INTRODUCTION

'Don't worry, I've got the key'

Guy Halsall

> A man is walking down the street when a neighbour runs up to him and says, 'Hey, your house is on fire!' 'Don't worry,' replies the man, 'I've got the key.'

This joke, possibly the best in this collection of essays (certainly that which got the biggest laugh at the conference where these papers were originally presented[1]), is to be found in John Haldon's treatment of 'Humour and the everyday in Byzantium',[2] and makes a useful focus for this introduction. Identifying the humorous in late antique and early medieval writing is very often a question of locating the key.

That, however, presupposes the willingness to look for the key in the first place, and this seems to have been conspicuously absent in previous generations of scholarship. At several points in the following chapters, we shall encounter footnotes pointing out how previous researchers have either not noticed that a work was intended to be funny, or have rejected interpretations of late antique or early medieval works which see them as anything other than entirely earnest.[3] Even a genre as overtly intended to amuse as riddle collections has, in its continental manifestations, been neglected.[4] Recently, historians have looked increasingly at humour and its uses;[5] the ancient world[6] and Anglo-Saxon England,

[1] With the possible exception of the occasion when Matt Innes tripped over the overhead projector's extension lead.

[2] Below, p. 64. [3] For example, below, p. 86, n. 60; p. 102, n. 55

[4] Bayless, below, p. 157.

[5] See, for example, *Humour and History*, ed. K. Cameron (Oxford, 1993); *A Cultural History of Humour*, ed. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenberg (London, 1997), with bibliography at pp. 242–52.

[6] In addition to works on Roman humour found in the footnotes of the essays in this collection, see: D. Arnould, *Le Rire et les larmes dans la littérature grecque d'Homère à Platon* (Paris, 1990); *Le Rire des anciens: actes du Colloque Internationale, Université de Rouen, Ecole Normale Supérieure, 11–13 janvier 1995*, ed. M. Trédé, P. Hoffmann and C. Auvray-Assayas (Paris, 1998); *Laughter Down the Centuries*, vol. III, ed. S. Jäkel, A. Timonen and V.-M. Rissanen (Turku, 1997).

with its distinctive corpus of literature,[7] have been well served. The late antique and early medieval periods in Europe, however, have not yet received their share of this attention.

There are a number of possible reasons for this neglect. One might simply be that, as is often said, history is made in the present; in many ways it is also made in the image of the present. Humour, it would seem, has appeared too flippant a subject for a self-consciously serious discipline such as history. Over the past 150 years, much early medieval historiography has been about reconstructing political history, and the history of institutions, lay and ecclesiastical. Humour has seemed irrelevant to this sort of project. As Matthew Innes says,[8] the study of the Carolingian period reveals this attitude particularly well. A clever writer like Notker of St-Gall – Notker the Stammerer – who used humour to make very serious points, suffered the fate of prolonged exclusion from the canon of 'respectable' sources. Though the great academic scholars of past generations may seem easy targets as humourless tweed-clad 'old fogies' (perhaps unfairly; for all I know, Georg-Heinrich Pertz and Georg Waitz may have had a great laugh in their spare time in the offices of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, though it does seem slightly unlikely[9]), it must be stressed that attitudes have been slow to change. More recent historical projects, the history of gender most notably, have been equally if not more self-consciously humourless; the recovery of the role of women and of gender relations in the past were, and are, not in themselves laughing matters, and that also appears to have informed the nature of historical writing. Thus Ross Balzaretti[10] points out that, even with recent attention to past laughter, humour and gender has remained a neglected topic – oddly, as humour is in many ways a particularly gendered aspect of social practice.[11]

There may therefore be something in the idea that for humour in late antique and early medieval Europe to become a topic, it had to wait for the emergence of a generation of historians who not only saw that history has its funny side but also, conversely, that humour and its past uses are, themselves, serious subjects. Maybe early medieval humour

[7] See, recently, *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. J. Wilcox (Cambridge, 2000) and references therein.
[8] Below, p. 131.
[9] D. Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises: Problems in Monastic History* (London, 1963), pp. 65–97, for a brief but very useful history of the *Monumenta*.
[10] Balzaretti, below, p. 114.
[11] Thus, note that it is a *man* who is warned of his house burning down, just as that tiresome trio, forever going into a pub, are an English*man*, a Scots*man* and an Irish*man*.

had to wait for a generation of historians with a *sense* of humour. This generation also sees that very serious points can be made through satire, irony and ridicule. To say that a passage in the sources is satirical or ironic is not to denude it of serious content. To study late antique and medieval texts to find instances of humour is not to belittle them or to miss the point by looking at peripheral ephemera. It is also possible that the search for humour in past texts, which, as we shall see, are rarely obvious places to look for jokes, mirrors broader changes in the nature of comedy over recent decades, which have often, in the world of post-modernism, focussed on conscious, self-referential irony.

Be that as it may, a more obvious reason for the neglect of late antique and early medieval humour lies in the unpromising nature of the source material. Danuta Shanzer outlines the fate of classical humour in her paper.[12] The obvious comedic genres of the ancient world, and their rich traditions, seem to have withered in late antiquity. This presents something of a contrast with humour in the eastern half of the old Roman Empire, that which became 'Byzantine'. John Haldon demonstrates a much clearer continuation of overtly humorous genres there.[13] At first sight it seems as though we can contribute to the ongoing debate on the Pirenne thesis[14] by adding to Pirenne's list – of gold, spices, silk and papyrus – another commodity which the Arab conquests prevented from reaching the west: jokes.[15] But, as with so much of the Pirenne debate, there is more to it than that. The great comic genres of antiquity appear to have atrophied long before the Fall of the West. Even the last western satirical play of the classical tradition, the fifth-century *Querolus*, can be condemned as not particularly amusing[16] (although that, of course, may just be because we don't get the joke any more[17]) and the genre of satire seems to have disappeared earlier still. There was continuity, too, though continuity from the specifically late Roman situation. Shanzer points out the continuation of late antique humorous techniques such as the use of bons mots and grim irony in narrative histories. The fate of this strategy in the works of fifth- and sixth-century writers, and the way in which it

[12] Below, pp. 25–37. [13] Below, pp. 48–71.

[14] See, recently, *The Sixth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, ed. R. Hodges and W. Bowden (Leiden, 1998); *The Long Eighth Century*, ed. I. L. Hansen and C. J. Wickham (Leiden, 2000).

[15] Honesty demands that I credit Paul Kershaw as originator of this joke, though he may yet not thank me for this acknowledgement!

[16] Shanzer, below, p. 25.

[17] For some discussion of what the joke may actually have been about, see R. Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 25–56, and J. F. Drinkwater, 'The Bacaudae of fifth-century Gaul', in *Fifth-century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* ed. J. F. Drinkwater and H. Elton (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 208–17.

was employed to respond to the changing world of those centuries, are further explored in my own chapter.[18] Riddles, a particularly common early medieval form of learned humorous expression, also derive their inspiration from a late Latin writer, Symphosius.[19]

That apart, we are usually forced to seek humour in non-humorous types of writing, and this can be problematic, as shall become clear. Nevertheless, some early medieval historical writers have long been suspected of deliberate humour. Gregory of Tours is one such.[20] In the introduction to his Penguin translation of Gregory's *Histories*, Lewis Thorpe included a section entitled 'Humour and irony'.[21] Thorpe, as often in his translation, seems to have correctly identified an aspect of Gregory's style,[22] though his insight did not spawn much further discussion of the bishop's sense of humour until, in a seminal chapter of his *Narrators of Barbarian History*, Walter Goffart argued that Gregory was a satirist.[23] This has not convinced everyone, and Shanzer criticises the thesis below, pointing out that Goffart's model of how Gregory would have acquired models for satirical history is 'too conjectural'.[24] The *satura* or mishmash of the *Histories*' organisation may result in them *appearing* to have the characteristics of satire – disjointed elements resembling a modern comedy sketch-show – but this structure seems to result from quite other demands. Gregory's view of causation, rather than, as in many modern views, being 'horizontal', with history unfolding as the cumulative result of previous human interactions, was typological and 'vertical'. That is to say, if people committed particular acts in particular ways or circumstances then a particular consequence, of divine provenance, would descend upon them. This, obviously, is the reasoning behind the narrative structuring of miracle collections and many saints' lives, especially Gregory's, into small self-contained incidents with actions and divinely ordained reward or punishment. The *Histories* fall into disjointed

[18] Below, pp. 89–113. [19] Bayless, below, p. 157.

[20] The absence of a chapter on Gregory's humour is perhaps a glaring lacuna in this volume. However, Gregory's humour has already been discussed. Simon Loseby is apparently working on a study of Gregory's jokes, and I shall make a number of comments about Gregory in this introduction. The forthcoming collaborative work, *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. K. Mitchell and I. N. Wood (Leiden, 2002) will doubtless also address the Goffart thesis and related aspects of Gregory's style.

[21] *Gregory of Tours*: *The History of the Franks*, trans. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1974), pp. 46–9.

[22] Thorpe's translation often captures the sense of Gregory's Latin, although often at the expense of mangling its technical meaning.

[23] W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History, AD 550–800*: *Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede. Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), pp. 197–203.

[24] Below, p. 32; see also, for example, the riposte by R. Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1993), p. 148, which makes a similar point.

independent episodes not as a result of Gregory's desire to write satire but because they are written to the same pattern as his hagiography. Recent analyses, notably Goffart's, have accustomed us to the injunction to read all of Gregory's works, *Historiae* and *Miracula*, as part of a unified and coherent project. Thus the self-contained stories of secular goings-on are in many ways best understood as a sort of anti-hagiography. Instead of immediate miraculous healing or cure, or chastisement of enemies, demonstrating the eternal power or merit of the godly, to strive after worldly rewards in these episodes produces at best only transient benefit, but more often no good at all – usually quite the reverse.

Nevertheless, to say that the *Histories* were not written as satire does not imply that they were written without deliberate humour, or even without *elements* of satire or parody. Laughter is very commonly the response of modern audiences to Gregory's tales, and it is often hard to see that this humour is not deliberate. By juxtaposing the eternal merit and everlasting rewards of the saintly with the pointless doings of the worldly, Gregory seems clearly to have intended to ridicule the latter, especially when the deaths and other punishments of wrongdoers often contain elements of farce.[25] This sort of humour could be and was used effectively in didactic and homily in east and west. John Haldon draws our attention to Anastasius of Sinai, who used humour to ridicule his parishioners and alert them to the folly of their ways.[26] It is possible, if perhaps not probable, that ridicule is also used to similar effect in Salvian's *On the Governance of God*;[27] Saint Jerome was an adept at this technique. It may seem odd to look for humour in hagiography but, as Shanzer points out and as we shall see below, it is to be found there in plenty.

Laughter, as Ross Balzaretti says, is also the common modern response to the stories of Liutprand of Cremona, whose English translator likewise appreciated the sense of the original.[28] Liutprand's humour is less controversial than Gregory's in that he very often cues it with a comment which makes clear that he regards the succeeding tale as funny.[29] Nevertheless, his humour has long awaited a sophisticated discussion, especially in regard to the ways in which it is used to reinforce ideas about gender. A third author whose overt use of humour has been noted is Notker. As mentioned, Notker's jokes long earned him a form of scholarly damnation, but they have also, in the end, meant that he is one of

[25] Gregory seemingly never tired of informing his readers of the heresiarch Arius' death on the toilet; see also Shanzer, below, p. 28, n. 17. For other episodes with clear farcical elements see *Histories* 3.7–8, *MGH SRM* 1.1, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison (Hanover, 1951).
[26] Haldon, below, pp. 62–3. [27] Halsall, below, p. 98.
[28] Balzaretti, below, p. 115 and n. 6. [29] Balzaretti, below, pp. 116–17.

the few early medieval historical writers to have had serious attention devoted to his use of humour.[30] The influence of David Ganz's seminal 1989 study of Notker is evident in several chapters of this book. Matthew Innes and Paul Kershaw develop, in slightly different ways, our understanding of Notker's humour from the base provided by Ganz. Building on Ganz's analysis, Kershaw in particular makes Notker a rounded and sympathetic character by pointing out how this writer, who himself created an identity based upon his stammer, found amusement in the failure to communicate clearly.

Beyond these writers, the search for humour becomes more difficult. Most humour retreated into genres which did, and do, not proclaim themselves to be deliberately funny. Jacques Le Goff has seen most of the period with which this volume is concerned as one of repressed monastic laughter.[31] This may not entirely be the case, even if the sources of humour are largely ecclesiastical, and sometimes monastic, in origin. Shanzer draws attention, as mentioned, to hagiography, and there is probably more humour that has yet to be discovered in this possibly unexpected source.[32] In addition to the grim humour of persecutors and – sometimes – martyrs, and the humour of the everyday props which Shanzer points out, there is also slapstick and the ridiculing of sinners. As one example, drawn from Gregory of Tours' *Glory of the Confessors*,[33] take the story of Maurus, a man whose ill-treated slave ran away and took sanctuary in the church of Saint Lupus at Troyes. Maurus pursued the slave and, dragging him from the altar, mocked the saint who could not prevent him from recovering his property. Whereupon, his tongue 'was bound by divine power. The man was transformed and began to dance about the entire church, lowing like an animal and not speaking like a man.' Thus the sinner is ridiculed, before receiving the ultimate divine sanction: death. This would appear to be deliberately humorous, perhaps because, just as it invites the audience to laugh at Maurus' misfortune, and at his (seemingly) jester-like antics,[34] this is immediately followed

[30] D. Ganz, 'Humour as history in Notker's *Gesta Karoli magni*', in *Monks, Nuns and Friars in Medieval Society* (Sewanee Medieval Studies 4), ed. E. B. King, J. T. Schaefer and W. B. Wadley (Sewanee, TN, 1989), pp. 171–83.

[31] J. Le Goff, 'Laughter in the Middle Ages', in *A Cultural History of Humour*, ed. Bremmer and Roodenberg, pp. 40–53. See also, Balzaretti, below, p. 127.

[32] See also H. Magennis, 'A funny thing happened on the way to heaven: humorous incongruity in Old English saints' lives', in *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Wilcox, pp. 137–40.

[33] Gregory, *Glory of the Confessors* 66, *MGH SRM* 1.2, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison (Hanover 1969); *Gregory of Tours*: *Glory of the Confessors*, trans. R. Van Dam (Liverpool, 1988).

[34] Note, in particular, that part of the punishment concerns Maurus' ability to speak 'like a man'. On the humour of communication breakdown, see Kershaw, below, pp. 179–202. For the similarity

by the punch line of the extreme vengeance of the saint, bringing the reader – or listener, since it seems clear that Gregory intended these stories to be read aloud, and appears to have used them himself as sermons[35] – back down to earth with a bump.

Humour in the past is endlessly fleeting. As Shanzer says, humour comes only in passing moments in comedic genres.[36] Furthermore, it is not unusual to find that a joke is not as funny when heard a second or third time, especially when the humour works on the principle of a sudden evaporation of expectations. On the other hand, a joke can *gain* in humorous value; we might not get, or see, the joke the first time. So humour is a passing moment in terms of both stimulus *and* response. Even then, not everyone in an audience finds a particular joke or comedy funny. One of the problems of writing the history of humour, as in my own paper in this volume, is that it is often difficult to persuade an audience that a story was meant to be funny when not all (or perhaps none) of that audience finds it in any way funny any more. How much more difficult does this become when one has to admit that probably not everyone in the original audience found it funny either? Historical humour is an incredibly slippery topic. The phrase 'you had to be there', often employed when a joke falls flat, is never more appropriate than in the study of humour in history. We can locate instances which seem funny to us in ostensibly non-humorous writings, but were they intended to be funny?

In trying to answer this question, this book makes a direct contribution to the ongoing debate on the history of emotions. The question of what is funny and why makes a particularly good case-study. Because we find something amusing, can we inscribe our response on to past audiences? Balzaretti reports that people still laugh at the things that Liutprand of Cremona thought were funny. If the genre of writing, or, as in Liutprand's case, a cue within a source, lets us know that a tale was thought to be funny,[37] can we analyse *why* it was humorous? The Byzantine joke with which we began makes a useful example. The laughter that it provoked when told at the conference[38] was largely based upon its almost surreal value to a modern audience, or its value as a piece of nonsense: what use is the key if your house has burnt down? When originally told in the

with a jester, see the discussion of Attila's court, below, pp. 17–18, which makes clear that the spectacle of a man dancing around and talking nonsense was precisely the sort of thing which early medieval people *did* find funny.

[35] Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles*, p. 144. [36] Below, p. 25. [37] Balzaretti, below, pp. 116–17.
[38] And, I can report, on the many subsequent occasions when I have retold it.

Byzantine Empire, however, the humour was based upon a quite different factor. Haldon explains the joke's punch line[39] as meaning 'mind your own business'. If explained to a modern audience this robs the joke of its humour: 'Hey, your house is on fire'; 'Mind your own business'. . . A Byzantine audience would doubtless have been equally askance at an explanation for the modern British response to the joke. Of course, the explanation of jokes tends to dissipate their humour in any case.[40]

There are, furthermore, instances in early medieval writing where we can be fairly sure that a joke is being told but have no idea why it was funny, or whom the joke is on. Another example can be drawn from the work of Gregory of Tours. Domnolus, Abbot of St-Lawrence, Paris, feared that King Chlothar I was about to offer him the see of Avignon, so he let the king know that he did not want the job: 'he looked upon being sent to Avignon as a humiliation rather than an honour and he begged the king not to submit him, a simple man, to the boredom of having to listen to sophisticated arguments by old senatorial families, or to counts who spent all their time discussing philosophic problems'.[41] This seems to have been a joke, but exactly why is unclear. Is Gregory poking fun at southern, classically educated aristocrats, or (since he came himself from an 'old senatorial family') at uncouth northerners (Domnolus has a Frankish name, fairly rare in the sixth-century Gallic church)? Or at something so culturally specific that no trace of it at all emerges from the text?[42] We shall never know. Looking for the key here is as fruitless as it is in understanding the joke cracked by Louis the Pious' court jester during the Easter celebrations. That joke,[43] at the expense of Hatto, an otherwise unknown aristocrat, is now utterly incomprehensible. As Haldon says,[44] to understand jokes like this we need to know the details, and here the necessary details are quite beyond our purview. On the other hand, whether or not we still find the joke funny, study of a historical culture can at least let us know that something *was* funny and why. Thick description, to borrow Clifford Geertz's phrase,[45] can provide a key.

[39] Below, p. 64.

[40] Herein lies perhaps the biggest joke of the entire project: putting together a book with the enticing word 'humour' in the title and yet filling it with (mostly) dry discussion of largely serious medieval texts. That joke, dear reader, is on you!

[41] Gregory, *Histories* 6.9.

[42] Similarly I have often wondered why, at *Histories* 7.27, Gregory makes a brief aside in a story about the mutually fatal duel between Eberulf and Claudius to tell us that Claudius' wife was from Meaux, information which has no bearing on any part of the story. What was it about women from Meaux . . . ?

[43] For which see Innes, below, p. 149. [44] Below, p. 50.

[45] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

It can also help with the difficulties of trying to reconstruct past humour from sources that are not obviously comic, and which do not introduce funny stories as such. This is a problem that my own chapter faces and may, understandably, not convince everyone as a result. If, however, we can 'find the key' by reconstructing norms and codes from the texts of a past society we should be able to find cases of clear incongruity and inversion. Where we can locate such instances, even if a story no longer strikes us as amusing today, a strong possibility, at least, is presented that that story was thought funny in the past.

Much of the debate on the history of emotions has focussed upon whether or not, or the extent to which, emotions are socially constructed. As outlined, for example, in Barbara Rosenwein's recent interesting edited volume, *Anger's Past*,[46] the sides in the debate may be characterised as primordialists, who believe in a certain timeless physiological and psychological 'human nature' in the expression of emotions, and social constructionists, who believe that emotions are only constructed within specific social circumstances. As will have become clear, neither view seems entirely satisfactory. Humour is a mix of psychological and physiological constants and cultural specifics. The physiological manifestation of the 'laughter reflex' has, it would seem, always been the same, but nevertheless there is apparently no clear biological, functional reason for laughter; whatever the physiological constancy of the response, the stimulus is socially contingent.[47]

Laughter itself can be a controversial topic within societies. As will be seen, the church could hold a very negative view of laughter,[48] well expressed in a reported speech of Saint Nicetius of Trier:

> My beloved, you must avoid all jokes and all idle words; for, just as we have to present to God our body entirely pure, so we ought not to open our mouths unless it is to praise God. There are three ways by which a man is ruined: when he thinks, when he speaks or when he acts. Therefore, my beloved, avoid levity, malice and every other evil.[49]

Yet, even if this was a view that came to predominate in this period, there was nevertheless more than one possible Christian opinion on the

[46] *Anger's Past: The Social Construction of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. B. H. Rosenwein (Ithaca, NY, 1997), with references. See also the 'debate' on the subject in *Early Medieval Europe* 10(2), pp. 225–56, and my review of Rosenwein's volume, *Early Medieval Europe* 10(2),break pp. 301–3.

[47] See Haldon, below, p. 48.

[48] Explored in this volume by Innes, below, pp. 143–7; Kershaw, below, pp. 181–2; and Haldon, below, pp. 60–2.

[49] Gregory of Tours, *Life of the Fathers* 17.1, *MGH SRM* 1.2, ed. Krusch and Levison; *Gregory of Tours*: *Life of the Fathers*, trans. E. James (2nd edn, Liverpool, 1991).

subject.[50] In this volume, Paul Kershaw and Martha Bayless draw attention to other Christian readings of the subject. Nevertheless, the clear prominence of a view akin to Nicetius', especially in monastic writings, would hardly justify us in concluding that no one, or even that no monks, ever laughed. Similarly, at the time of writing this introduction, a heated debate is taking place in Britain about the screening of an edition of a satirical programme, 'Brass Eye', dealing with the media's coverage of paedophilia. Was it funny or not? Should we have laughed or should we not? The very fact that groups within a society feel the need to try to define what is and what is not funny is a graphic indicator of the fact that humour is *not* ultimately entirely governed by social norms. The differences in ideas of humour within a society, and the communications breakdowns which that can engender, can themselves be a location of humour. Kershaw[51] discusses Notker's tale of a bishop who thought that something Charlemagne said was a joke when it was nothing of the sort, and suffered the consequences. Emotions and their expression are not even constants *within* societies; this is as true of laughter as it is of fear or rage. It has consistently proved impossible to control laughter and humour, and as a result humour can be a valuable tool in social politics. The mocking, joking chants hurled at Byzantine emperors might be a case in point.[52]

Yet it is not true even to say that laughter might depend upon the group *within a society* in which one situates oneself. If it were, there would be no need to repress laughter. Many if not most of us will admit to an occasion where we have had to stifle a laugh, or where we have suffered from an 'attack of the giggles' at what social convention would lead us to believe was an entirely inappropriate moment or occasion. If we are honest, many of us will also admit to laughing at a 'sick' joke, or a joke about a subject in which we 'know' (according to learnt values) that really we ought not to find humour.

Much humour *is* entirely culturally specific: for example, the precise nature of the norms whose inversion makes people laugh, or the precise characteristics given to particular social groups.[53] Much humour depends on incongruity,[54] but what is or is not held to be incongruous is highly socially contingent. The precise situations wherein laughter is

[50] See, e.g., J. Le Goff, 'Le Rire dans les règles monastiques du haut moyen âge', in *Haut Moyen Age: culture, education et société. Etudes offerts à P. Riché*, ed. M. Sot (Nantes, 1990), pp. 93–103.

[51] Below, pp. 191–2. [52] Haldon, below, pp. 64–5.

[53] Such as men and women – see Balzaretti, below, pp. 119–28; or foreigners – see Haldon, below, pp. 58–60, Halsall, below, pp. 89–113 and Kershaw, below, pp. 194–5.

[54] Halsall, below, pp. 89–90.