H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Simon Dickie. *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 384 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-14618-8.

Reviewed by Alison Conway (University of Western Ontario)
Published on H-Albion (January, 2012)
Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth

Forgotten Laughter

A brilliant and beautifully written book, *Cruelty and Laughter* introduces its readers to a world of violent mayhem, both rhetorical and real. Interrupting a critical narrative that foregrounds Britain's evolution as a polite and commercial culture over the course of the eighteenth century, Simon Dickie reveals the underbelly of this culture: in particular, its attachment to forms of entertainment that today we would consider tasteless at best, pernicious at worst. In drawing an unsavory portrait of three decades (1740-70), Dickie exposes the period's "unpleasant secrets" (p. 7). Indeed, such is the transformative experience of reading this book that I, for one, will never look at the mid-eighteenth century again in quite the same way.

The study's introduction documents how far the critical pendulum has swung in literary studies from the old eighteenth century, the Age of Johnson, to the new, "politeness-sensibility" era (p. 3). Even as he seeks to adjust the pendulum, Dickie is quick to reassure his readers that his study does not seek to "remasculinize" the field, but rather to incorporate new historical work into an account that attends to politeness's doppelgänger (p. 4). The introduction goes on to examine, more broadly, historical debates about emergent and reactionary trends in the eighteenth century and considers what is gained when we set aside our knowledge of "what happened next" (p. 13). Contemplating patterns of continuity and transformation, Dickie notes that "inertias and resistances" are less often studied than "momentums of change" (p. 8). To study what has been left behind by our narratives of progress is to defamiliarize the past and to open it up to new discoveries.

"What did British people laugh at in the mid-eighteenth century?" Dickie asks (p. 17). Chapter 1 begins with the jest book, repository of all varieties of nasty humor. Dickie dispenses with ideas about this humor belonging only to the lower sorts by attending to the production of jest books for middle- and upper-class consumers. Drawing on Jan Fergus's study of the book trade, he goes on to prove that women, as well as men, purchased jest books, thus dispelling assumptions about women's obsession with propriety. At least in private, it appears, women laughed as heartily as men at rude jokes. Chapter 2 turns our attention to humor that targets the disabled. Remarkably, Dickie is able to move, in this chapter, from jokes about cripples and hunchbacks to reflections on the lived experience of disability in the eighteenth century. Assessing the frequency of injury among the laboring poor, among others, Dickie gleans historical truths from commonplace rhymes and playing cards as well as more conventional sources. The same chapter reflects on why disability seemed to provoke laughter so readily in this period. In an age "in which everyday accidents crippled one in an instant and a mild conjunctivitis could blind one for life,... there must have been something therapeutic or compensatory about the laughter of witnesses," Dickie speculates (p. 101).

Chapter 3 shows how Britain's social hierarchy afforded pleasures for its upper classes organized around the torment of social inferiors. "Buckish misrule" proved entertaining not only for gentlemen, however, but also for everyone else besides (p. 142). Dickie studies the "odd compatibilities" between aristocratic pranks and sentimental gestures (p. 151), reminding us of the less appealing aspect of benevolence and the structures of dependence it sustained in the eighteenth century. Chapter 4 takes up *Joseph Andrews* (1742) to consider, in detail, Henry Fielding's vexed relation to the ethics of humor. Dickie adds a new dimension to the study of this novel in his rich contextualization of its treatment of Parson Adams. Noting that Fielding certainly was aware, by 1742, that whatever satirical intentions he declared regarding his lewd humor were likely to be ignored by his audience, he identifies the author's complicity in the par-

son's humiliation throughout the novel. Fielding's ambivalence toward Parson Adams, in turn, allows Dickie to reflect on the novel's anticlericalism, which we see more clearly when we recognize the extent to which Fielding was willing to exploit familiar anti-parson humor in his narrative. Chapter 5 reveals that not even rape stemmed the flow of laughter. Indeed, rape tapped into a rich vein of misogyny, allowing trials at the Old Bailey to be both recorded and read as extended jokes. Ballads and other popular material suggest "a widespread acceptance of male violence" (p. 215). The evidence Dickie gathers in this chapter convincingly proves that sympathy toward a rape victim–most famously advocated by Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748)–did nothing to change legal responses to rape charges, and little to mitigate widespread cultural skepticism.

The book concludes with a survey of dozens of long-forgotten comic novels of the mid-century, united by their distinctly unsentimental approach to the world. This overview revises critical accounts of the rise of the novel and its commitment to social mobility–accounts that, Dickie points out, "sometimes make it hard to recognize the snobbery and conservatism of so much eighteenth-century fiction" (p. 264). It is here that Dickie admits to enjoying at least one of the narratives he has studied: "Odd and appalling as it must seem, Betty is an enjoyable character–a pluckish, brassy survivor and the orchestrator of much high comedy" (p. 259). I would have liked to hear more about what is salutary in the material Dickie studies–if, indeed, there is anything worth reclaiming in this "shameless rubbish" (p. 273).

Dickie's ability to draw his investigation of cruelty and laughter into larger conversations about historiography, literary history, the book trade, and disability studies renders this book an immensely important contribution to the field. Paradoxically, the desire to look closely at a relatively thin slice of history ends up reshaping the long eighteenth century as we know it. For cultural and literary historians, *Cruelty and Laughter* provides a counter-Enlightenment narrative to the progress of polite society. What the long-term effects of this shift in emphasis might be remains to be seen, but future critics will need to take Dickie's evidence and ideas into account when considering canonical and noncanonical material alike. More immediately, for those teaching works from the period, *Cruelty and Laughter* provides us with a rich social history within which to contextualize the outbursts of aggression that punctuate sentimental narratives. Recently, a student of mine admitted to laughing her head off while reading about the old women's footrace in Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778). Other students in the class expressed shock and dismay. I can now say with confidence that my laughing student had entered fully into the spirit of the age we were studying.

Citation: Alison Conway. Review of Dickie, Simon, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34704