
COMIC LAUGHTER

ONLY the rational can be foolish. To say this is neither sophistry nor cleverness, nor is it an enigma; it is rather the ineluctable and ironic truth. Only those endowed with the faculty of reason are capable of being foolish and recognizing folly, and consequently they alone are enabled to respond to this self-discovery by means of what is perhaps the most curious manifestation of reflective reason, laughter. The captains or custodians of reason, the philosophers, are ironically often the most inept in their attempt to understand its nature. Perhaps no one will ever succeed in capturing its full essence, for its very intimacy makes all articulation of it seem alien; but so many thinkers have struggled with this issue to such a high degree of unsuccess that their efforts induce the very phenomenon they seek to explain. Descartes's definition of laughter is a howler. He describes the purely mechanistic functions of the body without indicating anything that would cause or provoke such a reaction. More profound thinkers, such as Kant, Schopenhauer, Aristotle, Hegel, and even Plato, argue that reason is the origin of mirth. They, however, in various ways, suggest it is somehow our reason being confronted with the irrational that causes the reaction. Thus, Kant, for example, argues that the distinction between the basic faculties of our consciousness, such as the sensibility and the understanding, in what he calls "the free play of the faculties," in a response to surprise, accounts for our mirth. Aristotle, in speaking of comedy, points

out that the origin of our amusement is our reaction to the ridiculous. These suggestions are superior to Descartes's because they render an account of *why* we laugh and not merely *how* we laugh, and they wisely spot our ability to reason as crucial. Their accounts are overly narrow, however. We do not always ridicule the hapless comic, nor are we always surprised when we laugh. Indeed, the causes of laughter, as we shall note shortly below, are far too myriad to locate in single phenomenon, and this proximity of causes confronts us with a methodological paradox.

If there are multiple causes for mirth, and if to make sense of laughter we must do more than merely describe its physiological reactions, then it would seem the present task is too daunting. Even were we able to compile an adequate list, gathered by sheer cataloging of experience, the multiplicity and length of such a list would be entirely unhelpful. Yet, unless we give some account of its cause, we seem to fall back on such vague principles or presuppositions about our consciousness that we are left with purely formal accounts that, being formal, are almost as comically unhelpful as is Cartesian mechanism. It is helpful to realize there may be different ways to be conscious, and that laughter is enabled by their difference or their interaction; but such enlightenment does not provide us with causes or even with phenomenal depictions that are adequate to all cases.

Perhaps, however, the very multiplicity of causes suggests there are different *kinds* of laughter; and perhaps among the kinds of laughter one species might emerge as paradigmatic. This suggestion would allow us to study one species of laughter as paradigmatic without having to consider all possible causes, which may be innumerable and no one of which would be universal. Just as one might argue that the paradigm of courage is to be found in the warrior, and thus an existential analysis of fear, loyalty to one's own, and sacrifice, would help us understand what it means to be courageous without thereby demanding that all who have courage are warriors, so a paradigm of mirth would allow us to understand its essence without claiming a univocity of its causality. Comic laughter—by which I mean that species of laughter provoked by comedic art works—may possibly emerge as such a paradigm. One must first, however, reflect on how we do in fact make distinctions between kinds of laughter. This book is not intended as a work on laughter per se, but on comedy as a resource for truth. But as a propaedeutic it is helpful to ask what it means to laugh in comedy to learn what it means to laugh at all. In order to do this, a rather simple distinction can be made solely on the basis of comparing two different ways in which we do, in fact, laugh.

Waking from his slumber following his tryst with the fairy queen, an Athenian weaver, frightened, bewildered, but still cheerful, ruminates on

what he thinks was a mere dream. As his recollections sharpen, he becomes awestruck by them, and plans to ask his poet-friend, Peter Quince, to write a ballad to give artistic form to his wonder. Carried away with what he remembers, he assures us, the audience, that: “the eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man, hath not seen . . .” anything quite like what he experienced. This garbled syntax often produces at least a chuckle and sometimes a hearty laugh. But why do we laugh? Or rather: what does it mean to laugh at the solecisms of a foolish weaver beguiled by magic? The line itself is not really that funny. Do we laugh at Bottom’s stupidity? But that is an unworthy thing to do, marking us as contemptuous elitists looking down with disdain on those who are so unlettered they mangle the glory of the English language. The warm, delicious joy that enables us to laugh with Bottom requires the whole play. We have, as audience, come to know and grow fond of this sanguine fellow; for there is much about his character that endears him to us. He really does not want to “affright” the ladies of the court; he is generous in his polite greetings to Titania’s fairies, Peasblossom, Cobweb, and Mustardseed. Above all, he knows how to laugh at himself; so that we truly can be said to laugh with, rather than laugh at, the beguiled but goodly weaver who weaves folly and love together.

In several works, Dostoyevski offers variations of the story of a man beating his weakened horse trying to pull a cart stuck in the mud. The villagers gather round this hapless man, jeering at him and mocking his distress. Mingling shame with fury, the object of this cruel laughter continues to beat his horse with mindless, desperate savagery. As he grows more fierce, the crowd laughs all the more, pointing contemptuously at him with fingers of scorn. The circle of linked passions waxes tighter like wet rope; the more the crowd laughs, the more violent the man becomes; and the more furiously he beats his pitiful horse, the more the onlookers laugh; until finally the horse succumbs; and as he falls dead the crowd whoops triumphantly at his folly, and the man bows, bitter and defeated, all the more ashamed in the realization that he had lost not only his horse but his dignity to the petty meanness of an unworthy crowd.

Is the laughter with Bottom the same as the laughter at the Russian horse beater? They seem entirely alien, almost opposites. It is foolish for the Russian to beat his horse; for in whipping the poor animal he depletes its strength to extricate the cart from the mud. It is foolish of Bottom to say we see with our ears and hear with our eyes. In both cases, it would seem, we laugh at folly. But the nature of the laugh in the two cases is so distinct it is difficult to see them as belonging to the same species of human activity; indeed, the nature of the folly in the two cases is itself so unlike we wonder whether more is gained by distinction than by what is common.

Further, it is fairly easy to imagine or remember cases of laughter that do not appear to be enabled by folly at all. The feeble sometimes laugh at everything; the highly stressed laugh without apparent cause; the solemn will on occasion laugh uncontrollably at a funeral; the child will laugh at sheer delight, with no folly at all; the lover may laugh at the sheer, joyous ecstasy in embracing the beloved. But stress, solemnity, delight, joy, and even feeble-mindedness are not folly. If the feeble-minded and the child laugh more readily, it even seems that linking laughter to reason is suspect, for the more rational are not always the more risible. Perhaps, after all, the purely mechanistic account of laughter given by Descartes is safer, for such physiological mechanisms seem the only constant running through all these examples.

These brief reflections spot the danger of any definitionist enterprise. A parallel can be drawn to other human phenomena. A loving husband finds his lust, not just his love, increasing as his wife responds to his erotic skills with her own heightened pleasure; *her* arousal increases *his*. The sadistic child molester finds his lust increasing as his sweet victim grows more terrified and frantic with pain. Do we say the lust is the same, but the consequences and conditions are different? Or is the sadist's lust distinct, as lust, from the loving husband's? In both cases there is arousal; but unless lust is merely that, we hesitate to identify the two. In part, this hesitation is due to what we mean by lust. If it is a certain feeling, and not a mere physical reaction, then we must stress the differences. It is rather difficult to restrict lust to reactions without any sense of the feeling that accompanies it, for when we reflect on our own lust it is often the feeling that we recall, and not the mere event. Is this nothing more, then, than the classic argument about the tree falling in an empty forest? If by "sound" we mean audial sensation, there is none; if by "sound" we mean the physical waves, there is. If by "lust" we mean only the physical arousal, both sadist and husband have the same; but if by "lust" we mean certain feelings, the two do not share the same experience.

These perils of definitional accuracy may weary the true thinker. They are genuine puzzles for lexicographers, but they are not genuine problems for a philosopher. It is important to note such denotive whimsy in language, but it is dangerous to be caught in the net of its distraction. Yet, even the definitionist quarrels often have deeper roots. The *Oxford English Dictionary* quite rightly insists that laughter be seen always as entailing *both* the physical reactions, such as facial and abdominal shaking and the uttering of nonverbal sounds from mouth or throat, *and* the feelings or sentiments that appear to cause them. In spotting the origin of the feeling

as the ludicrous, however, the *OED* reveals its Aristotelean bias. Webster does not mention the ludicrous or even the ridiculous; but refers instead to mirth and amusement. Neither mention the term *folly*. This seemingly petty quarrel reflects another side to this phenomenon. In both antique Roman and Medieval Christian literature one finds moral censure against laughter, on the grounds that it undermines *gravitas* and tends to reveal the giddy and irrational side, often conceived by Christians as the realm of Satan and by Romans the decadence of Greek culture. Certainly many of the early American Protestants were famous for their sermons condemning laughter as both frivolous and even worse, popish. It is perhaps too easy to dismiss these grim puritans as overly stern pedants; for watching today's adults convulse with ungoverned howling at the remarkably vulgar and coarse antics of a television sitcom or shriek show—I mean, talk show—gives us pause. Should we surrender our decency to the inebriate madness of the insensible? At the very least we must recognize that mindless intoxication of manic laughter may not always receive endorsement from those concerned with virtue and true joy. These reflections on the moralist's concerns, however, should at least suffice to convince us that the essence of the comic is ironically far too serious a matter to rely solely on definitions found in dictionaries or theological tracts; indeed, the issue may well be too profound to rely on any definition at all. Nor does the mere listing of possible causes offer enough. Not all who laugh, laugh well.

The praise of the comic seems more Greek than Roman; more Catholic than Protestant; more western Europe than eastern; more southern Europe than northern; though curiously, perhaps more English than Continental; more forgiving than morally correct; more divine than human, or perhaps more human than divine; more Dionysian than Olympian; more Mozartian than Beethovean; more dramatic than epic. Yet even these admittedly generalist pairings are misleading, though they may still contain a grain of truth: why does Dante call his epic a Divine Comedy? Comedy is a dramatic, not an epic, category. One might also point out some historical evidence that the rise of the comic prepares for decadence and then collapse, as Athens fell soon after Aristophanes, or as Oscar Wilde's comic genius prepared his own tragic end, and the end to the entire Belle Epoque. For the philosophical issue is not merely what constitutes the essence of the comic but what enables its praise. The latter may provide an actual, concrete phenomenon capable of being ranked, and thus make available a methodic approach to the former.

The praise of the comedic may itself be trivialized by the over-ready: laughter makes us feel good; it relieves tension, takes our minds off our

failures, and enables a rather special kind of sharing, bringing us together in a most amiable way. These psychological consequences are true benefits, and it would be churlish to deny them. To focus on them as the central explanation is rather like drinking a vintage Chateau Margaux merely to experience the gentle high that follows, and not to taste its wondrous, magnificent flavor. If cheap wine also provides the same high, why ever pay so much for the vintage? It is the taste, not the high, that ranks the Margaux; it is likewise not the mere psychological benefits that endorse comedic laughter. What would it be, then? The truth, perhaps? Even if it is truth it is only that peculiarly self-revealing truth about ourselves, which may be the most important kind, but it is also the most elusive. What enables us to praise comedic laughter apparently runs more deeply than its obvious psychological benefits, and no mere suggestion of its possibility as an origin of truth suffices to justify it. Work must be done. Before we praise we must first admit the censure: the puritanic mistrust of laughter's power to enthrall us is weighty and legitimate. We may find the severity of their disapproval merely grim or even unhealthy, but they cannot be denied their point. Manic laughter, like a species of intoxication, purloins our sense and decorum, and tends to unanchor our responsibility; the parallel with drunkenness is deeply revealing. Both tend to make us irresponsible; they lower our inhibitions and restraints, making us act more like idiots than sane and dutiful citizens. There is something giddy and unseemly about the unsteady, rollicking, undisciplined antics by the victims of either toxicity, bottle, or mirth. True praise of the gifts of Bacchus is not simple endorsement: drunk drivers are a menace and should be curtailed, even severely. Manic depravity due to wanton mirth is not enviable; it can diminish or even destroy us.

The irony here, as in most matters of art and self-revelation, is the key. It is precisely that which justifies our legitimate censure that also enables our praise. We are enslaved by excesses of both vine and mirth, and slavery is almost always to be shunned. Yet, slavery to beauty, or to loyalty, or even to duty, can paradoxically and ironically, enable a deeper freedom. There are two great perils here; the first is to praise without restraint, as if no censures were legitimate and no dangers threatened; the second is to stint our praise because of the risks, as if only fulsome adulation counts, seeing in guarded endorsement a warning in disguise. What must be seen is: we censure, in such cases, for exactly the same reason we praise; and this is troubling. It is this trouble that must be embraced if truth is to be revealed.

These early, cursory remarks seem to be steered by an oceanic undercurrent, not the playful wind that puffs our sails, and that can, by seaman-

ship, be controlled. The drift seems to pull us to narrower waters; we find ourselves speaking not of simple laughter but of a special species of it: the comic laughter wrought by comedic art. This drift, however, is not misleading. The very fact we can spot many instances of laughter that are undesirable and even unworthy shows us that, if we are to understand the phenomenon in part by praising and censuring, there is nothing wrong in letting these ruminations propel us toward that species of laughter that is self-consciously reflective. The greatest fault would be to yield to the demands of the widest generality, bringing forth a mere taxonomy of the risible. In philosophical inquiry the danger is not in leaving something out, but that in trying to include everything, only the most formal, or the bare minimalist conditions, will be gained, and that is not a gain but a loss. In seeking to understand what it means to laugh at all, it may well be that only when laughter is consciously self-reflective and self-revealing can we understand it; and comedy, as an art form, may well be not only the best, but the only, resource we have that allows us to ask in this way.

Even if we accept the strategy of approaching laughter through its art form, comedy, we must, on the warrant of caution, reflect. Not just any comedy will do. It has already been noted that those convulsed into brief idiocy by television's vulgarities are sufficiently unsavory to forfeit any praise of them. Yet, if we choose a Shakespearean masterpiece are we not offending by elitist prejudice? Restricting ourselves to the canon may warp as much as would the wanton embrace of all comic works. The need for openness and balance may seem, then, to thwart the method. To succumb to this anaesthesia of judgment is to abet the misuse of the narcotic. The analysis of a particular art work is not meant as empirical evidence to support a view, as if we were polling the laughing populace, but is rather a concrete paradigm of what can be learned about comedy from comic genius. To argue in advance that any selection must be a biased one is itself a bias, and indeed a singularly pernicious one. It is enough to note that selection itself cannot be whimsical; the reasons for the choice emerge in the analysis, and thereby become public, and as public can be challenged. To refuse to select because the choice may be vulnerable is a species of cowardice, and is unworthy of thought. We have, in our inheritance, wonderful comedies; it is stupidity not to use them. That we must select from them paradoxically reveals they may be truth-revealing, for that by which the selection is made may well be their power to reveal truth.

Men have laughed since the beginning of their history. How do we know this? Some ancient cultures have left evidence of their own laughter in varying degrees of artistic success; but not all have left remnants. Yet, this lack of evidence does not forfeit the judgment. Why? Perhaps because

laughter seems native to the species: man is the risible animal. If our evolutionary origins produced nonlaughing bipeds, we might suggest they had not yet reached full humanity; for in some deep sense we seem compelled to identify laughter with our species, which is fair enough as long as we accept it provisionally. Does it follow that men have always laughed as we can laugh at Shakespeare's genius? This can be doubted. Perhaps, though we have always laughed, we have done so more in the manner of the Russian peasants in Dostoyevski's story; that is, in a crude and vulgar way; to be able to laugh with Bottom requires the highest of cultural refinement. To say we have "always" laughed may ironically suggest two things: the ability to laugh is inherent in being rational, that is, it is a fundamental characteristic of the species. But: to be able to laugh with Bottom requires long periods of cultural refinement. Since cultural refinement itself may well be also inherent in the species, this need not jar; but reflection on this possibility allows us to realize the wisdom in focusing on high art to understand the inherent enabling of laughter as native to the rational species.

If laughter truly is grounded in our ability to reason or to think, what does this suggest? Do we say: we know what reason is, and hence, our account of comic laughter must conform to how we understand our reasoning? Or might it be the other way around? We do know what comic laughter is, and since being able to reason is what enables it, we must expand our understanding of what it means to reason. If only by being rational can we laugh, then, what must be presupposed about our reasoning that may be entirely unnoticed unless and until we see it as enabling laughter, becomes a revealing question. Certainly if reason does indeed ground comic laughter, then most accounts of reasoning by philosophers are inadequate, for there is nothing in, let us say, the ability to make logic-like inferences, that would explain what happens to us when we react to the performance of a great comedy. What do we learn about reasoning if comedy is enabled by it?

A loan taken out from Plato's treasury may provide here a helpful analogue. In Book II of the *Republic* we read of Socrates providing a speculative account of the state based upon mutual advantage. The emerging *polis*, however, seems rather spartan to the youthful and eager Glaucon, who protests such a state is bereft of luxuries. When Socrates, with putative reluctance, agrees to add some, he asks Glaucon what he has in mind, and is quickly provided with several instances, including spices for food. This introduction of spices alters entirely and forever what civility offers; for now, we do not eat merely for health and life, but we dine solely

because of its pleasure. Spices do not add one whit to the nutritive value of food; but they do introduce a dangerous, unhealthy, but wonderful new level of thought: I can eat, not merely to live, but simply to appreciate that I can taste at all. The whole world is changed by this introduction. In like manner, when laughter, which may be a natural instinct not unlike our desire for simple food, is refined, we then understand what it means to laugh, and not merely what causes it. Among the other luxuries added to what Glaucon contemptuously calls the pig-state, are the artists, which include the comic poets. For the Greeks this meant introducing the perilous magnificence of Dionysian spirituality, and it is from this spirit that philosophy itself emerges. And so we have a new resource for thinking about the nature of reason—not asking merely how it works and what are its criteria, but what it means to reason at all; just as spices reveal what it means to taste, rather than to eat. The Dionysian discipline that provides such self-reflective reasoning is called the love of wisdom.

It is a commonplace item of erudition that spots the Dionysian festival as the origin of drama and hence comedy. So if the inquiry into refined laughter is to be sanctioned as legitimate, its genealogy proceeding from this Greek festival cannot be overlooked. Only here, in its Dionysian genesis, can we find the true response to the question what must our reason be like if it is to sponsor comedic wisdom.

But the analogy between Glaucon's addition of spices to the *polis* and the new way of asking what it means to reason has further import. Comedy, like spiced food, no longer is in service of its product: we shift from the comic art as the cause of laughter to comic art for its own sake. For we realize that the best of artistic comedies are not at all measured by the amount of laughter they produce; at the greatest we may not laugh at all. A truly splendid production of *As You Like It*, one of the rarest few of the finest comedies ever written, may produce in lieu of laughter a warm, radiant glow of pure joy that lasts far beyond anything resembling Descartes's physiological description. Just as the finest sauce may be most appreciated when we are not hungry, so the finest comedy may be when we do not laugh. Perhaps the great comedies reveal what enables laughter without causing it, thereby accomplishing what must be true wonder rather than purpose. If this is so, the absence of laughter with the greatest of comedies is not a fault but a boon. Laughter may, in its non-cruel instances, make us feel good; not to laugh may allow us to participate, not in pleasure, but in magnificence.

If the study of comic art truly does reveal something fundamental about reasoning, we must ask further whether this revelation is due to

reason itself or our humanity: that is, our being animals endowed with reason. It is a pity, in a way, that angels are no longer available for philosophic sampling, for if they were conceived as rational beings without bodies, hence without animality, we could ask: can an angel laugh? Kant, for example, insists that aesthetic judgments are not possible for purely rational beings as moral judgments are, for only with the tension and hence possible symmetry between sensibility and understanding is beauty able to be appreciated. Angels, then, would not be able to make aesthetic judgments. This suggests they probably could not laugh, either. Alas, poor angels! Perhaps it is better after all that we no longer have them in our philosophical repertoire. The question, though, persists beyond the angelic. Do we laugh because we reason, or because being human we are either cursed or gifted with both rational and nonrational faculties? Kant and Schopenhauer both seem to suggest that laughter is the result of unexpected or surprising instances of nondangerous irrationality. We can either be or witness the irrational only if we have nonrational (animalistic) faculties. This would place laughter outside the realm of reason itself, but within its purview. I laugh because my reason is shocked by my nonrational side. This is a very attractive suggestion, for it places genuine laughter within the aesthetic realm, supporting the approach that comic art is our finest resource for understanding what it means to laugh. But even if this inquiry should focus on an exploration of the comic art, how should it begin? The temptation is to reflect on the origins of this art in the Dionysian spirit of Greek thought, as Nietzsche does. This lure must be postponed, however; for the approach here is not fundamentally scholarship, but philosophy. A more felicitous technique may be to reflect on some actual comic masterpieces to see how and to what degree they succeed or fail. In this way the inquiry will be initiated concretely, for the greater danger here is that focus on contending theories may well distract us from what we need to talk about directly. By comparing actual art works in light of their comparative success and unsuccess the reality of comic learning will be directly experienced. As true masters of the dramatic craft, the Greeks initiated their dramas *in media res*; there is no reason not to follow this sage technique.