

«Nothing Better than Mirth and Hilarity» Happiness, Unhappiness, Jest and Sociability in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract It has been claimed that the eighteenth century invented happiness – or at least, began to entertain the notion that secular happiness could be expected as part of virtuous Christian life. Studies of the notion of happiness in this period have tended to focus on the philosophical dimensions of the concept. This essay offers a different perspective, by considering jest book culture and the idea of mirth through reading. It had long been argued that melancholy could be driven away by sociable jollity, and the eighteenth century sees the development of this literary tradition, in a glut of publications designed to ‘purge melancholy’ and drive away care. Yet, as this article will demonstrate, the idea of becoming happy through laughing together was a complex one, necessitating a balance between laughing with and laughing at others. We can also see the way in which jovial sociability complicated ideas of contentment through retirement.

Summary 1. Happiness and Melancholy. – 2. Polite Laughter. – 3. Laughter, Cruelty and Unhappiness. – 4. Shared Laughter. – 5. Borrowed Fun.

It has been claimed that the eighteenth century invented happiness – or at least, began to entertain the notion that secular happiness could be expected as part of virtuous Christian life. In his history of philosophical ideas about happiness in Western Europe, Darrin McMahan describes a sixteenth and a seventeenth century in which it was widely assumed that happiness was really only found after death, and that to be a good Christian in this life was to embrace suffering. Texts such as *The Assurance of the Faithfull: or; The Glorious Estate of the Saints in Heaven, Described: and the Certainty of Their Future Happiness Manifested by Reason and Scripture* (1670) or *Heaven on Earth: Or A Serious Discourse Touching a Well-grounded Assurance of Mens Everlasting Happiness and Blessedness* (1654) stressed that true reward comes only in death (McMahan 2007, pp. 190-196). We can certainly see this perspective continuing into eighteenth-century literature – Richardson’s *Clarissa* being a prominent example of the reward in happiness of the afterlife. But McMahan argues that in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century we also see the emergence of a different viewpoint – the belief that earthly happiness might be a sign of grace; the idea that to delight in the world, to live happily, was to live as God intended. The world bore the imprint of its maker, and to delight in

that world, was to delight in God (pp. 199-200). Pope's lines from the *Essay on Man* could only have been written in an era which embraced contentment as evidence of divine grace and salvation:

Oh Happiness, our being's end and aim!
 Good, Pleasure, Ease, Content! whate'er thy name:
 That something still which prompts th' eternal sigh,
 For which we bear to live, or dare to die
 [...]
 Say, in what mortal soil thou deign'st to grow?
 (Epistle IV, ll. 1-4, 8; Mack 1950, p. 128)

This newfound commitment to the idea of being happy in life in turn generated much questioning and discussion. It prompted philosophers and moralists to ask whether everyone had a right to happiness. How might they best achieve it? McMahon argues that «no previous age wrote so much on the subject or so often» (McMahon 2007, pp. 200-201). He notes that in considering the nature of earthly happiness, commentators often blurred the distinction between the pursuit of happiness, and the state of actually feeling happy. And in confusing the two, they complicated the answers to a number of fundamental questions, such as how to account for the continued existence of misery, or whether feeling good was the same as being good; whether happiness was a reward for simply living, or for living well (pp. 201-202). Being happy turned out to be much more complicated than it initially seemed.

In literary terms, the new perspective on earthly happiness manifested itself in frequent evocation of the *beatus vir* or happy man, who lived in secular and moral contentment (see Røstvig 1958 for a full study of this tradition in English verse). Pastoral visions derived from Horace and Virgil were loosely blended with Epicurean and Stoic themes to create new images of the modern *beatus vir* – the happy man in rural retirement. The early eighteenth-century rector John Pomfret evoked the key notes of this model in his hugely popular and much anthologized poem *The Choice*, first published in 1700. *The Choice* is loosely modelled on Horace's *Satire II, i*, and Pomfret follows Horace in advocating the virtues of frugality, honesty and moderation. The secret of happy life, according to *The Choice*, was the balanced enjoyment of rural leisure, reading books and drinking a little fine wine with a couple of well-chosen male friends, on a well kept estate «not little, nor too Great». Samuel Johnson remarked of *The Choice* that «[p]erhaps no composition in our language has been oftener perused» and declared that the poem «exhibits a system of life adapted to common notions and equal to common expectations; such a state as affords plenty and tranquillity, without exclusion of intellectual pleasures» (Lonsdale 2006, vol. 2, p. 60). As the eighteenth century progressed, the notion of virtuous

happiness became a goal for enlightenment philosophers. «The Importance of any Truth is nothing else than its Moment, or Efficacy to make Men happy», wrote Francis Hutcheson (1725, p. 7). The poet and critic James Arbuckle observed that «Happiness, and the Search after it be the Business and Study of all Mankind, and nothing is of greater Importance to us in Life, than to be rightly inform'd wherein it consists» (Arbuckle 1734, vol. 1, p. 37).

McMahon's history of happiness is a compelling narrative – and one that provokes many questions. What was the relationship between theorizing about the societal importance of happiness, and actually being straightforwardly happy? It is also important to recognize that the visions of retired ease described by so many eighteenth-century writers often served polemical or political ends – the embrace of country contentment was frequently a way of critiquing the political status quo, as, for example, by dispossessed Royalist poets such as Vaughan and Cowley, or Pope opposing Walpole from his grotto at Twickenham. A vision of contentment outside of power was politically enabling, but was it really happiness? Was there room for straightforward mirth and jollity within these philosophically-driven versions of the happy man?

In this essay I will argue that although the study of happiness in the eighteenth century has tended to focus on the Enlightenment articulation of contentment in the works of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson or Hume, there are other literary sources that offer a different perspective. Alongside the emergent discourse of Christian happiness as contentment and benevolence, we also see a culture of mirth, of jestbooks and pamphlets designed to create well-being in alternative ways, and in particular, to drive away melancholy through communal joviality. Titles from *The Merry Medley for Gay Gallants* (1755) to *Fisher's Cheerful Companion to Promote Laughter* (1800) represent a very different kind of literature, whose perceived value can be traced back to medieval physiology. Ideas about contentment were inextricably linked to theories about unhappiness, to the longstanding exploration of the causes and cures of melancholy, and humoral theory. The literature of mirth is generally predicated on the belief that unhappiness, in the form of melancholy, could only really be cured by a forceful injection of its opposite – hilarity or joviality. Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there is a sizeable literature dedicated to the curative properties of sociable mirth, or as the great seventeenth-century theorist of melancholy, Robert Burton, puts it: «Nothing better than mirth and merry company in this malady [melancholy]. It begins with sorrow (saith *Montanus*) it must be expelled with hilarity» (Burton 1651, p. 305).

If we turn our attention to this popular tradition, and to the connections between contentment and unhappiness, we gain a different perspective on the relationship between reading and being happy. This was not happiness-

as-contentment - this was well-being created and maintained through communal joviality, often raucous merrymaking. Belly laughter and practical jokes, riddles, comic songs and tall tales. And by focusing on this tradition, we can start to discern some interesting connections between happiness and literature, aspects not evident by exclusive reading of the philosophical and poetic evocations of the polite happy man. We can see the way in which a literature of laughter moves across class and gender boundaries. It is situated between oral and printed culture, constantly evoking the social exchanges that it mimics, and in turn, as jokes and jests and comic poems are copied into commonplace books and letters, it moves back into oral circulation. We also see some of the tensions implicit in ideas about how to be happy. There was a fine line between idealized contentment through retired leisure, and the melancholy induced by idleness and solitude; a tension between the well being induced by jests and jokes, and the sense of alienation that this could also engender.

1 Happiness and Melancholy

Melancholy, defined by the eighteenth century physician Richard Blackmore as «continual Thoughtfulness upon the same Set of Objects always returning to the Mind, accompanied with the Passions of Sadness, Dejection, and Fear», was regarded in medieval physiology as stemming from a large amount of cold and dry black bile in the body (Blackmore 1725, p. 164). Only if the amount became disproportionately large in comparison to the others did it become a disease (Verberckmoes 1999, p. 60). According to the humoral doctrine, antidotal cures helped redress the balance of the four bodily liquids (pp. 60-61). In the case of too much black bile, a change in lifestyle guaranteed some success in chasing melancholy.¹ Blackmore recommended treatment through vomitory medicines, laxatives and other purges, alongside «riding on Horseback, new Company, Change of Place, and Variety of Objects» (Blackmore 1725, p. 174). Exercise and joyfulness were key to many cures, and could be promoted through communal eating, walks in the open air, travel, hunting parties, ball games, music, and jokes. Laughter was healing laughter, thought to make the heart swell and produce fresh blood (Verberckmoes 1999, pp. 62-63). It was considered especially good to relax after a meal: «The reading of joyful histories and pleasant conversation» lifted the spirits after dinner, according to a popular Dutch health booklet (p. 65). The recommendation of curative laughter became commonplace over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was

1 Medical opinion in the eighteenth century continued to assert the role of the blood: Richard Blackmore explained that the disorder stemmed from «the want of rich and generous Qualities in the Blood» (Blackmore 1725, p. 155).

an integral part of Robert Burton's systematic analysis of the causes and cures of melancholy in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a text whose concluding advice is «be not solitary, be not idle». Burton advocates various kinds of exercises of mind and body for the dispelling of melancholy, which range from hunting and fishing to writing acrostics and dancing. Jokes, jests and merriment were part of this recreational picture:

The ordinary recreations which we have in Winter, and in most solitary times busie our minds with, are *Cardes, Tables and Dice, Shovelboard, Chesse-play*, The Philosopher's game, small trunks, shuttle-cock, balliards, musick, masks, singing, dancing, ulegames, frolicks, jests, riddles, catches, purposes, questions and commands, merry tales of errant Knights, Queens, Lovers, Lords, Ladies, Giants, Dwarves, Theeves, Cheaters, Witches, Fayries, Goblins, Friers, etc., [...] which some delight to hear, some to tell; all are well pleased with (Burton 1651, p. 270).

To those who consider such light-hearted entertainment demeaning, he continued: «now and then (saith Plutarch) the most vertuous, honest, and gravest men will use feasts, jests, and toys, as we do sauce our meats» (p. 303). Burton sums up his advice on this matter:

what shall I say then, but to every melancholy man
[...]
Feast often, and use friends not still so sad,
Whose jests and merriments may make thee glad.
Use honest and chaste sports, scenical shews, playes, games (p. 305).

Burton was writing in the mid seventeenth century, but the notion that mirth and joviality could have a curative function is still evident in later thinking. The eighteenth-century physician Timothy Rogers recognised a spectrum of melancholy, and for the less severe forms suggests that «[Melancholy] which is not deeply rooted [...] can be drowned in wine, or chased away with sociable divertisements» (Rogers 1749, p. 276). The poet Anne Finch drives away melancholy with mirth and music:

At last, my old inveterate foe,
No opposition shalt thou know.
Since I by struggling, can obtain
Nothing, but increase of pain,
I will att last, no more do soe,
Tho' I confesse, I have apply'd
Sweet mirth, and musick, and have try'd
A thousand other arts beside,
To drive thee from my darken'd breast (Reynolds 1903, p. 15).

Much of the popular jest book and miscellany literature of the eighteenth century was promoted as a cure for melancholy. Compilations drew together miscellaneous extracts in different comic genres, and typically included jests (short anecdotes involving some piquant reversal, incongruity or smart reply), riddles, word games and music. A typical title page lists the various kinds of entertainments on offer within: the subtitle of *Laugh and be Fat: Or the Merry Jester* offered «diverting jests, funny jokes, frolics stories, humourous sayings, entertaining tales, lively bonmots, pleasant adventures, keen repartees, merry waggeries, excellent puns, curious bulls, English, Irish, and Scotch, smart quibbles, agreeable humbugs, witty gibs, and other flashes of merriment. To which are added, the following humourous and agreeable articles, viz. new, merry, and ingenuous conundrums, rebuffes, riddles, epigrams, epitaphs, poems, acrosticks and other witticisms. Together with an entire new selection of toasts, sentiments, hobnobs. &c. at this time used in the best companies in London and Westminster. Calculated for both sexes, to kill care, to banish sorrow, and promote mirth, fun, jolity, and good humour» (*Laugh and Be Fat* 1797, title page). The conceit of a text which offered 'pills to purge melancholy' recurs again and again, most famously in *Thomas D'Urfey's Wit and Mirth: Or Pills to Purge Melancholy*, a large collection of songs published between 1698-1720.² Other compilations made more elaborate claims for both their contents, and their curative potential. The *Complete London Jester* promised to «expel Care, drown Grief, banish the Spleen, improve the Wit, create Mirth, entertain Company, and give the Reader a light Heart, and a chearful Countenance» (*The Complete London Jester* 1764, title page). *The Laughters Delight* claimed to offer «an Hour's Laugh at any Time, and design'd on Purpose to make the Heart Merry, and to prevent and expell Spleen and Melancholly, and drive the Evenings away with Mirth and Jollity. Usefull to all especially to those who take Physic» (*The Laughters Delight* 1765, title page). It is clear from the evidence of these collections that there was a whole range of material, from short comic anecdotes, to epigrams, acrosticks, riddles and songs, toasts - all materials based on social circulation - which was designed to drive away unhappiness, and promote good humour. Interestingly, the words happiness and happy rarely feature on these title pages. A typical example of this fare can be found in *Fun for the Parlour*:

Not all that can be sung or said,
Will aught avail without my Aid (Answer: Hearing).

² Itself a possible reworking of a 1599 pamphlet *A Pil to Purge Melancholie*, which promised «health, with increase of mirth».

Why is a Musick-Book like a Prison?
Because it contains many Bars.

Why is a Corkscrew like good News?
Because it relieves the oppressed Spirits
(*Fun for the Parlour* 1771, pp. 81, 78).

The experience of positive well being is instead conjured through other synonyms – cheerfulness, mirth, jollity.

Whether readers – or editors – actually believed that the contents could cure melancholy, or depression is hard to tell. But there is clear evidence of the social circulation of this kind of material amongst eighteenth-century readers, and an understanding of the pleasures it could bring. Riddle and jest collections were frequently prefaced with frontispieces depicting groups of men in taverns, supping punch, pipes out and chairs pushed back in jovial enjoyment of the comic world offered by the book in question.³ If one is tempted to see the world of riddles and jokes as one largely rooted in popular culture, there is plenty of evidence, across England and Europe, of the enjoyment and collection of jokes amongst the elite (Bremmer; Roodenberg 1997, p. 5). At an average price of one shilling bound, jestbooks were far from the cheapest publications on the market – chapbooks typically sold for 1/2d to 1d. The price, the format and the terms on which such collections were described ('bon mots', 'smart repartees') all suggest that they were predominantly aimed at a middle and upper class readership. Historians of humour often note the changing social profile of joke tellers. After the Middle Ages, the collecting and telling of jokes spreads over the social spectrum, and it is clear that the telling of jokes even became part and parcel of the art of conversation among gentlemen (Brewer 1997, pp. 91-92). Derek Brewer has described the keen collecting of jokes and jest books by the great book collectors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (pp. 98-105; see also Birrell 1991, pp. 113-131). So, for example, Jonathan Swift's letters to his friend Thomas Sheridan have sometimes been seen by critics as an anomaly in his otherwise sophisticated literary repertoire. Yet in writing letters composed entirely of puns on the word 'ling', or in cod Latin, Swift was no more than a man of his time, enjoying the kind of verbal play that was the subject of hundreds of jest books and commonplace books.

3 On the use of such frontispieces in miscellanies, see Williams 2014, pp. 99-100.

2 Polite Laughter

One of the intriguing aspects of jestbook literature is the perspective it offers on the acceptable boundary between the polite and impolite. We might tend to assume that this distinction was gendered, that men drank punch and sang rude songs, and women sat and demurely sewed whilst they listened to a sentimental novel being read aloud. But these assumptions mask a more complicated story. Collections were marketed at a range of social groups – from *The Jovial Songster or Sailor's Delight* (1784) to *Fun for the Parlour: Or, All Merry Above Stairs* (1771), its frontispiece a group of well-dressed women sitting demurely around a table listening to a companion's reading from the book. The contents of *Fun for the Parlour* are not bawdy, but certainly not prim: there are jests about drunkenness, sexual reputation, shrewish wives, and unhappy marriages:

A Gentleman in the Country having the Misfortune to have his Wife hang herself on an Apple-Tree, a Neighbour of his came to him, and begged he would give him a Cyon of that Tree, that he might graft it upon one in his own Orchard; «For who knows», said he, «but it may bear the same Fruit» (*Fun for the Parlour* 1771, p. 13).

Elsewhere we find compilations which directly address the question of audience and appropriateness in their prefatory material. So, for example, a collection called *Sir John Fielding's Jestes* (1781) is subtitled *New Fun for the Parlour and Kitchen*. This suggests that it has an appeal both above and below stairs, with and without company. What is also significant is that the collection is presented as being more or less decent: «Stale Jestes, insipid Poems, and gross Indecencies, we have carefully avoided» (*Sir John Fielding's Jestes* 1781, p. iii). So what was 'decent'? Within the first fifty pages we have comic tales about sex, defecation, prostitution, infidelity and smelly feet. It is certainly tamer than other collections of the period but not really polite fare (see Thomas 2010). Looking at riddle and jest book collections, we can see that *double entendres* seem to have been a key part of witty amusement in the eighteenth century. Readers and listeners delighted in riddles and conundrums, and performed dialogues, all often based on playing with rude and polite meanings of words and phrases. Diaries and letters show us that women enjoyed bawdy riddles, and that comic dialogues were performed by both men and women. A Kew housewife Elizabeth Tyrell, writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century describes enjoying an evening of comic performances and riddles:

George went to Tea to Mrs Fishers to hear a young Lady play and sing – Mrs Henshaw brought her books of Riddles and Charades &c which

amused us the whole Evening – George came home soon after eleven well pleased with his visit (Tyrell 1769-1835, 26 March 1809).

Yet there is also evidence of young men being shocked by female enjoyment of bawdy jokes. Dudley Ryder, a young lawyer writing in the early eighteenth century, is sometimes thrown by the things he hears. He writes in May 1716:

«The worst of Mr. Powell’s conversation is that he is apt now and then to make use of double entendres, which shocked me very much and I wonder Mrs Marshall seems so well pleased with them and so little shocked at them.’ On a subsequent occasion, later that year, he notes that ‘we passed away the evening in comical conversation enough. It chiefly turned upon bawdy and double entendres, than which I perceived nothing is more touching to Mrs. Marshall. I don’t know that I ever talked so much to any woman in that way as I did at that time» (Matthews 1939, p. 332).

3 Laughter, Cruelty and Unhappiness

Such evidence of the enjoyment of – but also anxiety about – this kind of wit and innuendo complicates our expectations of what appropriate entertainment might consist of, for men and women. Dudley Ryder’s unease at Mrs Marshall’s bawdy jokes suggests that, for him, the world of jokey mirth is not a straightforward conduit to happiness. Although he is not the butt of the joke, her comic licence seems to exclude him. This question of inclusion and exclusion is central to the happiness of jest culture. One of the characteristics of jest books is that they offer many anecdotes based on stock types and situations – the cuckolded husband, the Welshman, the blind woman, the congenital idiot. These types by implication affirm a norm, a group of readers who are able to laugh, united, at the traits and misfortunes of those outside their group. Within *The Merry Medley* we find the following comic stories:

A Man that had but one Eye, met early in the Morning, one that had a crooked Back, and said to him, «Friend, you are loaded betimes». «It is early, indeed, (replied the other), for you have but one of your Windows open» (*The Merry Medley* 1758, p. 19).

Epitaph on a talkative old Maid.

Beneath this silent Stone is laid,
A noisy antiquated old Maid,

Who, from her Cradle, talk'd till Death,
And ne'er before was out of Breath;
Whither she's gone we cannot tell,
For if she talks not, she's in Hell;
If she's in Heav'n, she's there unblest,
Because she hates a Place of Rest (p. 26).

In an article on jest books and male youth culture, Tim Reinke-Williams discusses the role of misogyny in jest books of the seventeenth century. He argues that this misogyny created a sense of shared values amongst elite young single men, whose jokes were at the expense of the older married men who represented patriarchal authority. He concludes that «attacking women with 'revilings, taunts, and iests' thus enabled young men to fashion their own gendered identities and undermine married patriarchs, ridiculing what they had not yet, and might never, become» (Reinke-Williams 2009, p. 335). But here again our expectations of inclusion and exclusion sit alongside other forms of evidence. *Fun for the Parlour*, a collection expressly designed for a polite and female audience, is full of jokes about men who resent their shrewish wives, who celebrate their widowerhood, or who are generally unhappy in marriage. While there are jests about drunkenness, there are far fewer jokes about bad husbands. In this case, women laugh with and at men who are unhappy with other women, and the dynamics of exclusion are harder to pin down. But the prevalence of jokes at the expense of an outsider forces us to consider the link between laughter and unhappiness from a different angle. Much jest book mirth, promoted as driving away sorrow, is in fact predicated on laughing at others' misfortunes. Jestings affirmed shared values and fostered social bonds amongst those enjoying the joke, but also promoted social, religious and gender antagonisms and xenophobia by excluding victims of the jest (see Krahl 1966; Wilson 1969; Brewer 1997). As Simon Dickie has shown, jest books were only one manifestation of a strain of ridicule and cruelty in eighteenth-century literature that is hard to square with the notions of benevolence and sensibility that were so influential at the time. Dickie argues that recent emphasis on the sensibilities of polite culture in the eighteenth century, the commitment to humanitarian benevolence that we find in the works of Hume or Fielding, occludes the delight in slapstick cruelty that we find in the hundreds of jestbooks published in the period. «Too often, it would seem, our conclusions about mid-century 'polite' culture derive not from the actual pleasures or reading habits of this class but from its own idealized image of itself - from the self-conscious 'project' of 'politeness'» (Dickie 2003, p. 5). Dickie's study of cruelty in eighteenth-century literature amply illustrates the canon of jokes about disability, sexual violence, deformity, and poverty that runs throughout the comic literature of the period. As he affirms,

these jests were read and enjoyed by men and women, and at prices ranging from 1 shilling to 3 shillings, they were affordable only to those with considerable disposable income. Thus happiness and unhappiness were linked together in more complex ways – pleasure and well being could be generated by jests and jokes, yet those jokes were often predicated on forms of social exclusion and stigmatization which contemporaries believed could induce melancholy. In this context, it is not surprising that Robert Burton's approach to jests is twofold: they are both conducive to happiness, and also, in the form of «Scoffs and Calumnies», dangerous to the individuals who are mocked.⁴ Although as we have seen, mirth and jokes were seen as part of the cure for melancholy, Burton's fullest discussion of jests is in this section, in which he observes that «although they peradventure that so scoffe, do it alone in mirth and merriment [...] an excellent thing to enjoy another mans madness; yet they must know that it is a mortal sin» (Burton 1651, p. 150). He concludes his discussion on this theme with the following advice:

Set not thy foot to make the blinde to fall,
Nor wilfully offend thy weaker brother:
Nor wound the dead with thy tongues bitter gall,
Neither rejoyce thou in the fall of other.

If these rules could be kept, we should have much more ease and quietness than we have, lesse melancholy: whereas on the contrary, we study to misuse each other, how to sting and gaul, like two fighting bores, bending all our force and wit, friends, fortunes, to crucifie one anothers souls; by means of which, there is little content and charity, much virulency, hatred, malice, and disquietnesse among us (p. 151).

4 Shared Laughter

We can get some sense of the role that jests, jokes and riddles played in creating happiness in real social networks by looking at the evidence of individual readers. Warwickshire Record office holds a letter series from the 1730s, representing repeated exchanges between four well educated young women in their late teens: Catherine Collingwood, Mary Pendarves, her sister Anne Granvill, and Margaret Cavendish. Mary Pendarves would

⁴ As Mary Anne Lund has argued, this dual perspective is characteristic of Burton's approach to reading: «Tensions between therapeutic and dangerous reading are not continuously in evidence; occasional remarks about reading as potentially disquieting or unhealthy are not enough to destroy his presentation of reading as a healing activity, though they do present a challenge to it» (Lund 2010, p. 98).

become the blue stocking Mary Delany, Margaret Cavendish the Duchess of Portland, one of the greatest antiquaries and collectors of the century. Catherine Collingwood would become Lady Throckmorton of Throckmorton Hall, and Anne Granville another aristocratic hostess. At this stage in their lives, they were preoccupied with town gossip and social exchanges. Reading through the letters, it is soon clear that their epistles follow a formula: the addressee is praised, and then berated for not writing sooner. Mutual acquaintances are discussed. The final section of the letter discusses reading and usually offers an exchange of some sort of riddle, lighthearted jokes which affirm the friendship group. The games they circulate are similar to the word-based wit prescribed by Robert Burton as a preventative, or cure for melancholy:

If those other do not affect him [i.e. more serious studies], and his means be great, to imploy his purse and fill his head, he may go find the Philosophers stone; he may apply his mind I say to *Heraldry, Antiquity*, invent Impresses, Emblems; make *Epithalamiums, Epitaphs, Elegies, Epigrams, Palindroma Epigrammata, Anagrams, Chronograms, Acrosticks*, upon his friends names (Burton 1651, p. 285).

The jokes shared by the Pendarves/Cavendish/Collingwood circle are a form of wordy recreation, a social currency. They are recognized as an important source of happiness and pleasure in the domestic worlds inhabited by the group of women. Anne Granville writes to Catherine Collingwood on 27 August 1734:

I'm grown fatter then when I had the pleasure of seeing you last, hope you increase in it also, my receipt is laughing, for we have with us a good humoured merry man that Miss Harcourt has persecuted with tricks, if you know of any do send me word, or any pretty ridles or rebus's.⁵

Other letters give an insight into the wider circulation of the jokes: Margaret Portland writes to Catherine Collingwood on 16 September 1733:

I have likewise sent you a Dictionary of hard words which by the time I see you I shall expect that you will be able to Converse with a Certain Gentleman who I hear is going to be married to Miss Spencer. Don't put it in Fortunes Box for I must have it again adieu my dear Collyflower.⁶

5 Anne Vernon to Catherine Collingwood, 27 August 1734. In: *Letters written to Catherine Collingwood*, Warwickshire County Record Office, Throckmorton papers, Tribune, CR 1998/CD/Folder 49.

6 Margaret Portland to Catherine Collingwood, 16 September, 1733, WRO, Throckmorton Papers, Tribune, CR 1998/CD/Folder 49.

Portland writes a year later, on 16 September 1734:

the Ode I sent you I thought extremely silly but when I see you I will show you the Verses I told you of which are very pretty & you may Copy 'em if you please, they are not by the Club but by the Poetical Footman. I found out your Riddle & have Dazzled a good many People with it, I have sent you one in return that you may send to the Wit.⁷

Portland's letters are often partly in code, her gossip about mutual friends represented as flowers, in which everyone is named: there is a nettle, a rose and a sweet William. A letter of 20 October 1734 ends:

I have had a Letter from the Wit who is very angry you don't write to her she sent me a Rebus which I desire you will send me the explanation of very soon.

If measure of Lace thats Less than a nail
& Where travellers hope to meet with good ale
The Shepherds retreat when the sun is at height
is the name of a Lady we love at first sight.⁸

The letter collection reveals an avidity in the receipt and solving of these puzzles, and suggests that they will pass into further social circulation. The jokes entertain twice, once in the initial reading, and then again when deployed amongst other circles or friends or guests. The importance of such apparently slight pleasures should be seen in the context of the relative idleness and isolation of women such as these. Sarah Jordan, Diane Buie and others have emphasized contemporary concerns about the effects of female idleness and boredom in this period, related in part to the increasing leisure time of middling sort and gentry women during this period (Jordan 2003, pp. 84-122; Buie 2010, pp. 86-97). Buie states that «the link between women's idleness and the mental distress it caused becomes immediately apparent when we begin to read the letters, journals, poetry and prose written by eighteenth-century women» (Buie 2010, p. 97). She cites Johnson's *Idler* No. 80 essay, in which, writing of fashionable women who long for town life, he observes that:

They who have already enjoyed the crowds and noise of the great city, know that their desire to return it is little more than the restlessness of

7 Margaret Portland to Catherine Collingwood, 16 September 1734, WRO, Throckmorton Papers, Tribune, CR 1998/CD/Folder 49.

8 Margaret Portland to Catherine Collingwood, 20 October 1734, WRO, Throckmorton Papers, Tribune, CR 1998/CD/Folder 49.

a vacant mind, that they are not so much led by hope as driven by disgust, and wish rather to leave the country than to see the town (Bullitt, Bate, Powell 1969, p. 250).

We get an inkling of the boredom of rural retreat in the letters. Anne Granville writes from Oxfordshire to Catherine Collingwood on 24 May 1734: «I hope London is more agreeable than Cockthrop, for tis here as cold as xmas, and as wet, so I have nothing to doe but work and read my Eyes out».⁹ In a later letter, again sent from a country house, she complains:

Do not be so Cruel as to Imagine I don't feel very sensibly the leaving my agreeable Friends in London, but I brag of the pleasures of my Solitude more to show my Philosophy than any great Joy they give me, for nothing alone can be very delightful; you Contribute to my entertainment many Ways.

Yet she also makes claims for the benefits of rural seclusion:

I had rather you enjoy'd some rural retreat, and much rather it were in our neighbourhood, for all country pleasures give me so much pleasure that I pity all my Freinds who do not tast them or have no Opportunitys to learn, for I am persuayed it is like other inclinations, improved by seeing the reasonableness of it.¹⁰

Granville's letters, in particular, show an attitude towards country living which veers between bored disdain and philosophical encomium. The jokes and games she shares with her friends simulate a circle of wits – on paper – as a way of livening up her rural existence. Her dual response to her condition is suggestive of a wider ambivalence about the value of rural retirement, and its supposed pleasures. In much seventeenth and eighteenth century writing on melancholy, there was a perceived connection between idleness and melancholy – that too long left alone, without any sort of employment, was conducive to sadness and self absorption. The diaries of the depressive Nottinghamshire spinster Gertrude Savile are full of references to the melancholy state brought about by her under employment and solitary existence (cfr. Savile 1997). An idle, solitary lifestyle was considered detrimental in two ways: it had a depressing effect on one's mental health, and it was thought not to be the life God had intended for mankind. «It is

9 Anna Granville to Margaret Portland, 24 May 1734, WRO, Throckmorton Papers, Tribune, CR 1998/CD/Folder 49.

10 Anna Granville to Margaret Portland, 17 June 1736, 1 August 1737, WRO, Throckmorton Papers, Tribune, CR 1998/CD/Folder 49.

[...] by no Means allowable to sequester ourselves from Society», Peter Du Moulin states, «because God has formed us for one another. They who do so, unless it is for the public Good, are but an useless Burden upon Earth» (Du Moulin 1769, p. 90). Here we find one of the paradoxes at the centre of eighteenth-century notions of happiness – on one hand, the much praised ideal of the *beatus vir* was predicated on a life of relative seclusion – retirement from public life, a rural retreat, with modest sociability. Pomfret's *The Choice* for example, does not specify very much actual activity beyond leisure – drinking, reading, talking to friends occasionally. And an endless cycle of busy sociability was seen to be enervating, and ultimately depressing: George Cheyne writes that «Assemblies, Musick, Meetings, Plays, Cards, and Dice, are the only Amusements, or perhaps Business follow'd by such Persons as live in the Manner mention'd, and are most subject to such Complaints, on which all their Thoughts and Attention, nay, their Zeal and Spirits, are spent» (Cheyne 1733, p. 52). But was the flipside of the idea of happiness in retired solitude actually a disengaged idleness, which in itself could lead to sadness and melancholy? Perhaps contentment and unhappiness were two sides of the same coin. In a robustly argued article from 1952, R. D. Havens wrote of the contradictions at the heart of neoclassical visions of solitude. He argued that what we find in the eighteenth century is a twin preoccupation with man's essential gregariousness, paradoxically coupled with, as McMahon, Røstvig and others have noted, a massive literature of rural retirement. Havens argues that the praise of rural seclusion found in so much eighteenth-century literature was no real embrace of the contentments of solitude but rather, «a never never land of idealized nature. [...] the neoclassicists made clear that they regarded solitude, except as they disliked it, as an avenue of escape from reality, an excuse for day-dreaming» (Havens 1954, pp. 266, 269). It may be that the eighteenth century was a time for writing, endlessly, about the joys of rural seclusion – but not actually for feeling them.

5 Borrowed Fun

For the circle of young women described above, the circulation of games and jests was one form of entertainment, which enabled them to feel connected to their friends, and to a wider network of sociable exchange. They write about the exchange of these items as a source of pleasure, an alleviation of otherwise potentially unhappy isolation. Jokes are constantly related back to their social origins – to a particular wit or friend. Derek Brewer has argued that the recorded form of the joke decontextualizes the jest, depriving it of much of its emotional power by stripping it of its social group and communal jollity (Brewer 1997, p. 91). But in this and other letter series, we get a glimpse of the way the transcribed jest is used

to recreate the social group. The pleasures of jokes and games are not only about laughter, but also about the simulacrum of town wit that they afford. In this sense a manuscript exchange resembles the printed jest books of the era. Individual stories relating to particular figures become detached from their original author and circulate as part of a wider collection of witticisms. But in circulation, they continued to evoke the witty world which generated them. Most of the stories in jest books are based in towns, usually in London. Many were advertised by association with the haunts of town wits, and with their urbanity. There is much topical metropolitan humour in accounts of celebrated 'frolicks' and 'humbugs'; jokes about the London stage and high politics; about famous courtiers or men of fashion. This emphasis on the origin of the quip can be traced back to the first jest book proper, which is normally reckoned to be the *Facetiae*, the collection of jests written by Poggio Bracciolini, the great humanist scholar. His collection of scabrous, sometimes ancient, anecdotes was said to have arisen from the gossip of papal secretaries in Rome. Poggio Bracciolini claimed that the jests were written by named persons about others - witty, malicious gossip - but they had received literary polish. The jokes were written in Latin in 1450, circulated widely in Europe, and were printed in 1477. They were immensely popular, and others writers adopted individual items, and similar books began to be published in Europe.

Both manuscript and printed jests, riddles and jokes were a genre of recycling and updating - the scores of jest books published across the eighteenth century reworked and reused much of the same material, in slightly different formats and orders. Yet what is interesting about this phenomenon is that many of the jokes also retained a certain biographical specificity. As we have seen, a lot of stories centred around stock types: the shrewish wife, the Irishman, the cuckold. But other comic narratives were based on real life celebrity jokesters, Sir John Fielding, Baron Munchausen, The Earl of Rochester, Charles II or Beau Nash. *Joe Miller's Jestes*, perhaps the most frequently reprinted collection of the era, purported to contain the witty jests of Joe Miller, the early eighteenth century actor. Returning to *Sir John Fielding's Jestes*, which is subtitled *New Fun for the Parlour and Kitchen*, we glean from the title that its content has, supposedly, migrated from the public, and largely male, environments of the alehouse: the reader is told that the jokes and stories within are «carefully transcribed from original manuscript remarks, and notes made on such occasions, and at the Shakespeare, Bedford Arms, and Rose Taverns [...] where the above celebrated Genius and his Jovial Companions (the drollest Wits of the Present Age) usually met to Kill Care and promote the Practice of Mirth and Good Humour» (*Sir John Fielding's Jestes* 1781, title page). It is an interesting concept, that readers can use a collection such as this one to recreate a sort of celebrity jokester's evening entertainment within their

own homes. The reality was that the content of this particular collection was material recycled from innumerable other jest books of the period, and highly unlikely to have come from manuscript jottings of the *bon mots* of John Fielding (Dickie, 2003, p.7). But it is premised on the idea that it is pleasurable to have joviality by proxy, a kind of borrowed fun. This is also the case in some of the longer narrative collections. One publication, *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia* is described as «recommended to Country Gentlemen; and, if they please, to be repeated as their own, after a hunt, at horse races, in watering place, and other such polite assemblies; round the bottle and fire-side» (Raspe 1786, title page). The fictional collection of stories within, assembled by the German writer Rudolph Erich Raspe, was inspired by the historical figure of Hieronymus Karl Friedrich von Münchhausen, a German nobleman who had gained a reputation as an imaginative after-dinner storyteller, creating witty and highly exaggerated accounts of his adventures in Russia. Over the ensuing thirty years, his storytelling abilities gained such renown that he frequently received visits from travelling nobles wanting to hear his stories. Raspe took the reputation of the real von Munchhausen, and created a fictional character upon whom a whole assemblage of implausible anecdotes could be hung.¹¹ So what began as a real life collection of tall tales, was fictionalized as a vehicle for assorted travel anecdotes, which could then in turn be appropriated by their readers for rendition to be repeated as their own. We can start to glimpse here some of the ways in which jovial literature circulated throughout literary culture in this period – often attached to an individual through their reputation, stemming from a range of print and oral sources, and deployed orally in social situations. The literature of joviality thus sits on the boundary between print and oral forms, authored and anonymous works. W. Carew Hazlitt observed astutely in 1890:

we are not apt to ask ourselves the question, who delivered the joke, or ushered it into print? There are cases, of course, where the author of a sally or rejoinder, himself repeats it to a third party, possibly in its original shape, possibly with embellishments; but there must be, nay, there are numberless instances in which a funny thing is given to a person, not because he said it, but because he might or would have done so (Carew Hazlitt 1890, p. 17).

The Munchausen compilation also illuminates the way in which being jovial was a skill to be acquired. One of the big differences between the jestbook literature of the seventeenth and that of the eighteenth century was the

¹¹ The 1780s and 90s saw the publication of over 20 editions and reworkings of the Munchausen collection, many of them subtitled *Gulliver revived*.

shift towards the instructional nature of compilations. Simon Dickie claims that «many jestbooks were produced – in this age when dullness was the worst of social vices – as ‘how-to’ manuals for those wanting to shine in company» (Dickie 2003, p. 9). It is true that *The Art of Jesting* was the subtitle of many eighteenth-century texts, and prefaces introduced the contents of collections with basic instructions on how to delight assembled company. Rather than seeing eighteenth-century jestbooks merely as a continuation of a traditional genre of popular entertainment, we might also see them as part of a broader culture of eighteenth century of self improvement. Like the elocutionary manuals which taught aspiring middle class readers to read with assurance before their friends, jest books offered handholding for those keen to become the jovial and entertaining sociable man or woman at the centre of the group.¹² *Fun for the Parlour* was said to be «calculated to render Conversation agreeable, and to pass long Evenings with Wit and Merriment» (*Fun for the Parlour* 1771, title page). The intangible art of ‘good conversation’ was, of course, a cornerstone of eighteenth century polite sociability, and collections such as this one can be understood in part as a manifestation of this project. The «Preface to the Reader» in *Companion for Gay Gallants* begins with the declaration that «There is one Kind of Conversation which every one aims at, and every one almost fails in; it is that of Story-telling. I know not any Thing which engages our Attention with more Delight when a Person has a sufficient Stock of Talents necessary for it» (*Merry Medley* 1758, sig. a2). The editor goes on to distinguish between the five types of storytellers: the short, the long, the marvellous, the insipid and the delightful, with educative examples of each style. In the new landscape of self consciously acquired sociability, elements which might appear to us to be the basics of informal exchange – how to tell a good story, how to joke – were codified and taught in collections such as these. Baron Munchausen’s tall tales are «recommended to Country Gentlemen; and, if they please, to be repeated as their own, after a hunt, at horse races, in watering place, and other such polite assemblies; round the bottle and fire-side» (Raspe 1786, title page). Presumably no longstanding member of the rural gentry needed to be told the basics of male sociability – but a newly gentrified tradesman might. Other collections offered similar advice – all of which attempted to reconcile the spontaneous and fluid nature of joking and merriment with formal advice.

This article began with a distinction between happiness in the form of enlightenment ideas about human contentment, and a simpler idea of well-being through sociable mirth, a long standing cure for unhappiness. But

12 Some collections were prefaced with advertisements for other instructional works: *Sir John Fielding’s Jests*, for example, included a puff for *The New Universal Story-Teller*, which consisted of «a greater Variety of valuable Matter calculated for the Pleasure and Improvement of Readers of every Class» (*The Universal Story-Teller* 1785, title page).

as my discussion of the print culture of joviality suggests, the mirthful happiness of jests and jokes was not as straightforward as it seemed. Looking more closely at how people read and used the literature of jest reveals the faultlines between theories of happiness, and the lived reality. We can see the way in which jokes and games were sometimes seen as an embodiment of friendship groups, and were thus especially valuable for those living in relative isolation – often the same kind of rural seclusion that was elsewhere praised as a model of contented moderation. It also shows us the way sociable humour promoted inclusive ideas of general human well being, but that it was also frequently predicated on the exclusion of certain groups. Jestbook literature speaks to a blend of lived experience and printed representation, practical and theoretical fun – it offers a different way of looking at a literature of how to be happy. It was based on the idea that other people's joviality is infectious and curative. But printed jokes and games are of course, not the same as the company of real people, and in some ways, jestbook mirth is a culture of fun by proxy. If the eighteenth century was truly the age in which secular happiness was invented, it was also an age which discovered some of the limitations of a literature of happiness.

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