

# Laughter in Ancient Rome

*On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*

Mary Beard

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit [www.ucpress.edu](http://www.ucpress.edu).

University of California Press  
Oakland, California

© 2014 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beard, Mary.

Laughter in ancient Rome : on joking, tickling, and cracking up / Mary Beard.

p. cm. — (Sather classical lectures ; volume seventy-one)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-27716-8 (cloth, alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-520-95820-3 (electronic)

1. Laughter—Rome—History—To 1500. 2. Latin wit and humor—History and criticism. 3. Rome—Social life and customs. I. Title.

BF575.L3B38 2014

152.4'30937—dc23

2013040999

Manufactured in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with a commitment to support environmentally responsible and sustainable printing practices, UC Press has printed this book on Natures Natural, a fiber that contains 30% post-consumer waste and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*).



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley • Los Angeles • London

## Questions of Laughter, Ancient and Modern

### THEORIES AND THEORY

Marcus Tullius Cicero—the Roman world’s most renowned orator (and also one of its most infamous jokesters)—was curious about the nature of laughter. “What is it?” he asked. “What provokes it? Why does it affect so many different parts of the body all at once? Why can’t we control it?” But he knew that the answers were elusive, and he was happy to profess his ignorance. “There is no shame,” he explained in his treatise *On the Orator* in the mid-50s BCE, “in being ignorant of something which even the self-proclaimed experts do not really understand.”<sup>1</sup>

He was not the only one. A couple of centuries later, Galen, the prolific medical writer and personal physician to (among others) the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, admitted that he was stumped about the physiological cause of laughter. In his essay *On Problematical Movements*, he reckoned he could account for other types of involuntary bodily motion. Imagination, for example, might explain why a man gets an erection on catching sight of (or even just thinking about) his lover. But laughter, he was prepared to concede, defeated him.<sup>2</sup>

For well over two thousand years, laughter has baffled and intrigued. Ambitious theorizing and ingenious speculation about its nature and causes have gone hand in hand with frank expressions about the impossibility of ever solving its mystery. Beyond the specific prompts to any individual outburst (“Why are you laughing?” or “Quid rides?”),

laughter as a phenomenon demands explanation, yet it always seems to defeat any explanation offered. In fact, the more ambitious the theories are, the more striking laughter's victory seems to be over those who would control, systematize, and explain it.

To study the "laughterhood" of ancient Rome involves reflecting on when, why, and how Romans laughed, but also on how they tried to make sense of laughter, what they—or at least those who had the leisure to think and write—thought it was, and what might cause it. So this chapter will start by exploring some of the wide range of Roman theorizing on the subject and some of the sources of Roman ideas. Where did they look when they wanted to explain why they laughed? Was Aristotle (and in particular his discussion of comedy in the lost second book of the *Poetics*) really the origin of most ancient thought on the subject? Was there such a thing, as has often since been claimed, as "the classical theory of laughter"?

The chapter will move on to consider modern theories of laughter, partly to point up their relationship with their ancient predecessors (for almost every modern social or psychological theory on this subject—I am not referring to neuroscience here—turns out to have some precedent in the Greco-Roman world). But there are some even more fundamental questions to be broached. What resources are at our disposal when we attempt to make some sense of laughter, either now or in the past, at home or abroad? What wider cultural purposes do theories of laughter serve? When we ask, for example, "Do dogs laugh?," what is that question about? It is not usually, I think we can safely say, about dogs.

But first let us get a flavor of Roman speculation about laughter—and its diversity—starting with some of the theories and observations scattered throughout the vast encyclopedia (the *Natural History*) of that obsessive Roman polymath Gaius Plinius Secundus—or Pliny the Elder, as he is now usually known.

#### ROMAN QUESTIONS—AND OURS

Pliny was inquisitive about laughter—as he was inquisitive about almost everything else in his world. (It was, in a way, his scientific curiosity that killed him, when he went fatally close to the fumes of Vesuvius in the eruption of 79 CE). In the thirty-seven books of the *Natural History*, with, as he boasted, its "twenty thousand facts worth knowing," he returned to the subject several times. At what age do human infants

begin to laugh? he wondered. Where in the body does laughter originate? Why do people laugh if you tickle them under their arms?<sup>3</sup>

Those are familiar enough questions, and they continue to exercise modern students of laughter even now. Less comfortably familiar are some of Pliny's answers. Human infants, he confidently assures his readers, do not laugh until they are forty days old, except for Zoroaster, the ancient Iranian prophet, who laughed on the very day he was born—presumably a mark of his superhuman quality.<sup>4</sup> Pliny also identifies various organs in the human body that are responsible for laughter. One is the diaphragm, "the main site of merriment" ("praecipua hilaritatis sedes"), as he calls it. Its importance in producing laughter is proved, he explains, by the ticklishness of the armpits. For, in Pliny's version of human anatomy, the diaphragm extends right up to the arms; scratching the armpits, where "the skin is finer than anywhere else in the body," directly stimulates the diaphragm and so causes laughter.<sup>5</sup> But the spleen is involved too. Or at least "there are those who think that if the spleen is removed [or reduced], a man's capacity for laughter is removed at the same time, and that excessive laughter is caused by a large spleen."<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere in Pliny's encyclopedia we find all kinds of fantastic tales about laughter—earnestly recounted, however weird they may seem to us. There is, for example, the curious fact about Crassus (the grandfather of the more famous Marcus Licinius Crassus, killed at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE), who, "so they say," never once laughed in his whole life. His story leads off a long discussion of people with strange bodily peculiarities: from Socrates, who always wore the same facial expression and never seemed happy or sad, to Antonia (the daughter of Mark Antony), who never spat, and a certain Pomponius, "a poet and a man of consular rank," who never belched.<sup>7</sup>

Plants and a variety of other natural features have a part to play too. Pliny tells of the marvelous *gelotophyllis* (laughter leaves) that grew in Bactria, a region on the borders of modern Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, and along the banks of the river Borysthenes (the modern Dnieper). If it was consumed in a mixture of myrrh and wine, it produced hallucinations and laughter, which could be controlled only by an antidote of "pine-nut kernels, with pepper and honey in palm wine." Was this a cannabis plant, as some modern readers of Pliny have hoped? Or was it, more prosaically, as one dictionary has it, "probably a sort of crowfoot"?<sup>8</sup>

Also in the Eastern Roman Empire, in what is now central Turkey, Pliny points to two extraordinary springs, Claeon (Weeping) and Gelon (Laughing), so called—he explains—from the Greek words for the effect

that drinking from each one had. Springs had a definite association with ancient laughter. Pomponius Mela, for example, a Roman geographer and contemporary of Pliny, refers to another pair on “the Fortunate Islands” (probably the Canaries): the water of one would make you laugh to death; the other, luckily, was an effective antidote. But it was Pliny’s story that made a particular impression on Sir William Ramsay, an intrepid Scot from Aberdeen and late nineteenth-century explorer of Asia Minor, who took it so seriously that he tried to locate the very springs, in rural Phrygia. Having resolved in 1891, he wrote, “to test out every spring at Apameia,” he found two that neatly fitted the bill—though, oddly, he seems to have identified them on the basis of the sound their water made (“We could hear the bright, clear, cheerful sound with which the ‘Laughing Water’ ripples forth. . . . No one who goes to these two fountains and listens will entertain the slightest doubt that they are ‘the Laughing’ and ‘the Weeping’”). Pliny, by contrast, was referring to the water’s power: one spring made you laugh, the other cry.<sup>9</sup>

Where Pliny found his information is not always clear. Occasionally (and perhaps more often than modern critics tend to acknowledge) it came from personal observation or inquiry. That is almost certainly the case for one part of his discussion of the role of the diaphragm in producing laughter, which ends by noting a much more ghoulish version of the phenomenon of underarm tickling. It can be seen both on the battlefield and in gladiatorial shows, he claims, when the diaphragm is punctured, rather than merely scratched, that the result can be death—accompanied by laughter. The idea that wounds to the diaphragm could provoke laughter from military casualties had a long history in Greek scientific writing, going back at least to the fourth century BCE. But it may well have been Pliny himself, from his experience as a spectator in the Roman arena, who made the connection with the deaths of gladiators.<sup>10</sup>

In general, however, Pliny was proud to have assembled his information from earlier writers—so proud that, at the beginning of the *Natural History*, he insists that he has drawn on some two thousand volumes by one hundred authorities in compiling his twenty thousand facts, and he systematically lists those he has used for each book of his encyclopedia.<sup>11</sup> In a very few instances, we can more or less pinpoint the source of his material on laughter. For example, the story of the two springs, “Weeping” and “Laughing,” almost certainly derived from the work of the fourth-century Greek scientist, philosopher, and pupil of Aristotle Theophrastus, or at least it follows directly on from the tale of another extraordinary spring in the same region (this one “threw up masses of

stones”) for which Pliny explicitly references Theophrastus.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, though, it is a matter of conjecture from which of his named sources, or from where exactly in the rich tradition of Greek and Roman speculation on laughter, Pliny has gleaned any particular theory or piece of information. It is a question of spotting the similarities and postulating connections. So, for example, to judge from their similarity to a discussion in Aristotle’s fourth-century treatise *Parts of Animals*, many of Pliny’s remarks—gladiators aside—on the importance of the diaphragm in the production of laughter almost certainly go back ultimately to Aristotle himself or to one of his followers.<sup>13</sup>

A rich and varied tradition of speculation it certainly was, in Rome especially—as Roman writers drew on their classical and Hellenistic Greek predecessors, refining and adapting their theories, and adding some distinctively Roman contributions of their own. Even if we leave aside, for the moment, their discussions of the ethics of joking and laughter (when it is proper to laugh, at what, and for what purpose), Pliny’s remarks are just one small glimpse into Roman opinion about the causes and characteristics of laughter, ranging from the frank expressions of bafflement we have already noted to yet more ingenious and learned theorizing.

Galen may have despaired of revealing the physiological roots of laughter. But he had theories aplenty about the comic nature of apes and monkeys. These were animals that, as we shall see in chapter 7, could usually be guaranteed to raise a laugh among the Romans, and Galen knew them very well, for the simple reason that—given the impossibility or unacceptability of human dissection at that period—he based much of his anatomical and physiological theory on the dissection of apes. For him, the laughter they provoked was a question of imitation or, as we might put it, caricature. “We laugh particularly,” he wrote, “at those imitations that preserve an accurate likeness in most of their parts but are completely wrong in the most important ones.” So we laugh at the ape, Galen argues, as a caricature of the human being: its “hands,” for example, are very like our own in every respect, except the most important—the ape’s thumb is not opposed to its fingers, making it useless and “utterly laughable” (*pantē geloios*). This is a rare ancient reflection on what makes something visually laughable.<sup>14</sup>

Others had different observations. Plutarch, writing in the early second century CE about the role of laughing and joking at dinner, stresses what we would call the social determinates of laughter. What people laugh at, he insists, depends on the company in which they find

themselves (you can laugh at a joke with your friends that you could not bear to hear in the company of your father or your wife). And he points to the way in which social hierarchy impacts on laughter. The success of a joke depends on who is telling it: people will laugh if a man of humble origins jokes about the low birth of another; the same quip from an aristocrat will be taken as an insult.<sup>15</sup>

That question of why people laugh at jokes was also posed, and answered, by Roman theorists of rhetoric, Cicero included. After side-stepping the general problems of the nature of laughter in *On the Orator*, he turns—in the voice of Julius Caesar Strabo, the main character in this part of the long dialogue—to the specific ways an orator can exploit laughter and to what raises a laugh and why. “The main, if not the only, prompts to laughter,” he says, “are those sayings which highlight and point the finger at something unseemly but in no unseemly fashion.” Or as Quintilian put it more snappily, just over a century later, “laughter is not so far from derision” (better in Latin: “a derisu non procul abest risus”).<sup>16</sup> But the investigation that follows in Cicero’s dialogue (as also in Quintilian’s textbook on oratory) is more varied and nuanced than that summary might suggest. In analyzing the rhetoric of joking, Cicero identifies all kinds of features that may provoke laughter—from mimicry and “pulling faces” to the unexpected and the “incongruous” (*discrepantia*).<sup>17</sup> And it is Cicero who is the earliest surviving source for something close to the modern cliché in the study of laughter that nothing is less funny than the analysis of a joke: “‘My view,’ said Caesar, ‘is that a man, even if he is not unamusing, can discuss anything in the world more affably than wit itself.’”<sup>18</sup>

These Roman theories and observations take us into that intriguing intellectual no-man’s-land between the utterly familiar and the disconcertingly strange—between, for example, that simple question of “What makes people laugh?” (and which of us has not asked that?) and the unbelievable tales of magical springs and overactive spleens. But even that dichotomy proves to be less stable than we might at first imagine. This is partly the problem of how slippery and deceptive apparently familiar ideas can be. When Cicero wrote that “incongruity,” as I have translated the Latin *discrepantia*, was a cause of laughter, just how close to modern “incongruity theories” of laughter—which we shall shortly explore—was he? Or, if we identify Pliny’s *gelotophyllis* as cannabis, which we now believe is a good, chemical source of the giggles, does that make Pliny a more familiar and reliable witness than if we opt for the dictionary definition of “crowfoot” (which is not usually thought

to have laughter-inducing properties at all)?<sup>19</sup> But perhaps even more destabilizing is the way that those extravagant and implausible views of the ancients can prompt us to look again at some of our own scientific “truths” about this subject. What, after all, is to count as a plausible explanation of why we laugh? In the end, is one theory of modern neuroscience, that the site of laughter is located in the “anterior part of the human supplementary motor area” in the left frontal lobe of the brain, any more believable, or at least any more useful, for most of us on an everyday basis than Pliny’s mad ideas about the diaphragm and the spleen?<sup>20</sup>

#### ARISTOTLE AND “THE CLASSICAL THEORY OF LAUGHTER”

It is surprising, given the extraordinary diversity of these Roman speculations on laughter and its causes, that modern studies so often refer, in the singular, to “the classical theory of laughter.” This theory has become definitively associated with Aristotle, who still casts his heavy shadow over modern studies of laughter—the first systematic analyst, so it is often said, of the whole subject, and the one who canonically formulated (even if he did not originate<sup>21</sup>) two major claims. The first is that man is the only animal to laugh, or—to put it in its stronger form—that laughter is a property of the human being (man, that is, can be defined as “the animal that laughs”). The second is that laughter is essentially derisory or is the expression of the laugher’s superiority over, and contempt for, the butt of his laughter. Scholars working in later periods all too often assume that ancient speculation on laughter essentially followed a single tradition more or less defined by Aristotle and his followers, in the so-called Peripatetic school that he established.<sup>22</sup> In fact, it is not uncommon, even for classicists, to try to identify a direct source for most Roman writing on laughter in the works of Aristotle or later writers of his school (Theophrastus and Demetrius of Phaleron being popular candidates).<sup>23</sup>

So was all ancient analysis of laughter in effect a series of “footnotes to Aristotle”?<sup>24</sup> Before proceeding much further in exploring what Roman writers had to say about the subject, we need to look critically, and in some detail, at Aristotle’s contributions to theories of (and about) laughter and to consider how clear and systematic they may have been. This will involve broaching some of the arguments that surround perhaps the most famous “lost work” of antiquity: the second book of his

*Poetics*, which once formed the sequel to his analysis of the nature of tragedy, with its famous views of catharsis, pity, and fear. It was here, it is usually supposed, that Aristotle tackled the subject of comedy.

I am not claiming that Aristotle's work on laughter had no influence on Roman approaches. Roman writers on science, rhetoric, and culture were undoubtedly indebted to, and in dialogue with, their Aristotelian predecessors; in fact, I have already noted that Pliny cites Theophrastus as one of his authorities in the *Natural History* and seems to reflect some Aristotelian observations in his discussion of the role of the diaphragm in laughter. But the common idea that Aristotle's work on the subject—insofar as we can recover it—represented a systematic theoretical position amounting to something that could be called “the classical theory of laughter” is (at the very least) a drastic oversimplification, or, to put it bluntly, wrong. The truth is that many of the often-quoted, “classic” remarks by Aristotle—intriguing and intelligent though they may individually be—are little more than asides, and not part of a developed theory at all. Even the lost second book of the *Poetics*—with whatever it had to say of the nature, causes, and ethics of laughter as it occurred in the comic theater—hardly justifies the exaggerated significance often optimistically attributed to it.

This book has been one of the great controversies (or holy grails) of classical studies, and it has been hugely mythologized. A few mavericks have denied that it ever existed;<sup>25</sup> many more have been entranced by the lure of what has been lost and have debated how its contents are to be reconstructed. Most famously of all, it has been given a starring role in a best-selling modern novel. Umberto Eco's clever fantasy *The Name of the Rose* reenacted the destruction of this elusive text. At the climax of the mystery story (which also argues for the “liberating, anti-totalitarian” power of laughter as a weapon against oppressive authority), the very last manuscript copy of Aristotle's precious treatise, held in a murder-ridden medieval monastery, is literally consumed by a laughter-hating librarian—before the whole place goes up in flames.<sup>26</sup>

Eco's novel dramatizes not only the opposition to laughter by the authorities of the medieval church but also the belief, held by many students of both ancient and modern culture, that Aristotle's second book of the *Poetics* would have offered the missing link to “the classical view of laughter.” As Quentin Skinner once remarked, in trying to answer the question of why ancient Greek statues so rarely appear to smile, “It's odd that the phenomenon we would call good-natured laughter seems to have been a notion completely foreign to the ancient

Greeks. It's a terrible shame that Aristotle's treatise on comedy is lost, for *he would surely have explained.*”<sup>27</sup>

Others have tried to show that it is not quite as lost as is usually assumed. Hints of what it contained have been gleaned from other works of Aristotle. More radically, a quarter of a century ago, Richard Janko made a bold attempt to revive a much older idea that a short treatise known as the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, preserved in a tenth-century manuscript now in Paris, is none other than a skeletal summary of the second book of the *Poetics*. If so, it would confirm the contents of the book as both a literary analysis of comedy and a discussion of the sources of (comic) laughter, from words to actions—for instance “using vulgar dancing” or “when someone who has the power [to choose] lets slip the most important and takes the most worthless.”<sup>28</sup>

This idea has never won much support: the majority view is that the *Tractatus* is a muddled, mediocre confection, possibly Byzantine, which preserves at most a few traces of thirdhand Aristotelian reflection.<sup>29</sup> Yet in any case, the more fundamental question is whether that lost book really did contain the key to ancient analysis of comedy—and whether, as Skinner wrote, it “would surely have explained” what we want to know about Greek laughter and its theories. There is no clear sign that it would, and some telling hints that it would not. For why—in the pointed words of Michael Silk (who has done more than most to dispel the shadow of Aristotle over ancient laughter)—were those “Aristotelian pearls of wisdom on comedy” lost in the first place and “ignored by all of subsequent antiquity”? Disconcerting as this may seem, Silk's presumption is that “all or most of what Aristotle in fact said on the subject was perfunctory—and maybe *Tract. Coisl.* reflects it—and that there were no pearls there to be ignored anyway.”<sup>30</sup>

Who can know? This brisk dismissal may do Aristotle an injustice. But it is certainly hard to resist the conclusion that the loss of the second book of the *Poetics* (assuming, of course, that there was one) has contributed to its modern fame and exaggerated its ancient significance. We are dealing here with a powerful combination of our own emotional investment in those tantalizing books that have slipped through the net and—let's be honest—the convenience (in the absence of any firm evidence) of being able to reconstruct an Aristotelian view to suit our own various purposes. Indeed it may well be, as Silk again has hinted, that the “theory of comedy” in the *Poetics* owes much more to the inventive zeal of modern Aristotelians than to the mixed bag of observations and aperçus that Aristotle himself offered. The plain fact is that they are lost.<sup>31</sup>

If we focus instead on Aristotle's remarks on laughter that do survive, we get a very different impression from that which is often presented, and again much more of a mixed bag. For they include plenty of ideas *about* laughter but nothing that remotely approaches a theory of laughter—in the sense of a coherent explanatory model, a defined methodology, and a panoply of argument directed at the subject in hand. Aristotle certainly had powerful and systematic theories of other topics, but there is no sign of that in the case of laughter.<sup>32</sup> His longest discussion on the subject occupies a couple of modern pages in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he advocates, as so often, the virtuous middle way between two extremes. To be “well-turned” or “witty” (*eutrapelos*) is a desirable characteristic of a “gentleman” (as the Greek *eleutheros* is conventionally, but awkwardly, translated). Too much joking is the mark of a “buffoon” (*bōmolochos*), too little the mark of a “boor” (*agroikos*): both are to be avoided.<sup>33</sup> But the two main elements of what has become known as “the classical theory of laughter” are found elsewhere.

The claim that human beings are the only animals that laugh is a subsidiary argument in Aristotle's discussion of the human body, in particular the role of the diaphragm. In a perilously circular explanation, he asserts that the fact that “humans alone are susceptible to tickling is due (a) to the fineness of their skin and (b) to their being the only living things that laugh.” There is in this no suggestion that laughter is a distinguishing property of the human being. Despite the popular assumption about this aspect of his “theory,” he is certainly not defining man as “the animal that laughs.”<sup>34</sup>

The other claim, that laughter is a form of derision and a display of superiority, is more complicated. It derives in part from the discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle refers to some forms of joking (*skōmma*) as “a kind of abuse” or “a reproach” (*loidorēma ti*).<sup>35</sup> But in its popular form, it is drawn mainly from two passages in two different treatises. In the first, surviving book of the *Poetics*, he has a few words to say, in passing, on the subject of comedy: “A representation of people worse than us, not in the full sense of bad, but what we laugh at, is a subdivision of the ugly/shameful [*tou aischrou*]. The laughable is some kind of fault and ugliness/shame [*aischos*] that involves no pain or harm—such as, obviously, a comic mask [literally a ‘laughable face,’ *geloion prosōpon*], which is ugly [*aischron*] and distorted but free of pain.”<sup>36</sup> This is often put together with a second passage, from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, where he discusses the character of different groups of an orator's potential audience (for without knowing what his listeners

are like, the orator will never successfully persuade them). The young, Aristotle explains, are fickle, passionate, argumentative, and highly principled; also, “they are fond of laughter, and therefore witty [*eutrapeloi*]. For wit is educated insolence [*pepaidumenē hubris*].”<sup>37</sup>

It is hard to know how exactly to translate these passages, or to know what point Aristotle was trying to make. The key extract from the *Poetics* raises all kinds of questions. What kind of fault—moral or physical (shame or ugliness?)—underlies the laughable? Whose pain, or lack of it, does Aristotle have in mind? What implications does this discussion of comic drama have for laughter off the stage?<sup>38</sup> The other passage, from the *Rhetoric*, is even more puzzling, largely because of the strange oxymoron, even “joke,” in the phrase “educated insolence” (*pepaidumenē hubris*). For, as critics have often seen, *hubris* (which can mean anything from “excess” through “outrage” to “violence” or “rape”) cannot be “educated,” but that very word *pepaidumenē* has, in any case, an ambiguous root, *paid-*, which signifies both “education” and “childishness” or “play.”<sup>39</sup> What is Aristotle trying to say about wit, apart from being witty himself?

It is clearer what is he not saying. First, there is rather less about derision than is usually supposed. It is true that creative translation can turn his definition of wit into “educated *abuse*,” but the famous lines from the *Poetics*—though they refer to the subject of laughter as being “some kind of fault” and so suggest an element of derision—explicitly reject the idea of pain; there is no reason to see “scoffing” here.<sup>40</sup>

Second, even though some of these passages do share an interest in laughter prompted by ridicule (or laughter at another's expense), Aristotle certainly does not suggest that this is laughter's only cause, function, or stylistic register. If he were suggesting that, he would have been a very poor reader of Greek literature and culture, in which (*pace* Skinner's assertion that it was a completely “foreign” notion) there was plenty of “good-natured laughter.”<sup>41</sup> In fact, Aristotle himself, in another passage in the *Rhetoric*, explicitly places laughter and the laughable into the class of “pleasant things.” Whatever exactly he may have meant by this, it has seemed so incompatible with the idea of derision that several editors of the text have rejected it as a later addition—not by Aristotle.<sup>42</sup>

The fact is that Aristotle's ideas about laughter were numerous and not necessarily mutually compatible. One sixth-century commentary on a philosophical textbook (*The Introduction*) by Porphyry even states that Aristotle in his *History of Animals* claimed that man was not the only

animal to laugh: herons did too. True or not (and the laughter of the heron is found in no text of Aristotle that we still possess), he approached the subject from a variety of angles, and his views cannot be reduced, or elevated, to a single, systematic “classical theory of laughter.”<sup>43</sup>

It is also important to underline that there was almost certainly a much looser link than is often assumed between this diverse Aristotelian theorizing and later Roman writing about laughter. Roman theorists were not wholly dependent on what Aristotle had said before, or on the works of his immediate followers. With these, we confront the problem of loss on an even bigger scale than with the second book of the *Poetics*. Almost none of the key texts of Aristotle’s Peripatetic successors between the fourth and second centuries BCE survive, beyond a few sentences and some disputed titles. This makes it impossible to prove that they are not the source for any individual claim we may find in Roman discussions. But the signs are that—in laughter as in so many other areas—there was significant Roman input into the dialogue with earlier Greek thought. The argument that laughter is a property of man may even have been an innovation of writers of the Roman period, developing Aristotle’s almost casual observation that (leaving aside the possible distraction of the heron) man is the only animal that laughs. At least, we find that theory regularly in Roman imperial writers—and never in earlier surviving literature.

In the words of Porphyry, for example, writing in Greek in the third century CE, “Even if a man does not always laugh, he is said to be laughing not in that he always laughs but that he is of such a nature as to laugh—and this holds of him always, being connatural, like neighing of horses. And they say that these are properties in the strict sense, because they convert: if horse, neighing; and if neighing, horse.” Or, as Porphyry implies: if man, laughing; and if laughing, man.<sup>44</sup> For obvious reasons, this became a very loaded set of ideas in the controversies of early Christian theology, for if Jesus were known to have laughed, that would have major implications for those crucial debates about how his status—divine or human—was to be defined. Indeed, this is an issue that animates and divides Eco’s fictional monks in *The Name of the Rose*: Did Jesus laugh, or didn’t he?<sup>45</sup>

More generally, Roman discussions of laughter are only rarely a precise match for the Aristotelian theories that do survive in the works of Aristotle. It is clear enough, for example, that Pliny’s views on tickling are Aristotelian in a broad sense, focusing on the role of the diaphragm in the production of laughter. But it is equally clear that Pliny’s account

is significantly different from the version of tickling in *On the Parts of Animals*: Pliny suggests that it is direct irritation of the diaphragm that raises a laugh; Aristotle had argued instead that it was the heat generated by the irritation that actually produced the laughter. Pliny also has a different view from Aristotle on the first occurrence of a baby’s laughter (Pliny’s babies do not laugh at all until forty days old, while Aristotle’s laugh and weep while asleep), and it was surely somewhere else that Pliny picked up that story about Zoroaster, which is found in Iranian sources as well. To claim that all Pliny’s variants derive from some lost Peripatetic follower of Aristotle would be a mere act of faith.<sup>46</sup>

Much the same is true of Cicero’s discussion of laughter in *On the Orator*. This contains some material almost certainly derived from the Aristotelian tradition (Aristotle had, for example, already highlighted “incongruity” as a cause of laughter<sup>47</sup>). But most recent investigations of this dialogue have identified much less Demetrius of Phaleron (and his elusive, possibly nonexistent, treatise *On the Laughable*) and many more Roman elements, themes, and theories than was once thought. In fact, one of the main distinctions that structures Cicero’s argument—that between *cavillatio* (extended humor) and *dicacitas* (immediate witticisms)—seems to have little to do with anything we can find (or reconstruct) in earlier Greek works on the subject: these were, in Elaine Fantham’s words, “old-fashioned Roman terms” making “a Roman distinction.”<sup>48</sup>

I shall come back to the relationship between Greek and Roman laughter, in both theory and practice, in chapter 4. At this point let me emphasize two important tenets that underpin the rest of this book. First, there is no such thing as “the Aristotelian theory of laughter,” or at least not in those precise terms. Aristotle generated all kinds of ideas about laughter, a range of speculations and aperçus on aspects of the subject as diverse as tickling, the mechanisms of jokes, comedy, derision, the role of laughter in social life, and the importance of play. But there is no reason to suppose that Aristotle developed a systematic theory of laughter, or even that he necessarily saw laughter as a unitary phenomenon and field of inquiry.

Second, however influential some of Aristotle’s views were (and they certainly were influential), they did not delimit ancient approaches to laughter, still less did they amount to anything that might be called “the classical approach to laughter.” In both Greece and Rome, views about laughter multiplied and took root—some more strongly than others—in many different contexts, from the philosophical schools (for it was not only the Peripatetics who had things to say on laughter<sup>49</sup>) to the



emperor's dinner table, from the rhetorical classroom to the bar and the brothel. To put it simply, there was—as we have already glimpsed—a lot of very varied talk about laughter in antiquity.

Just as there is in the modern world. And it is to this that we now turn, and to another shadow that hangs heavily over recent studies of laughter: the so-called three theories of laughter. These are, in a sense, the younger siblings of “the classical theory,” and they too need to be gently dethroned before we move on.

#### “THE THREE THEORIES OF LAUGHTER”

The range of modern writing on laughter is truly daunting. My own university library holds around 150 books with *Laughter* somewhere in the title, published in English in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Leaving aside assorted memoirs, novels, and collections of poetry that managed to squeeze the word on to their title page (*Love, Laughter and Tears at the World's Most Famous Cooking School* and the like), these books range from popular psychology and self-help manuals through the philosophy of humor and the anatomy of the joke to the history of the chuckle, the chortle, the snigger, and the giggle in almost any period or place you can imagine (right back to the origins of laughter in the caves of primitive humans).

Behind these monographs—both weighty and popular—lies an even wider array of specialist articles and papers investigating yet more aspects of the subject, in ever finer detail: from the use of laughter in health education films in Dutch colonial Java or the sound of laughter in the novels of James Joyce to the patterns of laughter between interviewer and respondent in telephone surveys and that old classical chestnut of when, and how, babies first start to laugh or smile.<sup>50</sup> Not to mention all the radical philosophical, political, and feminist celebrations of laughter that would no doubt have confirmed the worst fears of the starchy Lord Chesterfield—whose notorious advice to his son in the 1740s was that a gentleman should at all costs avoid laughing out loud.<sup>51</sup> Wyndham Lewis and others, for example, urged laughter “like a bomb” in their 1914 Vorticist manifesto. And modern French feminism has often put laughter at center stage—rescuing the monstrous, snaky-headed, cackling Gorgon of classical mythology from Sigmund Freud's revulsion (to parade instead her beauty and her laughter) and making laughter a defining characteristic of that complex amalgam of female body and text that has become known as *l'écriture féminine* (inadequately translated as “women's writ-

ing”). The text is “the rhythm that laughs you” (“le rythme qui te rit”)—as Hélène Cixous memorably, but somewhat mystically, wrote.<sup>52</sup>

There is far too much written—and still being written—on the subject of laughter for any one person to master; nor, frankly, would it be worth their while to try. But when confronted with the product of centuries of analysis and investigation, stretching back as we have seen into antiquity itself, it is tempting to suggest that it is not so much laughter that is the defining property of the human species but rather the drive to debate and theorize laughter.

It is partly in response to the sheer profusion of views and speculation about laughter across various fields of inquiry that a “second-order” level of theorizing has developed—which divides theories of laughter into three main strands, with key theorists taken to represent each one. There are few books on laughter that do not offer, somewhere near the beginning, as I am about to do, a brief explanation of these theories of what laughter is, what it signifies, and how it is caused. I am more suspicious than many commentators of the oversimplification that this metatheorizing often entails, but I am struck that each of the three—more or less distinctly—echoes some strand of ancient theorizing (hence my phrase *younger siblings*). We are still discussing laughter in ways that are closely linked to the ancient Greeks and Romans.<sup>53</sup>

The first we have already touched on in discussing Aristotle. It is the so-called superiority theory, which argues that laughter is a form of derision or mockery. Laughter, in other words, always has a victim: we always laugh, more or less aggressively, at the butt of our jokes or the object of our mirth, and in the process we assert our superiority over them. Apart from ancient writers (including Quintilian, with his snappy slogan about *risus* being close to derision, *derisus*), the most celebrated theorist of superiority is the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. “The passion of Laughter,” he wrote in *The Elements of Law*, “is nothyng else but a suddaine Glory arising from some suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmities of others”—a much-quoted sentence, whose catchword of “Sudden Glory” has often been reused, even recently as the title of a book on the history of laughter.<sup>54</sup> But superiority theory is not only an aspect of the philosophy and ethics of laughing. Evolutionary biology chimes in, with some reconstructions of laughter's origins among the earliest humans: the idea, for example, that laughter derives directly from “the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel” or that the laugh (or the smile) originated in an aggressive baring of the teeth.<sup>55</sup>

The second is known as the incongruity theory and sees laughter as a response to the illogical or the unexpected. Aristotle gives a very simple example of this: “On he came, his feet shod with his—chilblains.” This raises a laugh, Aristotle explains, because the listener expects the word *sandals*, not *chilblains*.<sup>56</sup> But a much bigger team of modern philosophers and critics can be marshaled as supporters of this theory, albeit with a wide range of nuances and emphases. Immanuel Kant, for example, claimed that “laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing” (another of the most famous slogans in the study of laughter). Henri Bergson argued that laughter is provoked by living beings acting as if they were machines—mechanically, repetitively, stiffly. More recently, the linguistic theories of Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin have set the resolution of incongruity at the heart of verbal jokes—as in “‘When is a door not a door?’ ‘When it’s a jar.’”<sup>57</sup>

Experimental science has a role here too. One of the most celebrated experiments in the history of laboratory-based studies of laughter is the weight discrepancy test. Subjects are asked to lift a series of weights, similar in size and appearance and varying only slightly in heaviness, and to rank them from heaviest to lightest. Then another weight is introduced, similar in appearance but substantially heavier or lighter than the rest. The subjects regularly laugh when they lift the new weight—because, it is argued, of the incongruity between it and the others. In fact, the heavier or lighter the new weight is, the more strongly they laugh: the greater the incongruity, in other words, the more intense the laughter.<sup>58</sup>

The last of the trio is the relief theory, best known from the work of Sigmund Freud but not invented by him. In its simplest, pre-Freudian form, this theory sees laughter as the physical sign of the release of nervous energy or repressed emotion. It is the emotional equivalent of a safety valve. Rather like the pressure of steam in a steam engine, pent-up anxiety about death, for example, is “let off” when we laugh at a joke about an undertaker.<sup>59</sup> (Cicero may be hinting at something along these lines when he defends his own controversial joking in the midst of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey.<sup>60</sup>) Freud’s version of this idea is considerably more complicated. In his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he argues that the energy released in laughter is not the energy of the repressed emotion itself (on the safety-valve model) but the psychic energy that would have been used to repress the thoughts or feelings if the joke had not allowed them to enter our conscious minds. A joke about an

undertaker, in other words, allows our fear of death to be expressed, and the laughter is the “letting off” of the surplus psychic energy that would otherwise have been used to repress it. The more energy it would have taken to repress the fear, the bigger the laugh will be.<sup>61</sup>

These three theories can be a convenient shorthand: they bring some order to the complicated history of speculation on laughter, and they highlight some striking similarities in the way that it has been understood across the centuries. But beyond that, they run into serious problems—both in terms of the individual theories of laughter themselves and as an overarching scheme for classifying the field of study as a whole. For a start, none of the theories tackles laughter in its widest sense. They may try to explain why we laugh at jokes, but they do not address the question of why we laugh when we are tickled. Nor do they explore the social, conventional, domesticated laughter that punctuates so much of human interaction; they are much more interested in the apparently spontaneous or uncontrollable type.<sup>62</sup> To put it another way, they are more concerned with Dio’s laugh than with Gnatho’s—and not even, for the most part, with the act of laughing itself.<sup>63</sup> The first two theories do not begin to explain why the physical response we know as laughter (the noise, the facial contortion, the heaving of the chest) should be prompted by the recognition of superiority or incongruity. The relief theory does face that question directly, but Freud’s suggestion—that the psychic energy that would have been deployed in repressing the emotion is somehow converted into bodily movement—is itself deeply problematic.<sup>64</sup>

In practice, most of these attempts to theorize “laughter” focus more narrowly on the related, and somewhat more manageable, categories of “the comic,” “jokes,” or “humor.” The titles of some of the most famous books on the subject make this focus clear: Freud was writing explicitly about jokes; the full title of Bergson’s treatise is *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*; Simon Critchley’s excellent recent study, which includes a good deal about laughter, is titled *On Humour*.

Even within these limits, it is a general rule that the more features and varieties of laughter that a theory sets out to explain, the less plausible it will be. No statement that begins with the words “All laughter . . .” is ever likely to be true (or at least if true, too self-evident to be interesting). Superiority theory, for example, throws a good deal of light on some classes of joking and laughing. But the more it aims at being a total and totalizing theory, the less light it throws. It needs desperate ingenuity to explain on the basis of superiority why we laugh at

puns. Could it really be that the verbal jousting they imply takes us back to ritualized contests for supremacy in the world of primitive man? Or could it possibly be a question of displaying human superiority over language itself? I very much doubt it.<sup>65</sup>

And whatever we make of Freud's attempt to describe the mechanism of laughter generated by a dirty joke, when the same principles are extended to the question of why we laugh at (say) the exaggerated movements of clowns, the result is itself almost laughable. Still arguing that a saving of psychic energy must be involved, Freud claims that in watching the clown, we will compare his movements to those that we ourselves would use in achieving the same goals (walking across a room, maybe). We must generate psychic energy to imagine performing his movements, and the bigger the movements that have to be imagined, the more psychic energy will be generated. But when it is finally clear that this is surplus to requirements—in comparison with that needed to imagine our own more economical movements—the extra energy is discharged, in laughter.<sup>66</sup> This is, to be sure, a brave attempt to impose some systematic, scientific consistency across a range of different types of laughter. But its sheer implausibility must prompt us to wonder what we can expect from a general theory of how and why people laugh. For rather like Aristotle, modern theorists—whatever their grander aims may be—are almost always more revealing and stimulating in their speculations, aperçus, and theories *about* laughter than in any overarching theory of laughter.

There is also a problem, however, with the tripartite scheme itself. Convenient shorthand it may be. But it is also dangerously oversimplifying and encourages us to shoehorn long, complicated, nuanced, and not always consistent arguments into its tidy but rigid framework. The truth is, of course, that the theoretical landscape in this area is much messier than “the theory of the three theories” would suggest. This is clear enough from the fact that the same theorists crop up, in modern synoptic accounts, as key representatives of different theories. Bergson, for example, is assigned to both incongruity and superiority: incongruity because he argued that laughter arises when human beings are perceived to be acting “mechanically,” when—in other words—a human behaves like a machine; superiority because for Bergson the social function of laughter was to mock, and so discourage, such inelasticity (“Rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its *corrective*”).<sup>67</sup> Even Aristotle can be differently pigeonholed. To be sure, his elusive “theory of laughter” (or comedy) is usually seen as a classic case of superiority theory,

but he also crops up as an advocate of incongruity and, rather less plausibly, of relief.<sup>68</sup>

In fact, through the long history of studies of laughter, the works of the “founding fathers” have more often been raided than read; they have been selectively summarized to provide an intellectual genealogy for many different arguments; and slogans have been extracted that rarely reflect their original inchoate, uncertain, and sometimes self-contradictory complexity. It can often be a shock to go back to the original texts and discover what exactly was written and in what context. The famous quotation from Hobbes, for example, about laughter “arising from some suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmities of others” reads rather differently when we realize that it continues with the phrase “or with our owne formerly”: it is still a theory of superiority, but referring to self-criticism as well as the mockery of others. And Quentin Skinner has emphasized how Hobbes, in discussing laughter in the *Leviathan* in apparently similar terms, suggests that it actually reveals a sense of inferiority on the part of the laugher. Laughter, Hobbes wrote there, “is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity.” This is a rather different view of what lies behind that Sudden Glory than any simple version of superiority theory would suggest.<sup>69</sup>

The hundreds of pages that Freud wrote on the subject of jokes, humor, and the comic (comprising also a good deal about laughter) have probably been more selectively appropriated and tendentiously quoted than any other work on the subject. Freud's “theory” is a dazzling and confusing mixture: an attempt to reach a consistent, scientific approach (most implausibly, as we have seen, at its edges) standing alongside a range of speculations—some of which have little to do with his main argument, and some of which seem flatly contradictory. Freud offers probably the most extreme example of critics and theorists mining the work to extract different “key points” to back up their own arguments. So, in addition to the “relief theory” of laughter, one recent writer on Roman satire has stressed Freud's observation on the complex psychosocial dynamics of the joke (among the teller, the listener, and the joke's victim); another, writing on theatrical laughter in Greece, has emphasized instead Freud's insistence that “we scarcely ever know what we are laughing at”; another, concerned with Roman invective, invokes

Freud's distinction between tendentious and innocent jokes and his discussion of the role of humor in humiliation; and so on.<sup>70</sup> All these aspects are there. But it is salutary to wonder, if Freud's *Joke* book—like the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*—were one day to be lost, what kind of reconstruction could be made from the various summaries and quotes. My guess is that it would be a very far cry from the original.

One of the aims of this book is to preserve some of this disorder in the study of laughter, to make it a messier rather than a tidier subject. There will be much less on the three theories than you might expect.

#### NATURE AND CULTURE?

It will already be clear, I hope, that what has made laughter such an intriguing and compelling object of investigation for more than two thousand years is also what makes it such a tricky and sometimes intractable one. One of the most difficult questions is whether laughter should be thought of as a unitary phenomenon at all: Should we even be looking for a theory that might put under the same explanatory umbrella the ultimate causes (or the social effects) of the laughter produced by a hearty tickling, a good joke, or a mad emperor brandishing an ostrich head in the arena—let alone that often rather subdued version that regularly punctuates and reinforces human conversation? Scrupulous caution might suggest that these are significantly different signals, with different causes and effects. Yet in all kinds of ways, laughter as a response does feel very similar across its different manifestations, both for the laugher and for the audience.<sup>71</sup> Besides, it is often impossible to draw a clear boundary between its various types. The laughter of polite punctuation can slip imperceptibly into something much more uproarious; most of us, in Dio's position, would not be certain whether we were laughing out of nervousness or at the ridiculous antics of the emperor; and when someone is being tickled, it is common for even the observers, who are not themselves being tickled, to laugh.

But even more crucial is the question of how far laughter is a "natural" or a "cultural" phenomenon—or, perhaps better, how far laughter directly challenges the simplicity of that binary division. As Mary Douglas summed it up, "Laughter is a unique bodily eruption which is always taken to be a communication." Unlike sneezing or farting, it is taken to mean something. This is a distinction that Pliny missed in one of his observations on laughter that I have already quoted. For although he grouped together Crassus "who never laughed" with Pomponius "who

never belched," in fact they make an awkward pairing. Even in this negative aspect, "not to laugh" is a social signifier in a way that "not to belch" (probably) is not.<sup>72</sup>

This ambiguity of laughter, between nature and culture, has a tremendous impact on our attempts to understand how laughter in general operates in human society and more specifically how far it is under our conscious control. "I couldn't help laughing," we often say. Is that true?

To be sure, some laughter really does seem to be, and feels, uncontrollable—and not only that produced by tickling. Whether with Dio chewing on his laurel leaf in the arena or a BBC newsreader who cannot prevent herself corpsing on air, sometimes laughter erupts (or nearly does) whether we want it to or not, entirely outside our conscious design or control. Such incidents are presumably the clearest cases of what Douglas had in mind when she wrote of a "bodily eruption" that is also "taken to be a communication." However unwilling the eruptions may be, the observer or listener will still ask themselves what the laugher is laughing at and what message is being conveyed.

But the idea of laughter's uncontrollability is much more complicated than these simple stories may suggest. We have already seen several Roman instances in which laughter could be held back or released more or less to order, and we have noted the very fuzzy boundary between spontaneous and unspontaneous laughter. Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, even the narrative of Dio in the arena is more subtly nuanced than it at first appears. The fact is that most laughter in the world is relatively easy for the laugher to control. Even the effects of tickling are more subject to social conditions than we imagine: you cannot, for example, produce laughter by tickling yourself (try it!), and if tickling is carried out in a hostile rather than a playful environment, it does not cause laughter. Besides, even the most ticklish sites of the body are differently identified in different cultures and at different times. The underarm is more or less universal, but whereas we would stress the soles of the feet, one member of Aristotle's school, responsible for a relevant section of the long scientific compendium known as the *Problems*, had quite other ideas: we are, he claimed, most ticklish "on the lips" (because, he went on to explain, the lips are near "the sense organ").<sup>73</sup> Tickling does not, in other words, as we sometimes imagine, produce a wholly spontaneous, reflex response.<sup>74</sup>

Nonetheless, the dominant myth of uncontrollability has an important function in our view of laughter and in its social regulation. For the long tradition of policing and controlling laughter—stretching back to

antiquity itself—regularly relies on that image of a wild, unbounded, potentially dangerous, natural eruption to justify all the careful rules and regulations that are so often proposed. By a nice paradox, the most stringent mechanisms of cultural control are sustained by the powerful myth that laughter is an uncontrollable, disruptive force that contorts the civilized body and subverts the rational mind.

In practice, most people, most of the time, manage to manipulate two strikingly incompatible views of laughter: the myth of its uncontrollability on the one hand and the everyday experience of laughter as a learned, cultural response on the other. Anyone who has ever brought up young children will remember the time and effort it takes to teach them the standard rules of laughter: in simplest terms, what to laugh at and what not to laugh at (clowns, yes; people using wheelchairs, no; *The Simpsons*, yes; the fat lady on the bus, no). And some of the rough justice that children inflict on their peers centers on the proper and improper uses of laughter.<sup>75</sup> This is a theme in literature too. For example, in his fantastic prose-poem *Les Chants de Maldoror*, the Comte de Lautréamont offers an uncomfortably vivid image of the rules of laughter—or rather, of what it would be like to misunderstand them. In the first canto, his title character, the miserable misanthrope, scarcely human, Maldoror, notices people laughing and wants to follow suit, even though he does not see the significance of the gesture. So, in uncomprehending imitation, he takes a pocketknife and cuts the corners of his mouth to make “a laugh,” before realizing that he has not made a laugh at all but only a bloody mess. It is a clever reflection on our capacity to learn to laugh and on the idea of laughter as the property of the human being (is Maldoror a human?). And, as always with such stories, we are left with the nagging doubt that Maldoror’s first instincts might perhaps have been more right than wrong: that maybe laughter is nothing more than a (metaphorical) knife applied to the lips.<sup>76</sup>

#### LAUGHING DIFFERENTLY

Another aspect of learning to laugh is found in the cultural specificity of the objects, style, and rhetoric of laughter. Whatever the physiological universals that may be involved, people in different communities, or parts of the world, learn to laugh at different things, on different occasions, and in different contexts (as anyone who has tried to raise a laugh at a conference abroad will readily attest). But it is also a question of *how* people laugh and the gestures that accompany the laughter. Indeed,

it is part of our expectations and stereotypes of foreign cultures that they laugh differently. Even the most sophisticated theorists can have strikingly rough-and-ready views about these ethnic differences. For Nietzsche, Hobbes’s opposition to laughter (giving it a “bad reputation,” or bringing it “into disrepute,” as another translation puts it) was just what you would expect from an Englishman.<sup>77</sup>

The classic anthropological example of how people laugh differently comes from the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As Mary Douglas described it, not only do the Pygmies “laugh easily” compared with other, more dour and solemn tribes, but they laugh in a distinctive way: “They lie on the ground and kick their legs in the air, panting and shaking in paroxysms of laughter.”<sup>78</sup> To us this might seem a flamboyant and contrived display, but the Pygmies have so internalized the conventions of their culture that it is, for them, quite “natural.”

It is not, however, quite so simple. This description of the Pygmies raises some tricky questions about the nature and culture of laughing and reintroduces some of the literary, discursive, and second-order issues that I touched on in chapter 1. Pygmy laughter, and the paroxysms that go with it, is a favorite standby of students of laughter, a convenient example of cultural diversity in the ways that people laugh. But what is the evidence for it? So far as I can tell, the information is derived from just a single source—a best-selling book called *The Forest People*, by the popular anthropological writer Colin Turnbull. This account was driven by Turnbull’s romantic view of the Pygmies, as happy, open, gentle folk, living an idyllic existence, blissfully in harmony with their exotic rain-forest world (in stark contrast, as he claimed in a later book, with the unpleasant, grim mountain people of central Uganda). Exuberant laughter was just one of the signs of the Pygmies’ cheerful lifestyle: as Turnbull described it, “When pygmies laugh it is hard not to be affected; they hold on to each other as if for support, slap their sides, snap their fingers, and go through all manner of physical contortions. If something strikes them as particularly funny they will even roll on the ground.” Turnbull was “subjective, judgmental and naïve” and almost certainly an unreliable witness of Pygmy culture. Quite how unreliable we will probably never know. But in any case, the more interesting question is why his testimony on Pygmy laughter should have been so widely repeated, even by scholars such as Douglas, who in other respects would have little time for Turnbull’s brand of anthropology.<sup>79</sup>

It is partly, no doubt, that even the most hardheaded among us are loath to discard this happy, colorful image of the little Pygmy kicking his legs in the air, despite the reservations we may have about Turnbull's ethnographic observation (and despite the fact that his description actually stopped short of the leg kicking). But there are more discursive issues at work here too. For the behavior of Pygmies, as it is so often told and retold, no longer has much direct relationship with what the real people of the Ituri Forest do, or once did—still less with why they laughed in that way or with what consequences. Their story has become a literary cliché, a shorthand that—in our second-order reflections on laughter—usefully stands for the extreme case of a foreign people who laugh differently. In our own cultural calibration of laughter, the Pygmies have come to mark one end of the spectrum, with the no less overquoted Lord Chesterfield standing for complete control or repression at the other.<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche's view of the English as all lying toward what we might call the Chesterfield end of the laughter spectrum is a hint of how culturally relative such calibration can be. It is hard not to wonder how the Pygmies would have described Turnbull's style of laughter.

#### “DO DOGS LAUGH?”: RHETORIC AND REPRESENTATION

The study of laughter—in the present as much as in the past—is always bound up with literary representation, discursive practice, imagery, and metaphor. And it repeatedly faces the question of where the boundary between literal and metaphorical laughter lies and what the relationship is between them. Sometimes we find it relatively unproblematic to embrace metaphorical readings. If a Roman poet, for example, writes of glittering water or a houseful of flowers “laughing” (*ridere*), that is usually taken as a metaphor for the sparkling gaiety of the scene (rather than some learned hint at the etymology of the verb or its Greek equivalent).<sup>81</sup> But metaphorical uses of “laughing” also lurk just beneath the surface of some of the most apparently scientific, experimental discussions of laughter. Nowhere is this more striking (or more often neglected) than in the old Aristotelian question of whether human beings are the only animals that laugh.

This has been the subject of much inconclusive scientific investigation going back at least to Charles Darwin, who was, for obvious reasons, keen to stress that chimpanzees appeared to laugh when they were tickled. More recent scientific observers have identified a characteristic

“open-mouth display” or “play face” in primates engaged in nonserious activities—and have occasionally claimed to detect some chimps and gorillas using jokes and puns in their rudimentary sign language. Some biologists, not to mention devoted dog owners, have concluded that there is also such a thing as canine laughter (a conclusion that prompted Mary Douglas's famous article “Do Dogs Laugh?”), while a few have even interpreted the high-pitched chirping that rats produce when they are tickled as a form of protolaughter (the nape of the neck is said to be one of their most ticklish zones, though they chirp enthusiastically with a “full body” tickle too).<sup>82</sup>

Unsurprisingly, these interpretations have been contested from many angles. The “laughter” of primates, for example, is articulated differently from that of humans. The universal pattern in humans is for the characteristic *ha-ha-ha* to be produced in one single exhalation, followed by silence during inhalation. Not so among the primates. Their panting laughter is vocalized during both the in and the out breath. Is this, as some would have it, just a variant on the same spectrum of laughter? Or does it indicate, as others think, that we are dealing with a significantly different type of response—and that the primates are not, in our terms, laughing at all? The chirping of rats (which is, incidentally, at such a high frequency that it is inaudible to the human ear) remains even more deeply controversial, with many scientists resisting any connection to human laughter at all.<sup>83</sup> But even if we were to concede that similar neural pathways are involved in all these phenomena, and that there are at least some evolutionary links between the rats' chirping and the humans' chortling, there is a much more pressing question that is almost always sidestepped: What would we mean if we were to say that dogs or apes or rats “laugh”?

Most people would agree that the devoted dog owners, in detecting laughter in their pets, are driven by a desire to anthropomorphize and to incorporate the animals into the world of human sociality, by projecting onto them that key human characteristic of laughter. Or as Roger Scruton observed, with slightly different emphasis, when we hear hyenas (for example) “laughing” at one another, it is an expression not of *their* amusement but of *ours*.<sup>84</sup> But even in the apparently more rigorous discourse of experimental science, the boundary between laughter as a metonym of humanity and laughter as a physical or biological response is a tricky one. Once again we find an important blurring of the simple distinction between nature and culture. For the claim that a rat can “laugh” is always liable to imply something more about that

species in general, and our relationship with it, than just that the neurons in its brain operate in a particular way. Any study of laughter cannot help but raise questions about the language of laughter and about the ordering of our cultural and social world, in which laughter is such a key signifier.

These are just some of the puzzles that, for me, make the study of laughter in general so compelling: simultaneously enriching and frustrating, eye-opening and opaque. And, of course, when we turn to the study of laughter in the past—when the giggles and chuckles are long since inaudible—those puzzles become even more intriguing. How do those contested boundaries between nature and culture, between the rhetoric and the physical manifestations of laughter, impact on how we understand laughter in history? And what exactly are we interested in, anyway? Is it what made people laugh? Is it the social, cultural, and political effects of laughter? Its function? Or how it was discussed, debated, and explained?

In the next chapter I shall look briefly at some of the questions that govern any historical study of laughter, Roman or otherwise, and I shall reflect (critically) on one final theorist whom no book on past laughter can afford to ignore: Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work lies behind numerous attempts to tell the story of changing patterns of laughter from the Middle Ages on (and has influenced studies of antiquity too). In chapter 4, I shall continue to broach some of the basic ground rules for thinking about the issues that we face in exploring Roman laughter, in particular how we might negotiate that necessarily fragile boundary between what counts as Greek and what as Roman—between, in other words, *risus* and *gelōs*.

## CHAPTER 3

# The History of Laughter

### IS THERE A HISTORY OF LAUGHTER?

Human beings, we can safely say, have always laughed. But did people in the past laugh differently from us? And if so, how—and, just as important, how can we know? We have already glimpsed in chapter 1 the appeal and the frustrations of trying to understand a couple of outbursts of Roman laughter. In this chapter, I want to look harder at these issues, across a wider range of Roman material. We shall discover how scholars have ingeniously rewritten the texts of Roman jokes as they have come down to us, to make them funnier (in our terms). And we shall briefly reflect on the particularly tricky question of visual images. How can we identify visual depictions of a laughing face? (It's not as easy as you might think.) And how can we decide which images might have caused Romans—or which Romans—to crack up?

I shall also move outside the ancient world, to more general questions of how we might historicize the chuckles and chortles, giggles and guffaws of our forebears. There is, in fact, a long history to the history of laughter. Already in 1858, Alexander Herzen observed—in what has become something of a slogan among more recent scholars—that “it would be extremely interesting to write a history of laughter.”<sup>1</sup> Interesting it certainly would be. Yet the exact terrain of that history is hard to define. Are we dealing with a history of the theory of laughter, and its protocols and rules (whether broken or obeyed)? Or are we focusing on

the much less manageable, much more elusive subject of the practice of laughter in the past? Or some inextricable combination of the two?<sup>2</sup>

And what kind of changes can we hope to track over time? Here we need to consider the work of another modern analyst of the culture of laughter, the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. In many ways as important and innovative as Sigmund Freud in the study of laughter, Bakhtin has foisted some misleading myths onto the subject of Roman laughter, which I am afraid I must dispel. But his work also raises bigger questions about how we describe and understand long-term developments in an area such as this. What exactly is it that changes when we say that laughter changes across the centuries? I suggest that we can usefully shine the historical spotlight on laughter, that we can approach the subject *historically* (what else is this book attempting to do?), but that we can no more tell a linear history of laughter than we can devise a universal theory of laughter. In fact, I would argue that many so-called histories of laughter turn out to be loaded stories of human progress and refinement. When Romans reflected on the laughter of the past (and we ourselves are not so very different in this respect), part of the point was to show that their predecessors had laughed more coarsely, or more lustily, than they did—to construct a version of history in which laughter acted as a marker of increasing sophistication.

But we will start in December 1976, with a famous lecture delivered by the historian Keith Thomas on the place of laughter in Tudor and Stuart England. This lecture, though published only in a weekly magazine, was programmatic and has been extremely influential on approaches to the history of laughter, particularly in the English-speaking world.<sup>3</sup>

#### PAST LAUGHTER

Thomas posed the fundamental question. “Why,” he asked his audience, “should laughter concern the historian”—rather than be of interest merely to the social anthropologist, the literary critic, or the psychologist? Because, he insisted, “to study the laughter of our ancestors, to go on reading until we can hear the people not just talking but also laughing is to gain some insight into changing human sensibilities.”

The project that Thomas sketched out was both important and impossible. I mean *impossible*, because, of course, however hard we read, we cannot “hear the people . . . laughing” (or talking, for that matter) in any period of history before the late nineteenth century, and

it may be dangerously self-deceiving to imply, even metaphorically, that we can. But his project nonetheless remains important, for some equally obvious reasons. It almost goes without saying that we could write a better and “thicker” description of any historical society if we understood the protocols and practice of its laughter. Who laughed, at what, when? When was laughter out of order? What were the appropriate subjects or occasions for a chuckle?

Let’s take just a couple of examples from the Roman world. At least one writer of the imperial period, in his discussion of good manners at dinner, accepted that bald men or those with odd-shaped noses were fair game for a laugh but that blind people were emphatically not and that those with bad breath or dripping, snotty noses fell somewhere in between. This may not tell us much about real-life laughter, even among the elite, in the Roman Empire. Prohibitions of this sort are often perilous guides to popular practice, for, as we know from our own experience, the strongest prohibitions are sometimes aimed at the commonest features of everyday life (the modern equivalents—“No swearing!” or “Do not litter!”—are no sure indications of the prevalence, or otherwise, of foul language or of trash in the streets). But these laughter regulations are nonetheless a precious glimpse into one version of a Roman hierarchy of bodily transgression and abnormality; they hint at one way in which acceptable behavior and acceptable appearance might be calibrated—that is, measured on a spectrum from what was legitimately laugh-able to what was absolutely not.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the imagined “geography” of Roman laughter offers an intriguing sideways glance at ancient representations of cultural difference. Much as modern anthropologists have imagined the hysterical Pygmy, Roman writers pictured a world in which different peoples, countries, or cities could be characterized by their different styles of laughter, by the different objects of their mirth, or by the different degrees to which they themselves were laughable. On the one hand were those who repeatedly became the butt of laughter (such as the poor citizens of ancient Abdera, in northern Greece, whose supposed stupidity—as we shall discover in chapter 8—was often good for a laugh); at the other were people who simply laughed too much and were far too keen, so it was said, on the frivolous pleasures of laughing and joking.

The population of the Egyptian city of Alexandria—largely Greek by ethnic origin—was a case in point. In an extraordinary lecture to the Alexandrians, delivered at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE, the orator and intellectual Dio Chrysostom attacked



their apparently well-known passion for jocularly. “Please be serious, just for a moment, and pay attention,” he starts. “Because you’re always so full of fun and frivolity; in fact, one might say that you’re never found wanting when it comes to fun and pleasure and laughter.” He goes on to compare the laughter of “certain barbarians” with that of the Alexandrians. These barbarians, he claims, induce in themselves apparently drunken laughter by inhaling the fumes of incense (another candidate for an ancient reference to cannabis); the Alexandrians, by contrast, reach that state without chemical assistance, just by frivolous banter and joking, “through ears and voice,” as Dio puts it. And, he berates them, “you play the fool even worse than the barbarians do, and you stagger around, as if you’d been hitting the bottle.”<sup>5</sup>

In his dissection of the culture of the Germans, the Roman historian Tacitus offers a bleaker view of ethnic differences, pointing to some significant absences of laughter among the barbarians. He notes that in Germany—unlike at Rome—“nemo . . . vitia ridet”; that is, “nobody laughs off vices,” or “nobody [*merely*] ridicules vices.” But it is, of course, an observation that reflects back on the morals and practices of the Romans themselves. The implication is that in their primitive state of simplicity, the Germans take vice more seriously than simply as a subject of laughter or ridicule.<sup>6</sup>

I am not for a moment trying to suggest that Roman elite culture had a fixed template of the different ways in which laughter operated across the empire and beyond or that it would be possible simply to map the varieties of laughter found among the different peoples of the Roman world. It is, however, clear that laughter was one of the coordinates—shifting and unstable as it no doubt was—that Romans used to characterize cultural difference, as well as to define (and occasionally critique) themselves.

Yet these examples of Roman “laughter thinking” tend to make the history of laughter seem an easier subject than it is. For the further you move away from the rules, protocols, and moral exhortations associated with laughter and the nearer you get to what Thomas meant by “hearing” the laughter of the past, the murkier the waters become. That is to say—as those two scenarios with which I opened this book highlight—trying to recognize the situations, jokes, emotions, or words that actually prompted (or might have prompted) laughter in the past takes us right to the heart of the classic dilemmas of all historical understanding. How familiar or foreign is the world of past time? How comprehensible is it to us? How far does the process of historical study neces-

sarily domesticate (or refamiliarize) material that may be much stranger than we let it seem? Questions of laughter raise these issues in a particularly acute form: for if it is hard to access the day-to-day culture of laughter of our contemporary neighbors just the other side of a national or cultural boundary, how much harder must it be to access that of people separated from us by centuries?

We do not need to go back two millennia to see the problems. Anyone who has ever dipped into those diligent nineteenth-century newspaper accounts of meetings or debates that systematically record the occurrence of laughter throughout the text—“(Laughter),” “(Prolonged laughter),” “(Muffled laughter)” —will often have been baffled as to what prompted the mirth or why some things prompted more uproarious hilarity than others. It is not simply that we fail to spot the long-forgotten topical references or that we have no access to the gestures and visual effects that may have contributed to the laughter. We are also dealing with a series of strikingly alien and sometimes quite mysterious social conventions about what provoked laughter or when laughter was required.

But what makes it more complicated is that it isn’t always mysterious. If some laughter in the past is baffling, some does seem relatively easily comprehensible. As we have seen, it is not hard to empathize (correctly or not) with Dio’s half-smothered outburst in the Colosseum. Jokes too can sometimes operate across the centuries. Mark Twain nicely sent up the familiarity of very old gags in his 1889 satire *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (now itself ironically, more than a hundred years since its publication, an example of just the kind of continuity he was discussing). At one point in his stay at Camelot, Twain’s time-traveler hero, who has been transported back centuries to the Arthurian court, listens to the performance of the court wit, Sir Dinadan, and offers this judgment: “I think I never heard so many old played-out jokes strung together in my life. . . . It seemed peculiarly sad to sit here, thirteen hundred years before I was born, and listen again to poor, flat, worm-eaten jokes that had given me the dry gripes when I was a boy thirteen hundred years afterwards. It about convinced me that there isn’t such a thing as a new joke possible. Everybody laughed at these antiquities—but then they always do; I had noticed that, centuries later.”<sup>7</sup> At the end of this book we shall reflect further on the capacity of some Roman jokes, written more than two thousand years ago, still to raise a laugh (or not). Should we imagine some universal human psychology of laughter? Or have we successfully learned to find those

jokes funny—or have we inherited, no doubt unconsciously, some of the ancient rules and conventions of laughter?

One problem, then, is not whether historical laughter is familiar or strange to us (it is both) but how to distinguish the familiar elements from the strange and how to establish where the boundary between the two lies. We always run two different and opposite risks: both of exaggerating the strangeness of past laughter and of making it all too comfortably like our own.

By and large, classicists have erred on the side of familiarity, wanting so far as possible to join in the laughter of the Greeks and Romans, and they have often worked very hard to find and explain the funny points in ancient comedy and the quips, jokes, and other kinds of repartee signaled in Roman literature. Sometimes they have had to “emend”—or even effectively to rewrite—the ancient texts as they have come down to us to rescue the jokes they once contained. These desperate measures are not necessarily as illegitimate as they might appear at first sight. Inevitably there is a potentially large gap between what any ancient writer originally wrote and the version of their works, copied and recopied, that has reached the modern reader. The medieval monks who transcribed by hand so many works of classical literature could be very inaccurate, especially when they did not fully understand what they were copying or did not see its significance. Not unlike the complicated system of Roman numerals (whose details were almost invariably garbled in the scribal process), jokes were a common area for error. The errors can be glaring. One particularly dim copyist, for example, when transcribing the discussion of laughter in the second book of Cicero’s *On the Orator*, systematically replaced the word *iocus* (“joke”) with *locus* (“place,” in the sense of “passage in a book”). He removed the laughter at a stroke, but his mistake has been straightforward, and uncontroversial, to correct.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes, however, more radical ingenuity has been required. In the sixth book of his *Handbook on Oratory*, Quintilian (writing in the second century CE) also turned to the role of laughter in the repertoire of the orator. In the text we have—an amalgam of manuscript copies and the suggestions of now centuries of academic editors—many of his examples of what might prompt laughter in a speech seem at best flat, at worst garbled or close to nonsense, hardly the witticisms that Quintilian cracked them up to be. In a notable study of these, Charles Murgia claimed to have restored some point to a series of key passages. Thanks to his clever reconstructions of Quintilian’s original Latin, several of the jokes, puns, and wordplays have apparently been brought

back to life. But the nagging question is: Whose joke is it? Has Murgia really taken us back to the Roman quip, or has he actually adjusted the Latin to produce a satisfactorily modern joke?<sup>9</sup>

One snatch of repartee, quoted with approval by Quintilian, gives a good idea of the intricacy, technical complexity, and deep uncertainty of the whole process of getting and reconstructing these ancient gags. It is worth looking at in some detail. The passage in question is a courtroom exchange between an accuser and a defendant called Hispo, whose wisecrack we are supposed to admire. The text in the most recent printed edition of Quintilian goes like this: “When Hispo was being charged with pretty outrageous crimes, he said to his accuser, ‘Are you measuring me according to your own standards?’” Or in Latin: “Ut Hispo obicienti atrociora crimina accusatori, ‘me ex te metiris?’”<sup>10</sup> This text is the product of much hard work by modern scholars “improving” what is preserved in the manuscripts. *Atrociora* (pretty outrageous) has replaced the next-to-meaningless *arbore* (tree) of the manuscript versions. *Metiris* (“measure,” from the verb *metiri*) has been substituted for the word *mentis* (which looks as if it might come from the verb *mentiri*, with an *n*, meaning “to lie”—but it would be a hopelessly ungrammatical form). And *me ex te* (me according to your standards) has been incorporated to complete the sense.<sup>11</sup> But even with these emendations, the exchange seems decidedly lame, hardly the kind of thing to raise much of a laugh.

Murgia intervened, partly by going back to the manuscript version and partly by going beyond it. On his reading, the prosecutor was conducting his case “in language marred by barbarisms” (*obicienti barbore crimina accusatori*, replacing *arbore* with *barbare* rather than *atrociora*). Hispo instantly defended himself, and cleverly raised a laugh, by responding, exactly as the manuscripts have it, with a glaring barbarism. “Mentis,” he said, or “You is lying,” as Murgia translates it—so trying to capture something of the jarring note sounded by the ungrammatical Latin (*mentis* being, as he interprets it, an intentionally awkward active form of a verb that ought have been used in the passive form, *mentiris*). It certainly seems to make a funnier point: Hispo replies to an accuser who is attacking him in bad and barbarous Latin with some very bad, barbarous, and ungrammatical Latin indeed.<sup>12</sup>

But is it what Quintilian wrote? It is hard entirely to banish the suspicion that Murgia may have cleverly emended the usual version of Quintilian’s text to make it funny for us. “Mentis,” or “You is lying,” does, to be sure, stick close to the manuscripts, right or wrong, but “in language marred by barbarisms” has little support beyond the fact that it

contributes to a joke that sounds plausible enough to the modern ear.<sup>13</sup> And maybe it is rather too plausible. Maybe Hispo's joke really was feeble by our standards, even if it prompted Roman laughter for reasons we cannot now recapture. Or maybe, despite the spotlight Quintilian gives to it, it was feeble by the standards of most Romans too.

The truth is that one of the categories to which historians and theorists of laughter have paid the least attention is the “bad joke” (in Latin usually *frigidus*, a “cold joke”)—although, as Twain captured so nicely, in the day-to-day world of laughing and jesting, bad jokes are ubiquitous, can play an important part in defining what counts as good to laugh at, and may tell us as much about laughter's history and culture as “good” ones.

Recently, in a wide-ranging study of the “funny words” in the Latin comedies of Plautus (the major predecessor of Terence, writing in the late third or early second century BCE), Michael Fontaine has been even more ambitious than Murgia.<sup>14</sup> Fontaine's project has been to rescue the puns throughout these plays, not only those that the plodding medieval monks overlooked but those that he claims had been lost in antiquity itself, almost as soon as the plays reached written form.<sup>15</sup> He conjures up some exuberant—and indeed quite laughable—moments in Plautine comedy. To take one of the very simplest examples, in Plautus' *Rope*, a character who has struggled to shore after a shipwreck declares that he “is freezing,” *algeo*. Fontaine here suggests a pun on the Latin word *alga*, or “seaweed,” as if the word meant “covered in seaweed,” and he goes on to imagine that part of the joke is that the character in question was dressed in a seaweed costume.<sup>16</sup>

Who knows? Like many of the other conjectures in the book, this is learned, ingenious, and even quite funny. But whether Fontaine is revealing (as one commentator has it) jokes that have “lain dormant . . . for centuries”<sup>17</sup> or offering pleasing modern inventions that rescue the jokes *for us* is a moot point. In fact, this kind of approach should prompt us to think harder about the criteria available for figuring out exactly which lines in an ancient comedy were likely to have provoked ancient laughter. How much laughter we would have heard in the Roman comic theater, and at what particular moments in the script, is a trickier question than it might seem.

#### VISUAL LAUGHTER

An even starker instance of the modern dilemmas in recapturing Roman laughter is found in ancient visual images. The first problem is to decide

when ancient paintings or sculptures are attempting to represent laughter or smiles—or, more precisely, it is hard to decide what counts as an ancient visual representation of laughter or smiles. There is very little as straightforward as Terence's instantly recognizable *hahaha*.<sup>18</sup>

To our eyes, obvious laughers seem to be few and far between in the surviving repertoire of Greco-Roman art, though why that should be is less clear. To focus just on sculpture, a recent survey of scholars in the field elicited disappointing answers to the question of why there is so little laughter captured in ancient marble or bronze: “The prime reason is one of genre. Greek sculpture is broadly religious,” ventured one; “Because laughter distorts the body” or “[It] has to do with the issue of decorum,” others suggested; “A limitation of the sculptor's technique,” another rather desperately hazarded.<sup>19</sup> Of course, as is well known, the facial expression of many early Greek statues (especially the so-called *kouroi* and *korai* of the seventh to early fifth centuries BCE) is regularly called the “archaic smile,” but it is far from certain that it represented a smile in our sense of the word—rather than, to take just a couple of modern suggestions, a sense of animation or of aristocratic contentment.<sup>20</sup> And no less ambivalent are those apparently laughing Gorgons (are they really grimacing?), comic masks (are they intended to be grotesque rather than laughing?), and satyrs (who sport an uncontrolled animalistic rictus more than a laugh perhaps).<sup>21</sup>

These uncertainties are not, in fact, restricted to the art of the classical world. Surprising as it may now seem, it was only in the late nineteenth century that one of the best-known paintings of a laughing subject—Frans Hals's seventeenth-century *The Laughing Cavalier* (see fig. 1)—was given that title or even referred to as an image of laughter. What prompted the new description (or why it stuck so firmly) is difficult to determine. But it is largely thanks to its now-familiar title that we treat this painting so unquestioningly as an image of a laugher rather than of a man with “a disdainful half-smile and provocative air”—or, for that matter, a man of uncertain expression with an upturned moustache.<sup>22</sup>

But if the identification of laughers in art is tricky, it is even trickier to identify the images that might have elicited laughter from a Roman viewer. In a major book, *Looking at Laughter*, John Clarke attempted to do just that. He assembled an extraordinary range of Roman art, from grotesques to caricatures, from parodies to the ancient equivalent of strip cartoons, and tried to use it to open up the world of popular, lusty, raucous, and sometimes rude Roman laughter. It is a hugely engaging

study and, what is more, brings to our attention some intriguing—and largely forgotten—Roman images. But at the same time, it confronts us with another version of the problem I have just been pondering. How do we know that Romans, or some Romans, laughed at these images? To put it another way, who is laughing here? Is it the Romans? Or us? Or is it us trying to imagine—even impersonate—the Romans?<sup>23</sup>

Take one of Clarke's prime examples: not in this case a forgotten image, but the famous mosaic on the floor of the entrance hall of the so-called House of the Tragic Poet, showing a ferocious dog greeting the visitor and underneath the words *CAVE CANEM*—"Beware of the Dog" (see fig. 2). It is one of a group of three such entranceway mosaics in Pompeii apparently depicting the domestic guard dog for the visitor to walk over (which now decorate thousands of modern tourist souvenirs, from postcards to fridge magnets). For Clarke, they all would have prompted ancient laughter, because of the double take between illusion and reality, but the example in the House of the Tragic Poet would have elicited more chuckles than the others precisely because of the associated writing. That *CAVE CANEM* served to draw attention to the fact that the dog in question was only an illusion, to "unmask the humor of the artifice"—and so to prompt laughter.<sup>24</sup>

I share Clarke's view of the importance of illusion and imitation in producing Roman laughter. Less convincing is his attempt to explain the social function of the laughter that might have erupted at the entranceway to these houses—where he reaches too easily for that overused term *apotropaic*. Entrances, he suggests, were dangerous liminal spaces in the Roman imagination; a peal of laughter in the hallway was good defense against the evil eye.<sup>25</sup> But—apotropaic or not—none of this cut much ice with his fellow art historian Roger Ling. In an otherwise warm review of Clarke's book, Ling insisted that the mosaic was not funny at all but meant in deadly earnest. It was intended to alert visitors—with both the words and the picture—to "the creature that awaited unwelcome intruders." That is to say, "it was no joke!"<sup>26</sup>

There is no sure way that we can decide between these alternatives—between what might be, on Clarke's part (or my own), overenthusiasm for the unearthing of laughter where it might never have occurred and down-to-earth common sense, bordering on a failure of imagination, on the part of Ling. Yet this opposition reminds us of another side to the discursive complexity of laughter, at once baffling and intriguing. Notwithstanding all those grand theories of laughter, there is nothing that, intrinsically, causes human beings to crack up; there is nothing that

systematically and unfailingly guarantees laughter as a response, even within the norms and conventions of an individual culture. Incongruity, as one theory would have it, may often prompt laughter, but not all examples of incongruity do so, and not for everyone. A joke that raises chortles at a wedding will almost certainly not do so at a funeral—or as Plutarch noted (see pp. 27–28), what makes you laugh in the company of friends will not do so when you are with your father or your wife.

Over and above any psychological or evolutionary determinants, what makes words, gestures, or events seem laugh-able is that, for whatever reason, the culture in question has defined them as such (or at least as potentially such), has encouraged its members to laugh at them in certain contexts, and, by processes that I suspect are now entirely irrecoverable, has made that laughter appear "natural." So whether *CAVE CANEM* provoked laughter among Roman visitors to the House of the Tragic Poet depends on how far they had learned to see, in Clarke's terms, the unmasking of visual artifice as laugh-able or how far they saw the image, as Ling would have it, as an information notice about a dangerous dog—or how far both readings were possible, according to different circumstances, moods, or viewers.

It is for these reasons, despite all the possible perils of studying "written laughter," that this book concentrates on those cases, more numerous than you might expect, where Roman literature makes laughter explicit—where its eruption is signaled, discussed, or debated—rather than focusing on images or texts that may (or may not) have been intended to raise a laugh. So there is less in what follows on the laughter that might have been prompted by paintings or sculpture or that might have been heard in the comic theater; there is much more on the stories that Romans told about particular occasions of laughter, of all sorts, and on their discussions of its functions, effects, and consequences.

#### ENTER BAKHTIN

In framing his manifesto for a history of laughter, Keith Thomas had much more in mind than the question of how to spot the joke in any particular period of the past. He was interested in tracking historical changes in the principles and practice of laughter and in thinking about how they might be explained. As he put it, in broaching this subject, he aimed "to gain some insight into *changing* human sensibilities."<sup>27</sup>

So in his survey of Tudor and Stuart laughter, he pointed to a general shift over that period from the outspoken, popular, coarse, often

scatological forms of laughter (including all the carnivalesque forms of inversion—“the ‘holiday humour’ which accompanied those occasions of licensed burlesque and disorder which were an annual feature of most Tudor institutions”) toward an atmosphere that was much more controlled and “policed.” The “rites of misrule” were gradually eliminated, he observed, and there was a narrowing of the subjects seen fit for ridicule: much less jesting about bodily deformity, a growing aversion to crude scatology, and a marked tempering of open ribaldry at the expense of clerics and the social hierarchy. We are not far, on Thomas’s model, from the world of antigelastic decorum notoriously summed up in Lord Chesterfield’s advice to his son in the mid-eighteenth century, much quoted in the history of laughter (and its absences): “Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners. . . . In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter.”<sup>28</sup>

What caused the change? Thomas suggested a variety of factors. He noted, for example, a more general emphasis in this period on bodily control as a marker of a social hierarchy—of which laughter, and its associated bodily disruptions, was just one aspect.<sup>29</sup> He stressed the growing cultural importance of the middle class, for whom the old inversionary rituals of laughter (assuming as they did a binary division of English society into high and low) no longer seemed so pointed or so relevant: “Lords and servants could exchange places, but for the middle classes, who had no polar opposite, role-reversal was impossible.” He also reflected on the increasingly “precarious” position of some key institutions over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which acted to discourage, rather than to encourage, laughter. “Once the underlying security of medieval religion had gone, laughter had to be kept out of the churches. Once the social hierarchy was challenged, the laughter of carnival and festive inversion seemed a threat rather than a support. Once the aristocracy had been temporarily dethroned, during the Commonwealth, it seemed imperative to build a wall of decorum which would safeguard its position thereafter.”<sup>30</sup>

It is perhaps surprising that in the course of this, Thomas did not mention the name of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Soviet theorist and the author of *Rabelais and His World*—an extraordinarily influential study of François Rabelais’s controversial classic of the mid-sixteenth century, his multivolume satiric novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.<sup>31</sup> For Thomas’s characterization of feasts of misrule and other forms of inversionary carnivalesque celebrations has much in common with Bakhtin’s account of laughter in *Rabelais and His World*—which has inspired, or under-

pinned, many recent attempts to explore historical developments in (to translate Bakhtin literally) European “laughter culture.” In fact, after Aristotle and the three theories, Bakhtin represents the most recent shadow to hang heavily over modern discussions of laughter and its history. But unlike the theorists I considered in chapter 2, he was concerned not with the causes of laughter but with universal patterns of how laughter operates (between high and low) and, in particular, with its social and political operations within medieval and Renaissance culture—and (like Thomas) with the story of how those operations changed.

The book originated in Bakhtin’s doctoral dissertation. Written in the 1930s and defended amid controversy in the late 1940s (several of the examiners wished to fail it<sup>32</sup>), it was first published in Russian in 1965 and in English in 1968. Although—or perhaps because—Bakhtin had been consistently marginalized by the Soviet authorities, *Rabelais* quickly became influential among historians and critics in the West.<sup>33</sup> In truth, the book is complicated and in places—unless the English translation, on which most Western readers have relied, is very misleading—allusive, epigrammatic, and arguably self-contradictory.<sup>34</sup> It is also wide-ranging, making theoretical contributions to a number of very different fields. But historians have nevertheless extracted from it a powerful view of the development in the uses of laughter in the West, which forms the essential background to Bakhtin’s exploration of Rabelais’s extravagant satire and its later reception. In very broad terms, it runs along the following lines.

Bakhtin identified a clear distinction in the High Middle Ages between the popular culture of carnival—with its stress on the unbridled, all-embracing, life-giving force of laughter, often mediated through “the lower bodily stratum” (or “bums, farts and other transgressions,” as Vic Gatrell glossed it<sup>35</sup>)—and the decidedly nonlaughing, agelastic culture of the state and the church. These two spheres were brought together in Rabelais and other sixteenth-century writers when, for a brief period, high literary culture embraced vernacular, popular humor—“laughter in its most radical, universal and at the same time gay form emerged from the depths of folk culture” to take its place in the “sphere of great literature and high ideology.” From the seventeenth century on, however, the “people’s festive laughter” was diluted. Partly under the influence of early modern absolute monarchy, the true culture of carnival disintegrated, to be replaced by mere mockery, “erotic frivolity,” and an attenuated, ironic, bourgeois version of the earlier lusty festivities. It became, in other words, light entertainment, not liberation.<sup>36</sup>

These ideas have been inspirational, exercising a powerful influence on many leading critics and historians. “Bakhtin’s concepts of ‘carnivalization’ . . . ‘grotesque realism’ and the like are so frequently employed that it is difficult to remember how we managed without them.”<sup>37</sup> Yet at the same time—in whole or in detail—they raise a series of well-known, and much-discussed, problems. His characterization of the honest, earthy, incorporating laughter of carnival has certainly appealed to the nostalgia and the dreams of many decidedly unearthy, deskbound scholars, but in its simplest form it hardly stands up to historical scrutiny. Indeed, establishment apparatchiks though they may have been, several of Bakhtin’s doctoral examiners were rightly skeptical of his hard-line views on the popular character of medieval laughter (“I am afraid that when we evaluate the popular or non-popular nature of a movement only from the perspective of laughter, then we will diminish any notion of popular character,” as one, not unreasonably, put it<sup>38</sup>).

Many later critics have had equally severe reservations about Bakhtin’s notion that carnivalesque laughter was a wholly positive and liberating force. For, of course, carnival could be a site of conflict, fear, contestation, and violence too. Or alternatively, the temporary, licensed transgression that carnival allowed could be seen as a defense of the orthodox social and political hierarchy rather than a challenge to it (the price that the people paid for a few days of inversionary fun was knowing their place for the remaining 360-something days of the year).<sup>39</sup> There is also the question of whether the culture of church and state was quite as age-lastic as Bakhtin claimed (courtiers and clerics laughed too) or whether the laughter associated with the lower bodily stratum was in general restricted to the common people. Whatever their expressions of disapproval, the elite too have often found (and still find) that farts and phal-luses can prompt laughter. In the eighteenth century, for example, as Gatrell has insisted, saucy comic prints were often “unmitigatedly ‘low’ by polite standards” but nonetheless aimed at an elite audience (“Indicators of low manners in high places multiply as this book progresses,” he sharply observes).<sup>40</sup>

There are, however, two other problems with Bakhtin’s approach that are particularly relevant to my project.

#### SATURNALIAN FUN

The first problem is a specifically classical one: namely, Bakhtin’s reconstruction of the Roman festival of Saturnalia as an ancient ancestor of

carnival, and so a key component in the “laughterhood” of ancient Rome. This rather flimsy idea is, for classicists, one of Bakhtin’s most misleading legacies and deserves more challenge than it usually receives. I need to explain why the fun, games, and laughter of the Saturnalia are not at center stage in this book.

The Roman religious festival of the god Saturn took place over a number of days in December.<sup>41</sup> Involving both civic and domestic celebrations, it is one of the least understood but most confidently talked about of all Roman rituals—partly because of the easy assumption that it somehow represents the Roman origin of “our” Christmas (parties and presents in midwinter) and partly because it has been cast as a popular inversionary ritual, standing, conceptually at least, at the head of the whole Western tradition of carnival (a temporary topsy-turvy world, full of popular laughter and of the lower bodily stratum). This model of the festival was not entirely Bakhtin’s creation. You can find superficially similar approaches in James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, as well as in Nietzsche<sup>42</sup>—and in any case, many modern specialists in ancient ritual may never have read *Rabelais and His World*. But the trickle-down effect has been strong, and the continuing popularity of this approach must largely be a consequence of the powerful impact (direct or indirect) of Bakhtin, who wrote of the “essence of carnival . . . most clearly expressed and experienced in the Roman Saturnalias [*sic*]” and of the inversionary “crowning and uncrowning of a clown” and the “tradition of freedom of laughter” during the festival—of which “fara-way echoes” were still to be detected, he claimed, in later carnivalesque ceremonies.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, classicists often present the festival itself, along with a range of associated “Saturnalian literature,” in even more strongly carnivalesque terms. It is commonly said, for example, that a whole series of hierarchical role reversals defined the Saturnalia: that slaves were waited on at dinner by their masters; that anyone (from slave to clown) could be chosen by lot to be the master of ceremonies, or “king,” of the festival; that the festal dress for the free population was the *pilleus*, which was the distinctive headdress of the ex-slave; and even that the slaves actually took charge of their households while the festivities lasted. What is more, the occasion is supposed to have featured the kind of “exuberant gorgings and even more excessive drinking bouts” that we associate with carnival, as well as the general license to gamble (strictly controlled for the rest of the year), to party, to speak your mind (no matter what your station in life)—and to laugh.<sup>44</sup> Against this background have been set all

kinds of well-known literary manifestations of the topsy-turvy Saturnalian spirit: from the satiric free speech of Seneca's skit on the deification of the emperor Claudius, the *Apocolocyntosis* (often imagined to have been written for the Saturnalia of 54 CE),<sup>45</sup> to Horace's clever characterization of his slave Davus (who is given a chance to expose his master's vices in a poem explicitly set at the Saturnalia),<sup>46</sup> not to mention the whole world of Roman comedy, where the (temporary) victories of the clever slave over the dim master, and the laughter they provoke, can seem reminiscent of the (temporarily) inversionary world of Saturnalian carnival.<sup>47</sup>

The trouble is that there is much less ancient evidence for this proto-carnival than is usually assumed. It is true that the Romans wrote up the Saturnalia in ludic terms: we certainly have evidence for its sense of play, its parade of freedom (which Horace's Davus is imagined to exploit when he points up the failings of his master), and its suspension of normal social rules (togas off, gaming boards out).<sup>48</sup> But some of the most distinctive features of the Bakhtinian carnival—the gross overconsumption, the emphasis on inversion, on the lower bodily stratum, and even the laughter—are much harder to document. The references we have to increased wine allowances or special food are neither restricted to the Saturnalia nor treated by Roman writers as particularly gross.<sup>49</sup> And beyond the fantasy of the poor old emperor Claudius shitting himself in the *Apocolocyntosis*<sup>50</sup> (which may or may not be a strictly Saturnalian work), there is little hint of carnivalesque scatology: most Saturnalian wit comes across as rather refined, or at least verbal, and even the role of laughter is relatively subdued. In fact, the elite literary jesting that we witness in Macrobius' late-antique literary celebration *Saturnalia* may not be as untypical (or as "late") as is often imagined.<sup>51</sup>

More significant, though, the idea of role reversal, so characteristic of carnival, is a much flimsier construction than is usually allowed. There are, it is true, a couple of (late) references in ancient literature to slaves being served by their masters at the Saturnalian dinner.<sup>52</sup> Even so, some of the apparently key passages disappear on closer examination: the notion, for example, that the slaves ruled the household at the Saturnalia is the result of some imaginative repunctuation of a sentence of the philosopher Seneca, while other passages have been no less imaginatively (mis)translated.<sup>53</sup> And—whether the drawing of lots was rigged or not—the most famous "Saturnalian king" to have come down to us, indeed the only one we know by name, turns out to have been the emperor Nero.<sup>54</sup>

In fact, the emphasis in most ancient writing is not on reversal as such but on the social equality that apparently ruled during the festival. As Bakhtin himself acknowledged, ancient accounts stress that the Saturnalia represented not so much an overturning of social distinctions but rather a return to a primitive world in which such distinctions did not yet exist. In line with this, we find repeated emphasis on the fact that masters and slaves sat down together at dinner and that anyone was allowed to speak freely to anyone else across social boundaries. It is significant too that in their *pillei*, free Romans wore the costume not of slaves but of ex-slaves—a mediating category, which leveled rather than reversed social distinctions.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, the real-life Saturnalia must have come in many very different forms, and the views of the slaves and the poor (which we don't have) were unlikely to have been the same as those of the rich (which we do). But it is hard to resist the conclusion that in casting the festival in the mold of an inversionary carnival, Bakhtin and others have misrepresented, or highly selectively presented, what was for the most part a rather prim—or at least paternalistic<sup>56</sup>—occasion as a raucous festival of belly laughs and the lower bodily stratum. For this reason, though laughter may have been one element at a good Saturnalia, I shall not put much emphasis on the festival.

#### NARRATIVES OF CHANGE

The second problem with Bakhtin's approach—also raised by Thomas's essay—is far broader. It is the question of the very nature and status of a historical account of laughter. What kind of history are we telling when we try to tell "the history of laughter"? What is it a history of?

However we choose to contest many of the details of Bakhtin's account, from his interpretation of an ancient festival to his reading of Rabelais, there is one underlying principle that guides his work and that he shares with—or has bequeathed to—Thomas and many other scholars: namely, the idea that it is possible, not merely that "it would be *interesting*," in Herzen's famous phrase, to write a diachronic history of laughter as a social phenomenon. There is, of course, a compelling logic here. If laughter—its practice, customs, and objects—is found in different forms, according to context, place, or period, then it follows that laughter must necessarily be capable of change. If it can change, then surely we should be able to write a developmental history that delineates and even attempts to account for the transformation.

True. But the process is much trickier, in both theory and practice, than any such simple logic makes it seem. For the attempt to write a diachronic history raises once more, and in yet more acute form, all those questions about the relationship between laughter and the cultural discourse of laughter that I have already touched on (see pp. 7–8, 24, 45–46). To put this at its simplest, what is it that changes over time? Is it the practice of laughter as it was seen and heard? Or the rules, protocols, and discursive conventions that surrounded it? Or is it partly both? In which case, how can we now distinguish between those two aspects?

We certainly cannot assume that laughter was more restrained in a period when the rules governing its occurrence were more insistent. It is perfectly conceivable that raucous chuckles might ring out pretty much as before (though perhaps in tactically changed locations) in the face of new prohibitions. One critic has recently—and aptly—described the British eighteenth century as “an impolite world that talked much about politeness.”<sup>57</sup> And it may well have been that the behavior of the unfortunate Chesterfield son remained more or less unaffected by the strictures against “audible laughter” laid down by his obsessive father—whose advice was regarded in some quarters as maverick as soon as it was published (and certainly not as the orthodoxy that it is often presented as today).<sup>58</sup>

Likewise, Thomas in his lecture repeatedly pointed to areas of continuity even where he wished to show drastic change: the feasts of misrule, with their raucous burlesques, gradually faded over the seventeenth century (except, as he concedes, “annual occasions of burlesque and misrule lingered in many small communities until the nineteenth century”); rough forms of ridicule were tempered (albeit “among the common people these new attitudes were slower to take root. . . . Rough music and charivari continued in the villages”); jokes in general became more delicate by 1700 (though “middle-class delicacy took time to triumph. . . . Jest-books were really not cleaned up until the early nineteenth century”).<sup>59</sup>

But that is only one side of the story. For we must also assume that over time, new rules and protocols could have a major impact on where and when and at what laughter erupted. Or alternatively, we might infer that some of those new protocols were developed precisely to reflect “changing sensibilities” in the practice of laughter. After all, we don’t now laugh at cuckolds, one of Thomas’s key examples of Tudor ribaldry (or do we?).

These problems are tricky enough, but they are only the start of the intriguing methodological and heuristic dilemmas entailed in laughter’s

history. We might want to argue, for example, that his father’s rules necessarily made Chesterfield Junior’s laughter different, even if it continued in outwardly the same way (laughing in the face of prohibition is never the same as laughing with approval). We might also want to suggest that the attempt to separate laughter practice from laughter discourse is unhelpful or even actively misleading: “laughter” as an object of study is an inextricable combination of bodily disruption and discursive interrogation, explanation, and protocol. Or is that combination merely a useful alibi for our inability to “hear,” as Thomas would have it, the laughter of past times and its changing registers?

The closest comparison that I know—and one that helps us appreciate the perils and rewards of the history of laughter—is the history of sex and sexuality. We can track important changes in the discursive practices surrounding sex and in the regimes of policing and control that claimed to govern sexual conduct in the past. But it remains much less clear how these related to changes in what people actually did in bed and with whom, or the pleasure they derived: restrictive talk does not necessarily correlate with restrictive behavior, though it may do. It is also well known, of course, that the history we choose to tell of the sexual conduct of our predecessors is almost always deeply loaded and ideological, often as much an implicit judgment of ourselves as a scrutiny of the past—whether a celebration of our own “tolerance” or a lament for our “prudishness.”

Much the same is true in histories of laughter, which show a repeating pattern almost no matter what period or what culture is concerned. On the one hand we find commentators and critics focusing on, and indeed ridiculing, the occasional extreme agelasts of the past or particularly agelastic moments. It is to this tendency that Lord Chesterfield owes his fame, likewise that cliché of Victorian humorlessness “We are not amused.”<sup>60</sup> Agelasts indeed, as the Romans also found, can be very laughable. On the other hand, the overall developmental story is almost invariably similar to that told by Thomas and, with significantly different nuances, by Bakhtin—a version (as Thomas himself saw) of “the civilizing process.”

Diachronic histories of laughter regularly tell of the taming of the crude, the bawdy, the cruel and lusty. They may look back in nostalgia to a time when laughter was more honestly earthy (as Roger Chartier observed of contemporary discussions of medieval carnival, they always sited the truly carnivalesque some time in the past<sup>61</sup>). Or they may take pride in the growing refinement that has outlawed the crudity of earlier



forms of laughter or spared some innocent victims of ridicule. So far as I have been able to discover, there is no culture in the world that claims to laugh more coarsely or more cruelly than its predecessors. *Earthy* is only ever a retrospective designation. The modern history of laughter, in other words, is always bound up with a judgment (whether good or ill) on social and cultural progress.<sup>62</sup>

Much the same was true in ancient Rome. Admittedly, there are no ancient narrative accounts of the history of Roman laughter. But the contrast between the controlled, sophisticated, or mild laughter of *now* and the earthy, fearless, or crude laughter of the past is a striking theme in Roman writing. The details differ from author to author, the precise argument (and moral) of some of the passages concerned is hard to follow, not to say deeply controversial, and the idea of a chronological development correlates in sometimes complicated and contradictory ways with ideas of foreign influence. But the basic message that ancient writers tried to convey is clear: if you go back far enough in Roman time, you find a culture of ribald, jocular laughter that has—for better or worse—been lost or is on the point of being so.

Cicero, for example, could write nostalgically in a letter of 46 BCE of his affection for “native witticisms,” now so overlaid by foreign traditions “that there is hardly a trace of old-style wit to be seen.” It is only in his friend Paetus (to whom the letter is flatteringly addressed) that he can now “spot any likeness of the ancient native jocularity [*festivitas*].”<sup>63</sup> Both Livy and Horace refer back to the rough, caustic traditions of rustic Latin jesting and to the abusive, ribald—and frankly mysterious—“Fescennine verses,” or *Fescennina licentia*, much enjoyed, Horace claims, by “farmers of yore” (*agricolae prisci*).<sup>64</sup> In fact, as Emily Gowers suggests, Horace’s famous “Journey to Brundisium” in *Satires* 1.5 can be read not simply as the travelogue of an uncomfortable trip south from Rome or a pointed commentary on the politics of the 30s BCE but as a journey into the history of Roman laughter and satire: the central episode takes us back to its deepest roots, staging a comic duel between a pair of scurrilous, grotesque, jesting clowns, Sarmentus and Messius Cicirrus. Horace’s own style of laughter is much more up-to-date and refined than that: the poet, as Ellen Oliensis rightly insists, “takes care to locate himself very definitely in the audience, far above the satiric boxing ring.”<sup>65</sup>

The idea of a native Italic tradition of jocularity—“la causticité des vieux Latins”<sup>66</sup>—has been appealing to modern scholars. It has been seen as a powerful factor in the development of the distinctive tradition of Latin satire, and the lingering traces of the “Fescennine” spirit have

been sought out in all kinds of places where they sometimes do, and sometimes do not, belong.<sup>67</sup> But whether this Roman reconstruction accurately reflects the historical reality of the shifts and developments of Roman laughter (whatever exactly we mean by the term) is as hard to disentangle as any narrative of any history of laughter anywhere or at any time. In part it presumably does; in part it cannot. But which parts?

In exploring the case studies that are the focus of the second half of this book, I shall be alert to signs of historical change and shall keep an eye out for the perspective of ancient authors themselves on the history of Roman laughter. But for what are now—I trust—obvious reasons, I shall not set out to tell a diachronic story of how laughter changed at Rome over the centuries. I have no doubt that there were all kinds of differences in the “laughterhood” of Rome between the campfire world of the small, early settlement by the Tiber in (say) the seventh century BCE and the multicultural metropolis of Augustan Rome in the first century. And again, I am sure that the culture of laughter in the “pagan” empire was different, in crucial respects, from that of its Christian successor. I am, however, far from sure how confidently we can describe (still less account for) those changes or whether we have sufficient evidence, particularly for the earlier period, to make a useful attempt. My focus in what follows is broadly, and intentionally, synchronic, concentrating for the most part on the Roman world from the second century BCE to the second century CE.<sup>68</sup>

But first we need to ask what exactly the culture of Roman laughter might mean, what its basic coordinates are, and how far it can be distinguished from Greek laughter.