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FRENCH CROSSINGS: II. LAUGHING OVER  
BOUNDARIES

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ABSTRACT. Under the generic title, ‘French Crossings’, this Presidential Address explores the history of laughter in French society, and humour’s potential for transgressing boundaries. It focuses on the irreverent and almost entirely unknown book of comic drawings entitled *Livre de caricatures tant Bonnes que mauvaises* (Book of Caricatures, both Good and Bad), that was composed between the 1740s and the mid-1770s by the luxury Parisian embroiderer and designer, Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, and his friends and family. The bawdy laughter that the book seems intended to provoke gave it its nickname of the *Livre de culs* (Book of Arses). Yet despite the scatological character of many of the drawings, the humour often conjoined lower body functions with rather cerebral and erudite wit. The laughter provoked unsparingly targeted and exposed to ridicule the social elite, cultural celebrities and political leaders of Ancien Régime France. This made it a dangerous object, which was kept strictly secret. Was this humour somehow pre- or proto-Revolutionary? In fact, the work is so embedded in the culture of the Ancien Régime that 1789 was one boundary that the work signally fails to cross.

Jean-Georges Wille was a Parisian engraver. He kept a diary. And in that diary in June 1770 he recorded: ‘We dined at the home of M. Basan with the family of Chereau and with the elder Saint-Aubin. We laughed a lot.’<sup>1</sup> Pierre-François Basan and Jacques Chereau were also engravers.

<sup>1</sup> G. Wille, *Mémoires et journal*, ed. G. Duplessis (2 vols., Paris 1857), I, 440. On another occasion Wille notes the two men being together again in ‘un festin’ where ‘nous sommes restés assez longtemps à table de fort bonne humeur’. *Ibid.*, 578. (Note that the editor mistakenly takes this second reference to be to Charles-Germain’s brother Augustin.)

The ‘elder Saint-Aubin’ was Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin. He was by vocation an embroiderer, an artisan working in a luxury trade; but he also dabbled in much else besides, including engraving – and laughter. His family would retain the memory of him as ‘likeable, witty, clever, very caustic, very satirical, very gallant with the ladies, and never out of place wherever he went’. Witty, clever, satirical, caustic, never out of place in society – he was thus a good man to spend an evening with, an evening laughing with.

For much of Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin’s adult life, seemingly from the 1740s through to the 1770s, in an atmosphere of scrupulous secrecy, he maintained, developed and shared with a small group of cronies a collection of nearly 400 drawings that he entitled *Livre de caricatures tant Bonnes que mauvaises* (Figure 1: 675.1).<sup>2</sup> As its title suggests, it is a book of humorous drawings, a visual joke book. This extraordinary document, which is almost wholly unknown, testifies to that taste for festive sociability, that gift of laughter, that Wille’s diary evokes. It not only offers a striking visual perspective on the culture and politics of Paris during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, it also provides a unique prism on the nature of laughter in France of the Ancien Régime, a society organised around those boundaries, frontiers and divisions which Charles-Germain, a man ‘never out of place’, it would seem, was adept at crossing.

Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, whom we can take to be the principal author of the *Livre de caricatures*, is an obscure figure, in whom historians have expressed little interest (Figure 2: 675.386).<sup>3</sup> Born in 1721 under the Regency, he lived all his adult life – down to his death in 1786 – in pre-Revolutionary, Ancien Régime, Enlightenment France. Among historians of art, he is far less-known than his brothers, Gabriel, the odd-ball artist and proto-*flâneur* of the streets of Paris, whose star is currently rising in art-historical circles, and Augustin, one of the most celebrated engravers of the late eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Charles-Germain too may well

<sup>2</sup> *Livre de caricatures tant Bonnes que mauvaises*, Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, c. 1740 – c. 1775, 187 × 132mm, Waddesdon Manor, Classmark 675. It is currently located in the library of Waddesdon Manor, Bucks. In conjunction with colleagues from Waddesdon Manor, Juliet Carey and Pippa Shirley, and research assistant, Emily Richardson, I have recently completed an AHRC grant devoted to this volume. Note that to make references more manageable, I have included references to particular images in the text using Waddesdon Manor’s classification. The digitised images plus critical commentary – may be accessed on Waddesdon’s website: see the Waddesdon Saint-Aubin Project at [www.waddesdon.org.uk](http://www.waddesdon.org.uk). For all that follows, the curatorial commentary for each image mentioned is recommended.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Advielle, *Renseignements intimes sur les Saint-Aubin, dessinateurs et graveurs d’après les papiers de leur famille* (Paris, 1896), contains the fullest account of Charles-Germain’s life and draws on autobiographical and biographical fragments described below, n. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Advielle, *Renseignements intimes*, has until recently offered the best description of the lives of Gabriel and Augustin. For Gabriel, see now *Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, 1724–1780*, ex. cat. The Frick Collection, 30 Oct. 2007 – 27 Jan. 2008, Musée du Louvre, 28 Feb. – 26 May 2008

have nurtured artistic ambitions. Like the rest of his family, he had painted and drawn from childhood and he dabbled in engraving. From the age of fifteen, he maintained a book of drawings and paintings of flowers – the *Recueil de plantes* – which he prized highly.<sup>5</sup> Flower designs were staple features of the rococo style which adorned the clothes in whose design he came to specialise. In 1748, he produced a set of engravings of *papillonneries*, the human antics of butterflies, which seemed to presage an academic career in the art world – which then fizzled out completely.<sup>6</sup>

Charles-Germain probably made the right decision in renouncing a career in fine art and in following his father, who was *brodeur du roi* (royal embroiderer) into the trade of fancy, high-end embroidery. He enjoyed almost instantaneous success. In 1747, when he was still in his twenties, he designed the dauphin's wedding costume.<sup>7</sup> He was already accounted as among the very the best in the business. He went on to prosper, and to have children, whom he tried to marry well. Flowers and design remained at the core of the 40,000 drawings which he claimed to have completed in the course of his lifetime.<sup>8</sup> His *Recueil de plantes*, to which he was adding even on the eve of his death, would pass into the hands of his daughter on his death, as did a family album that he had composed in the last years of his life, known as the *Livre des Saint-Aubin*. These two books are now in the possession of the Oak Spring Garden Library in Virginia and the Louvre respectively.<sup>9</sup> The travels of his *Livre de caricatures* are more obscure. The volume is mentioned in no private document nor public record before the middle of the nineteenth century. It was fleetingly seen

(Paris, 2007). More generally, cf. E. Dacier, *Gabriel de Saint-Aubin. Peintre, dessinateur et graveur (1724–80), l'homme et l'œuvre* (2 vols., Paris, 1929–31), which contains much material on the brothers.

<sup>5</sup> *Recueil [sic] de plantes copiées d'après [sic] nature par de Saint Aubin, dessinateur du Roy Louis XV, 1736–1785*, by Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, 365 × 245mm, Oak Spring Garden Library, Upperville, Virginia. See also Lucia Tongiori Tomasi, *An Oak Spring Flora: Flower Illustrations from the 15th Century to the Present Time: A Selection of Rare Books and Manuscripts in the Collection of Rachel Lambert Mellon* (Upperville, VA, 1997), and Adrien Moreau, 'Recueil des plantes de Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin', *L'Art*, 73–8 (1903), 129–34. It is from the *Recueil des Plantes* that the description of Charles-Germain's character evoked in the first paragraph of this paper derives.

<sup>6</sup> P. Mauriès, *Les papillonneries humaines* (reprint edn; Paris, 1996). Charles-Germain also was involved with brother Gabriel in preparing a pornographic novel in the mid-1740s. For details on this and on other biographical data, see Juliet Carey and Colin Jones, 'Introduction', to *eadem, idem* and Emily Richardson, eds., *Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin and his 'Livre de culs'* (forthcoming Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, *L'Art du brodeur* (Paris, 1770). The text and accompanying illustrations have been reprinted as *The Art of Embroidery*, translated and annotated by Nikki Scheuer (Los Angeles, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> The reference is in the autobiographical fragments in the *Recueil de plantes*.

<sup>9</sup> See above, n. 4, and also Pierre Rosenberg, *Le Livre des Saint-Aubin* (Paris, 2002), for the Louvre volume.

by the Goncourt brothers, before it arrived at Waddesdon Manor in the 1890s – where it has been very little viewed.<sup>10</sup> It was evidently a book that the brothers Saint-Aubin did not wish to become public in their lifetime. They preferred to keep strictly to themselves and their closest intimates what was known in their family – with reason, as we shall see – as their *Livre de culs*, their ‘Book of Arses’.<sup>11</sup>

My series of presidential lectures, which I have entitled, ‘French Crossings’, has as its motif the act of crossing – crossing territorial boundaries (I am a British historian of France; France is the framework for my talks), crossing disciplinary frontiers and exploring the act of crossing, and the meaning of crossing, in the lives of my subjects. Last year, I used the Channel hoppings of Charles Dickens to explore issues of personal and national identity focused around his great novel about the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*. I suggested that understanding the act of constantly travelling between two cities and two cultures was crucial to grasping Dickens’s relationship with, and the underlying meanings of, his famous novel.<sup>12</sup> In this paper, I shall be studying an individual who, in contrast to Dickens, was almost wholly obscure yet who was similarly adept at crossing – though over social rather than national boundaries – and for whom, as we shall see, that act was a key, until now a hidden key, to his identity.

Coming to terms with the unusual laughing book that is the focus of this paper requires thinking about how as historians we deal with the subject of laughter. In recent years, this slippery phenomenon has enjoyed something of a vogue among historians, who have done their best to seek explanatory traction from other fields of scholarly endeavour, including philosophy, psychology, physiology, sociology, anthropology, literary criticism and visual theory.<sup>13</sup> Yet whatever its disciplinary livery, there is one virtually universal characteristic of scholarly studies of

<sup>10</sup> For the book’s history, see Carey and Jones, ‘Introduction’. This collection comprises essays on the work from very wide-ranging and divergent perspectives. The Goncourts provide the only substantial comment on the work before the present day: see their *L’Art du XVIIIe siècle*, 3rd edn (Paris, 1882).

<sup>11</sup> This in a loose-leaf page located in the *Livre de caricatures* at Waddesdon Manor. It is in the hand of Pierre-Antoine Tardieu, the husband of one of Charles-Germain’s granddaughters, who inherited the book in the early 1820s and seems to have been party to a number of family traditions.

<sup>12</sup> Colin Jones, ‘Presidential Address: I. Tales of Two Cities’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 20 (2010), 1–26.

<sup>13</sup> To focus solely on eighteenth-century France, particularly recommended on laughter, from a list which could be much extended, are Anne Richardot, *Le rire des Lumières* (Paris, 2002); ‘Le rire’, ed. Lise Andries, *XVIIIe siècle*, 32 (2000); Antoine de Baecque, *Les éclats du rire: la culture des rieurs au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2000); Jean Goldzink, *Les Lumières et l’idée du comique* (Fontenay-aux-Roses, 1992); *idem*, *Comique et comédie au siècle des Lumières* (Paris, 2002); and Elizabeth Bourguinat, *Le siècle du persiflage, 1734–1789* (Paris, 1998). For slightly earlier periods, see Daniel Ménager, *La Renaissance et le rire* (Paris, 1995), and Dominique Bertrand, *Dire le*

humour. They are very, very rarely amusing. ‘Those who seek the metaphysical causes of laughter’, Voltaire noted, presciently, ‘are rarely jolly.’<sup>14</sup> Present-day researchers beating their paths towards such works can be certain they will leave them with the straightest of faces. Indeed, there may even be something about the subject which attracts the constitutionally morose. The psychologist Vicky Bruce, author of important work on visual cognition and facial recognition, remarks in one of her books, ‘I am forever passing people in the street who say “Cheer up, it might never happen”’ – sadly going on to note, ‘Clearly though quite unintentionally I tend to wear a troubled face.’<sup>15</sup>

The apparent attraction of the topic of humour to the serious-minded and lugubrious of countenance seems quite amusing in fact, as though just talking seriously and academically about humour was comic in itself. Warming to the notion of the unwittingly comic aspect of serious work on the topic of humour, the sociologist Peter Berger has remarked that

writing a book about the comic could be construed as *prima facie* evidence of ... humourlessness. Conversely, the witness to such an endeavour may well find it funny. It calls for a humorous antithesis as occurs when a philosopher lecturing on metaphysics loses his trousers ... – the physical taking comic revenge on the pretensions of the metaphysical.<sup>16</sup>

An image from the *Livre de caricatures* appositely and punningly illustrates the point: the hot air of a musicology lecturer is met full on by wind of an altogether different kind emerging from a ‘fundamental bass’ (Figure 3: 675.63). The academic pretension to truth-telling finds itself subverted by the more earthy truth of the body, indeed in this case from this book of arses, the truth of the arse. This is a dimension of the comic, of which any academic researcher needs to remain acutely aware. Although I shall approach the subject of humour with due academic seriousness, I will be braced and tightly belted against the ironical realisation that just trying to be funny about the funny is supremely funny because the effort must needs be quintessentially unfunny.

Of course, one reason why historical studies of laughter are rarely amusing is that humour is both culture-bound and time-specific and

*rire à l'âge classique: représenter pour mieux contrôler* (Aix-en-Provence, 1995). Very useful general works include Georges Minois, *Histoire du rire et de la déraison* (Paris, 2000); Robert Favre, *Le rire dans tous ses éclats* (Lyon, 1995); Dominique Bertrand and Véronique Gély-Ghedira, eds., *Rire des dieux* (Clermont-Ferrand, 2000); C. Biondi et al., eds., *La quête du bonheur et l'expression de la douleur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises* (Geneva, 1995); and Maurice Lever, *Le sceptre et la marotte: histoire des fous de cour* (Paris, 1983). For a helpful comparative angle, see Jan Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks and Society in the Spanish Netherlands* (Basingstoke, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, article ‘rire’.

<sup>15</sup> Vicky Bruce, *Recognising Faces* (1988), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York, 1991), xiv.

consequently travels very badly. By the time a joke is explained in all its intricacy, any thought of laughter will probably have long vanished. Aristotle once remarked that surprise is an indispensable feature of laughter. But surprise cannot be patiently dissected and expounded at length. ‘A joke explained’, to cite Voltaire again, ‘stops being a joke’.<sup>17</sup> Laughter theory thus travels as badly as humour itself. This point is all the more pertinent in that since the late nineteenth century, theories of laughter with scientific claims have been dominated by two disciplines, psychology and evolutionary biology, neither of which is very receptive to historical analysis. In psychology, Henri Bergson’s influential 1899 lectures on laughter, and the work of Freud, stress the transhistorical universality of humour.<sup>18</sup> Following in the footsteps of Charles Darwin’s work on the expression of emotion, evolutionary biology offers categories whose ultra-long time-frame also makes them recalcitrant to chronological periodisation. Neo-Darwinian theorists of the emotions in our own day such as Paul Ekman and his school espouse an evolutionist viewpoint which is difficult to reconcile with historical analysis.<sup>19</sup>

The starting point for this essay on eighteenth-century laughter is that we will be in a better posture for understanding something like the *Livre de caricatures* if we accept that laughter and laughter theory simply do not travel, are indeed radically incommensurable, and that humour from another period or another society is just basically not funny any longer. In this, I am taking further the methodological path mapped out by Robert Darnton, in his wonderful essay on the ‘Great Cat Massacre’, which appeared in 1984.<sup>20</sup> Darnton argued that the historian should be particularly interested in areas of opacity about past societies. It was precisely when historians could not see anything even faintly amusing in what people in the past found funny that one could be certain that there was something being transacted that was worthy of investigation. In the case that Darnton studied, it was the mass slaughter of neighbourhood cats by young apprentices in the neighbourhood of the Rue Saint-Séverin in Paris in the 1720s, a mass slaughter that, it was recorded, provoked unparalleled hilarity among the group. What indeed – Darnton nodded towards the phrasing of his Princeton colleague, the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, with whom he collaborated – was

<sup>17</sup> Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*.

<sup>18</sup> H. Bergson, *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris, 1900); for Freud, see esp. his *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905).

<sup>19</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, ed. P. Ekman, 3rd edn (1998). Besides the introductory material by Ekman in this edition, see too Ekman, *What the Face Reveals*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2005); *idem*, *Emotion in the Human Face*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1982). Ekman appears to have never failed not to laugh at a historical joke

<sup>20</sup> Robert Darnton, ‘Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin’, in his *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984).

going on here? And understanding what indeed was going on – getting the joke in fact, understanding the laughter – would, Darnton wagered, permit us to gauge precisely what was specific, non-transferable, truly and intractably historical about a past society. Darnton wrote a brilliant essay, then a wonderful book, around this one grisly, surely unfunny, eighteenth-century ‘comic’ episode. Scholars of Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin’s *Livre de caricatures* will gulp at the prospect: for we have not one joke to decipher. We have nearly 400 comic drawings whose humour we have to unravel, whose capacity for eliciting laughter we have to understand.

In the daunting task of identifying the character of the humour to be found in the *Livre de caricatures*, it seems wisest to eschew laughter theories of the present day and to look for some guidance at least to those of the author’s past. It is comforting that if we today lack the conceptual equipment to say just what people found funny in the eighteenth century and why, so did they. Laughter in the eighteenth century was almost as much of a puzzle and a conundrum as laughter theory is to us. For the era of Enlightenment which prided itself on coming up with rational answers to questions about the natural and social worlds, laughter was annoyingly difficult to pin down, as indeed Voltaire’s comments highlight. Louis Poinset de Sivry, the author of a learned disquisition on laughter published in 1768, the *Traité des causes physiques et morales du rire*, agreed with Aristotle that laughter was the special privilege and province of humanity.<sup>21</sup> There was, it seemed, no individual in history who had never laughed. In antiquity even the supremely serious and virtuously po-faced Cato was known to have indulged once in his life, when he saw an ass eating thistles . . .<sup>22</sup> Poinset de Sivry, who could catalogue over a dozen forms of laughter (the gracious laugh, the silly laugh, the civil laugh, the forced laugh, the belly-laugh and so on), concluded that it was shocking that, despite the ubiquity of laughter and the existence of theories of laughter going back to antiquity, mankind had still to reach a real understanding of the essence of the phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> Yet this did not stop mankind from trying.

Early modern discussions of laughter invariably referred back to a sixteenth-century treatise on laughter written by Laurent Joubert, the *Traité du ris* or *Traité du rire* (the ‘Treatise on Laughter’). Written in 1560, published in French in 1579, Joubert’s treatise is a kind of ur-text of early modern discussions of laughter.<sup>24</sup> Its influence was very evident, for example, in Poinset de Sivry’s 1768 text. Joubert is a helpful

<sup>21</sup> Louis Poinset de Sivry, *Traité des causes physiques et morales du rire, relativement à l’art de l’exciter* (Amsterdam 1768; reprint edn, Exeter 1986, ed. W. Brooks).

<sup>22</sup> The Cato example is given in Joubert (see references at n. 24): 228.

<sup>23</sup> Poinset de Sivry, *Traité des causes physiques*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Laurent Joubert, *Traité du ris* (Slatkine reprint, Paris, 1970). See the English translation (with a helpful introduction): Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, ed. and trans. G. David

guide, supplying a whole agenda for considering laughter physiologically and aesthetically, medically and morally, culturally and socially. Joubert himself was a Montpellier medical professor by vocation, as indeed François Rabelais had been. The latter's *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* could be taken as a faithful exemplification of Joubert's treatise – had the latter not in fact predated them by several decades. No matter.<sup>25</sup> For both Rabelais and Joubert viewed the issues of laughter along similar lines, as pitched between the disciplines of natural philosophy and medicine. (Evolutionary theory was two centuries distant, the psychological turn in laughter studies 300 years away.) Joubert expressed particular interest in questions such as: what happens to the human body when we laugh? What triggers off that laughter? And what was the experience of laughing like? He provided, for example, a kind of comparative acoustic typology of the laugh, noting a wide range of behavioural tics. Thus there were, he suggested, individuals who laugh like geese hissing, goslings grommeling, wood pigeons sighing, chicks peeping, horses neighing, strangulated dogs yapping and so on, through to individuals whose laugh resembles a pot of cabbage on the boil.<sup>26</sup> Joubert's physiology had it that laughter originates in the heart and radiates throughout the body by the muscles in the diaphragm, causing the chest to shake, the voice to tremble, the mouth to widen and open. Air coming up through the chest becomes too much for nostrils to handle, causing the mouth to open, setting off a range of facial movements as the eyes wrinkle, the cheeks expand and dimples form on and around the chin.

Certainly [he states] there is nothing that gives more pleasure and recreation than a laughing face, with its wide, shining, clear and serene forehead, eyes shining, resplendent from any vantage point, and casting fire as do diamonds; cheeks vermillion and incarnate, mouth flush with the face, lips handsomely drawn back, . . . chin drawn in, widened and a bit recessed. All this is in the smallest laugh and in the smile, amidst salutations, caresses and greetings, favours an encounter of much grace.<sup>27</sup>

Joubert and his disciples were well aware, however, that, among the wide, gradated range of laughter forms that he could identify, less benign forms of laughter also existed. Two in particular stood out. First, there was sardonic laughter, which Joubert showed had been much described in antiquity.<sup>28</sup> It drew sustenance from Aristotle's proclamation that laughter

de Rocher (Alabama, 1980); and G. David de Rocher, *Rabelais's Laughters and Joubert's Traité du Ris* (Alabama, 1979).

<sup>25</sup> The works in the series appeared from 1532 to 1564 (Rabelais had died in 1553).

<sup>26</sup> Joubert, *Traité du ris*, 221. Following this cue, one later author maintained that four Galenic humours – melancholic, bilious, phlegmatic and sanguine temperaments – could be exactly mapped on to the different forms of laughter: hi-hi, hé-hé, ha-ha and ho-ho. *Ibid.*, *Épître*, no page number.

<sup>27</sup> Joubert, *Traité du ris*, 221.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 225ff.



derived from ‘the joy we have in observing the fact that we cannot be hurt by the evil at which we are indignant’, and was characterised as an involuntary sneering laugh, often displaying the canine teeth. It feigned a true, sincere laugh. And it characterised the liar, the embittered and the ill-willed.

Ugly, rude and indecorous, sardonic laughter should be steered clear of. The same caution should be exercised by another non-benign form of laughter. Joubert painted a frightening picture of laughter when it gets out of hand, instancing

the great opening of the mouth, the notable drawing back of the lips, the broken and trembling voice, the redness of the face, the sweat that sometimes comes out of the entire body, the spraying of the eyes with the effusion of tears, the rising of the veins in the forehead and throat, the coughing, the expelling of what was in their mouth and nose, the shaking of the chest, shoulders, arms, thighs, legs and the whole body, like a convulsion, the great pain in the ribs, sides and abdomen, the emptying of the bowels and the bladder, the weakness of the heart for want of breath, and some other effects.<sup>29</sup>

Joubert itemised some of the other effects as convulsions, fainting, apoplexy and indeed death. The death claim was repeated in the mid-seventeenth century by the physician Cureau de La Chambre who made this kind of ‘vehement’ laughter sound uncomfortably like orgasm.<sup>30</sup> Joubert’s description and this evocation of what was, literally, a killer laugh was much drawn on throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The vivacious, life-enhancing, attractive, salubrious laugh highlighted by Joubert thus had its dark avatar in mortiferous, uncontrollable, convulsive, body-shaking, sputum-spraying, self-soiling laughter. The latter form of laughter was also, as Joubert puts it, ‘ugly, deformed, improper, indecent, unfitting and indecorous’.<sup>31</sup>

Joubert’s basic physiology stood up relatively well to changes in medical knowledge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even as the credibility of the Galenic system of the humours on which it had been based began to erode. In his *Treatise on the Passions* (1649), for example, René Descartes would introduce a Harveian acceleration in the circulation of the blood as a predisposing factor to laughter as conceptualised by Joubert.<sup>32</sup> This mechanistic approach was elaborated further during the Enlightenment by post-humoral, anatomically minded physicians. The article on laughter in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, for example, showed the continuing influence of Joubert’s descriptions, but also sought a more precise, mechanistic understanding of laughter in terms

<sup>29</sup> Joubert, *Traité du ris*, 160–1.

<sup>30</sup> M. Cureau de La Chambre, *Les caractères des passions* (2 vols., Paris, 1658), I, 58.

<sup>31</sup> Joubert, *Traité du ris*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> René Descartes, *Traité des passions* (1649).

of the facial muscles.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the laugh was only one form in the broad taxonomy of mouth behaviours with which medical writers now concerned themselves: laughter took its place in advanced mouth morphology alongside the yawn, the smile, the hiccup, the rictus, the grimace.<sup>34</sup> Though also following a mechanistic approach, the great German physiologist Haller in addition highlighted the importance of the nervous system, as one would expect from one of the key theorists of the cult of sensibility.<sup>35</sup> For Haller, the laugh was essentially an alteration in the respiratory system. He twinned it with the equally involuntary cough. But the human mind was somehow engaged in laughter, he noted, except of course in cases of tickling (a practice in which Joubert had been particularly interested in fact).<sup>36</sup> The cult of sensibility developing across the eighteenth century highlighted how certain types of individual were particularly prone to laughter. The hyper-nervous constitution of women pushed them towards hysterical, pathological laughter; for example, while the crude nervous system of the common people predisposed them to coarse rough Rabelaisian mirth.<sup>37</sup>

Much of Joubert's physiology of the laugh remained recognisably in place; yet shifts were going on in the semiotics of laughter. In the middle of the seventeenth century, as Quentin Skinner has noted, Thomas Hobbes picked up the darker aspect of Laurent Joubert's account of occasions for laughter. Whereas for Joubert mocking, sardonic laughter was only one form among many, for Hobbes all laughter came down to rejoicing in the misfortunes of others. 'The passion of Laughter is nothyng but a suddaine Glory arising from the suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others.' For Hobbes, all laughter was derision.<sup>38</sup>

This view became highly influential in France as well as in England in the late seventeenth century. It was buttressed in France by the political and religious conjuncture, which predisposed towards a highly pessimistic evaluation of laughter. The Catholic Church after the Council of Trent had a gloomy predilection for avoiding humour at all costs. By the late seventeenth century, Bishop Bossuet would be defining laughter as 'a

<sup>33</sup> *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres* (17 vols., Geneva, 1754–72), XIV, 298ff.

<sup>34</sup> See the excellent M. Guédron, *L'art de la grimace: cinq siècles d'excès de visage* (Paris, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Dr. Albert Haller's *Physiology; Being a Course of Lectures upon the Visceral Anatomy and Vital Oeconomy of Human Bodies*, 2nd edn (1772), I, 346.

<sup>36</sup> 'Sis problemes du chatoulement', in Joubert, *Traité du ris*, 201.

<sup>37</sup> A. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (1998); L. Wilson, *Women and Medicine in the French Enlightenment: The Debate over 'Maladies des Femmes'* (1993).

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. F. Tonnies, 2nd edn (1969), 42 (original 1634). Cf. Quentin Skinner, 'Hobbes and the Classical Theory of Laughter', in *idem, Visions of Politics, III: Hobbes and Civic Science* (Cambridge, 2002).