

Giggles, Snickers, and Young Ladies' Knickers: Humour and the Body in the British Atlantic

People have always found something to laugh at. While the nature of humour has changed over the centuries, it is a certainty that people will laugh at anything from the most elaborate politically charged pun to the simplest fart joke. Humour is not only important as a source of study for academics, but also as a source for historians to use a means to look at the past. It provides historians "access [to peoples'] innermost assumptions, providing a guide to social tensions and anxieties"¹. Humour can provide a wealth of information about the early modern period specifically. As the Enlightenment gave way to new ideas of thinking, particularly about gender relations, health, medicine, and the body, humour and jokes evolved to reflect these new ideas about men's and women's bodies. With the Scientific Revolution beginning in the late 1500s and early 1600s, ideas about health and the body expanded with new theories replacing old ones. Certain aspects of early modern culture (like any culture), are not influenced totally by professionals. Jokes, especially ones dealing with sex, have revealed that it was not simply physicians who developed theories about medicine and thoughts about the body, but there was also "lower" cultural impact on the field of medicine and concepts surrounding gender relations. Jokes about the body influenced not only the most modern medical theories, but also how males came of age in the period. They also revealed a definite fear in the growing autonomy of women throughout the period as an openness about sexuality grew. Jokes, particularly about intercourse with women, reveal social norms about attaining manhood, and reinforced already embedded gender roles with women. This is also shown in certain areas of medical journals; this will be explained further in this paper.

Jokes in the early modern period were focused mainly around relishing in someone else's misfortune. Jokes played on the unfortunate position of second class citizens, such as the crippled, elderly, and especially women. Old women were the worst off, and many jokes had young gentlemen put gunpowder in their handbags to blow them up and things of that sort as the punch-line; early modern peoples would roar at "human suffering . . . [there was] unquestioned pleasure at the sight of deformity or misery"². If we can accept that there is an element of truth to every humorous situation, then these jokes are capable of showing us the fears and desires of men in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. By providing us with material with which gentlemen laughed at, understanding the innermost feelings of early modern English (and later British) society; their deepest social assumptions are clearer. The jokes being circulated amongst the English (and later British) people were "continually 'fed back' to the orally transmitting audience" of this jests and humorous stories³. These jokes were even available in polite society "because of their verbal framing . . . [it was] possible to discuss base or repugnant things without violating linguistic decorum", showing that jokes, even the basest jokes about bodily humour were being discussed by all classes⁴. Jokes, for the upper classes, were a means by which one could prove their wit; they "taught their readers to

¹ Tim Reinke-Williams. "Misogyny, Jest-Books and Male Youth Culture in Seventeenth Century England", *Gender and History* 21 (2009) 325

² Simon Dickie. "Hilarity and Pitilessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humour", *Eighteenth Century Studies* 37 (2003) 2

³ G. Legman. "Towards a Motif: Index of Erotic Humour", *The Journal of American Folklore* 75 (1962) 230

⁴ *Ibid.* 12

be witty in an original way”⁵.

William Byrd II, an elite Virginia planter, had written in his commonplace book several jokes concerning sex and sexuality. Entry 485 describes practices in Sparta where “old Bachelors above the age of 24 to be whipt publicly by the women upon a certain Festival, for shewing so great a disregard to their charming Sex”⁶. Other jokes were not as kind to females; the more “charming” sex. Many jokes revolved around a woman’s inability to be a normal person (i.e. a man). In a jest-book by Archie Armstrong, the punch-line to why women were so crooked was “inspired by the Bible, being ‘because the first Woman was made of a crooked thing’, namely Adam’s rib”⁷. Women were often the butt-end of jokes, unsurprising given the status of women at the time. In the medical profession, women were predominately seen as simply underdeveloped men until the end of the early modern period. Because of this model, and the biblical history of women (having cast out both Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden), medical designs often showed the female uterus as a monstrous place, and the female body was a horrible entity. The uterus was often displayed with horns, signifying the devil. In one medical text, the female “testicle” was shown to retain the body parts of undeveloped people within it upon dissection⁸. Women’s bodies were truly the monsters of the early modern period.

While this understanding of women’s bodies was prevalent in both medical journals and the most humorous jokes of the day, these jokes also have a lot to say about the influence these jests had upon men of the day. While one’s manhood was usually defined by one’s age, other tools were used to gauge masculinity amongst peers: “marital status, age, social position and context . . . [along with] sexual prowess and drinking”⁹. These jokes about sex and denouncing women were part of male culture in the early modern period. Many of these funny tales are set in ale houses, taverns, and other drinking establishments, with the punch-lines of the jokes suggesting that males desired “to be able to seduce the opposite sex, but [there was] an unwillingness to offer any form of commitment”¹⁰. Many of the jokes refer to some body part as a euphemism for another, such as the nose being closely related to phallus, and the “middle of the body” often refers to the anus. Jest such as a country man telling a wench “would my flesh were in thine” to which she replies: “so would I . . . would your nose were in my, I know where” would have enthralled male youths because of the flirtatious nature of these jokes¹¹. These jokes suggested not outright rejection, but rather enticing males to showcase their sexual performance in a setting around their peers.

These sorts of jokes, however, highlight a disparity between youth culture and the prominent medical discussions of the day. Youths were ideally to engage in large amounts of intercourse as part of their coming of age, while medical journals indicate that having sex with prostitutes will almost certainly give off the “burning” (Chlamydia). In a letter written from Mr. William Beckett to his colleague in the Royal Society, Dr. James Douglass, in 1717 Beckett outlines that “no other Disease that can be communicated by carnal Conversation with Women, but that which is Venereal”¹². It was generally accepted that having sex with a

⁵ Simon Dickie. “Hilarity and Pitilessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humour” 9

⁶ William Byrd; Kevin Berland; Jan Kirsten Gilliam; Kenneth A Lockridge. The Commonplace Book of William Byrd II of Westover. (Williamsburg, Virginia: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 183

⁷ Tim Reinke-Williams. “Misogyny, Jest-Books and Male Youth Culture in Seventeenth Century England” 328

⁸ James Cleghorn. “The History of an Ovarium, Wherein Were Found Teeth, Hair and Bones.” The Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy 1 (1787) 73-89

⁹ Tim Reinke-Williams. “Misogyny, Jest-Books and Male Youth Culture in Seventeenth Century England” 326

¹⁰ Ibid. 329-330

¹¹ Ibid. 335

¹² William Beckett. “An Attempt to Prove the Antiquity of the Venereal Disease, Long before the

diseased woman would certainly make you diseased yourself as argued by “almost all the physical writers upon this subject”¹³. The literature in medicinal thinking held the same sexist lens which most of the jokes of the period held. It is important to note, however, that while venereal diseases could be contracted primarily by prostitutes in public bath houses, John Astruc and his treatise on the matter concludes that:

“the Venereal Disease does never arise from the promiscuous copulation of sound Persons; and that a Woman in Health, let her lie with as many Men as she pleases, can never be infected with it, provided they are in Health too”¹⁴.

Jokes of the period also reflect this belief that honourable women were unable to be corrupted by venereal diseases, should they be “sound persons”. In a joke from William Byrd II’s commonplace book, a courtier tries his luck with his landlady’s daughter where the daughter is not the character of ridicule; it is the man for being dishonest and trying to impress a woman above his station while the woman remains untouched by the scathing humour¹⁵. This shows that while men did, indeed, hold their societal superiority to women dear, they also realized that their station could be slighted by their own illicit sexual behaviour¹⁶.

Jokes and medical thinking had taken the idea of developing manhood into a manner by which to cement male dominance in the British Isles during the early modern period. Medical texts of the 1600s had perceived “youth as an age of spirited and courageous action . . . but also a period of potential vice and lack of self control”¹⁷. By issuing medical texts which tailored to the developing sexual prowess of up-and-coming gentlemen, early modern English (and later British) society had made it socially acceptable for young men to engage in vast amounts of sexual intercourse, so long as it remained within the confines of “normal” society. The outcasts of society; prostitutes, harlots and wenches were to remain untouched out of fear of contracting venereal diseases. Honourable women were exempt from this rule.

While medicinal thought changed dramatically throughout the early modern period, the manner of jokes did not vary very much. Jest-books right up until 1800 continually used the same material; some using the same jokes from as early as 1558¹⁸. Material from the “Old Joe Miller” jest-book written in 1800 still uses the same euphemisms which were used in the 1600s. In one jest, the nose can be used as a substitute for a penis. The joke can be understood as two people having engaged in intercourse:

“An impudent jade was taken before a wise justice of the peace for an [illegible], who frequently made use of the following words: *Put that and that together*. At the end of the examination the justice ordered his clerk to write her mittimus, saying *Put that*

Discovery of the West-Indies; In a Letter from Mr. William Beckett, Surgeon, to Dr. James Douglass, M.D. and R. Soc. Soc. and by him Communicated to the Royal Society” Philosophical Transactions (1683-1775) 30 (1717-18) 843

¹³ John Astruc. A treatise of the venereal disease, in six books; containing an account of the original, propagation, and contagion of this distemper in general. As also of the Nature, Cause, and Cure of all Venereal Disorders in particular, whether Local or Universal. Together with An Abridgment of the several Discourses, which have been written upon this Subject from the first Appearance of the Venereal Disease in Europe to this Time, with critical Remarks upon them. Trans: William Barrowby. (London: the Royal Exchange, 1737) 41

¹⁴ Ibid. 21

¹⁵ William Byrd; Kevin Berland; Jan Kirsten Gilliam; Kenneth A Lockridge. The Commonplace Book of William Byrd II of Westover. 179

¹⁶ Tim Reinke-Williams. “Misogyny, Jest-Books and Male Youth Culture in Seventeenth Century England” 333

¹⁷ Ibid. 326

¹⁸ Editor of New Joe Miller, or the Tickler. Old Joe Miller: being a complete and correct copy from the best edition of his celebrated jests; and also including all the good things in above fifty jest-books published from the year 1558 to the present time. (London: Wilson & Co. 1800) 1

and that together: the girl, while this was doing, informed his worship that she had one particular observation to make; “What is it hussey?” said he: “Your worship has a large carbuncle on your nose.” “And what if I have?” “Why and please your worship, I have one upon my ----- *Put that and that together.*”¹⁹

Here the joke implies that the justice of the peace has slept with this “impudent jade” and grown a large carbuncle (skin infection) upon his nose (referring to his penis). Even in 1800 with developments in medicine, jokes still circulated about those with otherwise distasteful character giving more respectable gentlemen venereal diseases. The old jokes of the period remained as testament to the theory that people of low character could only contract these diseases, despite medical texts from 1800 suggesting otherwise. In one treatise about the treatment of venereal diseases by using nitrous acid, a wife had contracted “inflammation of the labia pudenda, which gave her much pain in walking. She had probably contracted these from her husband, as he lately had, according to her account, some primary symptoms of the disease”²⁰. This shows that there was a distinct change from the previous model that typically women could only contract venereal diseases by being of a more disreputable character, but by 1800 doctors had seemingly rejected this model. In William Blair’s “Essays on the Venereal Disease”, there is no mention of the women who he has treated having contracted the disease having had it from being of “low” character. Blair’s patients remain simply patients, while jokes from the period mocked shady characters for their high probability of having an infection, and finding joy in them spreading it to characters of authority.

It is important to note, however, that sexual humour cannot simply be looked at from the typical binaries with which discussions about sex are usually held; typically within the heterosexual, procreative, male-female relationship. While we understand marriage to typically have a procreative aspect, we also know that there were many instances of rudimentary birth control and attempts at sexual play at work within the early modern period²¹. Is it appropriate to see approach humour and sexuality in a manner which focuses only on “sodomy and procreation, marital and extramarital, male and female, masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive”²²? While these binaries help, it is important for historians to go deeper into the topic.

While it is clear that males used humour and modern medicine to reinforce their own growing sense of manhood, the issue behind the jokes told by young gentlemen of the period is more complex than wanting to express their developing sexuality through humour and having it reinforced by professional doctors. The jokes, particularly the ones issued in pamphlets featured “proverbs, drama and cheap print [often] reflected male anxieties about the instability of patriarchy [in the family] and the disorderliness of female behaviour”²³. Going back to the medical documents listed previously, we can see that these fears did in fact exist amongst doctors. Honourable women were truly appreciated by society and were “allowed” to bed as many men as they chose, while “loose” women were prone to contracting all sorts of terrible diseases. These morally lax women were also the subjects of many jokes. One describes a wife who has been particularly disobedient with her husband:

“A young Man married to an ill-temper'd Woman, who not contented, tho' he was very kind to her, made continual Complaints to her Father, to the great Grief of both

¹⁹ Ibid. 227-228

²⁰ William Blair, Essays on the venereal disease and its concomitant affections. Part the second: Containing Additional Evidence, with critical and practical Remarks, on the new saline antisyphilitic Remedies; and an Answer to some Objections made against the former (London: H.D. Symonds, 1800) 18

²¹ Katherine Crawford, “Possibility and Perversion: Rethinking the Study of Early Modern Sexuality” The Journal of Early Modern Sexuality 78 (2006) 416

²² Ibid.

²³ Reinke-Williams. “Misogyny, Jest-Books and Male Youth Culture in Seventeenth Century England” 324

Families; the Husband, no longer able to endure this scurvy Humour, bang'd her soundly: Hereupon she complain'd to her Father, who understanding well the Perverseness of her Humour, took her to Task, and lac'd her Sides soundly too; saying, Go, commend me to your Husband, and tell him, I am now even with him, for I have cudgell'd his Wife, as he hath beaten my Daughter"²⁴.

The punch-line of the joke, both men having established restorative justice upon each other at the expensive of their daughter and wife to prove a point, suggests that men were eager to laugh at the expense of women because they felt uncomfortable by the rising power women had throughout the early modern period. If we use Thomas Hobbes' definition of laughter: "the rush of glee caused 'by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves'", we can see that men would see the "deformed thing" as the growing power of women in the period²⁵. This is visible at all levels of society. Most jokes take place in taverns, bars, and ale houses, and as print media became more widely circulated, these jokes could have been read aloud at coffee houses and the bars where the jokes, in fact, are set. These jokes "take us strikingly close to lived experience" for many early modern people, and by examining their jokes, we can gather a wealth of knowledge about their personal lives outside of journals and commonplace books.

In conclusion, it is clear that understanding humour is important for historians to get a clearer grasp of the social and personal feelings of a society. In the early modern period, sexual humour was used to add a dimension to developing ideas about manhood and coming of age. This was often associated with excessive sex and drinking, which was reflected in the humour at the time. It is also important to note that sexual history should no longer be simply explained within the binaries of what is sexually "normal" (used here very loosely) but should be looked at from a larger context. For example, in this particular case, sexual jokes made by males about females often had a tinge of fear over the developing concept of feminism with Enlightenment thought. Jokes will, and should continue to be, a valued source for social historians to use as a passport into the minds of their subjects. It is difficult to gauge fears and personal feelings through a treatise, but through what people laugh at, there is a wealth of untapped historical research.

²⁴ Simon Dickie. "Hilarity and Pitilessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humour" 2

²⁵ Ibid.