This is the first book to offer an integrated reading of ancient Greek attitudes to laughter. Taking material from literature, myth, philosophy, religion and social mores, it analyses both the theory and the practice of laughter as a richly revealing expression of Greek values and mentalities. From the exuberantly laughing gods of Homeric epic to the condemnation of laughter by some early Church fathers, the subject provides a fascinating means of investigating complex features of cultural psychology. Greek society developed distinctive institutions (including the symposium and certain religious festivals) for the celebration of laughter as a capacity which could bridge the gap between humans and gods; but it also feared laughter for its power to expose individuals and groups to shame and even violence. Caught between ideas of pleasure and pain, friendship and enmity, play and seriousness, laughter became a theme of recurrent interest in various contexts. Employing a sophisticated model of cultural history, Stephen Halliwell traces elaborations of the theme in a series of important poetic and prose texts: ranging far beyond certain modern accounts of 'humour', he shows how perceptions of laughter helped to shape Greek conceptions of the body, the mind and the meaning of life.

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GREEK LAUGHTER

A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity

STEPHEN HALLIWELL
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In his characteristically bittersweet essay *Elogio degli uccelli*, ‘A eulogy of birds’, written in 1824, Giacomo Leopardi puts in the mouth of Amelius (a fictionalised version of Plotinus’ student of that name) a set of meditations which, among other things, treat the singing of birds as a kind of laughter. This thought gives Amelius the cue for a digression on the nature of laughter itself, which he regards (in a perception so typical of Leopardi, and one which later influenced Nietzsche) as a paradoxical capacity of humans, ‘the most tormented and miserable of creatures’. After pondering a number of laughter’s qualities – including its strange connection with an awareness of the vanity of existence, its appearance as a sort of ‘temporary madness’, and its association with inebriation – Amelius gives a startling undertaking: ‘but these matters I will deal with more fully in a history of laughter which I am thinking of producing...’ (‘Ma di queste cose tratterò più distesamente in una storia del riso, che ho in animo di fare...’), a history in which he promises to trace the intricate fortunes of the phenomenon from its ‘birth’ right up to the present.

This passage in Leopardi’s wonderful essay is, as far as I am aware, the first place where anyone ever contemplated such a peculiar thing as a ‘history of laughter’. Amelius’ promise (and Leopardi’s vision) is, for sure, not without irony, especially since he had earlier stated that the nature and principles of laughter can hardly be defined or explained. Yet the idea reappeared later in the nineteenth century when the Russian socialist Alexander Herzen (as quoted by Mikhail Bakhtin in his book on Rabelais) mused that ‘it would be extremely interesting to write the history of laughter’. It was to be two other Russians who in the twentieth century took active steps towards converting the idea into practice. One was the folklorist Vladimir Propp, who sketched out his thoughts on laughter in more than one text and left a book on the subject unfinished at his death in 1970. The other was Bakhtin himself, who in the 1940s and later developed his now well-known (though controversial) model of carnival and the carnivalesque as a major test case of
a `culture of laughter’ in which particular needs and mentalities were socially manifested. Whatever verdict might be reached on Bakhtin's specific model, it was his work more than anything else which established the possibility of addressing laughter as a fruitful topic of cultural history. And in recent decades the subject has indeed received an increasing amount of attention from historians of many periods between antiquity and the contemporary world. For all his irony, Amelius (or, rather, Leopardi) seems to have been prescient.

But what might it mean to pursue the history of one of the most familiar yet elusive of human behaviours? After all, the most influential of all approaches to laughter remains the one (itself partly of ancient ancestry) paradigmatically linked with both Bergson and Freud. This is an approach whose highest priority is the construction of general explanatory models (whether of 'humour', 'the comic' or some related category) to which history, it seems, is irrelevant. Henri Bergson's argument in *Le rire* (first published in book form in 1900) allows itself to refer to the 'essence' and 'laws' of the comic; yet despite its insistence that the 'natural environment' of laughter is the social world, it tells us virtually nothing about historical variations, shifts or tensions in the perception of what counts as 'laughable'. This absence of history, and its displacement by universalising theory, is equally a feature of Freud's 1905 book, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*). Freud, who cites Bergson's views with some approval, aspires to reduce jokes, and the pleasure they release in laughter, to a set of 'universal', 'essential' principles. (Freud was always, in part, a Platonist.) Even though sexual mores and social aggression are central to his theory, he never confronts the problem of historical variability in the operation of such factors of human behaviour. It would be ill-advised to deny that insight and stimulus can be found in the sometimes subtle observations of Bergson (for whom laughter and the comic are near-synonymous) and Freud (for whom they are not), as well as in the psychological theorising which has followed in their wake. But there is a price to be paid for dissociating psychology from history. And it is too high a price where laughter is concerned.

The present book is not, even so, exactly a ‘history’ of ancient Greek laughter. Like Leopardi’s Amelius, I think a history of laughter is something worth imagining yet (ultimately) incapable of being written. But it is certainly vital to regard laughter as having a history and therefore as most rewardingly to be studied within wider investigation of cultural forms and values. Although in one respect a deeply instinctive gesture, laughter’s psychological energy and vivid physical signals generate expressive protocols
Preface

and habits with complex social ramifications. As regards Greek antiquity, my dominant aim in this book has been to explore both the idea and the practice of laughter, including some of its intricate entanglements with religion, ethics, philosophy, politics and other domains. It needs stressing that I have not attempted to formulate a conception of Greek ‘humour’, nor to analyse at length Greek theories of ‘the comic’, even if my arguments inevitably touch on such issues from time to time. Surprising though it may seem, comic drama in its own right plays a deliberately subordinate part in the enquiry. Even in those chapters (4, 5 and 8) where comedy does figure prominently, I offer not so much a reading of the genre per se as a sort of meta-reading of its relationship to broader Greek perceptions and experiences of laughter. I try to elucidate attitudes to and uses of laughter – as enacted behaviour, symbolic imagery and an object of reflective analysis – across a wide spectrum of Greek culture, from Homeric epic to the writings of Greek church fathers in the early centuries of Christianity. I am interested in Greek representations and evaluations of laughter above all where they impinge on the dialectic of cultural self-definition and conflict. Guided by such basic coordinates as pleasure and pain, friendship and enmity, honour and shame, Greeks themselves often took laughter very seriously; and we too should do so in order to enrich our understanding of their myths, their literature and their lives. And because no one has tackled the material in quite this way before, I have supplied extensive and detailed documentation, both primary and secondary, in the hope that it may enable others to assess the evidence closely for themselves.

Arguments developed in this book have been presented as papers over many years and in many places. I owe sincere thanks to hosts and audiences in Bari, Birmingham, Boston, Cambridge, Freiburg, Glasgow, Glenalmond, Grenoble, Harvard, Lecce, London, Manchester, Mannheim, New York, Nottingham, Oxford, Philadelphia, Rome, St Andrews and Syracuse for their interest, encouragement and criticism. In the later stages of the project it was a particular pleasure to share some of my ideas with the audiences of the Gaisford lecture in Oxford, May 2005 (see Halliwell (2005)), and the Roberts lecture at Dickinson College, September 2005: I am grateful to Chris Pelling and Marc Mastrangelo, respectively, for organising those events. At Dickinson, I was fortunate to have as a commentator Ralph Rosen, with whom I have enjoyed congenial exchanges on other occasions as well. Many individuals have generously sent me copies of their own, or sometimes others’, work: my thanks to Mario Andreassi, Simone Beta, Bracht Branham, Christian Brockmann, Michael Clarke, Rossella Saetta Cottone, Angela Gigliola Drago, Anna Tiziana Drago, Steven Evans,
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Note to the reader

(1) Dates are BC unless otherwise indicated.
(2) The spelling of Greek names involves compromise, and therefore some inconsistency, between traditional Latinisation (which I usually prefer on grounds of familiarity) and the stricter principles of transliteration. I have tried to avoid forms that might puzzle non-specialists.
(3) The abbreviations of ancient authors’ names and works for the most part follow those used in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*; the Index of selected authors and works should also be consulted.
(4) All translations, from texts both ancient and modern, are my own unless otherwise indicated.
(5) All comic fragments are cited from *PCG* (see under Abbreviations below) unless stipulated otherwise, but ‘*PCG*’ is normally added to fragment numbers only of minor playwrights.
(6) The names of modern scholars appearing after references to ancient texts indicate the specific editions used; this applies especially to minor authors or to texts which can be cited with different systems of numeration. The editions appear in the bibliography under the editors’ names.
(7) Most miscellaneous abbreviations are self-evident, but note the following: BF = black-figure, RF = red-figure, Σ = scholia.
Abbreviations

ABV  J. D. Beazley, *Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters* (Oxford, 1956)
ANRW  *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin, 1972–)
ARV²  J. D. Beazley, *Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1963)
CA  *Collectanea Alexandrina*, ed. J. U. Powell (Oxford, 1925)
CAG  *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, 23 vols. in 28 (Berlin, 1882–1909)
CPG  *Corpus Paraemigraphorum Graecorum*, eds. E. L. Leutsch and F. G. Schneidewin, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1839–51)
DGE  *Diccionario griego-español*, eds. F. R. Adrados and E. Gangutia, in progress (Madrid, 1980–)
EGF  *Epicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, ed. M. Davies (Göttingen, 1988)
FGrH  *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, ed. F. Jacoby (Berlin/Leiden, 1923–58)
IG  *Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin, 1873–)
LfgrE  *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos*, eds. B. Snell et al. (Göttingen, 1955–)
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>LIMC</td>
<td>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae, 16 vols. (Zurich, 1981–97)</td>
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<td>PCG</td>
<td>Poetae Comici Graeci, eds. R. Kassel and C. Austin, 9 vols. in 11 (Berlin, 1983–)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RE</td>
<td>Pauly Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft (Stuttgart, 1893–1978)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEG</td>
<td>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum (Leiden/Amsterdam, 1923–)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SH</td>
<td>Supplementum Hellenisticum, eds. H. Lloyd-Jones and P. Parsons (Berlin, 1983)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ThesCRA</td>
<td>Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum, 5 vols. (Los Angeles, 2004–5)</td>
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<td>TrGF</td>
<td>Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta, eds. B. Snell et al., 5 vols. in 6 (Göttingen, 1971–2004)</td>
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