

## Book Review

**Simon Dickie.** 2011. *Cruelty and laughter: Forgotten comic literature and the unsentimental eighteenth century.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 384 pp. ISBN 978-02-261-4618-8 USD 50.00.

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This well-written, informative book is a must-read for anybody working on the history of cruel humor, early modern jestbooks, or on humor in eighteenth century novels. Its title is itself a telling abbreviation of the book's main content and argument: *Cruelty and Laughter* provides a first hint of the answers to Dickie's leading question, notably, "what did British people laugh at in the mid-eighteenth century?" (p. 16). It makes us aware of the fact that the allegedly sentimental "Eighteenth Century" was also unsentimental, possibly even very unsentimental period if we look at the bulk of its once popular, but nowadays "Forgotten Comic Literature." However, Dickie is clearly more interested in the social history of literature, gender theory and disabled studies than in humor theory (with the exception of occasional references to Freud, Bergson and eighteenth century essays on humor).

Nevertheless, the merits of this volume are manifold. First of all, Dickie uses historical sources of humor, which are rather difficult to obtain. Chapbooks, jestbooks, and comic pamphlets are – despite their prominence in the eighteenth century book trade – not very well-known today (and Britain is hardly an exception in this respect). Jestbooks and related comic imprints of the eighteenth century were cheap products that were typically disdained by libraries but nevertheless read (that is, used) to the point of disintegration. Only a few have thus been preserved in libraries, and it is extremely difficult to find reliable records of these products (p. 43).

By investigating these rare sources, the author manages to shed new light on the contents and character constellations found in eighteenth century comic literature. Dickie argues convincingly that these text collections show a disturbingly high rate of aggressive humor that is targeted at characters with lower social status or disabled bodies: he presents various examples of jokes about disabled and deformed people, pranks that members of privileged classes play on serious-minded countrymen and rebellious servants alike. Jokes that are sometimes as simple as an insult ("Two Gentlemen riding between Stanstead and Bishop Stafford, overtook a miller riding very soberly, they being merrily

disposed, were resolv'd to affront him ... So, said one to the miller, I prithee friend resolve me one Question, Whether thou art most Knave or Fool", p. 117). Particular attention is paid to texts that treat sexual violence and rape trials in a comic way ("A gentleman was accused for getting his maid with child, and that he went into his maid's bed to do it: he to excuse it, swore he never went into his maid's bed, for the bed was his own", p. 120).

Dickie extends the scope of his corpus to fictional novels, and demonstrates that the analysis of jestbooks allows for a fresh look at typical sentimental configurations: the character of Lovelace in Richardson's *Clarissa* turns out to be a good example of a "riotous upper-class comedian" (p. 142). Similar configurations can be found in Henry Fielding's novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742), where the "good natured" Parson Adams is exposed to various stock humiliations, despite the author's preliminary commitment to "true ridicule" in contrast to malicious laughter (pp. 156, 167). Dickie's catalogue of indecent practical jokes on good-natured characters might have been easily extended beyond British literature (e.g., Heinrich von Kleist's comedy *The Broken Jug* (1808)). However, Dickie's goals go beyond the demonstration of the contrast between humor targeting cruelly disabled bodies, poor simpletons and raped women, and the early beginnings of sentimental literature. This book aims to provide a rich socio-historical background to the practice of malicious laughter by discussing the book markets of the period, but also by comparing the stories to actual reports of upper-class violence against the poor. Of course, it is rather difficult to prove to what extent these literarily portrayed laughing communities did actually correspond to both the producers and consumers of this kind of humor. As a consequence, Dickie engages in a critical reading of historical trial protocols of the London Old Bailey session papers or anthologies such as *Humours of the Old Bailey*. He provides substantial proof of the widespread social practice of rebutting lower-class aspirations with humor, indicating a fundamental social opposition towards the "imaginative or ideological entity" of the "poor" (p. 125). For instance, Dickie can demonstrate that the "vast majority of Old Bailey rape cases are deliberately expansive comic representations of unsuccessful prosecutions" (p. 236): the everyday treatment of rape followed the script of comedy and ended typically in bursts of laughter from the audience.

Dickie's study concludes with comic best-sellers of the mid-century, a corpus that he explores with the conspicuously evaluative question of "How bad are these books?" (p. 265). Apparently, it is rather difficult to enjoy reading these novels and jestbooks and – considering their subject matter – I find it understandable that Dickie does not actually try to explore the humor in his sources. On the contrary, he expresses his irritation with the rampant violence and misogyny of the eighteenth century in various passages throughout

the book. He denounces the eighteenth century's novelists' ease in using sexual violence to tie up their plots "as readily, and as unreflectively, as the Victorians resort to chance encounters in hotels or railway carriages" (p. 200), or the judicial system of the eighteenth century as being heavily biased against women coming forward with rape accusations (e.g., p. 213). These accusations may appear ahistorical when considering the pervasive brutality of that age which included the continuing slave trade. However, Dickie does not forget to remind us that there is no point in considering the twenty-first century as morally superior. The "loudest laughter may have died down", but our "most malicious, petty, brutal, egoistical, defensive impulses have not disappeared. We just satisfy them in other ways." (p. 281). Still, it would have been interesting to read more about the author's own conception of humor in relation to his apparently rather negative anthropology.