An Eighteenth-Century Pivot: Theorizing Amiable Laughter and Comic Belles Lettres

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Abstract: Pronouncements by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in the early eighteenth century about an amiable laughter engendered new conceptualizations of *humor*, *humorist*, *satire*, and *satirist* that continue to shape discussions about all manner of comic artifacts. The pronouncements established a new aesthetic, *comic belles lettres*, revolutionary for literary production and philosophical speculation. To grasp the radical nature of this new aesthetic, this essay considers how long-standing was the classical theoretical tradition about comic art and comic laughter that it revised as well as charts in some detail the particular stages through which that revision developed.

Key Words: laughter, satirist, humorist, Comic Belles Lettres

If one imagines a complete and elaborate history of theorizing about comic laughter and comic artifacts, Western world edition, a model for correcting misconceptions and filling in gaps would be Lydia B. Amir's "Taking the History of Philosophy on Humor and Laughter Seriously," which pushes back on "a sketchy and ultimately inaccurate view of philosophy's relationship with laughter and humor, especially before the 18th century" (2014, p. 44). Amir carefully works through a number of statements by major philosophers throughout history to correct errors, advance nuance, and eliminate imprecise characterizations to show, in particular, that theorizing about comic laughter before the eighteenth century was not uniformly negative.

My effort builds on Amir's argument. Her essay skips the eighteenth century "because it is common knowledge that a positive attitude toward laughter along with a benign form of humor is characteristic of the Enlightenment" (2014, p. 45). My essay drills down into this positive attitude to illuminate ramifications. I will argue as my core thesis that one of the most significant moments in the imaginary complete history of theorizing about comic laughter and comic artifacts, Western world edition, would have to be the position most emphatically staked out by Joseph

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Addison and Richard Steele in the early eighteenth century for the existence of an amiable laughter because their argument generates two long-lasting consequences. First came new ideas about laughter but also new conceptualizations of *humor*, *humorist*, *satire*, and *satirist* that continue to shape discussions about all manner of comic artifacts. Second, the pronouncements by Addison and Steele established a new aesthetic, *comic belles lettres*, revolutionary for literary production and philosophical speculation.

Amiable Laughter, a Wrinkle in Theory

While the concept of an amiable laughter was not unheard of (Amir 2014; Halliwell 2008), it was effectively a minority report before Addison and Steele (Billig 2005; Tave 1960; Wickberg 1998). Jan Hokenson has charted significant theoretical propositions on comic laughter and comic artifacts in a Western tradition of philosophy, rhetoric, aesthetics, psychology, and literary criticism. In the schema that emerges from her history-of-ideas approach, she presents several important formations in chronological succession: classical, modernist, late modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary. For my purpose of arguing for the theoretical significance of amiable laughter and the emergence of the comic belles lettres aesthetic, only the first two formations are relevant.

In the classical moment, the tendency in the West since ancient Greece was for pleasure as a goal of comic artifacts to be superseded by social utility or a proto-bourgeois respectability: "the concept of the social norm becomes the centerpiece of theoretical reflection, if not artistic practice" (Hokenson 2006, p. 34). This tendency solidifies during the Renaissance; that period becomes the *locus classicus* for comedy as social mirror: norm maintenance instead of fun names the purpose of comic art. Thus what was defined as good comedy mocked the comic butt both as moral reprobate and as social deviant, and such comic mockery had a socially corrective function. Hokenson calls this function the "socio-moral axis of European critical conceptions" about comedy.[1]

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[1] Hokenson's use of *comedy* both as an umbrella term for all comic artifacts and for stage comedy epitomizes the potential for confusion when employing the term. In ancient Greece, *kōmōidia* designated stage comedy as a specific genre, implying a narrow use of the word that holds for ancient Rome and the West generally until the ascension of the novel. *Humor* as the umbrella term has its own historical entanglements in specific historical meanings. I will reserve

Between 1880 and 1914 a change in discourse about comic laughter and comic artifacts registered as the origins of modernism, the second relevant moment. Theorizing at the beginning of the twentieth century split into two rival conceptions, both drawing extensively from the Freudian model of the unconscious: a dominant archetypal and an emergent populist. The critical premise of the dominant perspective was that "comedy serves society's health" (Hokenson 2006, p. 105), which reformulates the Renaissance's neo-Aristotelian corrective or satiric tradition. The emergent perspective rooted itself in folk traditions and championed "the values of the social underdog in his comic battles with the establishment" (Hokenson 2006, p. 110). The two modernist conceptions of comic art have the same premise: "there exists a clear opposition between the comic character and society" (Hokenson 2006, p. 141), which establishes a theme of norm deviance.

In Hokenson's panoptic view, a wrinkle exists between the classical and modern conceptions of comic art. In fact, she names three pre-modernist concepts folded into that wrinkle: amiable humor; incongruity theory; and the ritual heritage of stage comedy advanced by the Cambridge anthropologists—Francis M. Cornford, Jane E. Harrison, and Gilbert Murray—who theorized both tragedy and comedy. The English Augustans in the late eighteenth century best elaborated the idea of an amiable humor: the classical irony of derisive satire becomes "the genial humor of the observer smiling at his own conditions and convictions" (Hokenson 2006, p. 72). For my purposes of understanding the aesthetic I am calling *comic belles lettres*, amiable laughter signaling amiable humor assumes a much larger role within discourse about comic art; it functions as a Foucauldian *énoncé*, enabling a set of discursive practices for producing a certain kind of comic artifact as well as commentary on those artifacts, discursive practices that also have material effects in the world of publishing (Foucault 1972). Here is the theoretical pivot. Rather than heralding a subcategory designated as "pre-modernist," amiable laughter, along with its corollary amiable humor, marks its own discursive formation, one profoundly part of Enlightenment ideas about human nature that signal the beginning of modern thought.

To grasp the radical nature of this discursive formation based on amiable laughter, we need to consider how long-standing was the classical theoretical tradition about comic art and comic laughter that it revised as well as to chart in some detail the particular stages through which that

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comedy for stage plays and use *comic art* and *comic artifacts* interchangeably to suggest levels of conscious craft and artistry for specific instances of what makes people laugh.

revision developed. Although conceptualizing laughter as potentially benevolent, humane, and enlightened was not a straightforward and seamless process, the concepts of amiable humor and amiable laughter provided the intellectual means for a decisive change.

The Pivot

Up to at least the eighteenth century, the dominant justification in the West for comic works of art was their function of reminding an audience of what constitutes social propriety or good ethics. Comic art needed justifying because much of it seemed harmful—scurrilous, abusive, scandalous—and because laughter too often seemed only to signify childishness, vulgarity, or even madness (Morreall 2010). This negative view of comic art and comic laughter in a most extreme form can be found in Samuel Butler's seventeenth-century work, "A Humorist" (Tave 1960, pp. 92-93), in which the humorist is nearly the same as a madman. Butler implies that laughter is not just low behavior in a scale of manners but also signals the complete disorder of insanity.

The classical view of laughter emerged from debates about what subjects were legitimately laughable as well as what comprised the nature of laughter. These focal points of intellectual discussions remained important during the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance periods. Although those discussions generated controversy, the question of what constituted the primary function for comic art and comic laughter was answered with noticeable unanimity: ethical correction. Comic art in this classical view incites comic laughter to correct the defects, foibles, faults, vices, iniquities, eccentricities, and follies of mankind. Thus a laughable character or person seems so to an audience or observer because of some represented or perceived lack in the character or person, a lack understood within the context of what constitutes proper behavior for a particular group or society.

The Western world's insistence on the ethical dimension of comic art and comic laughter began with Plato, who called the represented or perceived lack in the character or person an ignorance of one's true self (Plato 1997, *Philebus*, 48c). When Plato justifies a laughter-provoking speech or a *kōmōidia* (comedy), he did so because it teaches how to be serious and prudent by presenting a ridiculous counter-example (Plato 1997, *Laws*, Book VII, 816e). When Aristotle delineated the subjects *kōmōidi*a may lawfully ridicule, he also began with lacks or faults, what he called deformities (Aristotle 1984, *Poetics*, 1449a). For both philosophers, what causes laughter in art and rhetoric had to be harnessed to an ethical purpose. That which is laughable therefore is

that which must be corrected because it is ethically defective. In this view, the domain of the laughable (*to geloion*), what the Romans Cicero and Quintilian called *ridiculūm*, functions as a subset of the ethical.

Stephen Halliwell has painstakingly detailed the ancient Greek culture's unstable attitudes about laughter as an unresolved oscillation between representing it as amiable and cooperative on the one hand—and hostile and aggressive on the other. For the ancient Greeks, a playful laughter exists along with the serious and corrective laughter already noted: one kind of laughter exists without and another with animus, the latter characterized as "laughing down" (2008, pp. 11, 21, 25). Halliwell's account of representations of laughter in ancient Greece is valuable here first because it makes a persuasive case that the dominant view of comic art and comic laughter in the West as socially corrective stems from only one strand of Greek cultural attitudes on the subject. His account is also valuable because he marks the moment when that strand becomes the dominant view, during the 4th century A.D. when early Christian commentators stigmatized laughter with "the sinfulness of corporeal (even diabolical) disorder and dissolution" (Halliwell 2008, p. 8). Added to the ethical tradition in Greek paganism about the "capacity to resist (excessive) pleasure [because] the sheer physicality of laughter could create a presumption of moral danger" (Halliwell 2008, p. 9), this Christian emphasis effectively instituted the dominant Western classical view on comic art and comic laughter while relegating amiable and playful laughter to a residual role.

The ethical theory about comic art continued to be uppermost in the numerous accounts of comedy that flooded sixteenth-century Italy in the wake of the re-discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics*. From stage comedies "one learns what is useful in life and what on the contrary is to be avoided" (Donatus, in Lauter 1964, p. 27).[2] Most Italian analyses of the laughable during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were fundamentally rhetorical because they sought to explain how a recently revived form of entertainment, dramatic comedy, persuaded its audience to laugh or because the critic sought to justify dramatic comedy against detractors. Similar points were made during the same period by English writers: Thomas Elyot (1962, pp. 47-48), Martin Bucer (1963, vol. 2, p. 330), and Nicolas Udall (1964, p. 113). All of these commentators, by focusing on the way that ridicule corrects people's faults, underscored the dominant classical function of comic laughter to

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[2] Paul Lauter's compendium of critical thought about comic art contains several other excerpts from Renaissance thinkers that repeat the theme. See Tzetzes 1964, p. 34; Trissino, 1964, pp. 42, 43, 45; Robortello 1964, p. 44; Minturno 1964, p. 78; and Castlevetro 1964, p. 88.

correct, what Jan Hokenson calls the "Aristotelean satiric tradition" (2006, p. 44). Comic laughter as a satiric corrective, as ridicule meant to reform, prominent in Plato's writings and reformulated over the centuries, has remained an important theoretical function for comic artifacts (Bergson 1956; Gruner 1972).

Nevertheless, an important distinction running through all this commentary notes that not all faults are ridiculous. For Plato, faults in powerful people are detestable or dangerous, not ridiculous (1997, *Philebus,* 49c-49e), while Aristotle says some faults are too grave or painful for laughter (1984, *Poetics,* 1449a), and Cicero states that while deformity is the source of the laughable (*ridiculūm*), "great vice [or] great misery [requires] a weapon rather more formidable" than ridicule (1948, p. 375). The eighteenth-century revival of the concept of *amiable laughter* has as one of its objects not faults too serious for laughter, but rather faults so trivial that the comic laughter they generate does not possess the classical Aristotelean satiric attitude with its underlying corrective intent sketched by Hokenson. Instead, laughter can be playful and lighthearted, a marker of friendship, as even Aristotle noted (Halliwell 2008, p. 21). This re-emergence of the residual theory for comic art and comic laughter had its locus in England and Scotland. Issuing from a long-running set of debates about laughter and comic art (but especially about the nature of humor) among English and Scottish men of letters from about 1651 (Thomas Hobbes) to 1714 (Joseph Addison and Richard Steele), its roots can be found in the dramatic practice of the playwright Ben Jonson at the turn of the sixteenth century.

Though the term *humor* derived most immediately from the Galenic medical conception of what constituted a healthy human body (Temkin 1973), Ben Jonson's idea of humor found precedence in the ancient ethical and philosophical assumption that the function of the laughable was to scourge people out of their follies and vices. In a healthy body, the four humors are nearly balanced against each other; none exhibit an ascendency and truly predominate. An excess of a humor signaled an irregular state of health, and thus people might speak of someone in, for example, a melancholic humor. By the 1590s, it was fashionable to speak of humors and to anatomize an individual's temperament and behavior using them (Harrison 1956, pp. 154-156; Ostovich 2001, p. 13; see also Beaurline 1978, p. 114, Miola 2000, p. 12-16). This more psychological use of physical humors quickly became a satiric tool: playwrights could create characters dominated by a particular quirk or mood or behavior and refer to it as that character's

humor. Portraying such humorous characters elicited comic laughter to correct the imbalance, to return an eccentric to society's centric norms.

Ben Jonson's comedies of humors evoke Plato's idea that the chief fault to be ridiculed is an individual's ignorance of self. Jonson's comedies of humors thus exhibit a continuity with an important conception of *kōmōidia* held by the ancient Greeks, namely, to reveal faults in order to correct them. Despite that continuity, the Jonsonian entanglement of ethics and even manners with the medieval medical scheme for human health should be understood as a threshold, a re-visioning of the ancient ethical conception of laughter-provoking faults. This reset can be found in Jonson's distinction between a proper use and the "abuse of this word Humour." For Jonson, the abuse of the word came from its popular use, which referred to a surface of affectations and eccentricities rather than to a deeper behavior expressive of an individual's "general disposition" (Induction, *Every Man out of his Humour* 2001, pp. 117, 118). The correct use of the word *humor* was, therefore, a proto-psychological one derived from the primary physiological domain of medieval medical theory. The discursive practices for this physiological domain created the surface/depth distinction between humor as affectation and humor as "a genuinely ingrained temperament" (Snuggs 1947, p. 118).

The distinction remained current for William Congreve in 1695: "Humour, I take, either to be born with us . . . or else to be grafted into us [and] Naturalized" (1923, p. 163). Congreve explicitly remarks that a humor should not be mistaken for an affectation, though that is a common error. Similar distinctions can be found in claims made on the subject by John Dryden ("Preface, *An Evening's Love*," 1671) and Thomas Shadwell (*The Humorists*, 1671). These dramatists conceived of true humors as more than minor foibles. Rather, humors embody[3] what was wrong with contemporary behavior so that the faults could be laughed out of existence, fulfilling the long-standing idea that a stage comedy's function is to correct the errors of mankind. As Jonson puts it: the "office of the comic poet [is] to imitate justice and instruct to life" ("Epistle," *Volpone* 1997, p. 69). Henry Snuggs has argued that, despite making the distinction between true and pseudo humors, the deliberate stage practice of Ben Jonson as well as his Restoration admirers was to portray mostly the affectations and eccentricities of characters rather than walking embodiments

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[3] Paster (2004, pp. 11-22) argues that for Elizabethans psychology and physiology were one. Bodily humors were emotions literally, not metaphorically.

of a specific temperament (1947, p. 119). What emerged from the Jonsonian theory and practice of portraying humors in stage comedies, then, was a level of comic fault encompassed mainly by the affectations and eccentricities of characters.

Of course, the spectrum of faults to be corrected by the comic poet is greater than mere eccentricities or even affectations conceptualized as more than minor behavioral quirks. Affectations can compound to become follies, which in turn grow into vices. The apparently neat division between surface and depth, between humors that are more temporary and those more ingrained in a "general disposition," blurs as one considers specific characters in a particular play and how the action of the plot does or does not correct the laughable faults. Jonson through his character Asper may claim that "My strict hand/ Was made to seize on vice, and with a gripe,/ Squeeze out the humour of such spongy natures/ As lick up every idle vanity" (Induction, *Every Man out of his Humour*," 2001, p. 120). However, if the humor is ingrained in the individual's nature, if it is essential to the temperament, if in short it is a True Humor as Jonson would have it, then even the most caustically satiric grip cannot transform the sponge.

And yet, if Jonson's caustically satiric grip effectively squeezes surface humors out of his characters, he also represents humors that ought not to be purged because they are merry and mirthful. An excellent example of such a character is Justice Clement, "a city magistrate, a justice here, an excellent good lawyer and a great scholar; but the only mad, merry fellow in Europe!" (*Every Man in His Humor*, III.ii. 1971, pp. 251-53). His merry humor appears in more than one instance, but the best perhaps comes when the disguises of the cunning servant, Brainworm, are all found out, and Justice Clement sentences Brainworm to drink a pledge to him. The gesture represents more than a playful acknowledgment of Brainworm's comic talent; it also suggests the humorous kinship of Brainworm and Clement. In a play full of jests and practical jokes, Justice Clement becomes a carnivalesque judge who metes out just desserts at the end of the play, excluding the affected Captain Bobadill and Mathew but allowing Stephen into the concluding marriage feast. After dispensing justice, however, Clement pointedly displays his merry humor by making Brainworm his comic partner as the characters process into the wedding feast: "This night we'll dedicate to friendship, love, and laughter. Master bridegroom, take your bride and lead; every one, a fellow. Here is my mistress—Brainworm!" (V.i. pp. 279-80). Sensible yet silly, Justice Clement with his contradictions might deserve the title "wise fool." More importantly, because Brainworm's comic machinations have driven much of the plot, and because Jonson clearly

approves of the comic antics of Justice Clement, the merry humors of these two characters are not to be squeezed out by a ridiculing comic laughter. Rather, the audience laughs with these humorous characters. Theirs are good humors.

John Dryden, the most important of Ben Jonson's Restoration admirers, also suggests the notion of a comic laughter that tolerates a humor and thus transforms it to a good humor. In the Preface to his play *An Evening's Love* (1671), Dryden compares "humor, wit, Comedy, and Farce." The humor found in Jonson, Dryden declares, imitates folly in order to make men appear "pleasantly ridiculous" (1970, p. 205), a phrase suggesting that some imperfections of mankind are small enough, or good-natured enough, to tolerate. The yoking of opposing ideas found in the phrase "pleasantly ridiculous" again suggests a threshold, suggesting the kind of good-natured, that is, good-humored character represented by Justice Clement.

Yet another element in Dryden's preface hints at his role in a crossing of the theoretical threshold from the dominant classical view of comic laughter and comic art as corrective to a conceptual space about comic art that would enable and encourage a tolerant, amiable comic laughter. In the course of defending himself against a charge that he does not always punish his characters in proper measure, Dryden declares the charge irrelevant because the chief end of comedy is *divertissement*, not the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice (1970, p. 209). The shift in focus to entertainment marks a clear break from the ethical theorists in the ancient world and their Renaissance admirers. Without this very different notion about the function of comic art as a ground, tolerant comic laughter could not take hold as a legitimate reaction to representations or perceptions of fault. Nevertheless, Dryden's role in developing a distinctively liberal meaning for the word *humor* lacks force because he did not elaborate his idea about *divertissement*. We shall have to turn to the eighteenth-century English essayists Joseph Addison and Richard Steele to remark a more obvious step in this direction.[4]

Though the step in redefining what is meant by *humor* is more obvious with Addison and Steele's varied remarks on comic laughter and related topics, they did not take it without some confusing back-pedaling as well. As with Ben Jonson and John Dryden before them, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele were well-versed in what previous writers had to say on the relevant

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[4] Theorizing in England about an amiable laughter begins with Shaftesbury (1709) but is most notable with Addison and Steele's periodical essays (1709-13). Francis Hutcheson (1750) and Adam Smith (1759) make contributions later in the eighteenth century.

topics, and they drew upon those commentators. However, they also managed to strike out on their own more than their predecessors. In harmony with the classically dominant tradition of Western theory, they both acknowledge that comic art forms should be used "to laugh men out of their vice and folly" (*Spectator* #249, 1965, vol. 2, pp. 465-69). The proper objects of ridicule can be found in people and characters who affect what they lack (*Tatler* #63, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 98-105), a formulation very near to Plato's notion in *Philebus* that laughter should attack those who are ignorant of their true selves. Steele appears to link comic laughter to temperament in a Jonsonian manner when he suggests that such laughter indicates an inward satisfaction and that different sorts of comic laughter occur according to the temperament of those who laugh (*Guardian* #29, 1982, pp. 124-28). Addison shows a similar affinity for Jonson when discussing the possibility of good-natured comic laughter (*Tatler* #63, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 98-105).

However, Addison and Steele begin to move away from their predecessors, insofar as the corrective function of comic laughter is concerned, when they turn from the temperament or humor of the characters properly ridiculed on a stage or page to consider the temperament or humor of the writer whose efforts produce such satiric laughter. In *Spectator* #23, Joseph Addison considers the proper use of lampoons, that is, the ridiculing of specified individuals (1965, vol. 1, pp. 97-100). Plato had outlawed such writings, however playful. Addison agrees that such ridicule in an ill-natured man is troubling, but he does not as a solution ban the genre but rather insists that the ridicule be tempered with "Virtue and Humanity." In short, Addison prescribes what the satirist's temperament or humor ought to be. Richard Steele makes his own prescription. In addition to a good satirist having a cause that is society's concern and not merely his own, he must have a good-nature to "rail agreeably" and to create "representations [that] bear a pleasantry in them" (*Tatler* #242, 1970, vol. 4, pp. 234-38; see also *Spectator* #35, 1965, vol. 1, pp. 145-48). The last phrase bears a remarkably close resemblance to Dryden's phrase "pleasantly ridiculous." However, both Addison and Steele speak not just of the character as a "humorist" (see *Tatler* #12, 1970, vol. 1, pp. 106-15), but of the writer as "humorist," a crucial difference.

This focus on the humor of the person whose writings elicit the ridicule of satiric laughter does not mean that Addison and Steele abandon the concept of the character as humorist. However, when they discuss such laughter-provoking characters, the other important difference in their writings from other commentary on comic laughter and comic writing—their consideration of good humor or good nature—becomes apparent. This difference centers on the idea of the target

or butt of laughter, a concept first raised by Joseph Addison in *Spectator* #47 (1965, vol. 1, pp. 200-04). In his definition, a butt of laughter can be laughed at for "some odd turn of humor," but such a person or character also possesses enough intelligence to switch the spectators' or audience's laughter to his or her side. For Addison, Shakespeare's Falstaff exemplifies this type of comic individual. Ben Jonson's character Judge Clement fits this definition too. Richard Steele will revisit the idea of a butt of comic laughter in *Guardian* #29 (1982, pp. 124-128), where he conceives of the type as someone stocked with such good humor as to make others laugh, even at an innocent blunder. Clearly, both Addison and Steele are not concerned with the classically dominant theory of the corrective, satiric function of comic laughter when discussing this comic type. The good humor or good nature of the butt is part of the "representations [that] bear a pleasantry in them." If these representations rail at the odd turn of humor, they rail agreeably.

This good humor both on the part of the character and the writer generates a comic laughter that tolerates the faults perceived in a humorous person or represented in a humorous character. Addison argues that some comic laughter is good natured (*Tatler* #63, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 98-105) and that "we naturally regard laughter as what is both in itself amiable and beautiful" (*Spectator* #249, 1965, vol. 2, pp. 465-69). These assertions by Addison are bold, not only because the distrust of comic laughter was so long-standing in the West—one only need remember Plato's formulation of comic or playful malice to describe the emotion that lay behind comic laughter—but also because Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) had reformulated Plato's detection of malice into his own detection of superiority as the emotion expressed by laughter. Sixty years after Hobbes, his explanation for comic laughter remained a powerful one, so much so that Addison agrees with Hobbes not only in another essay (*Spectator* #47, 1965, vol. 1, pp. 200-04), but even in the very same essay quoted above that asserts the naturalness of an amiable comic laughter.

The Consequences

If Addison and Steele's essays do not provide an unambiguous position on the complex nature of comic laughter, if they do not decisively cross the threshold from derisive to amiable laughter, they nevertheless enunciate a clearly discernible alternative to the "Aristotelean satiric tradition" (Hokenson 2006, p. 44) that came to dominant Western theorizing (Crane 1971; Tave 1960). Their idea of a good-natured, amiable comic laughter created a forceful challenge to those who for so long had argued that comic laughter is synonymous with ridicule and who maintained that comic

laughter is so caustic in its effects that its only proper function can be in service against folly and vice. Moreover, their idea of an amiable comic laughter can be linked to discussions about good-natured characters and authors. Such characters and authors exhibit their good humor through a display of amiable laughter, revising the old category of *humorists*. Addison and Steele's championing an amiable comic laughter makes visible a particular aesthetic, what I am calling *comic belles lettres* (see Caron 2014).

This aesthetic can be traced back to Greek ideas about playful laughter, but in particular to Aristotle's concept of a "ready-witted gentleman" in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. This figure represents a golden mean between the buffoon on the one hand, always making jokes, and the boor on the other, incapable of making jokes. For Aristotle, *eutrapelia* (wittiness) is a characteristic of an honorable and free person, demonstrating "educated *hubris*" (Halliwell 2008, p. 22), an oxymoron that will find an echo in Addison and Steele's concept of a benevolent satirist. "[B]y the time of Cicero a concept of humor very close to that of the Aristotelian *eutrapelos* . . . has experienced a resurrection" (Amir 2014, p. 49); *ridiculūm* could appear with adjectives—for example, mild, cheerful, self-deprecating, good-natured—or be substituted with "*hilaritas*" as well as "*festivitas*." René Descartes also restates Aristotle's ready-witted man while suggesting the oxymoron of "pleasant raillery" to be found later in Addison and Steele: "he engages in that gentle mockery which is not a passion, but rather the trait of a good man. It bears witness to the cheerfulness of his temper and the tranquility of his soul, which are signs of virtue; and it often shows the quickness of his mind, in his ability to put a pleasant gloss on the objects of his mockery" (qtd. in Amir 2014, p. 68). Lord Chesterfield's famous dicta about smiles and laughter epitomize the way that the philosophic image of the ready-witted man smoothly segues into a question of manners and decorum realized in the figure of an amiable gentleman.

Thus, while comic belles lettres, with its signature amiable laughter, does not signify a complete reversal of the dominant classical view of comic laughter, but something more like a revival of a residual theme found even in the ancient world, outlining the commentary and theorizing by eighteenth century English thinkers and artists has revealed several aspects that enable a discernable modern cultural context.

First, because *humor* applies not just to a character (who is odd compared to social norm) but also to the temperament of a historical person, it becomes attached to nationalist pride: the rich and free gentlemen of England can, in a doubled sense, afford to be humorous. Humor at this level

emphasizes variety and the individual rather than class and conformity (Tave 1960, p. 96). Second, the development of the opposition "True Humor" versus "False Humor," expressed as early as 1695 by William Congreve and expanded by Joseph Addison in 1711 (*Spectator* #35, 1965, vol. 1, pp. 145-48), is crucial. The former is something "natural" (Tave 1960, p. 99), which completely reverses Ben Jonson's neo-classical view of what constitutes a "True Humor." Within the Congreve/Addison axis, the Jonsonian sense of humor names a false humor that needs to be corrected, which still echoes the medieval idea of balancing humors. However, within the concept of amiable laughter, True Humor ought not be changed. In addition, True Humor becomes linked positively to the political domain as a marker for liberty (Tave 1960, p. 100). Finally, the naturalness of humor—that is, humor is found in individuals though it can produce odd characters—makes it superior to wit, which must be created (Tave 1960, p. 114).

However, the naturalness of True Humor did leave it open to a charge of coarseness and vulgarity (Tave 1960, p. 115). To claim that True Humor's naturalness signifies its desirableness, the new theory of comic laughter as an amiable gesture had to insist that *true* meant *good*, and that *humor* meant *good humor*, which in turn signified the fundamentally good nature of the individual. Moreover, as Corbyn Morris argued (1744), a good nature was known by the "*generous benevolent* Sentiments of Heart," by the manifestation of "amiable sentiments" (qtd. in Tave 1960, 119, original emphasis). The eighteenth century prized benevolence and looked for it in literature, and this privileging intersected with the view that a humor could be true and good—and so tolerated rather than purged. Thus Cervantes had the "Gentle Spirit of sweetest humor," a temperament matched by Shakespeare, while Jonson was seen as the unamiable satirist. Farquhar and Congreve were divided in the same fashion (Tave 1960, pp. 159, 139, 109), an opposed pairing to be replicated later with Dickens and Thackeray.

Stuart Tave puts a particular emphasis on this point: "The introduction of benevolence, and the rejection of satire, turns humor entirely away from the direction of Dennis and Swift" (1960, p. 120), the literary descendants of Jonson and Butler. The proponents of the new theory about amiable laughter and amiable humor privileged exactly what Thomas Hobbes had ignored: the positive qualities of human nature. Moreover, the new theory about laughter and humor mostly ignored the darker side he had privileged in his superiority theory.

The power of the new formulation for *true humor*—that it was *always* good-natured—is seen in the eighteenth century's complete rehabilitation of Falstaff, a maneuver which Washington

Irving reiterates in *The Sketch Book* (1819, p. 103). Under the new banner of amiable, that is, true humor, Falstaff becomes not a "mere humorist" but "a man of humor," a conscious artist of humor: he is both a jester and a jest (Tave 1960, pp. 126, 128).

During the eighteenth century, many instances of this new conception of humorists were created by comic writers. Notable characters embodying the theory that a humor can be a positive thing include Henry Fielding's Parson Adams in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and Laurence Sterne's Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy* (1759). They exemplify a laughable yet lovable type, one whose estimable qualities are mixed with foibles and eccentricities (Tave 1960, p. 145), figures first anticipated by Addison's character Sir Roger de Coverley. Moreover, Stuart Tave says that Don Quixote should be named as the progenitor of all humorists in this new, positive mode (1960, p. 151). William Hazlitt called Quixote "an enthusiast of the most amiable kind" (qtd. in Tave 1960, p. 163). Like Falstaff, Don Quixote understood as a true humorist, that is, a ridiculous yet lovable character with an amiable humor, is enabled by the concept of amiable laughter that revises what counts as a laughable fault.

Through Addison and Steele, important vocabulary to define amiable laughter becomes available. Whereas *humorist* for Ben Jonson meant someone in need of the cleansing purge of comic laughter, "a man of humor" implied a creative ability to generate amusement. *Humorist* for a writer at the close of the eighteenth century could be a compliment, not an epithet (Tave 1960, p. 147). A mixture of oddity and humanity, humorists of the amiable sort could be associated with "gentlemanly virtues," could be men whose ethics are located in "goodness of heart, not action" (Tave 1960, p. 157). In the dominant classical theory, nearly all comic laughter was synonymous with ridicule. Now comic laughter could signify *the ridiculous* as well as another category marked by a tolerant and more playful brand of comic laughter—*the ludicrous*.[5] If a humor is natural and not affected, then it is merely ludicrous, and no need exists to purge the humor from the individual. Next, the prominence of the concept of benevolence matters greatly, for the virtues presented by the embodiment of an amiable laughter—a figure one might call *gentleman humorist*—include a good or benevolent heart, not just being ready-witted, as with Aristotle's ready-witted man, and this amiability becomes a humor to be desired. Finally, there is the question of mirth vs.

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[5] Although neither Addison nor Steele used these familiar terms to make this distinction, the root meanings of the words are apt for my purposes: *ridicule* indicates a harsher attitude than the playful one suggested by *ludicrous*.

cheerfulness, dramatized by Jonson's Judge Clement, and discussed by Addison in *Spectator* #381. The result is the possibility of gentlemen as (good-natured) humorists as well as amiable satirists.

The shift in eighteenth century England from conceiving of the laughable as synonymous with ridicule to distinguishing the laughable into the ridiculous and the ludicrous is profound and far-reaching. Paradigmatically, when the phrase *good humor* can be rendered simply by *humor*, the new discursive space becomes legible, enabling a wide-spread production of a comic belles lettres.

William Thackeray later makes the enunciative space for comic belles lettres especially visible in the way he discusses comic writers in his mid-nineteenth century series of lectures, *The English Humourists*. Like his predecessors, Addison and Steele, Thackeray in effect acknowledges the difference between the ridiculous and the ludicrous when he mixes satiric laughter and its corrective function with an amiable comic laughter that humors eccentricities and foibles. In addition, his focus is not so much on humorous characters but the temperament of the writers themselves as humorists. For Thackeray, being a humorist was more than possessing the power to make people laugh:

> The humourous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness— your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture—your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his means and ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak.
>
> (*The English Humourists* 1968, p. 4)

In its comparison to a preacher, this description implies the classical ethical dimension dominantly assigned to comic laughter and comic art. However, Thackeray notably emphasizes the benevolent emotions that accompany any comic laughter. Instead of the Jonsonian conception of the humorist as someone whose temperament reveals faults and whose behavior therefore needs correction for the good of society, Thackeray's humorist is someone who does society good because his writings induce others to have proper moral feelings. For Ben Jonson, a humorist needs a sermon read to him; for Thackeray, a humorist delivers the sermon.

The difference in the two conceptions stems from a fundamental assumption that posits humanity as naturally benevolent and from an unassailable belief that claims benevolent treatment of others as among the highest virtuous acts an individual can perform (Smith, 1969). That broad context enables the aesthetic of comic belles lettres, which Thackeray clearly uses to sort the English humorists he discusses. Thus, the best type of comic laughter is a good-natured laughter—a *humorous* kind of comic laughter—for "humour is wit and love [and] the best humour is that which contains most humanity, that which is flavored throughout with tenderness and kindness" (Thackeray, 1968, p. 270). Moreover, the best humorist cannot be one like Swift or Pope, who in Thackeray's view both exhibited a mean spirit or a wicked wit in the comic laughter they created (1968, pp. 165, 179). Instead, Thackeray uses words like "sweet," "joyful," "delightful," and "good-humoured" to describe the best humorist, with Joseph Addison as *the* model. Addison "laughs the kindest laugh—points our neighbour's foible or eccentricity out to us with the most good-natured smiling confidence"; he is "a gentle satirist" (Thackeray, 1968, pp. 85, 80) or, what amounts to the same thing, a gentlemanly humorist. Addison's humor—his very temperament as well as his writing—all demonstrate the natural benevolence of mankind that he encourages his readers to imitate. Ben Jonson knew that to write good stage comedies a man must himself be good in an ethical sense. Starting with Addison and Steele, however, the good writer of stage comedies or even satires was also good in the sense of good-natured or good-humored because that temperament ostensibly guaranteed that he would either tolerate the true humors that rendered an individual eccentric yet lovable, or when necessary take the cat out of the bag[6] and swing the corrective lash of comic laughter with benevolence, a kind of comic tough love. In effect, the gentleman humorist knows the difference between the ludicrous—and the amiable laughter it should generate—and the ridiculous, with the acerbic or caustic laughter it could generate. For Thackeray, this will-to-benevolence in creating the proper kind of comic laughter for the good of society or an individual was akin to the minister's duty to save souls.

When Joseph Addison created his most famous humorous character, Sir Roger de Coverly, the comic laughter elicited, says Thackeray, does not merely possess the corrective function of satire but instead adds the tolerance and sympathy of humor: "What would Roger de Coverly be

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[6] The phrase "take the cat out of the bag" refers to the lash used on British naval ships, the cat-o-nine-tails, which was stored coiled in a small cloth or leather bag. When the cat was out of the bag, punishment was imminent; "cat out of the bag" signifies pain and tribulation.

without his follies and his charming little brain cracks? We love him for his vanities as much as his virtues. What is ridiculous is delightful in him; we are fond of him because we laugh at him so" (Thackeray 1968, pp. 85, 86). Nothing could be further from the time-honored, standard defense of comic drama and its laughter, namely, that it presents on stage the faults of characters so that those faults in actual people may be perceived as ridiculous and thus corrected. Nothing could be further from the medieval sense of the word *humor*, systematized by Galen, which denoted a somatic and psychic imbalance ridiculed and therefore restored to a healthy balance. In that standard defense and that ancient meaning, faults and cracks cannot be charming. However, within the concept of amiable laughter, repairing Sir Roger de Coverly's cracks, correcting his faults, means that he would effectively cease to exist, for his foibles and eccentricities define him, and as long as his faults remain on the relatively harmless level of ludicrous foibles and eccentricities, a reader can laugh with a humorous laughter that matches the writer-as-humorist's benevolence towards all people.

Amiable laughter entails a number of key features, the primary one being the positing of an amiable satirist. The temperament of the comic writer, what medieval and Renaissance commentators would call a *humor*, must show sympathy and benevolence even when satiric tongue-lashings are in order. The traditional corrective function of stage comedy does not disappear, but it manifests in a hierarchy. Faults calling forth correction break into two large categories: *the ludicrous*, which implies a comic laughter that is playful and tolerant—a *humorous* laughter; and *the ridiculous*, which implies a comic laughter that scorns and chastises—a *satiric* laughter. Comic butts within the category of the ludicrous are marked either with eccentricities to be met with the most amiable of laughters, a merry and mirthful laughter that implies camaraderie, or with foibles, which may evoke laughter with some edge, perhaps, or what might be called "cringe laughter," which signifies a weak amiability because its implied sympathy is necessarily mixed with a greater emotional distance. Comic butts within the category of the ridiculous are marked either with follies, with a range of laughters implied, depending on the social or political stakes involved—sympathy might still be present, but it can be noticeably diminished—or with vices, which can evoke the most bitter, dark, and grim laughters we associate with the most caustic of satires. This hierarchy of laughters, from most amiable to most bitter, should be understood not just as an effort to chart the temperament of comic writers and thus the stylistic range possible when they attempt comic critique, but also to discriminate possible reactions of implied readers

(Caron 2020). The privileging of amiability and sympathy and benevolence in comic belles lettres encourages a diminishment, if not a marginalization, of the correcting function of comic writing, and thus a privileging of *the ludicrous* and *the humorous* over *the ridiculous* and *the satiric*.

Amiable laughter implies a good-natured person who produces a laughter that is not merely ridicule. That figure is not exactly the gentleman that Lord Chesterfield delineated, nor is it quite Ben Jonson's merry gentleman from *Every Man in His Humor*, Justice Clement. Arguably, Joseph Addison's Mr. Spectator is the first gentleman humorist for comic belles lettres. In any case, the championing of amiable laughter by Addison and Steele provides an important pivot in Western critical commentary, with ramifications for the production of comic artifacts that continue today.

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