

# Abstracts: Gender, Laughter & Humour

**Saturday 10.30-11.30**

## **Session 1 : Antiquity and Early Christian Culture D108**

### **Humour, women and the male gaze in ancient Greek visual culture**

Alexandre Mitchell (Oxford University)

The paper's general context is visual humour in ancient Greece but its main focus is on the way in which women from different backgrounds were portrayed and mocked by (mainly) male vase-painters in ancient Athens. The driving idea is that men tried to the best of their abilities to control women, and this is especially evident in comic depictions. The artists were really artisans: they usually did not have patrons as they produced their often well-designed utilitarian objects for the market-place. Their production followed the rule of fashion and because these objects were ubiquitous in Athens, and showed every aspect of daily life and mythology, they offer us a popular vision of what troubled, entranced, fascinated or amused most Athenians. In many respects, the main problem in studying women in classical

Athens is that they have often been seen as an undifferentiated mass. The paintings on Greek vases open a different path to studying women in Athens. Their goal was to please their viewers in order to sell their pots. This is why they can both contradict and comfort interpretations originating in the ancient textual evidence.

### **Mimes, Humour and Pornography in Early Christianity**

Anna Foka (Umeå University)

From the obscene and political Old Greek performances to the refined Menander who later influenced Terence and Plautus, Comedy in antiquity is stereotypically presented as an institutionalized genre; it is indeed often sponsored by wealthy individuals and other benefactors. Later antiquity, though, presents a totally different image. Sadly, modern histories of theatre tend to ignore Early Byzantium or treat it schematically- a literary bridge between antiquity and renaissance for the Roman East. While in the West, performances survive as Medieval Moral Mystery Plays, in the East, by the Middle Byzantine period there is no remaining organized forms of theatre. In this paper, I will look at a rather microhistoric aspect of the Early Byzantine period, the humble comic Mime: a largely improvisational comic genre of entertainment for streets, the hippodrome and private banquets.

I will specifically focus on gendered aspects of the mime. I will argue that Biological Mimes (quotidian-life-themed Mime) were associated with lascivious public dancing, which along with cross-dressing were considered pagan practices. Their plot was adultery in the basis and it, sometimes, involved sexual act on stage. This is evident by individual cases (Theodora) as well as the official Christian polemic of the genre with pejorative terms: words like mimoi, skenikoi, thymelikoi, mousikoi, orchestai comes to mean

effeminate, unmanly perverse, obscene, and superficial. Although common in the novel, komedio (to act comic) means to perform a comedy as well as any ridiculous figure (Bibilakis 1996: 147-73). Indeed, I will discuss how frequent association of the comic mime with prostitution and effeminacy shows how visibility and sexual availability were linked in thought and practice .

### **13.00-15.15 Plenary Lectures Auditorium F**

#### **Laughing at Ourselves: Gendered Humor in Classical Greece**

David Konstan (Brown and NYC University)

The ancient Greeks and Romans have a reputation today – not entirely undeserved – for a misogynistic streak. And yet, I wish to suggest that ancient Greek humor, or at least one important strand of it, was not in principle hostile to women, and that the butt of the joke was more often men themselves, and their silly expectations of the other sex. In what follows, I propose to give some examples of laughter aroused in this spirit, and then raise some possible explanations of why the Greeks should have deployed their wit in this way, and which seems so contrary to the prevailing view of them. Among the texts discussed are Homer's *Odyssey*, Semonides poem on women, Aristophanes *Assemblywomen* (*Ecclesiazusae*), and epigram by Marcus Argentarius, and Plautus' comedy, *Casina* (based on a Greek original by Diphilus).

#### **Do Muslims Laugh? Humor in Islamic Aesthetics and its function in Ottoman Poetry**

Didem Havlioğlu (Sehir University, Istanbul)

In 2005 when Southpark episodes and Danish cartoons about the Prophet Mohammad caused turmoil resulting in an apparent clash of civilizations, Muslims appeared in the mainstream media to be a homogeneous group of humorless people who have no tolerance for criticism. The major assumption by the West was that Islam, as a religious institution, encourages iconoclasm and prohibits human representations especially of the prophet. However, research shows that both iconography and representation have been significant parts of Islamic arts throughout history. In fact, the uproar from the Muslim people had nothing to do with artistic representations or the use of humor; Muslims were offended because they believed that the intention behind the above mentioned works was to humiliate their religion and the prophet. In other words, their issue was not with the art itself, but its intention. In fact, humor has historically played a significant role in Islamic arts and literature and identifies its strong and dangerous instrumentality as a double-edged sword.

My presentation will show historical examples of humor and explain its use in Islamic arts. My examples come from a wide variety of sources; religious literature such as the hadith, major poets such as Rumi and Attar, narrative transformations of jokes in Cuha stories and his Turkish version Nasreddin Hoca, traveling genres such as the puppet theatre and representations in miniature paintings. My aim is to not only showcase this panoramic

view but also to tackle the category of “Islamic humor.” I will then discuss the equivocal intention of Islamic arts, which is making meaning through a highly stylized artistic discourse in which both the artist and the audience are well-versed. More specifically, humor as an artform, is one of the legitimate ways to achieve ambiguity and it works based on the unspoken agreement between the artist and the audience.

Framed this way, humor is the achievement on the part of an artist who wants to communicate hidden meanings to the audience who experiences his/her art. According to early art critics, such as Aşık Çelebi, only the most accomplished artists can be successful humorists. I will discuss one such artist, Mihri Hatun, an Ottoman woman poet, whose use of humor challenges the poetic tradition from within. In particular, she carefully and cleverly dismantles the gender construction in Ottoman poetics with the tool of humor. The outcome is not only entertaining but also provocative.

## **15.30-16.30 Session 2: Medieval Europe I**

**D108**

### **Is the Comic World a Paradise for Women?: Medieval Models of Portable Utopia**

Martha Bayless (University of Oregon, USA)

Medieval comic narrative can be considered a portable Utopia: a comic world of appetite and abundance in which death is effaced and misfortune reduced to the laughable. But are women equal citizens of this paradise? The fabliau *Les Perdrix*, for example, concludes with the moral “Women live but to deceive” — is this an emblem of the fact that the comic world is essentially misogynous, its Utopia not fully available to women? This paper will analyze the contradictions between what is said about women and how women actually inhabit a range of comic narratives, from fabliaux to Latin tales. In particular this study will examine the ways in which the characteristics associated with women, such as bodiliness and sexuality, are central to comic tales, so that in essence the world of women is a comic world: the world in which women have power. In medieval terms, to introduce a woman into a narrative is to invite the comic, and to object to women’s power is to object to the comic world. As this paper will show, both elements bear a complex relationship to the contemporary world of “official” power, disparaged and prized in equal measure.

### **‘Seint er þó at tryggja slíkar konurnar sem þú ert’ [It takes a long time to tame a woman like you]. Gender, Performance and Humour in Icelandic Saga Literature**

Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir (University of Reykjavik)

The typical humorous scene in the Icelandic family sagas is characterized by understatement. The heroic status of the male hero is affirmed as he laughs or makes a

deadpan remark at the moment of his death. Similarly the saga heroine laughs or smiles at her husband's slayer, all the time plotting revenge. Many other forms of humour can be found in the sagas, among them satire and pastiche, bawdy and/or grotesque scenes and slapstick humour. In the late medieval period, we begin to see a growing popularity of so-called maiden-king sagas, where suitors woo powerful female rulers and are at first humiliated physically and/or verbally. After they have succeeded in other trials, the suitors return successfully to subjugate their brides, often with beatings or rape. These narratives are framed in a comic context, where humour is used to deflect anxieties about women's independence, and although he is the object of ridicule or violence, the male hero always ends up having the last laugh. These sagas could thus be said to appear as 'disciplining tools in enforcing gender norms' (to quote one of the suggested themes of the workshop), which scholars have argued became increasingly conservative in the late medieval period. However, there is one saga where this pattern deserves to be unpacked further, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*. The usual maiden-king paradigm is followed, but the woman has in this case taken up a male name, male clothes and weapons, and thus a male identity. (S)he governs a kingdom, keeping a castle and a retinue, and his/her retainers accept his/her performance of a male role. When the suitor comes to propose, he addresses the maiden-king as a man, using male pronouns and words such as 'sir' and 'king', and goes on to suggest they marry, to which the maiden-king responds very angrily. A theatrical and arguably very funny scene ensues, with plenty of witty repartees and an exciting, intricately choreographed battle. In this paper I will contextualize the scene more generally within previous studies of Icelandic medieval humour, and analyze what this saga reveals about changing attitudes to gender, power and performance in the medieval period. It will be argued that the humour that seems on the surface to deflect male anxieties can also be read as engaging with a more subversive message, the unsettling of traditional power structures and gender roles.

## **16.45 – 17.45 Session 3: Medieval Europe II                      D108**

### **Ale and Sympathy: Drinking, Laughter and Confession in Medieval Culture**

Virginia Langum (Umeå University)

Laughter is an ambivalent activity in the Middle Ages. Some churchmen condemned laughter as antithetical to the spiritual life. Poets and physicians, however, praised laughter's benefits to the body. However, in all medieval accounts, laughter is rooted within the body, either referred to in terms of its supposed origin in the body (the liver or spleen) or in reference to its expressing organ (the mouth). In pastoral writing, laughter was often associated with other transgressions of the mouth, such as gluttony and improper speech. Foolish laughter was listed as one of the "sins of the tongue" in medieval pastoral manuals. Together, the "sins of the mouth" offer an alternative form of religion. In a popular image, the Devil's tavern opposes the Church, wherein revelers "confess" in pride and laughter. Within this tradition, laughter of both men and women was suspicious if not outright immoral; women's laughter was particularly dangerous. Patristic writers aligned laughter to sin generally and sexual desire more specifically.

This paper examines a specific context for women's laughter: drinking and confession of marital troubles within this pastoral framework. Alewife poems and other texts centered around women drinking and laughing sacramentalize their laughter, rendering their discussions of marital troubles as "confession." This sacramentality is demonstrated through making their output sanative through expulsion of what is described as "bile". Pastoral discourse often describes confession to vomiting, because although it is shameful and painful when it occurs, but in the act of releasing poison and what is superfluous to the body, health-restoring. This paper puts the laughter of medieval woman in this sacramental context, arguing that despite social and authoritative concerns, it gives meaning to their suffering.

### **Laughter and the change of mentalities**

Olle Ferm (Stockholm University)

Olle Ferm will comment on two Fabliaus and a German Schwank. He will demonstrate a drastic change of mentality between the 13th century and the 15th century.

## **Sunday 9 December**

### **09.30- 10.30 Session 4: The Near East: Ottoman Humour D108**

#### **Public morality in Ottoman society through the prism of the Karagöz shadow theater**

Isik Tamdogan (EHESS, Paris)

Isik Tamdogan will talk about how rules can be transgressed through humor.

#### **Loving Boys as Fun in Early Modern Ottoman Erotic Imaginary**

Yavuz Aykan (Humboldt University, Berlin)

### **10.45- 11.45 Session 5: Early Modern Europe I D108**

#### **Gender and Laughter: City Women in the Early Modern Theatre Audience**

Kristine Steenbergh (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam)

In the seventeenth century, London theatres such as The Cockpit and Blackfriars were known for a large share of citizen's wives and gentlewomen in their audiences. Andrew Gurr in his study of playgoing in Shakespeare's London speaks of a "real takeover" by women in these theatres, and a contemporary source describing Blackfriars mentions the "frequent throngs of Gentlewomen which prest thither." Critics like Jean Howard and Alison Findlay have argued that the theatre may have been a liberating space for women.

As paying customers, they earned the right to exercise their judgment in watching a play. Women could interpret the performance on their own terms and apply their playgoing experiences to their own lives outside the theatre.

In the context of this workshop, I will take these “throng of Gentlewomen” in the theatre as my starting point for an exploration of the role of laughter and gender in the audience. I will ask such questions as: if women as consumers of plays were at liberty to form their own judgment, what was the role of the passions in their experience of the plays they saw? In early modern thinking about the effects of plays on their audiences, was laughter considered an individual or a collective response; did it unite or divide a theatre audience; were men and women in the audience expected to laugh at the same things? What do we know about ideas about laughter and the female body, for instance in humoral theory, and how does this relate to thinking about the effect of acted emotions on the audience in early modern poetics? Can we uncover how women in the audience reacted to a comedy like *The City Madam* (Massinger, *King's Men in Blackfriars*, 1632), which mocks citizens' wives?

Reflections upon the experience of attending a play in early modern London are very rare and those sources that do exist do not comment on the emotional experience of the play. I will therefore draw on a wide range of sources to explore these questions. These range from prologues and epilogues that address women in the audience; plays-within-plays that incite laughter in the onstage audience; to anti-theatrical texts and defenses of the stage. The paper will combine a review of relevant secondary material with a highly eclectic selection of case studies to make some tentative forays into the matter.

## **Constructing Gender in Early Modern English Jest-books**

Anu Korhonen (University of Helsinki)

One of the best ways to get to grips with early modern European humour is to look at jest-books, printed collections of jokes that were produced in small cheap formats by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printing presses. One of the most common themes discussed in jest-books was, in turn, gender.

In this paper, I want to look at the ways in which gender and laughter intersect in the context of the jest-book. What are the issues that early modern English humour discussed in gendered ways, and how do they contribute to our understanding of early modern gender more generally? Three perspectives will help to elucidate these questions.

First, I will talk about gendered conceptions of speech, particularly female garrulousness and the perceived connections between language and reason. Secondly, I will approach sexual humour by looking at cuckoldry jokes. Of all the breaches of sexual morality, women's adultery seems to have been the most comic, but the comic butt in these jokes was always the cuckolded husband, not the cheating wife. My third theme will be comic

violence and the ways in which the concept of the shrew was used in delineating ideal marital power structures and ideal gendered identities for both men and women.

However, what makes these jokes culturally specific is not so much the themes they discuss – these topics are by no means only found in England or in the early modern period – but the underlying message they convey. Their most emphatic demands were not directed at early modern women, but at men, the most avid collectors, buyers, readers and tellers of jokes. In the rhetoric of the jest-books, patriarchal power was under constant attack by wilful women, and the responsibility for retaining it resided with men.

## 12.45-13.45 Session 6: The far East: Humour in Chinese Culture D108

### Reproducing Hegemonic Masculinities: Representations of Fatherhood and Masculinities in Three Pre-modern Chinese Humorous Texts

Chan Ching Mario Liong (Umeå University)

Fathers in the Chinese patrilineal family system have a lot of power and control over their children, wives, and other family members as the moral educator and the chief trustee of the family's property (Baker 1979; Cohen 1992). Confucian notion, like filial piety, helps reinforce the authority and power of the patriarch. Yet researchers reveal that the actual practice of fathers and other family members does not follow the structural norms strictly (e.g. Diamond 1975; Freedman 1970; Judd 1989; Wolf 1972). The cultural ideology frames fatherhood in terms of what responsibility a father should bear, what right a father can exercise, how a father and other family members should behave and interact. In actual practice, fatherhood involves the performance of masculinity and the interplay of gender power and relations, and there is always difference in practice between the literati class who set out those norms and the commoners. Three pre-modern Chinese texts that are considered witty and humorous are included in the paper for analysis, namely shishuo xinyu 世說新語 (A new account of the tales of the world), xiaolin 笑林 (Forest of jokes), and xiaolin guangji 笑林廣記 (A wide record of forest of jokes). These texts are chosen due to the different class readerships in their respective periods of time. In the paper, I am going to show how the representations of masculinities and fatherhood in those texts coincide and contradict with the Confucian ideals and the structural expectations and how those 'deviant' masculinities are incorporated by discursive shift to fit into the cultural ideals.

Qi, Gender, Humour and Laughter in Contemporary Traditional Chinese Medical Practice in Australia

Rey Tiquia (The University of Melbourne, Australia)

Qi is 'the circulating life force whose existence and properties are the basis of much of Chinese philosophy and medicine'. Accurate translation of this key term is essential to grasping the essence of the connections between this psychophysical energy, humour,

gender, laughter and the respective roles they play in TCM (traditional Chinese Medicine) therapies.

In her book *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History: 960-1665*, Charlottte Furth advanced the concept that the human body shen 身 as conceived by the ancient Chinese medical classic, *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Cannons* is “truly androgynous (cixiong tongti 雌雄同體), balancing or juxtaposing bing lie 並列 “yin (female) and yang (male) ‘functions’ in everyone.”

What is central about qi is what it does — its functions. They are summarized as promoting human physiological activities, keeping up the body's temperature, defending the body from invasion of “heteropathic qi”, reinforcing and conserving the vital substance of the body, and transforming bodily substances.

Normal functions are achieved through orderly motions of qi characterized as moving up, going down, coming in and going out. The dynamic balance is upset if certain qi is supposed to go up but goes down instead, or if certain qi moves too fast or too slow. For example, the heart qi goes down, while the kidney qi is going up. The liver qi spreads out while the lung qi clears downward. When the movement is obstructed, the result is the disordered qi mechanism, such as stagnation, congestion, blockage, and closure of qi, which lead to all kinds of somatic and psychological symptoms.

## **14.00-15.00 Session 7: Early Modern Europe II**

**D108**

### **Laughing at the Unmanly Man in Early Modern Sweden**

Jonas Liliequist (Umeå University)

Manliness and honour are often intersected but while a man who loses his honour is put to shame, the unmanly man is typically ridiculed and laughed at. What is it that makes the loss of manliness so funny? To what extent has unmanliness been a theme for laughter and ridicule across time and cultures, and in what ways do the laughable aspects of unmanliness differ? How are notions of unmanliness mobilized for different purposes? These three questions will be discussed through examples of gendered stereotypes in early modern Sweden and how they have been used in different contexts. One initial problem is of course providing an analytical definition of unmanliness to serve as the basis for trans-historical and cross-cultural comparison. If honour is based on making distinctions, then gender categories work mainly through contrasts and contrasting. Unmanliness is thus the adverse of manliness, or rather the other way around; manliness is often constructed by contrasting it with unmanliness, with laughter and ridicule as the ultimate weapons.



## **Emotions in Motion: Laughing out Loud with Casanova and Baudelaire**

Stephan Steiner (Sigmund Freud University, Vienna)

Giacomo Casanova's "History of my Life" (1790–1792) is marked by a specific, weird humour that for the most part derives from his propensity for etiquette and outbursts of transgression at the same time. 60 years and a few revolutions later, Charles Baudelaire, (god)father of aesthetic innovation and self-styled outcast, published an essay on "The Essence of Laughter" (1855), which reads like a swan song to all that used to be Casanova's world of witticism. On the basis of these two classical texts, I would like to ask: What happened to humour on its way from the Old Regime to modernity?