Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter

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I

Hobbes assured John Aubrey 'that Aristotle was the worst teacher that ever was, the worst politician and ethick', but he conceded at the same time that 'his rhetorique and discourse of animals was rare.'[1] It is certainly evident that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was a work by which Hobbes was deeply impressed. One sign of its impact on his thinking has frequently been remarked. When Hobbes first turns to examine the character of the 'affections' in chapters 8 and 9 of *The Elements of Law*, he enunciates a number of his definitions in the form of virtual quotations from book 2 of Aristotle's text.[2] But a further and connected influence of the *Rhetoric* has been much less discussed. When Hobbes asks himself in chapter 9 of *The Elements*, and again in chapter 6 of *Leviathan*, about the nature of the emotions expressed by the phenomenon of laughter, he proceeds to outline a theory of the ridiculous closely resembling Aristotle's analysis in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*. It is with the Aristotelian tradition of thinking about the laughable, and Hobbes's peculiar place in that tradition, that I am principally concerned in what follows. Like the ancient and early modern writers I discuss, I shall focus on two specific questions. What emotion does the phenomenon of laughter express? And how is the phenomenon of laughter to be understood and appraised?

II

Aristotle's most frequently quoted observation about laughter comes from the text known to Latin antiquity as *De partibus animalium*, in which he notes that human beings are the only creatures that laugh.[3] This may well have been the text that Hobbes had in mind when he spoke admiringly to

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[1] Aubrey 1898, vol.1, p. 357.

[2] For discussions of the parallels see Strauss 1963: 36–41; Zappen 1983, Skinner 1996 38–9.

[3] Aristotle 1961, III. 10, p. 281. For a discussion see Screech 1997, pp. 1–5.

Aubrey of Aristotle's 'discourse of animals'. For my present purposes, however, Aristotle's most relevant observations can be found in the passage from book 2 of the *Rhetoric* in which he discusses the manners of youth. Hobbes was a profound student of this text, of which he produced a Latin paraphrase in the early 1630s.[4] It was from this paraphrase that someone (but not Hobbes)[5] made the translation that was published in *c.*1637 as *A Briefe of the Art of Rhetorique*, the earliest version of Aristotle's text to appear in English.[6] If we turn to this version, we find Aristotle saying that one of the characteristics of young people is that they are 'Lovers of Mirth, and by consequence love to jest at others'.[7] This leads him to enquire into the feelings expressed by their mirth, to which he replies that '*Jesting* is witty Contumely', having earlier assured us that contumely 'is the disgracing of another for his own pastime'.[8]

Aristotle's basic suggestion is thus that the mirth induced by jesting is always an expression of contempt, a suggestion already present in his earlier observation that among the sources of pleasure are 'ridiculous Actions, Sayings and Persons'.[9] As he points out himself,[10] he had already pursued these implications in his *Poetics*, especially in the brief section in which he had discussed the type of mimesis manifested in comedy.[11] Comedy deals in the risible, and the risible is an aspect of the shameful, the ugly, or the base. If we find ourselves laughing at others, it will be because they exhibit some fault or mark of shame which, while not painful, makes them ridiculous. Those who are chiefly risible are accordingly those who are in some way inferior, especially morally inferior, although not wholly vicious in character.[12]

It is possible that Aristotle was indebted for some of these observations to the remarks that Plato makes about laughter in several of his dialogues. In the *Philebus* Plato considers the nature of the ridiculous,[13] and in the *Republic* he foreshadows the central principle of Aristotle's analysis when he declares that laughter is almost always connected with the reproving of vice.[14] It would be fair to say, however, that Plato's observations remain scattered and unsystematic by comparison with Aristotle's direct engagement with the topic, and it is perhaps not surprising that it was Aristotle's analysis that exercised the greatest influence in antiquity.

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[4] Hobbes's paraphrase is preserved at Chatsworth as Hobbes MS D.1: *Latin Exercises* (bound MS volume with *Ex Artistot: Rhet.*, at pp. 1–143).

[5] As Karl Schuhmann's forthcoming edition will show, the English version of Hobbes's paraphrase contains a number of anomalies and mistranslations which suggest that it cannot be by Hobbes. (I have therefore bracketed Hobbes's name in referring to this text.)

[6] [Hobbes (?)]1986, pp. 33–128.

[7] [Hobbes (?)]1986, p. 86.

[8] [Hobbes (?)]1986, pp. 70, 86.

[9] [Hobbes (?)]1986, p. 57.

[10] Aristotle 1926, I. XI. 28, p. 128, and III. XVIII. 7, p. 466.

[11] It may be, however, that Aristotle is referring to a fuller discussion in the now lost book 2 of his *Poetics*.

[12] Aristotle 1995, 1449^{a}, p. 44.

[13] See Plato 1925 48c–50b, pp. 332–40 and cf. Plato 1926, 935d–936a, vol. 2, pp. 462–4, where he discusses the need to regulate comic writers in their use of ridicule.

[14] Plato 1930–5, 452d, vol. 1, p. 436.

We find Aristotle's theory taken up in two distinct but convergent strands of thought. One was medical, and appears to have originated with the apocryphal letter of Hippocrates about Democritus, the laughing philosopher. Hippocrates reports that he was summoned by the people of Abdera—the city to which Democritus had retired in old age—because of their anxiety about the sage's apparent insanity. One of the citizens had paid Democritus a visit and 'began to weep in a loud voice in the manner of a woman weeping at the death of her child'.[15] But even in the face of this seemingly tragic outburst Democritus merely laughed. Hippocrates writes that at first he took Democritus to task for his insensitivity, but Democritus explained that 'I am only laughing at mankind, full of folly and empty of any good actions'[16] and at a world in which men occupy themselves 'with matters of no value, and consume their lives with ridiculous things'.[17] Hippocrates was greatly impressed, and on leaving Abdera thanked the people for enabling him to talk with 'the very wise Democritus, who alone is capable of giving wisdom to everyone in the world'.[18]

The other group of writers who explored the connections between laughter and contempt were the rhetoricians, and in this case they drew their inspiration directly from Aristotle's texts. The most elaborate analysis is Cicero's in book 2 of *De oratore*, in which the figure of Caesar is persuaded to discourse about the concept of the laughable.[19] Caesar begins by offering a restatement and elaboration of Aristotle's argument:

> The proper field and as it were the province of laughter is restricted to matters that are in some way either disgraceful or deformed. For the principal if not the sole cause of mirth are those kinds of remarks which note and single out, in a fashion not in itself unseemly, something which is in some way unseemly or disgraceful.[20]

Caesar goes on to explain that the unseemliness can be either moral or physical in nature. He first suggests, again in strongly Aristotelian vein, that 'materials for ridicule can be found in the vices observable in people's behaviour, provided that the people concerned are neither especially popular nor figures of real tragedy'.[21] To which he adds that 'further materials especially suitable for making jokes are provided by ugliness and physical deformity'.[22]

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[15] Joubert 1579, Appendix, p. 358: 'voulant ancor mieus expliquer sa follie, se mit à pleurer à haute vois, comme une fame qui pleure la mort de son anfant'.

[16] Joubert 1579, Appendix, p. 363: 'Je ne me Ris que de l'homme, plein de folie, & vide de toutes accions droites.'

[17] Joubert 1579, Appendix, pp. 363–4: 'choses de nulle valeur, consument leurs vies an choses ridicules'.

[18] Joubert 1579, Appendix, p. 375: 'le tres-sage Democrite, qui seul peut randre sages tous les hommes du monde'.

[19] Cicero 1942, II. 57. 233, vol. 1, p. 370.

[20] Cicero 1942, II. 58. 236, vol. 1, p. 372: 'Locus autem et regio quasi ridiculi . . . turpitudine et deformitate quadam continetur; haec enim ridentur vel sola, vel maxime, quae notant et designant turpitudinem aliquam non turpiter.'

The other leading rhetorician to examine the relations between laughter and contempt is Quintilian in book 6 of his *Institutio oratoria*, a discussion that appears to be indebted in equal measure to Aristotle's and Cicero's accounts. Quintilian reiterates that laughter 'has its source in things that are either deformed or disgraceful in some way',[23] adding that 'those sayings which excite ridicule are often false (which is always ignoble), often ingeniously distorted and never in the least complimentary'.[24] Neatly juggling *ridere* and *deridere*, he concludes that 'our mirth is never very far removed from derision', since the overriding emotion expressed by it will generally be one of disdainful superiority.[25] When we laugh, we are usually glorying or triumphing over others as a result of having come to see that, by comparison with ourselves, they are suffering from some contemptible weakness or infirmity. As Quintilian summarizes, 'the most ambitious way of glorying is to speak derisively'.[26]

III

With the recovery of the classical theory of eloquence—one of the defining achievements of Renaissance culture—the classical theory of laughter was likewise revived. It seems to have been in the early decades of the sixteenth century that a number of leading humanists first took it upon themselves to enquire into the meaning and significance of laughter, the most important discussions being those of Baldessare Castiglione in his *Libro del cortegiano* of 1528 and Juan Luis Vives in his *De anima & vita* of 1539. Later in the century, for the first time since antiquity, a specialized literature began to appear on the physiological as well as the psychological aspects of the phenomenon.[27] Here the pioneer was Laurent Joubert, a physician from Montpellier, whose

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[21] Cicero 1942, II. 59. 238, vol. 1, p. 374: 'materies omnis ridiculorum est in istis vitiis quae sunt in vita hominum neque carorum neque calamitosorum'.

[22] Cicero 1942, II. 59. 239, vol. 1, p. 374: 'est etiam deformitatis et corporis vitiorum satis bella materies ad iocandum'.

[23] Quintilian 1920–2, VI. 3. 8, vol. 2, p. 442, quoting Cicero *De oratore*, II. 58. 236, vol. 1, p. 372: '[Risus] habet sedem in deformitate aliqua et turpitudine.'

[24] Quintilian 1920–2, VI. 3. 6, vol. 2, p. 440: 'ridiculum dictum plerumque falsum est (hoc semper humile), saepe ex industria depravatum, praeterea nunquam honorificum'.

[25] Quintilian 1920–2, VI. 3. 8, vol. 2, p. 442: 'A derisu non procul abest risus.'

[26] Quintilian 1920–2, XI. 1. 22, vol. 4, p. 166: 'Ambitiosissimum gloriandi genus est etiam deridere.'

[27] For fuller lists of Renaissance theorists of laughter see Screech 1997, p. 58 n., and especially Ménager 1995, pp. 7–11. Ménager's is an excellent study and I am much indebted to it.

Traité du ris was first published in Paris in 1579.[28] Soon afterwards several comparable treatises appeared in Italy, including Celso Mancini's *De risu, ac ridiculis* in 1598,[29] Antonio Lorenzini's *De risu* in 1603,[30] and Elpidio Berrettario's *Phisici, et philosophi tractatus de risu* of the same year.[31]

As in the case of the classical theorists, all these writers assume that the most important question to ask about laughter is what emotions give rise to it.[32] Some of them approach the puzzle by way of considering the phenomenon of laughter in conjunction with the shedding of tears. Francisco Vallesio, one of Philip II's physicians, included a chapter entitled *De risu et fletu* in his *Controversiae* in 1582,[33] while Nicander Jossius published an entire treatise under the same title in 1580.[34] Timothy Bright, a London physician, similarly juxtaposes laughter and weeping in his *Treatise of Melancholie* in 1586,[35] as does Rodolph Goclenius the elder in his *Physica commentatio de risu & lacrymis* in 1597.[36] Hobbes likewise links laughter and tears in his *Critique* of Thomas White's *De Mundo*, as does Descartes in *Les Passions de l'âme*.[37]

Among the elements common to laughter and weeping, these writers single out the fact that they are peculiar to humankind,[38] that they are largely uncontrollable,[39] and that they seem to be almost unnaturally vehement reactions to some inner movement of the soul.[40] They find it easy to agree that the main emotion expressed by weeping must be dejection and sadness,[41] perhaps accompanied on some occasions by fear.[42] But as Bright explicitly concedes, the cause of laughter 'is of more difficultie to finde out, and the reason not so manifest'.[43] What passion of the soul could possibly be so complex and powerful as to make us 'burst out', as Vallesio puts it, in this 'almost convulsive' way?[44]

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[28] See Joubert 1579 and on its publishing history Ménager 1995, pp. 7–8. On the place of Joubert's work in the medical literature see Machline 1998, pp. 251–64.

[29] Mancini 1598. According to Ménager 1995, p. 9, Mancini's text was originally published in 1591. But Ménager appears to confuse the publishing history of Mancini's book with that of Antonio Lorenzini (on which see n. 30 below).

[30] Lorenzini 1606. Lorenzini's text had already been published, together with a reprint of Nicander Jossius's 1580 treatise on laughter, in Lorenzini 1603.

[31] Berrettario 1603.

[32] This contrasts with some of the most interesting scholarship on the history of laughter, which has concentrated on genres of comedy and their potential for the subversion of elites. See, for example, Bakhtine 1970, Thomas 1977.

[33] Vallesio 1582, V. 9, pp. 220–2.

[34] Jossius 1580, pp. 44–144.

[35] Bright 1586, ch. 28, p. 161: '*Howe melancholie causeth both weeping and laughing, and the reasons how*'.

[36] Goclenius 1597.

[37] See Hobbes 1973, p. 360 on the 'affectus ridentium & flentium' and cf. Descartes 1988, Article 128, p. 156 linking 'le Ris' and 'les larmes'.

[38] Jossius 1580, pp. 91, 94–5; Vallesio 1582, p. 220. See also Goclenius 1597, pp. 21, 37, 45, who anticipates a possible objection by adding (p. 54) that the tears of the crocodile are not real but 'quasi' tears.

[39] Jossius 1580, pp. 52, 57; Vallesio 1582, p. 220; Goclenius 1597, p. 22.

[40] For the claim that 'risus et fletus praeter naturam fiunt' see Vallesio 1582, p. 222. Cf. Jossius 1580, p. 52, on how laughter 'oritur . . . ob vehementem occasionem' and Goclenius 1597, p. 21, on the 'animi commotio' involved.

[41] Jossius 1580, p. 99 claims that 'dolor seu dolorificium esset subiectum & materia fletus'. Cf. Vallesio 1582, p. 222, on 'tristitia' as the cause. See also BL Harl. MS 6083, fo. 177, Hobbes's fragment *Of Passions*, in which he likewise observes (fo. 177^r) that 'sudden deiection, is the passion; that causeth weeping'.

[42] Vallesio 1582, p. 222 argues that weeping can arise out of 'tristitia aut timore'.

One of the feelings involved, everyone agreed, must be some form of joy or happiness. Among the humanist writers, Castiglione stresses in his *Cortegiano* that (in the words of Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of 1561) 'laughing is perceived onlie in man, and (in maner) alwaies is a token of a certein jocundenesse and meerie moode that he feeleth inwardlie in his minde'.[45] Vives similarly maintains in *De anima & vita* that 'laughter is born of happiness and delight',[46] and this doctrine was widely repeated by the humanists of the next generation and beyond.[47]

We encounter the same assumptions in the medical literature, the pioneer in this instance being the physician Girolamo Fracastoro in his *De sympathia & antipathia rerum* of 1546.[48] The cause of mirth, Fracastoro declares, must always be some form of 'internal happiness'.[49] Laurent Joubert agrees, arguing that the passion moving us to laughter must always be related in some way to joy,[50] while Francisco Vallesio more straightforwardly affirms that 'it is my belief that men laugh whenever something joyful takes place'.[51] Within a generation, everyone writing on the topic had come to take this assumption for granted. Descartes simply notes in *Les Passions de l'ame* that 'the Laugh seems to be one of the principal signs of Joy',[52] while Hobbes still more briskly concludes in *The Elements of Law* that laughter 'is alwayes joy'.[53]

It was generally acknowledged, however, that this joy must be of a peculiar kind, since it appears to be connected in some way with feelings of scorn, contempt, and even hatred. Among the humanists, Castiglione mounts one of the earliest arguments to this effect. Whenever we laugh, we are always 'mockinge and scorninge' someone, always seeking 'to scoff and mocke at vices'.[54] Thomas Wilson enlarges on the suggestion in his *Arte of*

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[43] Bright 1586, p. 162.

[44] Vallesio 1582, p. 222 speaks of the 'quasi motus quidam convulsionis' that accompanies laughter. Jossius 1580, p. 57 similarly speaks of the passions that 'erumpunt in risum'.

[45] Castiglione 1994, p. 154.

[46] Vives 1550, p. 206: 'ex laetitia & delectatione risus nascitur.'

[47] See, for example, Jossius 1580, p. 57, Lorenzini 1606, p. 95.

[48] Ménager 1995, p. 8 notes that Fracastoro was one of the physicians appointed by the Vatican to attend the Council of Trent. He was also well-known as a poet, and received the praise of Sir Philip Sidney. See Sidney 1912, p. 35. On Hobbes as a reader of Fracastoro see Leijenhorst 1996.

[49] Fracastoro 1546, fo. 23^v states that, when we laugh, 'laetitia interna in facie manifestetur'.

[50] Joubert 1579, pp. 72–3, 87–8.

[51] Vallesio 1582, p. 220: 'sentimus, homines ridere quum occurrit res iocunda'.

[52] Descartes 1988, Article 125, p. 153: 'il semble que le Ris soit un des principaux signes de la Joye'.

[53] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[54] Castiglione 1994, pp. 155–6.

Rhetorique of 1554, the earliest full-scale neo-classical treatise on eloquence in the English language. Wilson includes a long section in book 2 entitled 'Of delityng the hearers, and stirryng them to laughter' in which he maintains that we experience feelings of contempt whenever we perceive 'the fondnes, the filthines, the deformitee' of someone else's behaviour, with the result that we are prompted to 'laugh him to skorne out right'.[55]

If we turn to the medical writers, we find the same theory laid out at greater length. Perhaps the subtlest analysis is that of Laurent Joubert, although he acknowledges a debt to the earlier work of François Valleriola, a fellow physician from Montpellier.[56] Suppose we ask, Joubert writes in the opening chapter of his *Traité*, 'what is the subject-matter of laughter?'[57] Drawing on Valleriola's discussion,[58] Joubert answers that we laugh at 'everything which is ridiculous, whether it is something done or something said'.[59] But anything we find ridiculous, Joubert goes on to explain in chapter 2, will always 'be something that strikes us as ugly, deformed, dishonest, indecent, malicious and scarcely decorous'.[60] So our laughter will always arise from the contemplation of deeds or sayings 'which have an appearance of ugliness without being pitiable'.[61] This in turn means that the joy we experience can never be unalloyed. We can never avoid some measure of scorn or dislike for baseness and ugliness, so that 'the common style of our laughter is contempt or derision'.[62] Joubert goes further and adds that, in consequence of these complex feelings, laughter can never be wholly unconnected with sadness. 'Given that everything which is ridiculous arises from ugliness and dishonesty',[63] and given that we can never contemplate such unpleasantness with equanimity, it follows that 'anything ridiculous gives us pleasure and sadness combined'.[64]

Joubert's emphasis on *tristesse* was rarely taken up, but his contention that laughter is basically an expression of scorn for ridiculous things was much reiterated,[65] especially by those who aspired to connect the insights of the humanists with those of the burgeoning medical literature. Perhaps the most important writer to forge these links was Robert Burton, who declares in the Introduction to his *Anatomy of Melancholy* of 1621 that there has never been 'so much cause of laughter' as we encounter in our present distempered world. He goes on to explain that in laughing we 'contemne others, condemne the world of folly', and that the world has never been so full of folly to scorn and condemn, so full of people who are 'Fooles & ridiculous'.[66] Sir Thomas Browne, another physician steeped in humanist learning, speaks in comparable vein in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* of 1646. Discussing the passion of laughter in book 7, he agrees that 'a laugh there is of contempt or indignation', adding that even God himself is described in the Scriptures as laughing the wicked to scorn.[67]

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[55] Wilson 1554, fos. 74^{v}, 75^{r}.

[56] Valleriola 1588, p. 134 in turn speaks warmly of Joubert's *Traité du ris*.

[57] Joubert 1579, p. 15: 'Quelle est la matiere du Ris?'

[58] Valleriola 1554, III, IX, pp. 212–24, esp. pp. 217–18.

[59] Joubert 1579, p. 16: 'tout ce qui est ridicule . . . an fait, ou an dit'.

[60] Joubert 1579, p. 16: 'Ce que nous voyons de laid, difforme, des-honneste, indessant, malfeant, & peu convenable.'

[61] Joubert 1579, p. 16: the 'fais ou dis' that provoke laughter are those 'qui ont apparance de laideur, & ne sont pitoyables'.

[62] Joubert 1579, p. 30: '[le] commum geanre . . . e[s]t le mepris ou derision'.

[63] Joubert 1579, pp. 87–8: 'pour ce que tout ridicule provient de laideur & meffeance'.

[64] Joubert 1579, p. 87: 'la chose ridicule nous donne plaisir & tristesse'.

[65] For a similar account see Goclenius 1597, ch. 2, pp. 9, 15.

So far, the account of laughter we have encountered in the humanist and medical literature of the Renaissance presents a purely neo-classical appearance. It is true that the Renaissance writers are generally content, at least initially, to repeat and embroider the classical case. Any suggestion, however, that they slavishly follow their ancient authorities would be seriously misleading, and needs to be qualified in at least two important respects.

It first needs to be emphasized that, in a number of Renaissance writers, we encounter two significant additions to their inherited arguments. First of all, they place a new emphasis on the role of suddenness, and hence of surprise, in the provocation of mirth. Cicero in *De oratore* had alluded to the significance of the unexpected,[68] but his Renaissance followers greatly embroider the point. Castiglione stresses that 'certein newlye happened cases' are particularly apt to 'provoke laughter', especially if we surprise our hearers by speaking 'contrary to expectacyon'.[69] Vives further elaborates the insight, arguing that our mirth 'arises out of a novel sense of delight', and that 'sudden and unexpected things have more effect on us and move us more quickly to laughter than anything else'.[70]

For a fuller analysis we need to return to the medical writers, who first introduce into the argument the key concept of *admiratio* or wonderment.[71] The pioneering discussion appears to be that of Girolamo Fracastoro in his *De sympathia* of 1546. 'The things that generally move us to laughter', he begins, 'must have a certain novelty about them' and must appear before us 'suddenly' and 'unexpectedly'.[72] When this happens, we instantly experience a sense of wonderment, which in turn creates in us a feeling of delight. The emotional sequence is thus that 'the sudden and the unexpected give rise to *admiratio*, which in turn gives rise to *delectatio*, which in turn provokes the movement of the face we call laughter'.[73] Francisco Vallesio fulsomely acknowledges Fracastoro's analysis and goes on to appropriate it.[74] 'As a result of experiment', he reports, 'I am led to believe that men laugh when something happens which is at once pleasant and new . . . the novelty gives rise to *admiratio*, the pleasure gives rise to joy' and the combination is what makes us laugh.[75]

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[66] Burton 1989, pp. 37, 57, 101.

[67] Browne 1928–31, vol. 3, p. 312.

[68] Cicero 1942, II. 63. 255, vol. 1, p. 388; cf. also II. 71. 289, vol. 1, p. 418.

[69] Castiglione 1994, pp. 188, 190.

[70] Vives 1550, p. 207: 'insperata vera & subita plus afficiunt, citius commovent risum'. On this assumption see Skinner 1996, p. 392. The claim was frequently reiterated by humanist writers of the next generation. See, for example, Mancini 1598, p. 217, arguing that anything which causes laughter must always happen *statim*, suddenly and all at once.

[71] The point was quickly taken up by the humanist writers. See, for example, Jossius 1580, p. 58, Lorenzini 1606, p. 95.

[72] Fracastoro 1546, fo. 23^{v}: 'Nova quoque ea sunt, quae risum movere solent.' See also fo. 24^{r} on the need for the *res* to be *subita* and *repentina*.

Fracastoro's emphasis on *admiratio* was quickly taken up by the humanists, and in particular by a number of commentators on Aristotle's *Poetics*. Here the pioneer seems to have been Vincento Maggi in his *In Aristotelis Librum de Poetica Communes Explicationes* of 1550.[76] Speaking in the special tone of vehemence that humanist scholars liked to affect, Maggi declares that 'I cannot sufficiently express my astonishment as to why it is that Cicero should have failed to say a single word about the subject of *admiratio*, which is one of the causes of laughter, when the fact is that in the absence of *admiratio* it is never possible for laughter to occur.'[77] The reason why the presence of *admiratio* is indispensable is that we laugh only when we encounter new and surprising things. It is the presence of *novitas* that induces wonderment, and it is our sense of wonderment that makes us laugh.[78]

The other important addition made by the Renaissance theorists to the classical theory of laughter arose out of their perception of a lacuna in Aristotle's original account. Aristotle's thesis in the *Poetics* had been that laughter reproves vice by way of expressing and soliciting feelings of contempt for those who conduct themselves ridiculously. As Maggi points out in his commentary on the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle had uncharacteristically failed to supply a definition of the ridiculous,[79] and had failed in consequence to indicate which particular vices are most susceptible of being held up to derision and thereby laughed to scorn.

To the medical writers this issue was of little significance, but to the humanists it often seemed the most interesting question of all. They found a clue to the answer in Aristotle's contention that wholly vicious characters are not properly the subject of ridicule.[80] Castiglione enlarges on the insight by suggesting that the vices specifically deserving of our contempt are those which exhibit 'affectation' rather than outright wickedness, and especially those which 'passe the degree' and thereby lead to extravagant behaviour. 'Those Affectations and curiosities that are but meane, bringe a lothsomnesse with them, but whan they be done oute of measure they much provoke laughter.' Those people who visibly 'passe the degree' when behaving discreditably reduce themselves to absurdity, which is why they 'doe rather provoke laughter then lothsomnesse'.[81]

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[73] Fracastoro 1546, fo. 24^{r}: 'Subitam & repentinam etiam admirationem ac repentinam etiam delectationem faciunt [et ex delectatione] . . . motum oris, qui risus dicitur.'

[74] Vallesio 1582, p. 220 acknowledges both Valeriola and Fracastoro.

[75] Vallesio 1582, p. 220: 'Experimento sentimus, homines ridere, quum occurrit res iocunda, & nova . . . nova faciunt admirationem, iocunda gaudium.'

[76] Maggi 1550, pp. 301–27.

[77] Maggi 1550, p. 305: 'Mirari satis non possum cur Cicero . . . de admiratione, quae est una risus causa, ne verbum quidem fecerit . . . cum risus nunquam sine admiratione fieri possit.'

[78] Maggi focuses on the importance of *novitas* in part 2 of Maggi 1550, pp. 310–22.

[79] Maggi 1550, part 3, esp. p. 325.

Among the vices resulting from a failure to observe this ideal of *mediocritas*, one of the most contemptible was generally agreed to be avarice. Nicander Jossius singles out this weakness as one of the most obvious 'characteristics of body and soul' in which 'matters of ridicule lurk'.[82] Celso Mancini ends his *De risu, ac ridiculis* by specifying in similar vein that one of the failings 'most worthy of derision' is 'the miserliness of old men, because any man is deformed and rendered monstrous by avarice'.[83] So too Paolo Beni, who notes in his *Commentarii* on Aristotle's *Poetics* that the figure of the miser always makes one of the best subjects for comedy.[84] The suggestion was not lost on the comic dramatists of the age, as Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and Moliere's *L'Avare* are there to remind us.

Of all the vices open to derision, however, the most flagrant were said to be hypocrisy and vaingloriousness. If we glance forward to post-Renaissance theories of comedy, we generally find the figure of the hypocrite singled out as pre-eminently worthy of contempt. This is Henry Fielding's argument in the theoretical essay that prefaces his comic novel *Joseph Andrews* of 1742. Echoing Hoby's translation of Castiglione, Fielding begins by laying it down that the vices most open to ridicule are those which exhibit 'affectation'. He goes on to assert that 'affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy', and that 'from the discovery of this affectation arises the ridiculous—which always strikes the reader with surprize and pleasure'. But he adds that this happens 'in a higher and stronger degree when the affectation arises from hypocrisy, than when from vanity', and he concludes by noting that 'our Ben Johnson, who of all men understood the *ridiculous* the best, hath chiefly used the hypocritical affectation' in his comedies.[85]

Among the Renaissance theorists, by contrast, we encounter a weightier emphasis on the affectations of pride and vaingloriousness. It is possible that they may have been directly influenced by Plato at this point, for when Socrates examines the nature of the ridiculous in the *Philebus* he not only argues that those who render themselves absurd must be suffering from some kind of vice, but adds that the vice in question will generally be lack of self-knowledge, especially in the form of self-conceit.[86] It is more likely, however, that the Renaissance writers were drawing on a suggestion of Cicero's in book 2 of *De oratore*, in which the figure of Caesar begins his analysis of the ridiculous by declaring that the people most worthy of being laughed to scorn are 'those who act in a particularly boastful way'.[87]

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[80] Aristotle 1995, 1449^a, p. 44.

[81] Castiglione 1994, pp. 163–4.

[82] Jossius 1580, p. 75, offers 'quodam avaritiae genus & actiones' as his first example of the fact that 'in moribus quoque corporis, atque animi latent ridicula'.

[83] Mancini 1598, pp. 22–30: 'Ridendo avaritiam senum [quod] ab avaritia hominem fieri deformem & monstrum.'

[84] Beni 1613, p. 162.

[85] Fielding 1985, pp. 28–9.

Whatever the source, the suggestion is one that the humanist writers of the Renaissance develop at much greater length. It is when people 'bragg and boast of them selves and have a proude and haughtye stomake', Castiglione maintains, that we are justified 'in mockinge and scorninge such a one' to raise a laugh.[88] He offers the example of men who 'speake of their auntientrye and noblenesse of birth' and of women who praise their own 'beawtie and handsomenesse'.[89] Celso Mancini singles out 'the would-be boastful soldier' as yet another type of person 'whose boastings make us laugh' because 'we know that such vaingloriousness is ridiculous and because such lack of measure irritates us'.[90] Speaking in a loftier register, Lodovico Castelvetro—yet another learned commentator on Aristotle's *Poetics*—suggests that the principal cause of laughter arises from the fact that our fallen and corrupted natures have left us 'stuffed with vanity and pride'.[91] Once again, these insights were not lost on the comic dramatists of the age, who often exhibit a special detestation of those who act without 'measure' and try to pass beyond their degree. The overweening self-love of Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the vainglorious boasting of Puntarvolo in Jonson's *Every Man Out of his Humour*, the ridiculous social climbing of M. Jourdain in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* are all variations on the same satirical theme.

IV

So far I have considered the two main ways in which the classical theory of laughter was extended and developed in the course of the Renaissance. Far more important, however, is the fact that a number of Renaissance writers began to express doubts about the governing assumption of the classical theory, the assumption that laughter is invariably an expression of contempt for vice. They began to ask themselves whether this argument, if not entirely mistaken, may not be considerably exaggerated. Is it really true that our laughter is always an expression of scorn? Surely some laughter—for example, the laughter of infants—is an expression of unalloyed delight?[92]

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[86] Plato 1925, 48c–49c, pp. 332–6.

[87] Cicero 1942, II. 58. 237, vol. 1, p. 374, singles out the absurdity of those who 'se forte iactant'.

[88] Castiglione 1994, p. 155.

[89] Castiglione 1994, p. 163.

[90] Mancini 1598, pp. 229–30: 'Provocat nos ad risum iactantia militis gloriosi [quod] cognoscimus dementiam esse illam inanem gloriam . . . carens mensura nos vexat.'

[91] Castelvetro 1570, fo. 53^v, speaks of 'la natura nostra corrotta per lo peccato originale' and the fact that 'si riempie d'alegrezza, & di superbia'.

A number of medical writers, no doubt anxious to throw off the weight of scholastic learning, particularly emphasize the point. Fracastoro insists that 'the things which are said about the ridiculous are not properly said', for the truth is that 'laughter is composed out of joy and wonderment combined'.[93] Vallesio refers us to Fracastoro's anti-Aristotelian analysis and proceeds to adopt it. He begins by declaring that 'men laugh when something happens which is at once pleasant and new', but adds that 'our mirth ceases either when the feeling of novelty, or else the feeling of pleasure, wears off'.[94] From this he infers that our laughter need have nothing to do with contempt, since it can equally well be a simple response to a pleasing and surprising event. Developing the insight more systematically, the Pisan physician Elpidio Berrettario in his *Tractatus de risu* introduces a sharp distinction between what he takes to be two distinct *genera* of mirth.[95] One is the *genus* discussed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, in which our laughter is provoked by seeing vices successfully held up to ridicule.[96] But the other is unconnected with derision, and simply arises 'when we are enticed into laughter by something that is joyful or precious to us'.[97]

Nor were these doubts confined to the medical literature. Castelvetro in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*[98] opens his analysis of the passage in which, as he translates it, Aristotle had argued that 'the laughable is a subdivision of the base'[99] by retorting that 'laughter can be provoked in us by purely pleasurable things'.[100] Beni in his still more comprehensive

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[92] One might expect to find in addition some *moral* objections to contemptuous laughter, and especially to its use (in accordance with Cicero's instructions) to mock other people's weaknesses and infirmities. But such scruples are rarely voiced in this period. Sir Thomas More is the only leading humanist to make this kind of anti-Aristotelian point. See More 1965, p. 192. But see Cockagne 2000, pp. 79–82, 89–91 for later moral anxieties about laughter as an expression of ridicule.

[93] Fracastoro 1546, fos. 23^v–24^r: 'Verum haec non proprie ea sunt, quae ridicula dicuntur . . . Est autem risus, compositus ex admiratione & letitia.'

[94] Vallesio 1582, p. 220: 'Homines ridere, quum occurrit res iocunda, & nova . . . atque quamprimum cessat aut iocunditas, aut novitas, cessare risum.'

[95] Berrettario 1603, fos. 7^r and 22^r also singles out the laughter provoked by tickling, insisting (against Fracastoro) that this too is a 'real' and distinct *genus* of the phenomenon.

[96] Berrettario 1603, fo. 7^r.

[97] Berrettario 1603, fo. 19^r: 'Alterum vero, quando iucunditate & caritate quadam allicimur ad risum.'

[98] See Ménager 1995, pp. 32–3 for a discussion of this text.

[99] Castelvetro 1570, fo. 50^v: 'Il ridevole è particella della turpitudine.'

[100] Castelvetro 1570, fo. 51^r: 'Il riso si muove in noi per cose piacentici.'

Commentarii on the *Poetics* similarly questions Aristotle's claim that comedy is always preoccupied with reproving vice, pointing out that 'it is not at all rare for comedy to portray good men and to represent them in a praiseworthy way'.[101]

These observations were sometimes underpinned by an anti-Aristotelian vision of the joy and delight out of which laughter can arise. The underlying emotion, some theorists argue, can often be simple *joie de vivre*, unconnected with any feelings of superiority or scorn. Fracastoro observes that 'we often laugh and show our joy when we meet our friends and acquaintances, or else our children, and more generally those who are dear to us'.[102] Castelvetro illustrates the same *mise-en-scène*, picturing a situation in which 'a father and mother receive their little children with laughter and festivity, while in a similar way a lover greets his beloved with a laugh'.[103] Referring with approval to Fracastoro's analysis,[104] Berrettario adds with a flourish that we laugh not only when we encounter our children and friends, but also when we contemplate a beloved mistress or a precious stone.[105]

A further way in which laughter can sometimes arise, according to these writers, is when we experience a sudden defeat of our expectations, whether in the form of a surprising juxtaposition or some other kind of incongruity. Nicander Jossius, although in general a close follower of Aristotle, illustrates the possibility at considerable length. He invites us to consider how we would react 'if a woman were to put on male attire, or gird herself with a sword and set out for the forum, or if a boastful soldier were to settle down with boys learning their grammar at school, or if a prince were to dress himself up as a peasant'.[106] We would certainly laugh, but the reason for our mirth would be the utter incongruity of it all, the failure to pay due respect 'to time, place, moderation or appropriateness'.[107] While these situations would undoubtedly be ridiculous, Jossius appears to suggest that we would laugh at them less in contempt than in sheer astonishment.

These insights were eventually developed in Augustan culture into a general defence of the claim that there can be purely good-natured laughter.[108]

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[101] Beni 1613, p. 103: 'Comoedia non raro bonos exprimit . . . [et] cum laude representet.' Cf. also pp. 162, 197.

[102] Fracastoro 1546, fo. 23^v: 'Quum aut amicis & familiaribus, aut filiis, & universaliter charis occurrimus . . . ridere solemus, & laetitiam ostendere.'

[103] Castelvetro 1570, fo. 51^r: 'Il padre & la madre con riso & con festa riceve I figlioletti piccioli . . . & parimente l'amante raccoglie la donna amata con riso.' See also the tabulation at the end of this section of Castelvetro's commentary, which is headed (fo. 54^v) 'cose piacenti che ci muovono a riso'. The first is said to be 'carita di persone prossime o amate o di cose desiderate'.

[104] Berrettario 1603, fo. 20^v.

[105] Berrettario 1603, fos. 19^r, 21^v.

[106] Jossius 1580, pp. 71–2: 'si mulier induat habitum virilem, aut accincta ense proficiscatur ad forum . . . [aut si] miles gloriosus . . . sedeat cum pueris in schola discens grammaticam . . . [aut] si princeps ut rustica gens vestiat'.

[107] Jossius 1580, p. 71: 'ad locum, ad tempus, ad modum, aut occasionem'.

[108] On this development see Tave 1960, esp. pp. 43–87.

We encounter the suggestion in Joseph Addison's articles on laughter in the *Spectator* of 1711,[109] in Francis Hutcheson's explictly anti-Hobbesian *Reflections upon Laughter* in 1725,[110] and perhaps most interestingly in Fielding's Preface to *Joseph Andrews*. As we have seen, Fielding's analysis at first sight looks thoroughly classical, for he accepts that comedy aims to ridicule certain types of affectation, and he agrees that the vices most susceptible to ridicule are avarice, hypocrisy, and vanity. At the same time, however, he draws a strong distinction between the comic and what he describes as the burlesque. While the latter genre 'contributes more to exquisite mirth and laughter than any other', it never does so by seeking to arouse contempt. Rather it works by conveying a sense of the 'surprizing absurdity' of some situation, 'as in appropriating the manners of the highest to the lowest' or by producing other 'distortions and exaggerations'. The effect, if successful, will be to make us laugh, but our mirth in these cases will be 'full of good-humour and benevolence'.[111]

These later arguments were undoubtedly of great importance in the evolution of modern theories of comedy. As we have seen, however, it had come to be widely accepted as early as the opening decades of the seventeenth century that the classical theory of laughter had only succeeded in capturing one element in the explanation of this protean phenomenon. For a summary of the more complex theory that had by then become orthodox, we can hardly do better than turn to that fount of conventional sentiment, the French *conseilleur* Louis Guyon, who includes a chapter on laughter in the third edition of his *Diverses Leçons* of 1617.[112]

Guyon continues to cleave to a number of classical arguments. He agrees with Aristotle that 'man alone is capable of laughter'.[113] He adds that 'something sudden and unexpected' must happen if laughter is to be provoked.[114] And he feels bound to accept the basic Aristotelian contention that 'the cause of laughter must be a certain deformity, because we laugh only at those things which are unsuitable in themselves and appear to be badly formed'.[115]

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[109] [Addison] 1965, no. 249 (15 Dec. 1711), vol. 2, pp. 465–9, refers us back to an earlier article (no. 49, 24 Apr. 1711, vol. 1, pp. 200–4) about Hobbes's theory of laughter. Addison maintains (pp. 466, 468) that while Hobbes's account 'seems to hold in most cases' we need to recognize a form of laughter 'in it self both amiable and beautiful'.

[110] Hutcheson 1750, originally published as three articles in the *Dublin Review* for 1725. (For the printing history see Tave 1960, p. 56.) Hutcheson 1750, pp. 6, 29 denounces the 'palpable absurdity' of Hobbes's failure to recognize that laughter frequently 'evidences good nature'.

[111] Fielding 1985, pp. 26–8. On the evolution of the contrast between laughter produced by satire (contemptuous and ridiculing) and by the burlesque (sympathetic), see Paulson 1988.

[112] Guyon 1617, I. 3. 3, pp. 434–42.

[113] Guyon 1617, p. 442: 'l'homme seul est capable [de rire]'.

[114] Guyon 1617, p. 442: 'quelque chose de soudain: & non attendu'.

[115] Guyon 1617, p. 435: 'les causes du rire sont, une certaine deformité, pource qu'on rid seulement des choses qui ne conviennent en soi, & semblent mal feantes . . . je ne le puis pas declarer autrement'.

As he makes clear, however, his intellectual allegiances are far from strictly Aristotelian, and he goes on to develop a more complex although still conventional account. He begins by stressing that it is possible to laugh 'in a civil style',[116] and explains that 'anyone who reflects properly will see that what makes us laugh is almost always something which, while it is in some way unsuitable, nevertheless need not be badly-formed'.[117] He declares that 'everything which provokes laughter gives pleasure',[118] and is very insistent that 'laughter is highly agreeable to everyone, so that anyone who provokes it in a good way, and in its proper season, is greatly to be commended'.[119] His own aspiration—as he explains in line with much Renaissance sentiment—is thus 'to show what methods a discreet personage should use to move laughter'[120] if the aim is 'always to guard one's dignity' at the same time.[121]

V

The idea that laughter can be pleasant as well as contemptuous, and can therefore form a part of a properly 'civil' life, had come to be widely accepted by the early decades of the seventeenth century. So it comes as something of a shock to find that, in the two best-known discussions of laughter in the next generation—those of Hobbes and Descartes—these assumptions are explicitly set aside in favour of a return to an unambiguously classical point of view.

This is not to say that Hobbes and Descartes restate the Aristotelian theory in its most blinkered form. They both pick up and reiterate the two developments of Aristotle's argument I have already discussed. First of all, they lay considerable emphasis on the concept originally introduced by Fracastoro into the discussion, the concept of surprise or wonderment. Descartes, for whom *admiratio* is a fundamental passion,[122] opens his analysis of laughter in *Les Passions de l'ame* by stressing the importance of novelty and suddenness, arguing that we laugh only when something happens 'to cause the lungs suddenly to inflate' so that 'the air they contain is forced out through the windpipe with impetuosity, forming an inarticulate and uncontrolled voice'.[123] He adds that these distinctive physiological changes take place only when a new and sudden event is associated with feelings of wonderment. The blood coming from the spleen must be 'pushed towards the heart by some light emotion of Hatred, aided by the surprise of *l'Admiration*' if the outcome is to be the form of dilation with which laughter is associated.[124]

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[116] Guyon 1617, p. 434 speaks of provoking others to laugh 'bien à point & civilement'.

[117] Guyon 1617, pp. 435–6: 'qui pensera bien en soi-mesme, verra que quasi tousjours ce dont on rid, estre une chose qui ne convient pas, & toutefois n'est malfeante.'

[118] Guyon 1617, p. 434: 'tout ce qui provoque le rire . . . donne plaisir'.

[119] Guyon 1617, p. 435: 'le rire est tres agreable à tous, & est bien loüable celui qui le provoque de bonne sorte, & en sa saison.'

[120] Goyon 1617, p 436: 'Je veux monstrer de quels moyens doit user un personage discret: pour mouvoir le rire'.

[121] Guyon 1617, p. 437: 'gardant tousjours la dignité d'une discrette personne'.

[122] On the place of wonder in Descartes's theory of the passions see James 1997, pp. 169–70, 187–9.

Hobbes brings the same features together in his first and fullest discussion of laughter, which he presented in chapter 9 of his *Elements of Law* in 1640. He too stresses the importance of novelty and surprise, arguing that 'for as much as the same thinge is noe more ridiculous, when it groweth stale, or usuall. Whatsoever it be that moveth Laughter, it must be new and unexpected.'[125] He likewise agrees that the cause of laughter must be something that gives rise to admiration, especially in the form of 'a suddaine conception of some ability in himself that laugheth'.[126] It is when we experience 'the suddaine Imagination of our owne odds and eminence' that we find ourselves bursting out with mirth.[127]

Hobbes also agrees about the specific vices most open to being ridiculed or scorned. It is striking that neither he nor Descartes gives an explicit account of this aspect of the Renaissance theory of laughter in the manner of Beni, Mancini, or Castelvetro. But when Hobbes chooses to write in satirical vein—as he does above all in book 4 of *Leviathan*—the failings he takes as the targets of his ridicule are, recognizably, the three vices that the Renaissance theorists had singled out: vainglory, avarice, and hypocrisy. It is pride and vaingloriousness, especially among those whom he mockingly praises as the egregious Schoolmen,[128] that he attacks in book 4 under the heading of 'vain philosophy'.[129] It is clerical avarice that he satirizes in his withering passage about the 'profitable' doctrine of purgatory.[130] And it is clerical hypocrisy that he wittily urges us to acknowledge in his comparison between the Roman Catholic priesthood and the kingdom of the fairies: 'The *Fairies* marry not; but there be amongst them *Incubi*, that have copulation with flesh and bloud. The *Priests* also marry not.'[131]

What is striking, however, is that neither Hobbes nor Descartes ever mentions the direct challenge to the Aristotelian theory that had arisen in the course of the Renaissance, an omission all the more surprising when one reflects that they usually go out of their way to express their scorn for

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[123] Descartes 1988, Article 124, p. 153: 'enflant les poumons subitement . . . fait que l'air qu'ils contienent, est contraint d'en sortir avec impetuosité par le sifflet, où il forme une voix inarticulée & esclatante'.

[124] Descartes 1988, Article 124, p. 154: 'poussée vers le coeur par quelque legere émotion de Haine, aydée par la surprise de l'Admiration'.

[125] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[126] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[127] Hobbes 1969, p. 42.

[128] Hobbes 1996, ch. 8, p. 59.

[129] Hobbes 1996, ch. 46, p. 458.

[130] Hobbes 1996, ch. 44, p. 426.

[131] Hobbes 1996, ch. 47, p. 481.

Aristotle's philosophy. Descartes's principal claim about laughter in *Les Passions de l'ame* remains a purely Aristotelian one. 'Although', as he explains, 'the Laugh may seem to be one of the principal signs of Joy, joy cannot be the cause of laughter unless the joy is only moderate, and is at the same time mixed with an element of hatred or wonderment.'[132] The connection of laughter with hatred and contempt is one on which he lays particular emphasis, and he later returns to it in his discussion of *la moquerie*: 'Derision or Mockery is a kind of Joy mixed with Hatred, and when this feeling arises unexpectedly the result is that we burst out with laughter.'[133]

That Hobbes returns to the same classical argument is yet more remarkable, since he opens his discussion in *The Elements* by proclaiming that his own analysis is an entirely novel one:

> There is a passion, which hath noe name, but the signe of it, is that distortion of the Countenance we call LAUGHTER, which is alwayes joy; but what joy, what we thinke, and wherein we tryumph when we laugh, hath not hitherto bene declared by any.[134]

Despite this characteristic flourish, the account Hobbes goes on to give is a wholly classical one. His oft-quoted definition, initially formulated in *The Elements*, runs as follows:

> The passion of Laughter is nothyng else but a suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others, or with our owne formerly.[135]

The invocation of glory, and the emphasis on glorying over others, have often been singled out as quintessentially Hobbesian sentiments. As will by now be evident, however, they amount to little more than unacknowledged quotations from Hobbes's ancient sources, and in particular from the analysis of laughter in book 6 of Quintilian's's *Institutio oratoria*.

Hobbes further underlines his classical allegiances by emphasizing that the feelings of glory he is describing are invariably contemptuous and derisory: 'Men Laugh at the infirmityes of others by comparison of which their owne abilityes are sett off, and illustrated.'[136] This being so, 'it is no wonder therefore that men take it heanously to be laughed at', for in becoming objects of laughter they are being 'derided, that is, tryumphed over'.[137] He summarizes still more brutally at the end of the chapter, where he presents his ‘comparison of the life of man to a race’ and explains the role in this competition of the different passions of the soul:

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[132] Descartes 1988, Article 125, p. 153: 'Or encore qu'il semble que le Ris soit un des principaux signes de la Joye, elle ne peut toutefois le causer que lors qu'elle est seulement mediocre, & qu' il y a quelque admiration ou quelque haine meslée avec elle.'

[133] Descartes 1988, Art. 178, p. 195: 'La Derision ou Moquerie est une espece de Joye meslée de Haine . . . Et lors que cela survient inopinement . . . on s'esclate de rire'.

[134] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[135] Hobbes 1969, p. 42.

[136] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[137] Hobbes 1969, p. 42.

> To fall on the suddaine, is disposition to Weepe
> To see another to fall, disposition to Laugh[138]

As in the case of Descartes, Hobbes’s basic suggestion is thus that laughter expresses a joyful and contemptuous sense of our own superiority.[139]

Hobbes and Descartes enunciate similar theories, but Hobbes’s analysis is a more elaborate one, embodying as it does a number of distinctive elements. One is the suggestion, put forward at the end of his discussion in *The Elements*, that we sometimes laugh not because we feel contempt for any particular person, but rather because we have been made aware of some general absurdity. This possibility allows for what Hobbes describes as ‘laughter without offence’, which is said to take place when we laugh ‘at absurdityes and infirmityes abstracted from persons, and where all the Company may laugh together’.[140] Such laughter will still be an expression of our scorn, but instead of mocking other people to their faces we join together in ridiculing some ludicrous feature of the world and its ways.

Curiously, Hobbes never reverts to this suggestion in any of his subsequent discussions of laughter. But he introduces a further distinction in *The Elements* which he subsequently reiterates in both versions of *Leviathan*. A contrast needs to be drawn, he suggests, between two different ways in which the sense of superiority evinced by laughter can arise. Sometimes people laugh ‘at the infirmityes of others by comparison of which their owne abilityes are sett off, and illustrated’, and in particular ‘at Jests, the witt whereof alwayes consisteth in the Elegant discovering, and conveying to our mindes some absurdity of another’.[141] But at other times people laugh ‘at their own Actions, performed never so little beyond their owne expectations, as also at their owne Jests’.[142] They laugh, that is, when they make the sudden and pleasing discovery that they are even more superior than they had supposed.

After this discussion in *The Elements*, Hobbes next returns to the subject of laughter in his manuscript fragment *Of Passions* in 1650. This includes a trenchant restatement of his basic argument, beginning as it does with the declaration that ‘sudden imagination of a mans owne abilitie, is the passion that moves laughter’.[143] As this observation makes clear, Hobbes does not think of laughter itself as a passion, although he does speak elliptically at one moment in *The Elements* of 'the passion of Laughter'.[144] Rather, as he indicates at the outset of that discussion, he regards the occurrence of laughter as the natural 'signe' of a passion.[145] He adds in *The Elements* that the passion in question 'hath noe name',[146] but in the manuscript of 1650 he goes on to name it with confidence, remarking that it centres on the feeling of superior power—or 'imagination of abilitie'—that he particularly singles out.

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[138] Hobbes 1969, p. 48.

[139] Heyd 1982, in an otherwise excellent discussion, makes the questionable suggestion (p. 289) that this may be due to the direct influence of Descartes. But this is because Heyd supposes (p. 286) that Hobbes first discusses laughter in 1650, whereas his principal discussion (in *The Elements of Law*) in fact dates from 1640, eight years before the publication of Descartes’s *Les Passions de l’ame*.

[140] Hobbes 1969, p. 42.

[141] Hobbes 1969, pp. 41–2.

[142] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[143] Hobbes, *Of Passions*, BL Harl. MS 6083, fo. 177^r.

Hobbes's final pronouncements on laughter can be found in the two versions of *Leviathan*, although the relevant passage from the Latin edition of 1668 amounts to little more than a translation of the English version of 1651. Hobbes begins by reverting to the definition he had already furnished in *The Elements of Law*. '*Sudden Glory*', he again declares, 'is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER'.[147] He likewise reverts to his earlier claim that the sense of superiority prompting people to laugh can arise in one of two ways. They may succeed in accomplishing something beyond their expectations, with the result that they laugh 'because of some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them'.[148] Alternatively, their sense of superiority may stem more directly from their perception of some contemptible weakness or 'deformed thing' in someone else.[149]

Hobbes now passes over the interesting possibility he had raised in *The Elements* to the effect that the sense of 'eminency' that makes us laugh can arise not merely from comparing ourselves 'with the Infirmityes of others', but also 'with our owne formerly'.[150] The implication that we may sometimes laugh at our previous selves finds no echo in either version of *Leviathan*. Perhaps Hobbes had come to believe, as he sometimes seems to imply, that our previous selves can be regarded as equivalent to different persons, so that there is no distinction to be made.[151] Or perhaps he had come to feel that such self-mockery is less common than he had earlier implied, especially as he stresses in *The Elements* that no one ever laughs 'at the follyes of themselves past' unless they can be sure of doing so without 'any present dishonour'.[152] 'For when a Jest is broken upon our selves or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never Laugh thereat.'[153] Whatever the reason for the omission, the outcome is that in *Leviathan* Hobbes focuses exclusively on what he had always taken to be the principal cause of people's laughter, namely 'the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves'.[154]

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[144] Hobbes 1969, p. 42. [145] Hobbes 1969, p. 41. [146] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[147] Hobbes 1996, ch. 6, p. 43. Hobbes 1841, p. 46 translates the definition, although without offering a rendering of 'grimaces'. [148] Hobbes 1996, ch. 6, p. 43. Cf. Hobbes 1841, p. 46.

[149] Hobbes 1996, ch. 6, p. 43. [150] Hobbes 1969, p. 42.

[151] It seems, that is, to be Hobbes's view that, even when our laughter is directed at our own former infirmities, this is an instance of our present ascendancy over others.

[152] Hobbes 1969, p. 42. [153] Hobbes 1969, p. 42. [154] Hobbes 1996, ch. 6, p. 43.

Before turning to the second main question I want to consider, I need to pause to ask what might have prompted Hobbes to revert to this older and partly discredited way of thinking about laughter, while at the same time laying such strong claim to the novelty of his own account. Did he think that the challenge to the Aristotelian theory mounted by so many Renaissance writers was simply misguided? Perhaps, but it seems strange that he never mentions any of the prevailing doubts or in any way makes it clear that he is writing with the aim of responding to them. Was he simply unaware that the Aristotelian theory had been so extensively criticized for its obvious one-sidedness? I confess that I do not know, but my hypothesis is that what caused the Aristotelian view to remain irresistible for Hobbes was his more general view of human nature. It is one of Hobbes's most fundamental beliefs that, as he expresses it in *Leviathan*, we need to 'put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death'.[155] Not only do we find that men 'naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others'.[156] We also find that in man 'Joy consisteth in comparing himselfe with other men', so that men 'can relish nothing but what is eminent'.[157] According to the classical theory of laughter, however, we laugh both as an expression of joy and at the same time as a means of conveying a scornful and contemptuous sense of our own superiority. This suggests that Hobbes's special interest in laughter, as well as his adherence to the classical account, may stem from the fact that, on this analysis, the phenomenon of laughter provides a perfect illustration of his more general views about the nature of humankind.

VI

I turn to the other issue generally raised by the writers I have discussed. As I mentioned at the outset, the further question they ask is concerned with how we should appraise the phenomenon of laughter, what we should think of it. For those who thought of laughter as being—or at least as capable of being—a pure expression of joy and delight, there was little difficulty here. It was possible to accept the phenomenon, at least in some of its manifestations, as uncomplicatedly worthy of being cultivated. We have already encountered this defence of laughter in such humanist writers as Castelvetro, Beni, and Guyon, and we find a noble restatement of it in book 4 of Spinoza's *Ethics*, in which laughter is treated as an element in the lighter side of life which it is part of Spinoza's purpose to commend to us.[158]

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[155] Hobbes 1996, ch. 11, p. 70.

[156] Hobbes 1996, ch. 17, p. 117.

[157] Hobbes 1996, ch. 17, p. 119.

[158] Spinoza 1985, IV. P. 45, pp. 571–2.

Even for those who thought of laughter as invariably an expression of scorn for certain vices, it was still possible to think of it as valuable and worthy of being encouraged. One reason had been given by Aristotle himself when he had insisted that the vices deserve to be reproved, and thus that laughter, one of the most effective means of reproving them, has a moral role to play in our lives. A very different reason had been put forward by the medical writers I have discussed, for whom a disposition to laugh at the follies of mankind was taken to be a valuable means of preserving one's health. As Laurent Joubert explains in detail, the encouragement of this kind of mirthfulness is exceptionally valuable in the case of those with cold and dry complexions, and hence with small and hard hearts.[159] Anyone cursed with this temperament suffers from an excess of *atra bilis* or black bile in the spleen, which in turn gives rise to feelings of rage and, unless treated, to loss of *esprit* and eventual melancholia.[160] The example to which the physicians constantly recur is that of Democritus, whose bilious temperament made him so impatient and irritable that, as Burton reports in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, he eventually became almost suicidally depressed.[161] Democritus's decision to cultivate the habit of laughter provided him with a remedy for this dangerous predicament.[162] By making himself a constant spectator of human absurdity, he was able to overcome his splenetic disposition by laughing at everything that excited his contempt. Not only did this improve the flow of his blood, thereby making him temporarily more sanguine; it also helped him to expel the black bile that would otherwise have brought a return of his melancholia. As Joubert concludes, we must be sanguine and light-hearted to remain 'civil', and the medical virtue of laughter stems from the fact that its violent action enables us to correct a threatening imbalance in our temperament.[163]

During the seventeenth century, however, each of these defences of laughter began for different reasons to run into difficulties. First of all, we find the belief in laughter as a form of medicine gradually losing credibility. One of the achievements of seventeenth-century physiology was to undermine the standing of humoral psychology, and with its rejection the seemingly intimate connection between laughter and good-humour was reduced to nothing more than a metaphor. Still more strikingly, we find the belief that laughter should be encouraged as a means of scorning vice, or even as an innocent expression of delight, likewise falling into disrepute in the latter part of the seventeenth century. This development, however, is less easy to understand, and I should like to end by trying to outline and if possible to explain this cultural shift.

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[159] Joubert 1579, pp. 251–4, 258–9.

[160] Joubert 1579, pp. 81–3, 273–6.

[161] Burton 1989, p. 2.

[162] Joubert 1579, Appendix, p. 363, speaks of this 'remede et cure'.

[163] Joubert 1579, p. 259, speaks of the value of laughter in helping to sustain 'la symmetrie & moderacion de la temperature ou complexion humaine'.

We already encounter a marked disapproval of laughter among a number of moralists' writings in the middle years of the century. Hobbes himself always expresses considerable misgivings and doubts. He refers with distaste in *The Elements of Law* to those who 'thinke the Infirmityes of another sufficient matter for his tryumph', declaring that this 'is vaine-glory, and an argument of little worth'.[164] Subsequently he speaks in yet more dismissive tones in *Leviathan*, adding that 'much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity'.[165] The impression he always conveys is that laughter is something that needs to be eliminated or at least controlled.

If we turn to the next generation, and especially to the courtesy-books that began to proliferate around that time, we encounter an even deeper hostility. Consider, for example, the discussion of laughter in Lord Halifax's *Advice to a Daughter* of 1688. No lady, Halifax maintains, should seek to cultivate the character of 'a good-humoured woman', thereby presenting herself as someone who 'thinketh she must always be in a laugh, or a broad smile', for this alleged 'necessity of appearing at all times to be so infinitely pleased' involves 'a grievous mistake'.[166] If we glance forward a further generation to Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* of 1748, we find that laughter has been absolutely proscribed. 'I could heartily wish', the earl assures his son, 'that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live.'[167]

Why did laughter fall into such disfavour with these writers on polite behaviour? Perhaps the chief source of their hostility can be traced to the demand for higher levels of decorum and self-control. An important aspect of this so-called 'civilizing' process took the form of a call for mutual respect and restraint, and more particularly for the control of various bodily functions previously classified as involuntary.[168] Laughter came to be seen as a form of incivility, and at the same time as an obvious instance of an uncontrolled reaction that needed, in polite society, to be governed and preferably eliminated.

We encounter almost nothing of this animus against laughter even in the most exacting courtesy-books of the sixteenth century. Consider, for example, the attitude adopted by Castiglione in his *Libro del cortegiano*. He is certainly anxious to ensure that our mirth should never be vulgar, nor of such a kind as to give rise to blasphemy or dangerous hostilities.[169] But he is so far from viewing laughter as inherently uncivilized that, in book 2 of the *Cortegiano*, he makes the irreproachable figure of Lady Emilia call on

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[164] Hobbes 1969, p. 42.

[165] Hobbes 1996, ch. 6, p. 43.

[166] Halifax 1969, p. 298.

[167] Chesterfield 1901, Letter 144, vol. 1, p. 213.

[168] Elias 1994, pp. 110–17; Thomas 1977, p. 79.

[169] Castiglione 1994, pp. 155, 159–60.

M. Bernarde, after a particularly high-spirited exchange, to 'leave nowe makynge us laugh wyth practisynge of Jestes, and teache us howe we should use them'.[170] Nor do we ever find Hobbes saying that his reason for disapproving of laughter is that he sees it as indecorous. He duly notes in *The Elements of Law* that men laugh at indecencies,[171] and he emphasizes in the Latin version of *Leviathan* that we laugh not merely at other people's vices, but also at their indecorous behaviour.[172] But he never suggests—even in the case of such coarse and vulgar mirth—that we need for this reason to control or eliminate it.

Within a few decades, however, such lack of concern for the social niceties was beginning to seem ill-bred. If we ask, for example, what reason Lord Halifax gives for warning his daughter against indulging in 'senseless merriment', we learn that he regards such a 'boisterous kind of jollity' as contrary not merely 'to wit and good manners', but also 'to modesty and virtue'.[173] The reason why laughter must be avoided is that it is 'a coarse kind of quality, that throweth a woman into a lower form, and degradeth her from the rank of those who are more refined'.[174] A generation later, we find Lord Chesterfield expressing the same commitment in yet more vehement terms. So peremptory is his demand for decorum that laughter, that great vehicle of contempt, is turned into an object of contempt itself. The reason given by the earl for insisting that laughter must be altogether avoided is that 'there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill bred'. To indulge in laughter is something that 'people of sense and breeding should show themselves above'. To laugh is 'low and unbecoming', especially in virtue of 'the disagreeable noise that it makes, and the shocking distortion of the face that it occasions' whenever we succumb to it.[175]

The imperative of decorum was no doubt the principal source of the growing movement in the early modern period to outlaw laughter from polite society. To anyone living in a post-Freudian culture, however, it will seem natural to suggest a further and strongly contrasting reason for treating laughter, and especially contemptuous laughter, as something to be avoided or controlled. Such outbursts are liable to be interpreted not merely as highly aggressive, but at the same time as obvious strategies for dealing with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. They are liable, in other words, to be viewed as signs of psychic weakness of a kind that any self-respecting person will want to control or cover up.

Did any of the writers I have been considering attain this level of insight? The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is that in general they seem not to have done. To this generalization, however, there is at least one exception, and that is Hobbes.[176] As early as *The Elements of Law*, we find Hobbes observing that it is generally those who 'are greedy of applause, from every thinge they doe well' who enjoy laughing 'at their own Actions, performed never so little beyond their owne expectation'.[177] He also notes that such laughter consists in effect of 'the recommending of our selves to our owne good opinion, by comparison with another mans Infirmityes or absurditie', and it is at this juncture that he adds his scornful comment to the effect that 'it is vaine-glory, and an argument of little worth to thinke the Infirmityes of another sufficient matter for his tryumph.'[178]

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[170] Castiglione 1994, p. 153.

[171] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[172] See Hobbes 1841, p. 46 on laughing both at 'conceptum turpitudinis alieni' and at 'facti indecori'.

[173] Savile 1969, p. 298.

[174] Ibid.

[175] Chesterfield 1901, Letter 144, vol. 1, p. 212.

For Hobbes's first explicit suggestion, however, that laughter betokens lack of self-esteem, we need to turn to his *Answer* of 1650 to Sir William Davenant's Preface to *Gondibert*:

> Great persons that have their mindes employed on great designes, have not leasure enough to laugh, and are pleased with the contemplation of their owne power and vertues, so as they need not the infirmities and vices of other men to recommend themselves to their owne favor by comparison, as all men do when they laugh.[179]

Here Hobbes brings together two equally stern thoughts about laughter, namely that great minds will not merely lack any motive but any time to indulge in it.

If we turn to *Leviathan*, published a year later, we find Hobbes concentrating his main attention on the suggestion that laughter reveals a weakness of character, and expressing the thought in still more forbidding tones:

> [Laughter] 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. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able.[180]

Since this is Hobbes's last word on the subject, it is striking to find him introducing two entirely new elements into his basic theory that laughter is an expression of contempt. One is that, because it is appropriate for great minds to compare themselves only with the most able, they will have no occasion to entertain such feelings of superiority or scorn. His other and still more demanding suggestion is that gifted people have in addition a positive moral duty to help others to cultivate similar feelings of magnanimity and respect.

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[176] There is a hint of the same idea in Descartes 1988, Art. 179, p. 196.

[177] Hobbes 1969, p. 41.

[178] Hobbes 1969, p. 42.

[179] Hobbes 1971, p. 53.

[180] Hobbes 1996, ch. 6, p. 43.

Although Hobbes had never previously expressed these ideas in print, they were by no means new commitments on his part. He had held these views for a considerable time, as is evident from a remarkable letter of admonition and advice he had addressed to Charles Cavendish, the younger son of the second earl of Devonshire, at the time when he had taken up residence in Paris in 1638:

> To encouradge inferiours, to be cheerefull with ones equalls & superiors, to pardon the follies of them one converseth withall, & to help men of, that are fallen into y^{e} danger of being laught at, these are signes of noblenesse & of the master spirit. Whereas to fall in love with ones selfe upon the sight of other mens infirmities, as they doe that mock & laugh at them, is the property of one that stands in competition with such a ridiculous man for honour.[181]

Here the duty to exhibit and help others to cultivate a proper sense of magnanimity is so much emphasized that Hobbes comes close to the traditional humanist claim that *virtus vera nobilitas est*.

Hobbes is clear, then, that laughter is fundamentally a strategy for coping with feelings of inadequacy. But is this his reason for thinking that it ought to be controlled? It is not perhaps his principal reason, for he chiefly emphasizes his dislike of the aggression he also takes to be involved. To understand his dislike, we need to begin by recalling the most basic principle of his political philosophy: that we must '*seek Peace and follow it*'.[182] When he goes on to itemize the lines of conduct we must follow if peace is to be preserved, he declares that one of these 'Articles of Peace' ('which otherwise are called Laws of Nature')[183] is that '*no man by deed, word, countenance, or gesture, declare Hatred, or Contempt of another*.'[184] The reason why the observation of this precept is indispensable to peace is that 'all signes of hatred, or contempt, provoke to fight; insomuch as most men choose rather to hazard their life, than not to be revenged.'[185] As we have seen, however, Hobbes invariably treats laughter as a sign of contempt. The main reason for his hostility is thus that he considers it an obvious threat to peace.

There are several indications, however, that Hobbes is also moved by the thought that, if scornful laughter betokens lack of self-esteem, this gives us a further reason for avoiding it. He turns to this argument at the end of chapter 9 of *The Elements of Law*, in which he lays out his fullest account of laughter and its significance. He brings his chapter to a close with his image of life as a race, adding that 'this race we must suppose to have no other goal, nor other garland, but being foremost'.[186] The achievement of felicity comes from managing 'continually to out-go the next before', while misery comes from being continually 'out-gone'.[187] Among the means of courting misery, one will consequently be to act vaingloriously, for those who suffer from this weakness 'lose ground with looking back'; another will be to exhibit pusillanimity, for this weakness causes us to 'lose ground by little hindrances'.[188]

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[181] Hobbes 1994, letter 28, vol. 1, pp. 52–3.

[182] Hobbes 1996, ch.14, p. 92.

[183] Hobbes 1996, ch. 13, p. 90.

[184] Hobbes 1996, ch. 15, p. 107.

[185] Hobbes 1996, ch. 15, p. 107.

[186] Hobbes 1969, p. 47.

These features of the race take on a special significance when we recall what Hobbes says about the failings disclosed by those who enjoy laughing derisively. As we have seen, he declares that laughter 'is vaine-glory' and that 'much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity.'[189] He now adds that, if we give in to these weaknesses, we shall lose ground in the race of life, since vainglory causes us to look back and pusillanimity causes us to suffer hindrances. But he also believes that losing ground in this particular race is the worst thing that can happen to us. All this being so, we have strong reasons for controlling any disposition to laugh, since we have strong reasons for controlling the feelings of vainglory and pusillanimity that find their expression in laughter. We cannot afford to indulge in any such weakness while running to keep up in an emulative and hostile world.

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[187] Hobbes 1969, p. 48.
[188] Hobbes 1969, pp. 47–8.
[189] Hobbes 1969, p. 42; Hobbes 1996, ch. 6, p. 43.

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