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Chapter One: ALISON WILLIAMS AND JOHN PARKIN

Feminine wiles and masculine woes: sexual dynamics in *Les Quinze Joies de Mariage* 21

The wiles and woes of marriage as depicted in this famous text are re-examined with special reference to female language and female sexuality. These areas of self-expression are prime among the means whereby its shrewish women defeat their male opponents to the consternation of the narrator – if not in fact of the reader or author – as they turn what are traditionally held to be flaws in womankind to their own comic advantage. The moral implications of this process provide an interesting lesson in satiric practice: are we (as women or men) eager to defend the hapless victim, or are we indifferent to him; and by what considerations are we motivated in taking up either option? Do we despise the cuckold in the tradition of Latin societies? Do we protect him by counter-attacking in his name on the viragos who are outsmarting him? Do we regard each participant in the text as equally unfortunate, marriage itself being the problem? Do we see the stories as so distant from reality that no serious comment is relevant to them? Or is there a further choice available to those who feel an instinctive affinity with the victim figure, however low he may fall in the eyes of a hostile society and readership?

Chapter Two: MICHAEL FREEMAN

Laughter in the Waning of the Middle Ages 39

It is perhaps inevitable, given the enduring popularity of Johan Huizinga's classic *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, that those who do not specialise in fifteenth-century France should continue to think of it as a period of decline and decadence. But a closer inspection of the literature of the time reveals that there is also much laughter. It was for the most part of a raucous and vulgar kind, however, which did not appeal to the tastes of nineteenth-century scholars when they "rediscovered" the period. For this reason the abundant literary output which indulges in jokes and playfulness has been generally misrepresented. By looking in particular at the work of François Villon and Guillaume Coquillart, it is possible to investigate the nature of contemporary

humour and see how it depended on a form of complicity with its audience. The overriding characteristic would appear to be a certain knowingness (which suggests a level of sophistication) and a celebration – often with tongue in cheek – of materialism (which suggests a level of prosperity). It reflects an urban, educated culture. It was also centred on Paris, at a time when the city was enjoying its post-Hundred Years War boom. Puns, innuendo, verbal humour relying on shared knowledge and assumptions, these are the typical devices of comic writing both in satirical poetry and in farce theatre. What becomes clear is that the humour of the fifteenth century in France is a natural prelude to that of the sixteenth. It also helps to explain the background to Rabelais' style, tastes and technique. The object of this chapter is to show that it is an over-simplification to see the waning of the Middle Ages in an entirely negative light.

Chapter Three: JOHN PARKIN

Bergson and Rabelais: the twain who never met

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Rabelais was France's greatest comic genius. Bergson was France's most famous theorist of humour. Yet *Le Rire* uses Rabelais only once for illustrative purposes, the main reason being that Bergsonian theory cannot accommodate the kind of humour which Rabelais was attempting most frequently to generate, one whose ambiguities defy the coercive and conformist tendencies which Bergson attempts to impose on his subject-matter, often, to be fair, with considerable success. However, those whose humour, or sense of humour, resists conformity and coercion will be less persuaded by the Bergsonian approach, and more attracted to Bakhtinian theories of liberation, whereby Rabelaisian laughter is grounded in a cyclic temporality in which a community renews itself irrespective of the social values it sustains in terms of serious living. Against the temporality of responsible life, whose humour is value-based and corrective, and the temporality of festive revelry, whose humour negates values and celebrates anti-heroes, one can also, moreover, set the temporality of the individual moment, as sustained via the imagination rather than the conscience or the collective spirit. The humour of this third kind depends on the spontaneous enrichment of the circumstances in which it is generated, creating a famous comic instance – of which there are many in *Gargantua* and

Pantagruel – out of a set of themes and elements which, though recognisable in themselves, are but the raw materials rather than the defining principles of great humour.

Chapter Four: JOHN PARKIN

La Bruyère: a study in satire

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Defied by much of Rabelais, Bergsonian techniques are highly relevant to a more representative and value-based satirist such as La Bruyère, whose negative comments concerning Rabelais are famous. In arguing for the social utility of satire, moreover, La Bruyère is begging the question, for to insist that satire is a punitive mode is not the same thing as to demand that the punishment it implies be socially useful or desirable. The punishment in the alternative mode of clan-based satire relates not to values (whereby one mocks what is wrong), but to identities (whereby one mocks what is different), and much of the humour within closed societies (La Bruyère's Versailles in particular) has traditionally been of this kind. The satirist aims at least in part to encourage his readers to join the clan whose comic self-expression his satire represents, whilst also claiming, via his narrator, that the values his satire purports to uphold are worth supporting, whether or not he or his reader in fact believe this. Skilful technique will enhance the success of both procedures, and it is instructive to examine how La Bruyère's satire is more effective in manipulating his readers' loyalties and convictions, than are his moral pronouncements convincing in the way they seek to impose conclusions on his readers' responses.

Chapter Five: KEITH CAMERON

Humour and Propaganda under the Second Empire

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French humour can be seen as particularly favourable to satire and caricature, and this in periods as far apart as the Religious Wars and the reign of Napoleon III. These humorous modes intend to amuse an audience while discrediting a target, and, as unashamedly partisan, they are applied vigorously to the illicit and semi-licit campaigns of opposition during the Second Empire, often employing and exploiting scurrilous and unfounded accusations in their attacks on the Emperor and several members of his family. Such satiric techniques can be traced back at least to the Roman period, and they are theorised in treatises of classical

rhetoric. What they create is a humour which stimulates political awareness via a campaign of systematic and witty defamation and deformation. In the process humour is overtaken by ridicule, and ridicule by unremitting hostility, the skilled caricaturist and satirist having a potential influence on opinion which is quite as dangerous as it has been felt to be by the authorities who have so often persecuted and condemned them.

Chapter Six: WILLIAM HOWARTH

Bergson Revisited: *Le Rire* a hundred years on 139

Bergson's *Le Rire* focuses on a more limited subject than its title suggests: the subtitle "*Essai sur la signification du comique*" is a better guide to its real subject, which is an analysis of the nature of French comic drama. This chapter considers the originality of Bergson's formula "du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant" against a background of the long-standing debate between the intellectualist and the moralist explanations of laughter, arguing that *Le Rire* stands on that side of the debate which sees laughter as essentially a spontaneous phenomenon, not morally motivated, and supports the view (not advanced by Bergson) that corrective elements in comic drama properly belong not to the element of *le comique* (laughter) but to *la comédie* (plot, characterisation, etc.). Looking ahead to some of the more important theorists of the twentieth century, and extending his survey beyond the central thesis of *Le Rire*, the author examines contrasts between concepts such as ludic and mimetic comedy, laughing at and laughing with, and *le comique (français)* and *l'humour (britannique)*. His conclusion is that while many leading theorists since Bergson have chosen to reject certain aspects of the latter's argument, very few have been able to disregard it.

Chapter Seven: WALTER REDFERN

Bad Jokes and Beckett 157

This text seeks to analyse an area of humour often under-examined: bad jokes. It is not merely a knocking-job, for a necessary counterpart and criterion is the good joke. It makes a comparison with Proust's Dr Cottard, expert in misplaced, mistimed witticisms. Throughout it looks for metajokes: the internal commentary of the very self-aware author on the comic business being enacted. Joking is linked up with the various *modi*

vivendi (and *moriendi*) displayed in Beckett's writings; life itself is seen as a bad joke, perpetrated by a Creator with a peculiar sense of humour. Where relevant, Beckett's French or English versions of his texts written in the other language are conned for cross-evaluation, as is the effect of his recurrent pedantry on his style of joke-creation. Other humour traditions under consideration are: the "Joe Miller" (or chestnut), dirty jokes, talking parrots. Other theorists or comparable practitioners of humour adduced include (ineluctably) Bergson, Michel Tournier, Céline and Queneau. Various kinds of punning relevant to Beckett are considered: puns as bargains (two meanings for the price of one word or phrase, an economy attractive to so laconic a writer as Beckett); inadvertent puns; macaronic play between languages; and recycled, literalised idioms.

Chapter Eight: KEITH FOLEY

'Comparaison n'est pas raison': humour and simile in San-Antonio 175

The detective fiction of Frédéric Dard, writing under the pseudonym of San-Antonio, enjoys a wide readership and has done so for nearly five decades. The enduring popularity of this prolific author may be attributed at least as much to his ludic style as to the intricacies and interest of his plots, for Dard is a master of the art of verbal humour. The vicissitudes of the supersleuth *commissaire* San-Antonio, and of his various sidekicks and paramours, provide a convenient framework for the author to display his verbal gymnastics. In a jubilatory celebration of language, Dard exploits its humorous potential to the full, as puns, malapropisms, neologisms, reconfigured clichés and literary allusions jostle for room on the page. Dard has a particular predilection for comparisons, but rarely employs stock similes without embellishing them in some way. This chapter describes the stylistic mechanisms by which Dard seeks to enhance the impact of his similes.

Chapter Nine: CAROLINE COOPER

Humour and Gender in French New Wave Cinema

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Questions about humour, gender and cinematic comedy are taken as a theoretical framework for exploration of some early films by Truffaut, Chabrol and Godard. Bearing marks of art cinema (laconic narratives, characters with existential anxieties, low-

budget cinematography) and of a certain self-conscious Frenchness (*l'amour*, Paris in springtime), films such as *Jules et Jim*, *Tirez sur le pianiste*, or *Pierrot le fou* usually play to laughs. They also have certain superficial similarities to romantic comedy, particularly in their humorous play with conventional gender roles. But their basic narratives, lacking conventional happy endings, and their underlying theme of the impossibility of communication between the sexes relate these films surprisingly closely to the potential tragedy of Hollywood melodrama.

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