

Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego and Cristina Larkin-Galiñanes
eds. 2009.

***A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical
Writings about Humour and Laughter:
The Seventy-Five Essential Texts
from Antiquity to Modern Times
Lewiston, et. al.: Edwin Mellen.***

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Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego and Cristina Larkin-Galiñanes have done humour researchers and teachers of comedy studies a great service in the compilation of this rich and wide-ranging anthology, the first of its kind for almost a quarter of a century, and undoubtedly the most exhaustive.

Featuring a generous selection of texts – many of which are not readily in print – the anthology aims to present the reader with the key discussions of humour and laughter from Plato to Henri Bergson, arranging the sections within three broadly-defined periods: antiquity and the middle ages; the early modern period; and what they term the “late modern” period. The anthology collects works from authors as varied as Aristotle, Descartes, Coleridge, Herbert Spencer and Charles Baudelaire, and from fields as diverse as literary criticism, philosophy, theology, experimental psychology, medical theory, political science, and conduct literature. As such, the form of the book serves to make an important point about one of the perennial problems of humour studies: how are we to define such overlapping and profligate terms, and to which discipline or disciplines do they properly belong? This is a question that Larkin-Galiñanes takes up in her helpful introduction, acknowledging the mobility of humour’s terminology and the difficulty inherent in trying to determine the object of study in any definitive sense. To aid

the reader, therefore, the editors offer a substantial and authoritative essay at the beginning of each section that seeks to locate the texts within their historical contexts and offer a gloss on the place of humour and laughter within their respective eras. This is, of course, a significant undertaking, but one that is accomplished admirably.

All of the texts that one would expect to be here are in evidence: Sir Philip Sidney on Elizabethan comedy, Thomas Hobbes' famous remark on laughter as a sign of "pusillanimity," and George Meredith on the socially-corrective purpose of the comic spirit. The stand-out sections, however, are the earliest texts, primarily because they are the hardest to find in reliable modern editions. These selections include the enigmatic and fragmentary *Tractatus Coisilianus* (anecdotally believed by some to present the blueprint for Aristotle's lost *Poetics* of comedy), and handily-excerpted selections from Cicero and Quintilian on the utility of laughter in rhetorical arguments. Also particularly welcome is the section on the early Christian tradition, reprinting the Bible's sparse comments on laughter alongside those of Church Fathers such as Basil of Caesarea, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom. The Christian tradition is central to western concepts of humour, but often overlooked in favour of a secular, literary tradition that runs from Roman New Comedy through renaissance humanism and into eighteenth century debates about the proper use of wit. This narrative can now be re-evaluated thanks to the material being made once-again accessible.

Omission is, of course, the necessary evil of all anthologizing, and there are some notable gaps – the inclusion of only a single text by a woman (George Eliot), for example, no Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, or Asper's speech on humour in Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour*, despite of the acknowledgment of Jonson's centrality in the General Introduction. The absence of some texts, such as the stanzas on comedy in Spenser's *Tears of the Muses*, George Puttenham's thoughts on comedy in the *Arte of English Poesie*, and the Congreve-Collier controversy of 1698, are rendered untroubling by coverage elsewhere. Others, such as the glaring nonappearance of Sigmund Freud, are surely explained by copyright issues beyond the editors' influence. One does wonder, however, why the selection stops so abruptly at 1900 when the subtitle promises us material up to "modern times" – surely a sufficiently capacious term to include

writers such as Francis Cornford, Mary Douglas, James Agee, Mikhail Bakhtin, Northrop Frye, C.L. Barber, Theodor Adorno, and the Cambridge Ritualists, among others. Similarly, there is a large body of poststructuralist and postmodern work on humour and playfulness now sufficiently entrenched within the academy to be anthologized. Again, the dual nuisances of copyright and clearance no doubt present an obstacle to extending the work far beyond its present form, but it does make one hope that the editors have the enthusiasm to produce a second volume. There is certainly an appetite for it, and it would be greatly appreciated. An invaluable source-book indeed.

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