, who never laugh – but who “with our spleens, / Would all themselves laugh mortal” (2.2.120-23). Paradoxically, the spleen is also mentioned as the source of anger: in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus challenges Cassius to swallow his fury with the words, “You shall digest the venom of your spleen / Though it do split you” (4.3.46-48).

What was a shared premise, however, was the belief that laughter was an expression of derision.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle had adopted the idea from Plato, who in the *Philebus* (48-50) had disputed the proposition that pleasure, as opposed to wisdom, was the highest good. As Socrates points out, most forms of pleasure involved an ambiguous mixture of emotions. Laughter was inextricably linked to malice, a pain of the soul. Particularly deserving of laughter were those who displayed a blatant lack of self-knowledge, the key Delphic injunction that Socrates propagated throughout the dialogues. The notion that laughter was an ambivalent form of pleasure and an articulation of scorn and contempt shaped all discussion of laughter from antiquity onwards. The precise mixture of emotions at stake remained controversial. Not all thinkers bracketed the pair of concupiscible passions, joy and sorrow, with laughter, as Joubert did. In his treatise *De ridiculis*, published in 1550 with his commentary to the *Poetics*, Madius (or Vincenzo Maggi) proposed that laughter was produced by turpitude or the ugly in conjunction with wonder (*admiratio*) (Herrick 7-9). Descartes in *Les passions de l’âme* (1649) claimed that laughter sprang from joy mixed with hatred and wonder (85; part 2, art. 126). Other writers such as Thomas Wilson echo Aristotle faithfully:

The occasion of laughter and the mean that maketh us merry . . . is the fondness, the filthiness, the deformity, and all such evil behaviour as we see

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<sup>3</sup> In the following I am deeply indebted to Quentin Skinner’s work on the classical theory of laughter.

to be in other. For we laugh always at those things which either only or chiefly touch handsomely and wittily some especial fault or fond behaviour in some one body or some one thing. Sometimes we jest at a man's body that is not well proportioned, and laugh at his countenance if either it be not comely by nature or else he, through folly, cannot well see it. (165)

Thomas Hobbes summed up these views in the memorable words, "laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in our selves by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly" (qtd. Skinner 148).

Aristotelian ideas about the comic remained influential in the Renaissance. Together with Horace's discussion of decorum in his *Ars Poetica*, and Cicero's elaboration of the types of wit in *De Oratore*, they shaped the ideas of writers on the theory of comedy (Galbraith 7). In his *Defence of Poesy* Sir Philip Sidney draws a careful distinction between delight and laughter: "Delight hath a joy in it, either permanent or present. Laughter hath only a scornful tickling" (112-13). In *Timber, or Discoveries*, Jonson denounces laughter categorically:

Aristotle saies rightly, the moving of laughter is a fault in Comedie, a kind of turpitude, that depraves some part of a mans nature without a disease. As a wry face without paine moves laughter, or a deformed vizard, or a rude Clowne, drest in a Ladies habit, and using her actions, wee dislike, and scorne such representations; which made the ancient Philosophers ever thinke laughter unfitting in a wise man. (643)

Satirical laughter, however, is justified as a social corrective, inspiring the audience to reform itself. In the Prologue to *Every Man in his Humour* Ben Jonson declares that comedy serves to "show an image of the times, / And sport with human follies, not with crimes" (23-24). He refers explicitly to "such errors, as you'll all confess / By laughing at them, they deserve no less" (27-28). Thus far the theory. In practice, Renaissance drama exploded with laughter, comic literature of all kinds – satires, novellas, *facetiae*, ballads – flooded the market, and the genre of the jest book was born. Jonson's own comedies were among the most hilarious on offer.

Despite the pervasive early modern conception of laughter as ridicule, the idea that laughter might be an expression of delight unrelated to mockery was gaining ground (Skinner 160-62). In his *De sympathia et antipathia rerum* (1546) the physician Fracastoro claimed laughter sprang from joy and *admiratio*; Madius, who retained the emphasis on the ugly, nevertheless took up the notion of *admiratio*, as did, indeed, Descartes (Skinner 155-57). The emphasis on *admiratio* was linked to a revival of the notion of surprise in evoking laughter – originally put forward by

Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (3.11.6, 1412a). Castelvetro, who otherwise endorses Aristotle's theory of the ludicrous, did point out that some forms of laughter could be induced by pleasure alone (214). These thoughts paved the way for a new theory of laughter. In the eighteenth century the idea emerged that laughter was a purely benevolent affair. The views of Hobbes were challenged by Shaftesbury, who now proposed that humankind was in essence benign. Thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Francis Hutcheson and James Beattie, mooted the idea that laughter was not grounded in a feeling of superiority, but was a response to intellectual stimulation through the perception of incongruity. The emotion linked to laughter, they claimed, was sympathy rather than malice. Indeed, derisive laughter was now condemned as unnatural.

These are not ideas that interest Joubert. While he concedes that the unexpected plays an important role in evoking mirth, in general he remains conservative in his approach, steeped in classical ideas both regarding the physiology of laughter and the source of mirth. Significantly, he ignores the findings of Vesalius, whose seven volume *De humani corporis fabrica* (*On the Fabric of the Human Body*) had appeared in 1543, and whose experiments in anatomy had dismantled many of Galen's claims. The most innovative aspect of Joubert's work is the Neoplatonic spirit it is steeped in. Chancellor of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Montpellier, Joubert was appointed *premier médecin* to Catherine de Medici and went on to become royal physician to Henry III. He dedicated his book to Princess Marguerite de Valois. In his dedicatory letter he waxes eloquent about the subject of his treatise: "Certainement, il n'y ha rien qui donne plus de contentement & recreation, qu'un visage riant" (n.p.); "Certainly there is nothing that gives more pleasure and recreation than a laughing face" (10). Not only is laughter proper to man, as Aristotle had claimed, it was even more proper to woman: "Le Ris aussi luy est plus convenable, mieus feant & de meulheure grace, declairant sa grande douceur & humanité" (n.p.); "laughter in her is also more proper, more fitting, more gracious, expressing her great gentleness and humanity" (11). In the Preface to Book Two, he enthuses, "il n'y ha rien de plus merveilleus que le Ris, lequel Dieu a donné au seul homme, d'antre tous les animaux, comme etant le plus admirable" (142); "there is nothing more marvelous than laughter, which God has given to man alone above all the animals because he is the most admirable" (65). In his paean to humanity he implicitly cites Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which had set the framework for the humanist quest for knowledge:

Car il et non seulement prince des animaux, & d'une splendeur divine de raison & antandement, interprete de toute la nature: ains aussi an mode de

Prothee, ou d'un chamaleon . . . il se transforme an tout ce qu'il veut coup à coup. (158)

For he is not only prince among the animals, and of a divine splendor by virtue of his reason and understanding, interpreter of all Nature, but also of the nature of a Proteus, or of a chameleon . . . he transforms himself into everything he wishes again and again. (71)

He prefaces his third book with a personal, rather touching proem, in which he justifies his scholarship in unequivocally Neoplatonic terms, claiming, "l'ame . . . et comme un petit Dieu" (121); "the soul is like a little God" (91), which remains insatiable in the sublunary realm. "Donques noltre esprit ne sera jamais rassasié, que la gloire de Dieu ne luy apparaisse" (227-228); "Therefore, our mind will never be satisfied until the glory of God appears to it" (93). This, he admits, is what inspired him to delve into the subject of laughter: "Or c'et ce qui m'a fait, si avant anfoncer au discours de mon argumant, an cette matiere du Ris, la plus jantile & galharde qui ayt été jamais touchee" (228); "Now, this is what made me advance my argument so far into this matter of laughter, the nicest and most exciting that has ever been touched" (93). He realizes that his thirst for learning will never be quenched: "Car d'un propos je fuis conduit à l'autre, & d'un curieus desir je vay toujours recherchant, comme insatiable, tout ce que j'an peus comprendre" (228); "For from one proposition I am led to another, and with a curious desire I go searching constantly, as though insatiable, all that I can grasp" (93). As he sees it, laughter has been granted to humankind for recreation and as a means to refresh the mind. Here he draws on ideas adumbrated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle explained that relaxation and amusement were a necessary element in life. Quoting the philosopher Anacharsis, Aristotle declares, "It seems correct to amuse ourselves so that we can do something serious" (10.6.6, 1176b33-34). Amusement was a form of relaxation, and relaxation was conducive to activity and work, enabling one to lead a virtuous life. It is this passage that would emerge as the key justification for laughter, and would furnish arguments for a number of thinkers, ranging from Aquinas to humanists such as Erasmus and Thomas More.

Joubert's Neoplatonic credentials appear most explicitly at the very end of his book. He advocates living joyously and laughing often, citing the advice of Marsilio Ficino: "Vivés joyeusement, dit-il. Le ciel vous ha créés de sa liesse, laquelle il ha déclaré de sa fasson de rire . . . comme an s'ebaudissant" (330-331); "Live joyously," he says, "the heavens created you out of joy, which they have made clear to be their way of laughing . . . as if they were at play" (126). In the Renaissance Ficino was proba-



bly one of the most eloquent champions of human laughter, which he saw as symbolic of the divine. In the strand of Neoplatonism that he represented, inspired by the fifth century Greek philosopher Proclus, laughter was an aspect of divine creativity. The physiological agitation brought about by laughter harmonized with the movement of the spheres. “Ficino identified laughter as pleasure; pleasure was grace; therefore, laughter could be grace” (O’Rourke Boyle 722). He radically reversed the long legacy of hostility towards laughter articulated by both Plato and the Church Fathers.

What is striking about Joubert’s text is the absence of a didactic framework. To be sure, he does differentiate between proper and improper types of mirth. In Book Two he presents a taxonomy of types of laughter, and lists a number of forms of “Ris mal sain & batard” (177), “unhealthy and bastard laughter” (76): Sardinian laughs, engendered by eating the herb sardonian, also known as dog laughter; convulsions created by the bite of the tarantula; laughter caused by injuries to the diaphragm. Tickling, too, is a false kind of laughter. He also offers a catalogue of excessive laughs, such as the syncrousian laugh, which shakes one intensely; the bitter sardonian laugh; Ajax laughter, when one laughs with rage; megaric laughter, articulated while one is depressed; or Ionic laughter, associated with the “mollesse des Sybarites” (218), the “flabbiness of the Sybarites” (90). Then there is Catonian laughter, named after Cato, who laughed only once in his life, and then excessively. According to a hoary old chestnut that Joubert obligingly recycles, Cato saw an ass eating thistles and cried out, “Ces laivres ont de samblables laitues,” “His lips have similar lettuce” (90). Many of these forms of improper laughter are taken from Erasmus’ *Adages*, to which Joubert points his readers.

For all Joubert’s endorsement of the therapeutic and recreational virtues of mirth, he devotes considerable effort to warning the reader against the harmful effects of laughter. Laughing weakens the body through the great dissipation of humours it effects – which in its turn produces the diminishing of natural heat. Those who are weak are further weakened by laughter. Laughter can even be the cause of death, most frequently through suffocation. Admittedly, these cases are extremely rare. However, he warns us that fat people are particularly at risk, since they have little blood left in their vessels (it has all solidified into fat). Indeed, among the less serious effects of laughter is the fact that too much laughter causes wrinkles. It also makes one fat. Laughter is evoked by an abundance of blood and heat. Fat people have an excess of blood, and are naturally joyous, foolish, and enjoy laughing. Hence the podgy end up more wrinkled in old age than their skinny counterparts.

Joubert's emphasis on moderation in laughter is, of course, indebted to the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explicitly applies the yardstick of temperance to laughter:

Those who go to excess in raising laughs seem to be vulgar buffoons. They stop at nothing to raise a laugh, and care more about that than about saying what is seemly and avoiding pain to the victims of the joke. Those who would never say anything themselves to raise a laugh, and even object when other people do it, seem to be boorish and stiff. Those who joke in appropriate ways are called witty. (4.8.3, 1128a4-10)

The ideal that a virtuous man and a gentleman would cultivate lay in the mean and consisted of true wit (*eutrapelia*). For Aristotle, wit together with honesty and friendliness belonged to the social virtues, which contributed to leading a fulfilled life. Cicero develops the idea of the appropriate even further. In *De Officiis*, probably the most popular book of moral philosophy in the Renaissance, Cicero replaces the fourth of the canonical virtues (wisdom, justice, courage, temperance or moderation) with decorum. For him the proper regulation of speech and bodily behaviour is the foundational virtue of civil life. Even apparently trivial aspects such as laughing, posture, gait, and facial expressions are underwritten by natural law. They are signs from which the personality of the citizen can be inferred. At the same time, they are susceptible to self-discipline and are capable of being governed by force of habit. The virtuous self is a product of both nature and culture. In Ciceronian ethics, the key precept is the role of education in shaping bodily practice. As Michael Schoenfeldt has shown, the main difference between humoral pathology and modern ideas of the self rooted in psychoanalysis is the belief that emotions do not erupt out of an inner self, but are open to manipulation through regimes of self-discipline and dietary regulations (1-39). For Joubert, laughter is both an involuntary and voluntary phenomenon. Like all constituent factors in Galenic physiology, it is susceptible to human control.

The wider backdrop to Joubert's work on laughter is formed by the emergence of a culture of civility in the early modern period (Elias; Ardit; Chartier). A new set of rules regulating social manners and corporeal habits began to circulate in elite circles, specifying which forms of comportment, speech, gesture, and dress marked the aristocracy off from lower ranks of society. A gradual withdrawal of the elite from popular culture was discernible (Burke 335-86). In a political landscape in which absolutist regimes increasingly gained ground throughout Europe, the aristocracy was under pressure to find new forms of legitimation and authority. The Ciceronian precepts of self-restraint and de-

corum were refashioned into a code of social distinction. Certain types of behaviour were regarded as bearing the cachet of prestige, status, and authority. Laughter, too, became a tool of self-definition. In the book that launched the literature of civility in 1530, *De civilitate morum puerilium*, Erasmus expends considerable effort in discussing the limits to decorous laughter:

To laugh at every word or deed is the sign of a fool; to laugh at none the sign of a blockhead. It is quite wrong to laugh at improper words or actions. Loud laughter and the immoderate mirth that shakes the whole body and is for that reason called “discord” by the Greeks, are unbecoming to any age but much more so to youth. The neighing sound that some people make when they laugh is also unseemly. And the person who opens his mouth wide in a rictus, with wrinkled cheeks and exposed teeth, is also impolite. . . . The face should express mirth in such a way that it neither distorts the appearance of the mouth nor evinces a dissolute mind. . . . If something so funny should occur that it produces uncontrolled laughter of this sort, the face should be covered with a napkin or with the hand. (275-76)

Like other humanists, Erasmus was confident that laughter was amenable to self-control. The ethical principle he propounds is that of the Aristotelian mean, avoiding excess of any kind. As Vives explains in *De Anima et Vita* (1538), laughing “can be controlled by habit and reason to prevent excessive outbursts. . . . Such are the convulsions of the ignorant, the peasants, children, and women, when they lose their self-control as they are overcome by laughter of this kind” (58). Excessive laughter stigmatized one as either vulgar, infantile, or effeminate.

The cult of manners did not merely offer elite and upwardly mobile circles an instrument of social distinction. It was shaped by the same imperative as was Joubert’s paean to laughter. The Neoplatonic celebration of the human quest for knowledge and the techniques of self-control set out in the courtesy literature of the Renaissance were both fuelled by the emerging ideal of humankind as consisting of self-determined, disengaged subjects, preoccupied with forging a self in accordance with their aspirations. Identity was seen as a matter of achievement, not a given. Manuals of courtesy had of course existed since the twelfth century. But in the new wave of books, which had its apotheosis in Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), the main focus shifted from virtue to aesthetics – albeit aesthetic virtuosity impelled by an ethical impulse (Arditi 55). At stake was the desire to create a self in consonance with aesthetic norms – and thus aspire towards the sublime. This is visible in the precepts on laughter in courtesy books, which apart from presenting prescriptions about the aesthetics of laughing often

include an entire section on decorous mirth. While jesting as a form of mockery remains an important tool in the game of one-upmanship played by courtiers with each other, what was also advocated was the deployment of laughter as a means of easing social relations. As Stefano Guazzo in *The Civile Conversation* (1574) has one of his interlocutors point out, it is a sign of courtesy and wit “no lesse in jesting merily with others, then in taking jest patiently of others” (1.158-59). In the final section of his book, Guazzo gives a demonstration of his ideal of witty, mirthful conversation. He presents a banquet in which he describes a small, elegant circle of aristocrats and the playful banter they indulge in. As it happens, one of the jests bandied about in this polished society is the joke about the monkey that Joubert relates to his readers (2.166).

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