
Book review:
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Review of Ross Carroll, Uncivil Mirth: Ridicule in Enlightenment Britain (Princeton University Press, 2021)

Historians have long been interested in the laughter of the past: the subjects that people saw fit to laugh at can provide a window into historical cultures like no other. In recent years, however, there has been growing attention to the act of laughing itself, how it has been understood in the past, and what its effects might have been. This book follows this line of inquiry, exploring debates in eighteenth-century Britain about the practice of ridicule, that is, the uses and abuses of laughing *at* something or someone. The focus is at the level of intellectual and philosophical debate, as Ross Carroll mines the writings – published and unpublished – of some of the period's leading thinkers, beginning with the third earl of Shaftesbury and concluding with Mary Wollstonecraft. This is particularly fertile ground: as Carroll argues, the eighteenth century 'saw philosophical scrutiny of the subject rise to a pitch and intensity rarely matched before or since' [2]. Time and again ridicule was celebrated as a tool of critique and inquiry, though it never entirely shook its latent potential to foster contempt and fractiousness. None of those who advocated the use of ridicule did so without reservation and ambivalence is a theme throughout. As the introductory chapter makes clear, Carroll is writing for political theorists: he casts the book as 'an exercise in historical recovery' [19], which is intended to shed light on present-day concerns about civility (or lack of) in public debate and the effects of reaching for ridicule in this context. Yet, there is plenty here too for those whose primary concern is historical, and especially those whose interests lie in eighteenth-century Britain. Carroll makes a convincing case that this 'Age of Reason' was also an 'Age of Ridicule' in which laughter was a prominent part of enlightenment intellectual culture.

The book is divided into six chapters, arranged chronologically from the first decade of the century through to its close in the revolutionary decade of the 1790s. The opening two focus primarily on the third earl of Shaftesbury, who was particularly influential in rescuing ridicule from its Hobbesian trappings and setting the course of debate over the following decades. As an alternative to Thomas Hobbes's now infamous notion of laughter as 'sudden glory' – the product of a selfish ego triumphing over others, and hence inherently divisive – Shaftesbury understood ridicule as an essential prop to civil society. Carroll demonstrates this first through analysis of his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708), which celebrated ridicule as a means to quell the religious passions of the late-Stuart period without resort to harsh persecution, while also serving a pedagogical purpose, edging Christianity in a more tolerant and good-humoured direction. Attention then turns to *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*

(1709) and Shaftesbury's investment in ridicule in the service of sociability and peaceable co-existence. Chapter three focuses on David Hume who, although famously good humoured in personal demeanour, was ambivalent towards the Shaftesburian programme where ridicule was concerned, before chapter four considers Hume's Aberdonian adversaries, Thomas Reid and James Beattie. Carroll shows that Reid and Beattie were not only intensely interested in laughter and ridicule, but also deployed them in order to deflate Hume's philosophical arguments. Chapters five and six move into the later century to find polemicists turning to ridicule. First, attention focuses on a group of Scottish abolitionists – James Ramsay, William Dickson and James Tytler – who sought to diminish and undermine pro-slavery arguments through mock endorsement. Lastly, Carroll turns to Mary Wollstonecraft who, he reveals, viewed ridicule as a powerful weapon to expose and challenge the subordinate position of women in society. Given the book covers such a range of political and philosophical positions and debates, the conclusion is welcome to tie together the broader themes, and Carroll also returns to the question of ridicule in present-day politics, with reflections on the often-celebrated connection between democracy and ridicule.

This book is the most sustained analysis of eighteenth-century British intellectual debates about ridicule to date, and it makes an important contribution by bringing to light the richness and complexity of these discussions, while also demonstrating ridicule's centrality to enlightenment intellectual culture. One of the book's great strengths is its impressive clarity, which is maintained by lucid prose and signposting of the argument, as well as a well-struck balance between abstract theorizing *about* ridicule and concrete examples of it being deployed *in practice*. Not only is it clear that many of the period's most notable thinkers were deeply invested in ridicule, but also that it was deployed and implicated in some of the most important (and most studied) issues of the age: the limits of religious toleration, the nature and purpose of sociability, slavery and abolitionism, and the dismantling of patriarchy. Many of those Carroll discusses were in dialogue with Shaftesbury – either directly or obliquely – but they are explicitly not lumped together as a 'school' of thought. Opinions varied and could be contradictory: even individual figures might lack a consistent position. Moreover, each author was first and foremost engaging with the specific moral, political, or religious concerns of their day, and hence reached different evaluations of ridicule. This leads to an important conclusion about the primacy of context: ridicule, argues Carroll, 'cannot be evaluated in a vacuum'; it should not be essentialized or considered solely 'moralistically as a virtue or vice'; rather it should be understood '*politically* as a form of speech capable of producing an array of context-dependent benefits or harms' [215]. This is a useful takeaway for both political theorists studying our own culture of public debate, as

well as historians who – following this book – should be more alert to ridicule as a deliberate strategy in eighteenth-century debate, which had particular significance and effects.

Dr Kate Davison
University of Sheffield