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The Power of Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain: Political and Religious Culture, 1500-1820. Edited by Mark Knights and Adam Morton. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017. pp. ix and 242. £65.00 (hb). ISBN 978-178327 203 7

Like eating, drinking and sex, laughter is a fundamental characteristic of humanity, but—like eating, drinking and sex—it is also historically contingent. What makes people laugh, and how that laughter is thought about, can vary dramatically with time, place and culture. So it is not for nothing that the history of laughter has long been recognised for its potential to unlock past mentalities and cultures. This volume of essays, which started out life as a conference in 2014, is guided by this same premise: on the first page of their introduction, Mark Knights and Adam Morton declare that ‘Getting the joke helps us to ‘get’ at fundamental assumptions in a given society or culture’. Laughing is an ‘instant reaction’ and thus ‘to understand what past cultures laughed at ... is to open a window onto the social mores and assumptions of those cultures’ (p.1). But there is more to this volume than channelling Robert Darnton and ‘The Great Cat Massacre’. The contributors are not just concerned to identify what people laughed at or satirised; more ambitiously, they are concerned with the *power* of that laughter and satire. In the first sentence, Knights and Morton argue that ‘laughter and satire played significant roles in political processes and social practices’ (p.1). The goal is to discover not just what was amusing, but to ask what—in practice—did laughter and satire *do* in early modern Britain.

These are new and difficult questions, which cannot be answered at a general level for the more-than-three centuries covered by the volume. They require close attention to reception and thus each chapter provides a snapshot of a particular context. The contributors are drawn from the fields of history and literature, and their specialisms are diverse. Chronologically, the chapters range from Sophie Murray’s account of anti-monastic satire during the reign of Henry VIII through to Mark Knights’s analysis of William Hone’s treason trials in 1817, and there is much in between. Particular highlights include Cathy Shrank’s chapter on laughter in the early modern dialogue, which demonstrates that laughing was often ‘depicted as a tool that can be used to foster and display sociability’ (p. 57), in contrast to its callous aspects so dominant in theories since the classical period on which historians have often focused. Robert Phiddian’s chapter on John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* and its suppressed sequel *Polly* is similarly thought provoking. In seeking to explore the impact of Gay’s satirical plays, Phiddian acknowledges the elephant in the room that satire has rarely (if ever) succeeded in felling a monarch or ministry

and thus hones in on the subtler ‘cultural and emotional work’ that it does. This he locates in the mobilisation of ‘public indignation’ (p. 135): by generating feelings of contempt, anger and disgust towards its targets, Phiddian argues that satire creates ‘a theatre of public opinion’ (p.149)—a space where hostility can be expressed, shared and exercised without becoming an immediate threat to public order. A sentence or two cannot do justice to the richness of these chapters, but should serve to demonstrate how the volume encourages new ways to think about the role of laughter in social or political contexts. Two other chapters are worth noting for readers of this journal in particular. In ‘Laughter and the Limits of Reform’, Andrew Benjamin Bricker discusses the doubts that Jonathan Swift and his contemporaries had about satire’s ability to change behaviour by provoking laughter; this nuances our understanding of early eighteenth-century confidence in the reformatory power of ridicule. And, focused on the close of the century, is Mark Philp’s analysis of caricature responding to the threat of invasion during the French Revolutionary wars. Working with the theory that laughter can relieve tension, Philp’s attention to ‘nervous laughter’ reminds that comic material can reveal not just the delights of past society, but its anxieties too.

These are diverse topics, but the chapters are tied together by two common threads. First, is a fundamental concern with questions of acceptability: what it was permissible to say or do in a given social or political situation. Whether identifying the limits of tolerance for political debate or the boundaries of civil interaction, the chapters more than demonstrate the usefulness of laughter and satire for exposing that fine line between acceptable and unacceptable. Secondly, the authors are united by a common willingness to engage with the complexities of the phenomena of laughter and satire. In this volume laughter is a physical and audible bodily action, which interrupts conversation and sends social signals to those present; it is not, as is often the case, treated purely as a response to humour. And nor is satire defined narrowly as a canon of texts, but as a mode of expression which could infiltrate a variety of genres—visual, textual or performative—to make its point cheerfully, contemptuously or anything in between. Both are important insights that are useful beyond the field of early modern British studies.

Knights and Morton’s introduction does important work in establishing these common threads, as well as confronting the complexities of laughter and satire head on. In a remarkably clear and useful discussion, they guide the reader through the scrutiny that laughter and satire attracted in early modern Britain and pinpoint their ‘vibrant duality’ (p.1). Both ‘constructive and destructive’, laughter and satire could foster bonds as well as break them; they could reinforce political and religious identities and positions, but they were also potent means to subvert and undermine them. The central theme that the role of laughter and satire was

'contradictory and ambiguous' (p.1) might sound unsatisfying, but the chapters are effective in explaining how laughter 'changed function according to context' (p.26). It is a shame there is no conclusion to tie the threads back together, but perhaps that is the nature of the beast. Rather than serving as a final word on the topic, the volume collectively indicates what fertile ground there is still to explore.

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Kate Davison, University of Sheffield

kate.davison@sheffield.ac.uk