"A Little Discourse *Pro & Con*": Levelling Laughter and Its Puritan Criticism*

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Summary: The mid-seventeenth century English social movement known as the Levellers was perhaps the first liberal-democratic social movement. Among their communicative strategies, to garner supporters while challenging the authorities, humor figured prominently. In this article, the nature of this levelling laughter is highlighted and juxtaposed against Puritan injunctions to mourning and objections against humor. Regarding the latter, four such objections are distinguished and elucidated: "damnable heresies", "strange opinions", "fearful divisions", and "loosenesse of life and manners". Finally, it is suggested that the Puritan repudiation of the Levellers highlights the need for social movements of democratic dissent against various aspects of the given status quo to use incongruous and relief humor to prompt reflection without relying too heavily on boorishly flouting social prohibitions for the sake of the pleasures of superiority and release. It also suggests that humor will do better in a culture already tolerant of pluralism, comfortable with a measure of non-literal ambiguity, and committed to democratic deliberation.

INTRODUCTION

Whether characterized as an Interregnum, a Great Rebellion, a Puritan Revolution, or the English Revolution, it must be acknowledged that the decade of the 1640s occasioned an epochally new public sphere in England. That is, the mass public emerged as a literate legitimate political force aware of itself as such.[1] The onset of elite tensions between Charles I and Archbishop William Laud on the one hand and substantial critical factions within the Lords and Commons on the other disrupted the prevailing

1. David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

institutions of social control. Before long, elements of the middling and lower orders felt free to gather conspicuously yet "without control" in separatist congregations, in outdoor crowds, at state entrées and executions, and on the steps of Westminster Hall to assert themselves. Furthermore, if not crucially, King and Parliament went public, engaging in a "paper war". This, together with the collapse of effective press regulation, allowed authors of all religious persuasions and ideological stripes to cultivate a reading public and involve it in deliberating upon the religious and political shape England ought to take.

The leaders of a short-lived (1645–1649) but highly influential London-based social protest movement promptly dubbed by its critics "the Levellers" – principally John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and William Walwyn – seized upon both aspects of this newly politicized public to advance, and indeed invent, a program justly characterized as precociously "liberal-democratic" *avant la lettre*.[2] They wrote and distributed audacious pamphlets, prepared petitions (with 40,000 and perhaps as many as 100,000 names), organized rallies, established a newspaper (Gilbert Mabbott's *The Moderate*), made media spectacles of their own repeated imprisonments, drafted a constitution intended for popular ratification ("The Agreement of the People"), and sponsored mutinous followers known as "Agitators" in the Parliamentary army. Initially they were preoccupied with freedom of conscience and an attendant state policy of toleration. However, their developed program demanded the abolition of monarchy and aristocracy in favor of a radically democratic politics of consent for men and women, separation of church and state, legal reform including trial by jury, public education and healthcare, and the protection of small private property by abolishing economic monopolies.

Strikingly, amid rhetorical strategies that included radical and heretical theological contentions, historical arguments about the legacy of the Norman Conquest, comparisons with the republican experiences of the Dutch, legalistic invocations of the Englishman's birthrights, visceral appeals to the instinct of self-preservation, and ultimately direct formulations of "natural rights" and even "human rights", humor also figured prominently. More specifically, humor was crucial to the cultivation of popular support for the agenda of causes that would come to define the Leveller movement, relatively absent during the Levellers' most organized phase of interaction with prevailing institutions and authorities, but again resorted to even as it contributed to the rapid waning of popular support for its agenda in 1649. In what follows, I read this historical episode as an

2. David Wootton, "Leveller Democracy", in J.H. Burns and Mark Goldie (eds), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge [etc.], 1991), pp. 412–442; Andrew Sharp, "Introduction: the English Levellers, 1645–1649", in *idem* (ed.), *The English Levellers* (Cambridge [etc.], 1998), pp. vii–xxxiv.

archetypal clash between levity and gravity and venture some general observations about the limitations of humor as a means of political communication.

THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

Charles I's preferences evident in Laud's church policies – which included moving the communion table from the nave to a railed off chancel, endorsing services that promoted ceremony and music over sermons, and favoring clergymen, such as Richard Montagu, who in turn endorsed authoritarian notions of monarchical power, while resisting Puritan Sabbatarianism – gave the distinct impression that a Catholic or "Popish" plot at court sought to undermine not only Parliament but Protestantism. From the onset of the 1640s, then, having suspended Laudianism, contesting visions of New Jerusalem divided the disaffected and reformation-minded Puritans. They competed to motivate the relatively silent Protestant majority, who remained complacently settled in their parochial Anglican communal rituals and mores and annoyingly lukewarm about change.

The principal divide was between "Presbyterians", who predominated in the Long Parliament and sought a unified national hierarchic church structure of Courts of Ministers, and lay Elders and the "Independents" who argued for local semi-independent congregations under a national umbrella. In addition, throughout the 1640s, beyond the elitist ken and patience of both Presbyterians and most Independents, there also flourished a small yet conspicuous plethora of heterodox "Sectaries". These Sectaries ran the gamut of forms of belief from expansive fundamentalism and scriptural literalism to radical minimalism and wholly idiosyncratic readings. Some gathered in public churches, others outdoors in hastily arranged *ad hoc* assemblies, and still others in private homes renovated to accommodate such meetings. Some of these "visible Saints" even coalesced around uneducated yet seemingly inspired individuals, a notable number of which were women.

Even as the first civil war ensued (1642–1646), by 1644 the Westminster Assembly of Divines had consolidated a Parliamentary agenda in favor of Presbyterian "doctrine and discipline" and, amid fierce pamphlet exchanges, ceased negotiating with the Independents. The Presbyterian agenda centered on rejecting toleration and was epitomized, again not without pamphlet exchanges, by the Ordinance "for the preventing of the growing and spreading of heresies", which prescribed corporal and capital punishment for the espousal of several strains of heresy. The Independents henceforth would adopt a more aggressively oppositional and politicized stance centered on gaining control of Parliament's New Model Army (henceforth NMA). This proved successful and increasingly after 1647, as

the NMA became a central political institution of reckoning, it was the Independents led by Oliver Cromwell who dictated the flow of political events. The Sectaries too gained importance as adherents grew among the rank and file. The decade culminated, of course, following a second civil war (1648), with the execution of Charles I, and the abolition of the monarchy and the Lords (1649). The subsequent Republic, directed by the Rump Parliament, proved unworkable (1649–1653), and was forcibly dissolved in favor of the more autocratic Protectorate with Cromwell as Lord Protector (1653–1658).

LEVELLING LAUGHTER

For the purposes of this paper, and given limitations of space, I shall simply presume two broad theoretical and ahistorical claims about humor and its uses. First, the necessary but insufficient essence of humor is a close juxtaposition, be it between one or more behaviors, elements, events, ideas, objects, and others or in relation to backgrounds, contexts, expectations, frames, wholes, and so on. The juxtaposition initially defies the receiver's comprehension but is subsequently, even if quite rapidly, given a stable construal. What distinguishes the four main competing theories of humor – release, incongruity, superiority, and relief – is the manner in which the mirthful pleasure that accompanies the reconciliation or recognition taps one of four modes of being – the affective, the cognitive, the evaluative, and the physiological respectively. A given instance of humor, a joke say, involves making sense of a juxtaposition that partakes in any one or more of the four forms of humorous pleasure. Second, in communication, humor has four distinct functional uses: differentiation or identification and clarification or enforcement which might be located as the poles of two intersecting axes.[3] That is, on the axis of political action, humor might be deployed to express criticism of dominant institutions, expectations, and tropes thereby differentiating the humorist and his sympathizers and even allowing them to symbolically exit. Conversely, humor might be designed to evoke and reinforce the status quo dimensions of the available discursive space by producing the laughter of loyalists. On the epistemological axis, humor might be used to convey what the humorist believes to be true and compellingly so once acknowledged, or alternately as a form of social enforcement in which everyone has to laugh at the behaviorally discrepant butt of the joke.

3. John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY, 1983); Sammy Basu, "Dialogic Ethics and the Virtue of Humor", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 7 (1999), pp. 378–403; John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication", *Communication Theory*, 10 (2000), pp. 310–331; Owen H. Lynch, "Humorous Communication: Finding a Place for Humor in Communication Research", *Communication Theory*, 12 (2002), pp. 423–445.

Across the span of the decade, though always on the margins, the leaders of the Leveller movement played the pivotal role of democratic provocateurs. They turned the logic of the arguments of the prevailing authorities and institutions back on them, and ventured new arguments and idiom of their own. However, though Lilburne, Overton, and Walwyn shared many notions and goals and co-authored several Leveller tracts, they played different roles in the movement and remained throughout intellectually and stylistically distinctive in print.

Lilburne, a printer's apprentice, and an early victim of Laudian repression for distributing works critical of bishops, was the somewhat histrionic figurehead of the movement. He cultivated self-referentially tragic and martyrological tropes and legalistic devices in his writing. By contrast, both Overton and Walwyn worked more behind the scenes, and as several scholars have stressed, resorted to humorous techniques, by turns vivid and subtle, persona-driven and abstract, polemical and pragmatic, when engaging with the status quo as well as with specific opponents and critics in print.[4] In theoretical terms, Overton and Walwyn used incongruity to clarify their values, superiority to differentiate themselves from their hypocritical targets, and release and relief to bolster and solidify the loyalty of their supporters. In doing so, they might be said to have renewed the northern humanist humor tradition of Erasmus, More, Rabelais, and Montaigne. Certainly, they participated in the specifically English literary tradition of satire and religious controversy, constituted by the likes of John Wycliffe, Geoffrey Chaucer, and William Langland, and followed the rhetorical recommendations of Thomas Wilson's influential *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553).[5]

Over the course of the 1640s, Overton combined his skills as a minor playwright with his adopted trade as an unlicensed itinerant printer to engage in a pamphlet campaign of literary guerilla warfare. He operated against, in turn, Charles I and the repressive Laudians, the elitist Presbyterian Parliament and Assembly of Divines, Cromwellian

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4. Nigel Smith, "Soapboilers Speak Shakespeare Rudely: Masquerade and Leveller Pamphleteering", *Critical Survey*, 5 (1993), pp. 235–243; Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640–1660* (New Haven, CT, 1994); Jack R. McMichael and Barbara Taft, "Introduction: The Life and Thought of William Walwyn", in *idem* (eds), *The Writings of William Walwyn* (Athens, GA, 1989), pp. 1–51; Glenn Burgess, "Protestant Polemic: The Leveller Pamphlets", *Parergon*, 11 (1993), pp. 45–67; Sammy Basu, "'Woe unto you that laugh now!': Humor and Toleration in Overton and Shaftesbury", in J.C. Laursen (ed.), *Religious Toleration: "The Variety of Rites" from Cyrus to Defoe* (New York, 1999), pp. 147–173; Nicholas Mcdowell, "Latin Drama and Leveller Ideas: Pedagogy and Power in the Writings of Richard Overton", *Seventeenth Century*, 18 (2003), pp. 230–251; *idem*, "Levelling Language: The Politics of Literacy in the English Radical Tradition, 1640–1830", *Critical Quarterly,* 46 (2004), pp. 39–62.
5. Chris Holcomb, *Mirth Making: The Rhetorical Discourse on Jesting in Early Modern England* (Columbia, SC, 2001).

Independents, fundamentalist Puritan Sectaries, and finally Cromwell's republic. In each instance, Overton's objections focused on the willingness to use the coercive machinery of the state to tie and tithe everyone to a particular religious regimen of doctrine and discipline. Moreover, at salient junctures, Overton's literary methods for challenging the underlying epistemological overconfidence included caricature and spoof of the communicative devices and institutional forms of the authorities. Thus, for example, in 1637, in an egregious instance of corporal punishment Laud had the ears of an Independent minister, William Prynne, shorn away for the publication of an anti-prelatical anti-Laudian tract. Recalling the incident in *A New Play called Canterbury, His Change of Diot* (1641), a playlet with a "variety of wit and mirth" trading on the ambiguity of "diet", Overton cast Laud as an Epicurean cannibal at a banquet with a plate full of ears as the main course. He also assigned a jester, depicted in Figure 1, the concluding task of explaining all.[6]

Significantly, following his conversion to the General Baptist faith (c.1643), it was Overton who reprised the literary persona "Martin Marprelate" or "Marpriest". Marpriest was the notorious pseudonymous Puritan satirist who in the 1580s ridiculed Elizabethan bishops using plebian anti-clerical humor and Saturnalian May-game motifs, indeed casting himself as a self-deprecating, clownish Lord of Misrule. In addition to reprinting some of Marpriest's works, Overton also issued some of his own early satirical efforts, such as *The nativity of Sir John Presbyter* (1645), *Martin's echo* (1645), *The ordinance for tythes dismounted* (1645), *A sacred decretall, or Hue and cry* (1645), and *Divine observations upon the London-ministers letter against toleration* (1646), under related pseudonyms.[7] Thus for example, the title page of *The Araignement of Mr. Persecution* (1645), perhaps Overton's most influential early effort, attributed the work to "*yongue Martin Mar-Preist, son to old Martin the Metropolitane*", and advertised, flaunting its illegality, that it was "to be sould at his shop in Toleration Street, at the signe of the Subjects Liberty, right opposite to Persecuting Court".[8] In this extended masquerade Overton provided a sustained critique of the Presbyterian version of the persecutory psyche in the form of a trial between various representative and allegorical figures.

6. Richard Overton, *A new play called Canterburie his change of diot. Which sheweth variety of wit and mirth: privately acted neare the Palace-yard at Westminster* (London, 1641).
7. Joseph Black, "The Rhetoric of Reaction: The Martin Marprelate Tracts (1588–89), Anti-Martinism, and the Uses of Print in Early Modern England", *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 28 (1997), pp. 707–725; Nigel Smith, "Richard Overton's Marpriest Tracts: Towards a History of Leveller Style", *Prose Studies*, 9 (1986), pp. 39–65.
8. Richard Overton, *The araignement of Mr Persecution: presented to the consideration of the House of Commons, and to all the common people of England wherein he is indicted, araigned, convicted, and condemned of enmity against God, and all goodnesse, of treasons, rebellion, bloodshed, &c. and sent to the place of execution* (London, 1645).
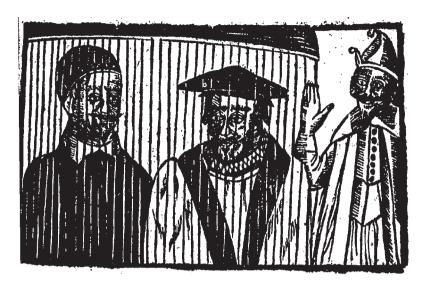
Figure 1. Prynne left, Laud center, and jester to the right. Anon., *A new play called Canterburie his change of diot* (1641).
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Walwyn, a cloth merchant who later practiced medicine, was perhaps more secular than Overton, for though he appealed to a conception of Christianity centered on love and compassionate Samaritanism, he also admitted to reading humanist figures such as Montaigne and Charron. Walwyn was a subtle satirist given to cultivating ironies on the model of parables and bantering slyly with critics of Leveller causes, including most notably, the Levellers' arch-nemesis, Thomas Edwards. Since Edwards had likened the profusion of sectarianism to gangrene in the body politic, Walwyn responded by seemingly discretely providing benignly condescending medical counsel to Edwards for his own distemper. Thus for example, Edwards ventured a dialogue in which Doctors Love, Justice, Patience, and Truth consulted with Edwards in the presence of observers named Conscience, Hope, Piety, Superstition, and Policie. Remarkably he did so on the serious grounds that "*it cannot proceed from* true Religion *rightly understood, to beget malancholly, moody, angry, frampoll Imaginations, for that rightly understood begets cheerfulnesse of spirit*".[9]

9. William Walwyn, *A parable, or consultation of physitians vpon Master Edwards* (London, 1646), p. A3v. See also William Walwyn, *A Whisper In The Eare of Mr Thomas Edwards Minister* (London, 1646); *idem*, *A Word More To Mr Thomas Edwards Minister* (London, 1646); *idem*, *An antidote against Master Edwards his old and new poyson: intended to preserve this long distempered nation from a most dangerous relaps* (London, 1646); *idem*, *A prediction of Mr Edwards his conversion and recantation* (London, 1646).

Now, again, though at its height the Levellers organized numerous supporters to distribute illegal pamphlets, attend rallies, deliver petitions, and foment mutinies, in 1649, quite rapidly, the movement disintegrated and its liberal democratic agenda was abandoned by supporters. Why? In some sense England wasn't ready. Indeed, even as the anti-monarchical Lord Protector Cromwell pursued a relatively tolerant Puritan agenda he found himself having to assume the trappings of regal authority to meet the conservative habits of the heart of popular political culture. More specifically, however, the Leveller leaders were beset by both Royalist critics and an increasingly concerted campaign against them from Parliament, by the likes of Marchamount Nedham, Henry Parker, Walter Frost, and John Canne.[10] They were also outmaneuvered by Cromwell. Cromwell had them imprisoned for several months, while he crushed Leveller-inspired army mutinies, and pacified army unrest with pay arrears, military reorganization, and demobilization. Most importantly, Cromwell also promised an adequate degree of protection to the Independents and Sectaries, on whose behalf the Leveller leaders had fought for religious freedom, so that they not only withdrew their support but openly repudiated and condemned the Levellers' much more radical project of securing freedom of conscience by separating church and state.[11]

What warrants more notice than it has received from scholars is that Independent and Sectary groups like the Particular Baptists, led by William Kiffin and John Price, also expressly cited in their critique of and break from the Levellers the unacceptable humor of Walwyn and Overton. In considering this critique of Leveller humor and the responses of Walwyn and Overton, I shall endeavor to locate both within the larger seventeenth-century context of the characteristically Puritan critique of the festive culture of plays, playing, and laughter.

PURITAN OBJECTIONS

Puritanism is best thought of as a practice of piety, a set of aesthetic expectations and behavioral strictures, a temperament or style of subjectivity. External actions were presumed to bear witness to internal experiential appreciation of and affections for Christ and God. Although self-respecting Presbyterians, Independents, and fundamentalist Sectaries differed on many specific doctrinal and organizational matters, stretching from Deuteronomic moralism to Antinomian separatism, they nonetheless

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10. Jason Peacey, "The Hunting of the Leveller: The Sophistication of Parliamentarian Propaganda, 1647–53", *Historical Research,* 78 (2005), pp. 15–42.
11. Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616–1649* (Cambridge, 1977).

affirmed intensely certain specifiable "Puritan" norms of precisianist self-fashioning and bodily discipline, together with an evangelical zeal that others do so too in a "culture of discipline".[12] Injunctions to mourn and avoid laughter were integral to these norms. Whence Puritan antipathy towards the "ritual year" of "Merry England" – a mixture of Anglican, Pagan, and semi-secular ritual and seasonal parish festivities and practices, such as May games, Maypoles, dancing, wakes, and feasts, many of them dating from the Middle Ages – the general social and moral economy as well as everyday humor and laughter were recurring motifs through the seventeenth century.[13]

In the name of the Sabbath, Puritans sought to suppress a number of popular and Royally sanctioned recreational aspects of traditional, local, and oft-times pagan culture, including feasts, festivals, and sports. Moreover, and increasingly through the 1620s and 1630s, Puritans constituted a kind of "moral majority" within evangelical Protestants who threw themselves into the reformation of manners *vis-a-vis* vagrancy, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, bastardy, unlicensed ale-houses, gambling, and playhouses. In local offices, whereas "lukewarm" non-Puritan magistrates addressed social problems as matters of social control, Puritans were more officious and less forgiving, sometimes viewing their role as one of eschatological fulfillment.[14] Ultimately, the Puritans not only made observance of the Sabbath a rallying point, and arguably were driven to do so by Laud's repudiation of it as a theological innovation, but in effect, affirmed Sabbatarianism seven days a week. What is striking in this regard is the consistent moroseness of the Puritans – as political outsiders until 1640s, as policy makers during the 1640s and 1650s, and then again, after 1660, as outsiders persecuted as "Dissenters" during the Restoration.

12. Christopher Hill, *Society & Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964); William Hunt, *The Puritan Moment: The Coming of the Revolution in an English County* (Cambridge, MA, 1983); John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford, 1991); Peter Lake, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven, CT, 2002); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion & Antonomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).
13. Leah S. Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Johson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago, IL, 1986); Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (New York, 1994); David S. Katz, *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York, 1988); Kenneth Parker, *The English Sabbath: A Study of Doctrine and Discipline from the Reformation to the Civil War* (New York, 2002).
14. J.S. McGee, *The Godly Man in Stuart England: Anglicans, Puritans and the Two Tables, 1620–1670* (New Haven, CT, 1976); Margaret Spufford, "Puritanism and Social Control?", in Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (eds), *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 41–57; John Spurr, *English Puritanism 1603–1689* (New York, 1998), pp. 72–78.

BAWLING ALONE

Why were the Puritans so determinedly lachrymose? Why did they recur to the tropes of fountains, rivers, and floods of tears? Why were they all wet? The preoccupations with repentance and mourning represented the compelling convergence of a series of culturally specific pressures: the biblical affirmation of weeping, original sin, Calvinist predestination, and national bad times. Bolstered by the early Church Fathers, Tertullian, St Jerome, St John of Chrysostom, St Benedict, and St Augustine, the Puritans were adamant that the Bible disavowed human laughter in favor of a behavioral norm of conspicuous lamentation. In his enormous paradigmatic Puritan critique of the theater and the culture of plays, playing, and laughter, *Histrio-mastix* (1633), Prynne appealed to many of the standard passages available for misogelastic arguments, in noting crucially, that "Christ Jesus our *patterne, our example, whose steps we all must follow, if ever we expect salvation from him: was always mourning, never laughing.*" Paul and David were similarly invoked by Puritans.[15]

The Fall of Adam was a fall from grace into seriousness, and a loss of true joy notwithstanding the desperate worldly laughter of the reprobate. The Pauline and Augustinian conception of Adamic original sin meant that man was an execrable dunghill and certainly not laughably so. Hewit counsels: "Learn to wash your selves by the tears of repentance from the filth of sin: your whole life should be a continued Lent."[16]

Puritans were especially given to religious despair as a result of their Calvinist assumptions. As a general matter, they collectively suffered from a "persecutory imagination" that was difficult to avoid, given an irresistible God with the panoptic proclivities announced by Newcomen, Essex minister and one of the Assembly of Divines, in *The All-seeing Unseen Eye* (1647). In this sermon preached to the Commons Newcomen argued that "God knows all the *speeches* of *all men*: Every word, every syllable that the tongue of any one doth mutter or whisper, God knows it," "even the *thoughts of men*," and hence "is it possible we should hear the word with scorn, with slighting, with indignation, with disdain?"[17] Moreover, the doctrine of double predestination pre-occupied believers with the distinction between the elect and the reprobate, and required that they engage in continual close scrutiny and reinterpretation of the behavior of self and others. Put differently, life became a process of preparation for death and the divine encounter. In the course of this process, some found somber assurance of their eternal salvation through abundant sorrow-making.

15. William Prynne, *Histrio-mastix. The players scourge, or, actors tragaedie, divided into two parts* (London, 1633), p. 294.
16. John Hewit, *Repentance and conversion, the fabrick of salvation: or The saints joy in heaven, for the sinners sorrow upon Earth* (London, 1658), p. 19.
17. Matthew Newcomen, *The all-seeing vnseen eye of God* (London, 1647), pp. 3, 4, 23.

Having apparently discussed the matter with him, Hewit informed his parishioners that "God loves a broken heart".[18] Killiray, similarly, assured that "Godly sorrow and confession of sin, is a safe thing; It is the sure and safe way to heaven and glory". Indeed, inasmuch as it relieves one of the uncertainties concerning one's eternal estate he proffered the terse pragmatic advice: "better weep here a while, than for ever in hell".[19]

Finally, that the fallen condition of man, continuously closely scrutinized by God, warranted mourning was compounded by the conflation of England with Israel and London with Jerusalem, or alternately, with dreadful lapses towards Babylon, Babel etc. and the implication that God was as attentive as he had been in those cases. Consequently, and like the previous generation of Puritans, while counseling Parliament to undertake the speedy suppression of heresy, to "Private Christians" Edwards recommended mourning, wariness, and "call[ing] upon others to come and make hast, and take up a wailing for us, that our *eyes may run down with tears, and our eye-lids gush out with waters*, to teach also our sons and daughters wailing, and every neighbour lamentation."[20] Such injunctions to fasting, humiliation, and tears, and to the avoidance of open mocking of all "godlinesse" were also a central feature of *The Declaration of the Kingdome of England and Scotland, by the Honourable Houses of Parliament of England, and the Honourable Convention of Estates of the Kingdome of Scotland* (1643).

Thus far we have considered the Puritans' positive case for mourning. In the next section we work through the negative case against laughter. Whereas the former is of culturally particular and hence historically specific interest, the latter raises generalizable theoretical concerns about reactions against the pleasures and communicative uses of humor.

Why were the Puritans such misogelasts? Why did they not only enjoin mourning but entreat the suppression of laughter? If repentance for man's inherent sinfulness required the former, repression of present temptation (to flaunt the Decalogue) accounts for the latter. Invoking Isaiah 22.12, Whincop, in *Gods call to weeping and mourning* (1645), argued "Now by the rule of proportion, as thy sins have beene extraordinary which have caused thy judgments, so must thy humiliation be." Conversely, "And I wonder such can hold from shame and blushing, thus to mock God, as when hee calls for *sack-cloth* and *mourning*, they are in all their jollity, in all their bravery."[21]

18. Hewit, *Repentance and conversion*, p. 23.
19. Matthew Killiray, *The sinners sobs or The sinners way to Sions joy Plainly demonstrating the absolute necessity of true Godly sorrow for the sinners safety* (London: 1667), pp. 19, 18.
20. Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena: Or A Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errours, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this, vented and acted in England in these four last years* (London, 1646), p. I:153.
21. John Whincop, *Gods Call to Weeping and Mourning* (London, 1645), pp. 6, 45.

   Though the Puritan campaign against humor occupied multiple decades it reached its zenith in the mid-1640s with Thomas Edwards, a leading Presbyterian preacher and perhaps the foremost heresiographer of the mid-1640s, who rallied the orthodox against the aberrant beliefs and behaviors of the Independents and Sectaries, declaring that "there never was a greater generation of scoffers at Religion then many of the Sectaries of our times".[22] Overton's *The Araignement* (1645) and fellow tolerationist John Goodwin's *Cretensis* (1646) were held as exemplary in this regard. The various Puritan objections to humor are, I submit, effectively encapsulated in Edwards's insistence that four sorts of mundane horrors, each accompanied by its own perfidious laughter, went together constituting a spectrum of sin: "damnable heresies, strange opinions, fearfull divisions, loosenesse of life and manners."[23] Thus, one finds John Price in *Walwins wiles* submitting a withering critique of Walwyn's "sligh cunning and close subtlety" on all four counts.[24] For my purposes, Edwards's critical classification also corresponds rather neatly with the four main theoretical approaches to humorous pleasure: release, incongruity, superiority, and relief, respectively. That is, the Puritans were not unreasonably criticizing the implications of the excessive use of each of these types of humor.

''DAMNABLE HERESIES''

The pleasure of release humor is the relaxation of the psychic energy otherwise expended in repressing taboo topics. One of the behaviors that early garnered sustained Puritan attention and acrimony, exemplified by Gibson's *The lands mourning, for vaine swearing* (1614), was profane swearing, a kind of mockery of one's communicative relationship to God.[25] In this regard, Price reports of Walwyn that:

> Having once upon a fast day (as his usual manner was both upon those, and the Lords days) gone from place to place, hearing here a little, and there a little what the Ministers said, making it the subject matter of his prophane scorning and jeering, came at last to his own house with one of his supposed Fast disciples … being at home, he fetcht out that prophane scurrilous *Lucians* Dialogue, come (said he) let us go read that which hath something in it, *Here is more wit in this* (saith he) *then in all the Bible.*[26]

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22. Edwards, *Gangraena*, p. I:55; Ann Hughes, *"Gangraena" and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004).
23. Edwards, *Gangraena*, p. I:125.
24. John Price, *Walwins wiles: or The manifestators manifested viz. Liev. Col. John Lilburn, Mr Will. Walwin, Mr Richard Overton, and Mr Tho. Prince* (London, 1649), p. 5.
25. Abraham Gibson, *The lands mourning, for vaine swearing: or The downe-fall of oathes Declaring how this land groneth vnder the burthen of this sinne, and of Gods fearefull iudgements that attend it* (London, 1614).
26. Price, *Walwins wiles*, p. 9.

Price also notes, though does not discuss, the "notorious profanes of Mr Richard Overtons pen".[27] Others, former Leveller supporters, apparently did, however, pointing to Overton's *Defyance of the Act of Pardon* (1649), in particular. In that pamphlet, in a brief vignette Overton dubbed Cromwell "the great Bull of Bason" and likened the Leveller effort to subdue him to a bull-baiting. He also asked his readers to imagine themselves as "brave Levelling Bull dogs and Bear Dogs" who catch Cromwell by the "Gennitals" and resolve not to abandon the task "till we have worried, or broke the Buls neck, or else gain'd our Agreement".[28] If they do not take up the task, Overton further mock-threatens to turn on them: "amongst you flyes the little whisking mischievous bird, Primate and Metropolitan of all the Swallows and Martins in England: and then look to your selves". He continues the "jest" with a mock "Act of Grace... Smile O Heavens, and clap they hands O earth, ha, ha, ha", and refers to himself as "that little brisk Levelling *Dick* in the Tower".[29] The bull was a recurring motif with Overton, associated at once with the scriptural symbol of oppression (in *Psalms* 22.12), papal bulls, the scandalous entertainment world that surrounded bull-baiting and bear gardens, and as an icon for audacious behavior. It figures in the latter capacity in *Sacred Decretall*, with Overton anonymously representing himself as a bull tossing a Presbyterian into the fires of Hell by writing against the Ordinance for Tithes.

"STRANGE OPINIONS"

Humor and laughter are not only contraventions of the behavioral aesthetic of controlled lamentation but they also express and pleasurably motivate further epistemologically dubious practices. That is, in the form of incongruity, it licenses untoward juxtapositions and unpredictable thought-experiments, and thereby makes pleasurable the "wantonnesse of mens spirits in the entertainment of opinions", as the sub-title of Bolton's *The Arraignment of Errovr* (1646) puts it.[30] Under the pretext of levity, humor makes cognitive room not only for grave heresies but an exceedingly wide swath of strange doctrines. Such unaided human reason, such undisciplined mental cogitations, will always lead the soul astray. As Lithgow explains:

27. *Ibid.*, p. 5
28. Richard Overton, *Overton's defyance of the Act of pardon* (London, 1649), p. 6.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8.
30. Samuel Bolton, *The Arraignment of Errovr: Or. A Discourse serving as a curb to restrain the wantonnesse of mens spirits in the entertainment of opinions; and as a Compasse, whereby we may sail in the search and finding of truth* (London, 1646).

Figure 2. Richard Overton, *A sacred decretall*, (1645).
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    What are the humours, of our foggy braines?
    But stupid thoughts, conceiv'd of doubts and feare:
    Best pregnant wits, suspition quells their straines;
    The wise, the wordlings, have their Emblemes here:
    A shadow without substance, I finde man,
    Nay worse! than *Baalams* Asse, the truth to scan.[31]

To Edwards it was proof of the decadence of the tolerationist sectaries that:

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31. William Lithgow, *The gushing teares of godly sorrow Containing the causes, conditions, and remedies of sinne, depending mainly upon contrition and confession. And they seconded, with sacred and comfortable passages, under the mourning cannopie of teares, and repentance* (Edinburgh, 1640), np.

> [...] 'tis usual and lawful, not only for the company to stand up and object against the Doctrine delivered when the Exerciser of his gifts hath made an end, but in the midst of it, so that sometimes upon some standing up and objecting, there's *pro* and *con* for almost an hour, and falling out among themselves before the man can have finished his Discourse.[32]

Price, similarly accuses Walwyn of an epistemologically destabilizing humor:

> [...] he employs his skill in casting a mist before them, and in blinding the eyes of their minds, that the great mysteries of Life and Salvation by Jesus Christ, and the Doctrines of Justification by his Death and Resurrection, Sanctification and Mortification by his Spirit, &c. may appear but meer fantasms, rediculous, irrational, ayry, vain, empty notions.[33]

"FEARFUL DIVISIONS"

Mockery undermines the available divinely moralized socio-economic and political authorities. That is, the humor dynamic of superiority tears "fearful divisions" in the social fabric. When laity mock clergy, be it *ad hominem* or *ad clerum,* they are abusing their own spiritual fathers, taunting God's ministers on earth; likewise, when sons mock their fathers, or wives their husbands. In *Reall Persecution* (1647), the anonymous Presbyterian author criticized toleration and those radicals who affirmed its separatist and libertine consequences, arguing that scoffing at the godly was the real persecution, not promoting godly discipline. The text reprints examples of "wicked and abusive language" from Overton's Marpriest pamphlets, and offers an instructive graphic caricature of what was understood to be the relationship between Marpriest and his Sectary followers.

Marpriest is presented as an archetypal joker with bladder and belled ears. In the manner of the Skimmington ritual he is riding (and thereby bestializing) a "Sectary" who has supposedly been fooled by *Martin's Eccho.* In forerunners of the cartoon voice bubble, Marpriest declares "Behold my habit like my witt/Equalls his on whom I sitt", while the Sectary admits "My cursed speeches against Presbetry/Declares unto the world my foolery". The caption below reads:

> For Opposeing Authority Revileing the Assembly Slandering the Government by Presbetry and disturbing the ministers at the time of their publique excersise by giveing up bills in mockery calling the ministers preists rideing slaves, horse leeches cormorants gorbellyd Idoll Consistory of devills etc: hath not this discoverd ishmaels carnall spirits persecuting godly Isaaks

32. Edwards, *Gangraena*, p. I:93.
33. Price, *Walwins wiles*, p. 7.

Figure 3. Anon., *Reall persecution or, The foundation of a general toleration, displaied and portrayed by a proper emblem* (1647).
Thomason/669.f.10[114] copy from the British Library. Image published with permission of ProQuest Information and Learning Company. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission.

(recalling the *Epistle of the Galatians*, 4.29).[34] Again, Price directs this charge against Walwyn, noting that he is said to have wandered from church to church heckling godly ministers, "staying no longer then while somewhat drops from the mouth of the Minister, which he may through his art (not minding what went before, and what followed) render rediculous and weak".[35]

"LOOSENESSE OF LIFE AND MANNERS"

Sin multiplied helpless and habituated sinners. It was a corrupting leaven, an infection, or as Edwards (1646) characterized it, gangrene. Heretical

34. Anonymous, *Reall persecution or, The foundation of a general toleration, displaied and portrayed by a proper emblem, and adorned with the same flowers wherewith the scoffers of this last age have strowed their libellous pamphlets* (London, 1647).
35. Price, *Walwins wiles*, p. 8.

rationalizations and humorous treatment leave the godly prone, according to Lithgow, "to humor pleasures, in their head-strong life".[36] In bodily and bawdily spurring a measure of cognitive distance from one's primary assumptions and expectations humor does so to some extent unpredictably and against one's will. That is, when presented with the initial puzzle of a humorous utterance the mind rushes to make sense of it, encounters dissonance, and strives to shift this way and that until it can reach a position of temporary coherence. In part, what was so worrisome to the Puritans was the extent to which humor might prompt in the receiver *involuntarily* a measure of such *pro* and *con* questioning and attendant decadent behavioral licentiousness.

Edwards's various synonymous descriptions of the lightness, laughter, play and debate at Sectary gatherings is illuminating in this regard. These meetings involved "a great deal of lightnesse and vanity". At one, relates Edwards from the secondhand testimony of a godly Minister secretly in attendance,

> In briefe, there was such laughing, confusion, and disorder […], that the Minister professed he never saw the like; he told me the confusion, horror, and disorder which he saw and heard there, was unexpressible, and so he left them, fearing lest the candles might have gone out and they have fallen to kill or mischiefe one another.

More generally, "In their Church meetings and Exercises there is such a confusion and noise, as if it were at a Play." Enough apparently said.[37] Again Price finds Walwyn guilty of this too, i.e. his influence included turning men useful to the common-wealth into moral derelicts, "speaking about the nature of God, his Grace, Mercy and Goodness, most prophanely and lightly replyed, *Yea, I hope God is a merry old man, and will make a good companion when I am dead*", and also seducing godly gentlewomen and poisoning them with "scorns and scoffs against Religion". Worse still, on finding such a woman in an appropriately "melancholy and sad condition" he tried to shift her from this state.[38]

How did Walwyn and Overton defend themselves in their use of humor on behalf of the Leveller causes? Both effectively acknowledged the salience of the pleasures of release and superiority but stressed that they used the incongruity and relief dynamics to physiologically direct their readers towards meaningful cognitive gains. In noting Price's avoidance of Overton, Walwyn responds:

> And for the complexion of my Friend Mr *Overtons* pen, truly it commonly carries so much truth and reason in it, though sometimes in a Comick, and

36. Lithgow, *The gushing teares*, np.
37. Edwards, *Gangraena*, pp. I:87, I:86, I:92.
38. Price, *Walwins wiles*, pp. 11, 12.

otherwhiles in a Satyrick stile, that I do not wonder you shun its acquaintance; and you did wisely by this touch and glance, think to passe him by without provoking of him.[39]

Likewise, already in the *Defyance*, Overton explained that he was trying to rouse the Leveller supporters from their apathetic sleep by enjoining them: "rub up your wits".[40] This explanation is amplified in his final pamphlet of note, *The baiting of the great bull of Bashan unfolded* (1649), prepared while Overton was still in the Tower of London. Sounding a bit like a stand-up comedian fending off hecklers, Overton notes referring to his Marpriest pamphlets, that earlier in the decade "things as unserious as my last sheet, drest out in the youthfull attire of mirth, hath found a very large acceptance not only with you, but even with this generation of men, that are now the Enemies of the People".[41] Audaciously, he likens his use of humor to Christ's use of parables, and suggests, as Walwyn had before him, in a direct reversal of Puritanism that laughter is a divine instinct in man whereas melancholy is unnatural and unwarranted. Crucially, he further explains in his defense that he had

> [...] essayed to put you out of your dumps, and mind you of the *Agreement of the People*, [...] but it seems it proved but as musick to the house of Mourning; yet however, it hath so far gained its end; if by it you will not be provoked to your duties equally with us, it hath awaked you into a little discourse *pro & con*.[42]

CONCLUSION

If one can speak generally about the communicative uses of humor for identification, differentiation, clarification, and enforcement purposes, it is essential to bear in mind that the practical possibilities and pitfalls of using humor socially and politically are conditioned by the wider political culture. The Puritans were a conspiracy of repressive killjoys and their ethos one of pronounced hostility towards humor. They regarded mourning and suppression of laughter in self and others as the outward expression of inward penitent, temptation-styming godliness. Whence, in Bogan's *A view of the threats and punishments recorded in the Scriptures* (1653), a catalogue of over 600 pages of the disciplinary and punitive lessons of scripture, helpfully arranged alphabetically by type of errant behavior, one finds "mirth-worldly" and "mockers" lodged between "ministers-bad" and "murderers", and "scorners" between "scandalizing"

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39. William Walwyn, *Walwyns jvst defence against the aspersions cast upon him in a late un-Christian pamphlet entituled Walwyns wiles* (London, 1649), p. 15.
40. Overton, *Defyance*, p. 5.
41. Richard Overton, *The baiting of the great bull of Bashan unfolded* (London, 1649), p. A3v.
42. *Ibid.*, p. A2R.

and "scriptures, not knowing them". Bogan's summary warning against humor is that

> The men of the world, who so often commit this sinne, and make use of it to make themselves and others merry, thinke but slightly of it; because it steales no goods, and makes no scarre in the flesh, and does a man no visible hurt. But doubtlesse, it is not so slightly accounted of by God; and he will severely punish it.[43]

Though the Puritans' celebration of misery was theologically over-determined and institutionally overwrought, their fourfold critique of humor was not without its merits, however. Humor, excessively, can harm.[44] It can degenerate into boorish fixations on profanity and normative shocks. It can become a flippant buffoonery in the face of serious and tragic matters. It can get twisted into a cynical taste for killing jokes. It can develop into an all-excusing clause that one was "just joking". In the case of the Levellers, humor both galvanized the social movement, prompting many to question authoritative structures and strictures for the first time, and tarnished it, resulting in a moralizing backlash. The Puritan repudiation of the Levellers highlights the need for social movements of democratic dissent against various aspects of the given status quo to use incongruous and relief humor to prompt reflection without relying too heavily on boorishly flouting social prohibitions for the sake of the pleasures of superiority and release. It also suggests that humor will do better in a culture already tolerant of pluralism, comfortable with a measure of non-literal ambiguity, and committed to democratic deliberation.

43. Zachary Bogan, *A view of the threats and punishments recorded in the Scriptures, alphabetically composed. With some briefe observations upon severall texts* (Oxford, 1653), p. 428.
44. Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago, IL, 2006); Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (New York, 2005).