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“Alas, poor Yorick”: Death of the Fool in Sterne and Shakespeare

Mark Weeks

Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* was quickly a popular sensation when its first two volumes went on sale in London in 1760. Praised for its comic literary inventiveness, lambasted for its ribald humour, the book had soon sold out. It was no flash in the pan, though. Two centuries or more later it would regularly be cited as an (and possibly *the*) outstanding prototype of postmodern fiction: “Sterne appears the most modern as well as the most contemporary of all eighteenth century novelists, inviting comparison as easily with Beckett, Borges, Barthes or Italo Calvino as with Defoe, Richardson, Fielding or Smollett.”¹ The implications of the text, and analysis around it, extend well beyond its immediate historical context, then, even if there is a lot to be gained from working through that context, as I will be doing here.

In the first few pages of the novel, Sterne introduces the character Yorick, a country parson with an irrepressible sense of humour, quite clearly an extension to some degree of Sterne himself, also a clergyman. Yet within a few more pages, Yorick is dead, destroyed apparently by people seeking revenge for the offense they consider has been committed against them by his “unwary pleasantries,” his penchant for innocently, if somewhat carelessly, employing others as the subject matter of his jests.² It appears

1) Ian Campbell Ross, Introduction to Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983) xvi.

2) Sterne, 25.

likely this short-lived tale is Sterne's own response to attacks launched against him by people who had already felt slighted by his humour, had interpreted his jests as malicious ridicule. Still, to leave it there, at the level of biography and petty intrigue, is to miss a broader and more interesting plot, one that revolves firstly around the history of debate over the functions and status of laughter, but arguably more deeply than this, around the perceived (in)significance of humour in the evolution of the modern self in English-speaking and European cultures.

If this seems like an extravagant leap, I should begin by noting that Sterne goes to considerable pains, particularly in the early pages of his novel, to situate himself within a contemporary debate over the value of humour and laughter. In dedicating his first two volumes to William Pitt, he writes that "I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and the other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles,-but much more so when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life."³⁾ (p.3) Shortly, within the first few pages of the text, the narrator makes this direct address to the readers in preparing them for the volumes ahead:

Therefore, my dear friend and companion... if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,-or should sometimes put on a fool's cap with a bell on it, for a moment or two as we pass along, --don't fly off,-but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears on my outside;-and as we jogg on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do any thing,-only keep your temper.⁴⁾ (p.11)

3) Sterne, 3.

4) Sterne, 11.

Laughter, then, as a force, or rather a sudden exhaustion of force, for good. The author, the narrator, and very soon the character Yorick form a phalanx of pro-laughter voices from the outset. Yorick is introduced riding a “sorry jack-ass of a horse” that is a “full brother to *Rosinante*,” Don Quixote’s mount. In fact, on his death bed, Sterne’s Yorick identifies himself explicitly with Quixote’s sidekick Sancho Panza, and *Tristram Shandy* repeatedly alludes to the Spanish comic novel, published about a century and half earlier, as a model for its own form and tone. Yorick’s name is also of course referring to the deceased fool whose skull Hamlet first addressed as “a fellow of infinite jest” around the same time (1600) that Sancho set off as Quixote’s comic sidekick and dispenser of rustic comic sense.

Given that the narrator has already painted himself wearing a “fool’s cap with a bell,” what do we make of Yorick’s death so early in the first volume of Sterne’s novel? Like Shakespeare before him, the clergyman Sterne is undoubtedly making an existential point by juxtaposing mirth and death, a point pushed way to the foreground by Sterne when after “Alas, poor YORICK!” he has two pages of the novel blacked out: the dramatic, and yet comic, coexistence of light and dark, the comic and tragic that is the lot of we humans with our unique temporal awareness of our own mortality. Sterne’s point, and it was surely Shakespeare’s, is that our knowledge of the ultimate vanity of human projects renders all of us fools in one way or another, in which case the only question is whether as individuals we approximate Shakespeare’s insightful, enlightened fools or just plain garden-variety idiots.

If that is an *eternal* predicament of the so-called “human condition” (I’m not arguing here whether it is or not), there is a related but narrower historical issue at work here: the death, or at least near-fatal wounding, of the concept of the fool Shakespeare had famously and popularly rendered on the stage. John Wilson argues

that "In the fool... we come very close to Shakespeare's own standpoint as a comic dramatist,"⁵⁾ and they are not restricted to the comedies: in fact the fool of one of the most tragic of tragedies, *King Lear*, is the most well-remembered. It was a contentious characteristic of Shakespeare's work that he not only wrote plenty of comedies but allowed comedy to inhabit his tragedies and histories, something that contemporaries such as Ben Jonson would eschew and critics often saw as an aesthetic mistake. Wilson goes so far as to contend that Shakespeare's "tragedies grew out of the comedies. The stuff of his 'mind and art' was first woven on the comic loom."⁶⁾ The comic idler Falstaff, with his "drinking of old sack and unbuttoning... after supper and sleeping upon benches after noon,"⁷⁾ has more lines than any other Shakespeare character apart from Hamlet. As one modern writer puts it, Falstaff, as a species of the fool, is the epitome of a kind of character "surely first conceived by Shakespeare. It is Shakespeare's creation of the man with a sense of what is humorous,"⁸⁾ that is, not just a funny character, but a person for whom humour is a crucial part of being in the world. Various points are made through the character of Falstaff, but none so consistently as the one about the existential importance of being and satisfaction outside of linear temporality, in the present - and the laughter around Falstaff is central in not only describing but in generating that enjoyable experience of the now. Moreover, Shakespeare was unique in having laughter *on the stage*, characters laughing at each other and at themselves, in which sense it ultimately makes no sense to describe it as laughing *at*, being in spirit closer to a universal laughing *with*.⁹⁾ This is why the early nineteenth century literary critic William Hazlitt would complain that Shakespeare's works were

5) John Wilson, *Shakespeare's Happy Comedies* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), 25.

6) Wilson, 16.

7) William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part I, Act I, Scene 2*.

8) Stephen Potter, *Sense of Humour*, (London: Max Reinhardt, 1954), 19.

9) Wilson, 23-4.

all too prone to a benign laughter and humour for its own sake, or in other words, for the sake of a pleasurable collapse into laughter and the moment.¹⁰⁾

Things changed in the course of Shakespeare's career, however. We hear of Falstaff's execution in *King Henry V*, and Shakespeare scholars have long speculated why Shakespeare chose to put an end to his most popular character. Some say it could have been as simple as Shakespeare wanting to rid himself of the actor who had been playing Falstaff; others say it reflects a noticeable darkening in Shakespeare's works from around the time of *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*.¹¹⁾ But a writer on comedy in the middle of the eighteenth century saw a bigger and more disturbing picture emerging behind Falstaff being killed off: “His Imprisonment and Death... seem also to have been written by Shakespeare in Compliance with the Austerity of the Times; and in order to avoid the Imputation of encouraging Idleness and mirthful Riot by too amiable and happy an Example.”¹²⁾ This is to say, there was a broader cultural shift away from enjoyment of laughter and the comic as epitomised, personified in the fool. In fact, the ascendancy of the fool seems to have been a brief moment in history. According to Wilson, “The Clown or Fool had a long stage-history behind him when Shakespeare took him over. But Shakespeare brought him to perfection, and after Shakespeare he disappears and is seen no more in the theatre or in literature.”¹³⁾ It was not just in the arts that the fall from grace occurred. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg observe that King Charles II,

10) William Hazlitt, *English Comic Writers* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1910), 32-6.

11) David Richman, *Laughter, Pain, and Wonder: Shakespeare's Comedies and the Audience in the Theater* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 21.

12) Corbyne Morris, *An Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule*. Quoted in Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 123-4.

13) Wilson, 24.

whose reign ended in 1685, was “the last king who took his court jester seriously.”¹⁴⁾ That was over seventy years before *Tristram Shandy* came into the world, and the premature death of Yorick there mirrors the socio-historical reality even as the novel attempts a counteroffensive against the spirit of an overbearing gravity and obsessive activity.

So what happened to the fool, and the sense that type or role brought with it of a comic existential perspective on a par with the tragic? It is significant, I think, that Hazlitt claims “the golden period of our comedy was just after the age of Charles II,” coinciding with the waning of the fool’s influence in the court. At that time there was a particular historical shift underway, with the early days of urbanisation and the development of a middle-class producing a collision of urbane gentility and unpolished rusticity which served in the theatre a genteel comedy of manners and pretense rife with social ridicule. Shakespeare’s failure as a comic dramatist, Hazlitt writes, is that he lacked this contrast and a determined critical spirit: “The fault, then, of Shakespeare’s comic Muse is, in my opinion, that it is too good-natured and magnanimous.” A large part of the perceived problem is that “Shakespeare’s comedies are mostly laid in the country, or are transferable there at pleasure.”¹⁵⁾ Out in the countryside, in the depths of the forest, there is simply not so much to be ridiculed: in the context of a benignly indifferent nature, manners are too incidental to be comic fodder. Again, for Hazlitt, the value of comedy resides in its critical edge; for Shakespeare, as for the later Sterne in his attempt to resurrect the spirit of the fool, laughter approaches cosmic indifference and is very often generated as an end in itself.

14) Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg, *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 8.

15) Hazlitt, 35, 36.

For Sterne and Shakespeare laughter need not constitute or attend the communication of some specific message, although it might at times *also* have such a function. Laughter, viewed as an experience rather than as a signifier, is valued for its broader effect of affirming a way of being, one which well before Shakespeare seems to have had a connection, as evident in ancient and mediaeval carnivals, to the pastoral and what Tony Pinkney calls the "circular (non-)temporality of the 'organic community.'"¹⁶⁾ The fool, while he could certainly have a critical role, was also the embodiment of that particular existential mode. The important point is that there was some kind of cultural change going on not just in the aesthetic realm but in the ontological, and the status accorded laughter was implicated in that.

A likely key to understanding what was at work here is to look at the way laughter was being treated intellectually, and in that case there is no better place to start than Thomas Hobbes in 1660.

"*Sudden glory*, is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men."¹⁷⁾

In modern parlance, Hobbes is saying laughter is a defense mechanism for lazy losers, which, as one of the foremost modern

16) Tony Pinkney, Preface to Raymond Williams's *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989) 3.

17) Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter 6, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. 3, ed. William Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1839), 46.

philosophers of humour John Morreall points out, is not surprising given that Hobbes is famous for his contention that human beings are “in constant struggle with one another for power and what power can bring.”¹⁸⁾ Yet Hobbes’s contribution is not easily dismissed. It was immediately disseminated and well received, became the central platform of what is today called the “superiority theory” of laughter. Despite amounting to a couple of short passages, Hobbes’s remarks present a view of laughter that has been extraordinarily influential. They are clearly evident in Henri Bergson’s book of 1905 *Le Rire* (*Laughter*), described at the turn of the millennium as “the theory of laughter that exerted the greatest influence on the twentieth century” and “probably the most important philosophical work on the comic in the twentieth century.”¹⁹⁾ There has even been a recent attempt to resurrect superiority theory by the British social psychologist Michael Billig.²⁰⁾

In short, Hobbes’s theory had an enormous impact on the way laughter would be regarded in English-speaking countries and much of Europe over the ensuing centuries. Of course, it would be unfair and pointless anyway - to blame Hobbes, since he was really reflecting the temper of his times. This was more than half a century after Shakespeare’s work had already been seen to turn somewhat dark under the influence of a tightening of prohibitions against frivolity and idleness. Hobbes did not singlehandedly send laughter into decline, but rather provided an intellectual buttressing for a cultural trend that was militating against the metaphysics of the fool.

18) John Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (New York: University of New York Press, 1987), 19.

19) Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 55; Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), p. 28.

20) Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage, 2005).

Following Hobbes there was an increasing tendency to equate laughter with ridicule, often with obvious negative connotations. The best that might be hoped for from this perspective, it seems, was that the ridicule might be appropriated for progressive, socially constructive ends as a means of chastising inappropriate behavior, as a tool of instruction and so of progress. It was in this capacity that it was much later taken up by Bergson, though it should be pointed out that even Bergson saw at the core of laughter a degree of bitterness and a “curious pessimism” that amount to resentful aggression.²¹⁾

There are good reasons for thinking, therefore, that the death of Sterne’s Yorick at the hands of people who “mistakenly” take his jesting for malicious ridicule has more than a personal significance. There was a cultural battle going on around laughter and it was an important one, not least of all for ideological reasons. If even laughter could be viewed as aggression, then perhaps there was really no alternative to institutions and systems that would at the very least keep the dangerously vicious human animal in check, whether that be traditional disciplinary regimes or the emerging competitive environment of capitalism. It is difficult to overstate how far Hobbes’s over-generalised view of laughter is from that idea of laughter as a natural ally to moderation, tolerance and health set out by the Christian clergyman Sterne, and in that context it is not difficult to comprehend why Sterne goes to such lengths early in his novel to expound his comic vision and his concerns about the misinterpretation of the spirit of the fool.

Sterne was not alone, however; there was already a kind of theoretical support for his position. In his writing on laughter, Francis Hutcheson, like most after him, did not deny that laughter

21) Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: MacMillan, 1911) 200, 199.

could sometimes be used to ridicule, but he pointed out how misguided it was to try to conjure ridicule into a general theory. His work on laughter was first published in 1729 and although it was some time before it became widely read, it had achieved a certain currency by the time Sterne was writing *Tristram Shandy*. Hutcheson sets out by launching a direct critique of Hobbes's theory of laughter. "It is pretty strange," he writes, that Hobbes and those with a similar view of laughter "have never distinguished between the words laughter and ridicule: this last is but one particular species of the former....There are innumerable instances where no person is ridiculed; nor does he who laughs compare himself to anything whatsoever."²²⁾

Hutcheson's alternative explanation in a later essay is that laughter follows a quick and surprising juxtaposition of "remote conceits" (incongruous concepts). This is generally thought to be the beginning of what is now called the incongruity and relief theories of humour. Hutcheson, unlike Hobbes, doesn't attempt to reduce laughter to a single causal factor (Hobbes's superiority), although he does equate it with a certain disposition. Laughter, Hutcheson explains, is mostly about an enjoyable sudden drop of tension and this is a sufficient, indeed valuable, end in itself: "Everyone is conscious that a state of laughter is an easy and agreeable state, that the recurring or suggestion of ludicrous images tends to dispel fretfulness, anxiety or sorrow, and to reduce the mind to an easy, happy state; as on the other hand, an easy and happy state is that in which we are most lively and acute in perceiving the ludicrous in objects."²³⁾ Again, the difference between this somewhat idealised image of laughter and the even more extreme view presented by

22) Francis Hutcheson, "Reflections upon Laughter," in John Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 30. The essay was originally published in the *Dublin Journal* in 1729.

23) Hutcheson, 35.

Hobbes is striking, and it is clear in which direction Sterne's work, and Shakespeare's so-called "happy comedies" for that matter, were leaning.

In the long run, by which I mean up to the present day and in the narrow academic field of humor theory, it is the incongruity and relief theories that have held sway, in spite of the persistence of voices seeking to find something malevolent lurking beneath all laughter. In a sense, though, the damage had already been done, and it might be argued that laughter, like the fool, has never recovered the position it found in Shakespeare, despite the counterattacks of Hutcheson and then Sterne in the eighteenth century. With the ascendancy of reason as a cultural and personal value in that century, the incongruity theory, based on the notion of laughter producing a degree of emotional detachment through a conceptual disjunction, found support among the intellectuals. Stuart M. Tave's description of the rise of "amiable humour" at this time remains the best description of the trend.²⁴ But even then, there was often a stated preference for the moderate smile over the paroxysms of laughter. Moreover, those determining literary and cultural hierarchies tended to promote humor harnessed to the end of instruction and social critique, to satire in particular, in which case the element of ridicule sustained its hold, even if it was rendered more culturally constructive as such. This was epitomised by Swift and then the literary criticism of Hazlitt, not least of all his criticism of Shakespeare's laughter and its "unpruned, idle" and all too "good-natured" comedy.²⁵ Interpretations of *Don Quixote* shifted towards reading the novel as morally instructive literature around this time (although later Quixote would acquire a more heroic aspect). The stress was on the semantic content of the comic text, not on laughter's

24) Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the 18th and Early 19th Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

25) Hazlitt, 36, 35.

interruption of the flow of discourse in incongruity - its “de-tension,” its *détente*, its indifference.

By equating laughter with resentment and ridicule, Hobbes had incorporated it within his vision of the human as an insatiably driven being: “I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death,” he writes in *Leviathan*.²⁶⁾ The noise of laughter, according to this view, could be nothing more than a rather pathetic volley launched by the weak in a relentless war, the unending struggles for power that were supposedly the (tragic) human lot. The attempts by Hutcheson and Sterne to render laughter as a source of detachment that would allow tolerance and even a sense of contentment in life was soon overtaken by the attempts-facilitated by literary critics, who accorded value to texts only insofar as they could be interpreted as rendering some especially significant semantic content-to shackle laughter to progress, to the project of civilization. The influence of that tendency is still clearly evident in Bergson’s notion of a chastising laughter, is faintly apparent in Freud’s theory of the comic in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, and continues through the inordinate amount of attention given in the late twentieth century to the problematically progressive idealisation of laughter by Bakhtin (beyond my scope here).

There is of course value in satire, as there is in the comparatively gentle release of potentially destructive emotions in some humour, even in the idea that a radical new culture might be born from a free-flowing carnival of ridicule. Yet, something may have been lost in all this: that species of the fool who dies in Shakespeare and then again in Sterne. This is the fool with a license to ridicule, yes, but also with the power to deflate the drive to power, to interrupt the momentum,

26) Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 10.

to have the supposedly driven human “trifle upon the road,” and even step off the road in idleness. This is laughter not as another signifier, but as a disruption of the relentless signifying momentum, and accompanying this collapse (which amounts to a weird kind of silence at the core of the paroxysms of laughter) the tragic but equally comical awareness that in the long run, to quote Keynes, we are *all* dead.