

# *H*ILARITY AND PITILESSNESS IN THE MID-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: ENGLISH JESTBOOK HUMOR

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What did English people laugh at in the mid-eighteenth century? From the literary record, we have a partial answer to this question: the corrective laughter of Augustan satire; the cuckolds and sexual intrigues of stage comedy; the familiar cast of Irish idiots and *soupe-maigre* Frenchmen. But what did people laugh at in everyday situations—in streets or coffee houses or polite assemblies? By considering this more specific question, we may learn important things about a historically distant culture. One might begin, like a good ethnographer or folklorist, with a few jokes:

A Man being very much diseased and weak, was bemoaning himself to his only Son, whom he loved very well: For, *Jack*, says he, if I stand, my Legs ach; if I kneel, my Knees ach; if I go, my Feet ach; if I lie, then my Back achs; if I sit, my Hips ach; and if I lean, my Elbows ach. Why truly Father, says he (like a good dutiful Child) I advise you to hang yourself for an Hour or two, and if that does not do, then come to me again.<sup>1</sup>

One Day in the Grove, [Beau Nash] joined some Ladies, and asking *one* of them, who was crooked, whence she came? She replied, *Strait* from London. *Indeed, Madam*, said he, *then you must have been confoundedly warpt by the Way.*<sup>2</sup>

One *Easter Monday*, an arch Rogue meeting a *blind* Woman who was crying Puddings and Pies, taking her by the Arm said Come along with me Dame, I am going to *Moorfields*, where this Holliday-time, you may Chance to meet with good Custom. Thank'e kindly, Sir, says she.

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Whereupon he conducted her to *Cripplegate* Church, and placed her in the middle Isle. Now, says he, you are in *Moorfields*: which she believing to be true, immediately cried out, *Hot Puddings and Pies! Hot Puddings and Pies! come their all Hot! &c.* which caused the whole Congregation to burst out in a loud Laughter, and the Clerk came and told her she was in a Church: You are a lying son of a Whore, says she. Which so enraged the Clerk, that he dragged her out of the Church: she cursing and damning him all the while, nor would she believe him 'till she heard the Organs play.<sup>3</sup>

A deaf Man was selling of Pears at the Town's End in *St Giles's*, and a Gentleman riding out of Town, asked him what it was o'Clock? He said, Ten a Penny, Master. Then he asked him again, what it was o'Clock? He told him, Indeed he could afford no more. You Rogue, says the Gentleman, I'll kick you about the Streets. Then says the Man, Sir, if you won't, another will.<sup>4</sup>

A young Man married to an ill-temper'd Woman, who not contented, tho' he was very kind to her, made continual Complaints to her Father, to the great Grief of both Families; the Husband, no longer able to endure this scurvy Humour, bang'd her soundly: Hereupon she complain'd to her Father, who understanding well the Perverseness of her Humour, took her to Task, and lac'd her Sides soundly too; saying, *Go, commend me to your Husband, and tell him, I am now even with him, for I have cudgell'd his Wife, as he hath beaten my Daughter.*<sup>5</sup>

A Woman prosecuted a Gentleman for a Rape; upon Trial the Judge ask'd her, if she made any Resistance? *I cry'd out, an't please your Lordship, said the Woman. Ay, said one of the Witnesses, but that was nine Months after.*<sup>6</sup>

What is remarkable to modern readers about these jokes (all taken from mid-century jestbooks) is their sheer callousness, their frank delight in human suffering. They suggest an almost unquestioned pleasure at the sight of deformity or misery—an automatic and apparently unreflective urge to laugh at weakness simply because it is weak. The miserable old father, the hunchback, the disabled street vendors, the battered wife, the rape plaintiff: the victims of these jokes are as helpless and vulnerable as it is possible to be. Those who mock them are simply delighting in their immense superiority and good fortune; they are indulging the “sudden glory” that Hobbes describes in his famous analysis of laughter, the rush of glee caused “by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.”<sup>7</sup> But it is all surprisingly genial and good-humored: the fellow who torments the blind pie-seller is “an arch Rogue”; in many similar jokes, the tormentor is introduced as “a good impudent fellow,” a “diverting wag,” “this facetious gentleman,” and so on.

English jestbooks of this period offer innumerable jokes about cripples, dwarfs, and hunchbacks; about amputees and other *mutilées*; about the blind or one-eyed; about decrepit old people, paupers, and invalids. One finds frequent jokes about stuttering and other speech impediments. Noselessness was evidently a particularly amusing affliction—perhaps because it reduced one to an almost animal state (man, it was often said, was the only animal with a nose).<sup>8</sup> God bless your eyesight, says the joker to someone with no nose—because you certainly

couldn't wear spectacles. The jokes about rape and wife-beating are typical of unsympathetic jests about the maltreatment or helplessness of women. Many of these jestbook witticisms are no more sophisticated than the waggish insults quoted above. Some are little more than physical cruelties—blind men led into walls, midgets tossed out windows, cripples tumbled into ditches. Others are more inventive pranks, like the following:

The lord Mohun and the earl of Warwick being on the ramble, they took notice of an old woman, who early and late was boiling codlings [apples] near Charing-cross; one day they bought some of her, pitied her poverty, and promised to send her a bushel of charcoal for nothing. I thank your honours, replied the old woman. In the morning a porter brings a bushel of charcoal, at which the old woman was very joyful: but their lordships had filled up the hollow of the charcoal with gunpowder, and sealed up the ends with black wax and stood at a distance to see the effect of their project. The old woman's fire beginning to decay, she supplied it with the charcoal which was sent her. In a little time, bounce went the charcoal like so many crackers, down went the kettle into the street, and away flew the codlings about the old woman's ears; and she getting no hurt, their lordships were well pleased with the frolick.<sup>9</sup>

This jolly tale, frequently reprinted, is one of many in which some waggish aristocrat torments a cripple or starving pauper before a delighted mob (so much for plebian class-consciousness). More obscurely, it seems to literalize an old adage that the best thing to do with an old woman was to blow her up or grind her into gunpowder.<sup>10</sup> Such elaborate anecdotes often continue for several pages—thus the hundreds of tales in which two invalids or disabled persons (a blind man and a cripple; a deaf man and a gout sufferer) are put together to torment and injure each other.



Given the focus of much recent scholarship—work on the self-conscious “politeness” or sentimentality of mid-eighteenth-century England—we might easily see such jokes as artifacts of “low” culture, examples of the vulgar taste from which the “polite” classes had apparently so decisively separated themselves. Such jokes could only appear, we might assume, in the cheapest and most ephemeral forms of print: in the crude chapbooks put out by the Dicey family or the even smaller comic pamphlets sold by itinerant pedlars and the shabbiest booksellers on and around London Bridge. In more dialectical terms, we might think of such malicious humor as a “residual” aspect of culture, the anomalous hangover of a premodern barbarity that was soon to sink into oblivion. For it was becoming increasingly unacceptable, we often observe, to laugh at the sufferings of others. Moralists warned that such humor was nothing but malicious superiority—Hobbes's “sudden glory.” Nothing shocks us more, wrote Adam Smith in the opening pages of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, than an absence of sympathy. “It is natural,” insisted James Beattie, that “pity should prevail over the ludicrous emotion.”<sup>11</sup> Only the most “diabolical” person, Fielding warned in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, would laugh at “Ugliness, Infirmary, or Poverty.” We often as-

sume that the deformed, the disabled, the elderly and infirm had become objects of sympathy rather than figures of fun. They benefited from an increasing number of charitable initiatives. In fiction, sentimental souls weep over a succession of mutilated beggars and old soldiers. Yorick's reflections on the miserable plight of dwarves—"this poor blighted part of my species, who have neither size nor strength to get on in the world"—occupy an entire chapter of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*.<sup>12</sup> As for the misogynistic violence of the last two jokes—this, we might assume, could have amused only the most vulgar of readers. For inherited assumptions about the nature of women were dying out, we are often told. Middle-class culture attributed an increasing ethical superiority to women. Sentimental tales of the *vertu persecutée* sort, with their affecting episodes of female suffering, had become more and more popular.

The problem is that these nasty witticisms do not come from the cheapest or crudest forms of print. The jestbooks or comic miscellanies from which I have taken most of my jokes were produced for middle and upper-class readers (at 1s. 6d., 3s., or even 5s., they were far beyond the reach of a "popular" audience). These texts, packed with cruel jokes of this sort, were produced in enormous quantities, with dozens of new volumes appearing each year. They surely force us to qualify our working assumptions about the prevailing sentimentalism of mid-century England. The primary documents of the "culture of sensibility"—all the complaints about the degenerate cruelty of the age; the charity sermons; the sentimental novels about helpless virgins or impoverished cripples—surely demonstrate less the *dominance* of this sensibility than the sheer prevalence of older and less sentimental pleasures, their stubborn resistance to reform. Similarly, mid-century jestbooks force us to qualify recent arguments about the rapid sharpening of social divisions in mid-century England—arguments that "polite" manners and morals enabled the middle classes to claim a cultural or ethical authority to match their economic power (and thereby to challenge the aristocratic oligarchy that ruled Georgian England). "Polite" anxieties about cultural distinctions would seem to have been less widespread than we have often assumed.

No one, of course, would claim that the emergence of humanitarian sensibility or the "rise of the middle class" happened overnight (although the terminology can be unhelpfully dialectical, as when we speak of a sentimental or bourgeois "revolution"). A heated debate continues among historians about the strength of class divisions in eighteenth-century England and the very possibility of the "popular"/"polite" distinction, with its emphasis on differences rather than continuities and its simplification of the infinite gradations and complex interactions of the English social hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> And no one, more importantly, would deny the coarseness or cruelty of eighteenth-century English culture—even in "polite" contexts. We know about the mixed crowds at executions and other public punishments. Cruelty to animals, as Robert Darnton has famously demonstrated, remained a popular form of fun throughout eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>14</sup> We are accustomed to the malice of Augustan satire and to the extravagancies of the eighteenth-century grotesque—the hyperbolic coarseness and violence of Swift or Voltaire. Fielding's fiction, in spite of his protestations to the contrary, is full of cruel humor and violent incidents. Smollett specialized in horrific beatings and scaldings, in nasty pranks against hunchbacks and lame matrons. And we find

such materials in the most unexpected contexts: the courtship plot of Burney's *Evelina*, with its delicate descriptions of thought and feeling, is repeatedly interrupted by such episodes as the old women's footrace or the brutal pranks of Captain Mirvan. From the emerging field of Disability Studies, we are learning more and more about this culture's harsh treatment of the deformed and disabled.<sup>15</sup> And much of this, we find, was oddly compatible with "politeness" or "polite" literature. Indeed, a "polite" literature, as Adam Potkay has recently put it, "is precisely one that attenuates violence and argumentative strife" and is therefore "best seen in relation to them." Swift, we must remind ourselves, was a "polite" author.<sup>16</sup>

But this more pitiless side of mid-century culture has been decisively de-emphasized by recent scholarship. The cumulative effect of so much work on the emergence of politeness and sensibility—although this is clearly not the intention of any one study—is a sense that the beginnings of these long-term changes characterized the culture as a whole. And even when we do recognize such cruelties, we often try to explain them away. The cat-killers of the rue Saint-Séverin, Robert Darnton tells us, were not simply enjoying an everyday recreation: they were skillfully manipulating the symbols of authority in order to protest against the conditions of their labor. The cruel incidents of verse satire and narrative fiction are justified as satiric punishments—as appropriate reactions to accepted social enemies. Even Smollett's exuberant comic cruelties, his exquisitely distended incidents of physical pain, are justified in this way.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, we are told, grotesque comedy is a deliberately exaggerated aesthetic form with obvious corrective or polemical functions.<sup>18</sup> What interests me, by contrast, is the thoroughly noninstrumental *Schadenfreude* of eighteenth-century humor—its unmotivated malice, its sheer frankness and taken-for-grantedness. On the evidence of the mid-century jestbooks, at least, this sort of humor was widely enjoyed in "polite" circles. Too often, it would seem, our conclusions about mid-century "polite" culture derive not from the actual pleasures or reading habits of this class but from its own idealized image of itself—from the self-conscious "project" of "politeness."



Given that eighteenth-century jestbooks have received very little scholarly attention—and that they have been widely assumed, on the basis of content, to be "popular" texts—it seems important to describe them and their distribution in some detail.<sup>19</sup> For jestbooks were an enormously profitable part of the eighteenth-century book market. At the lowest end of the spectrum, the Dicey family's humorous chapbooks—with their ribaldry, scatology, and jokes about scolds or Welsh morons—are well known and need not be described here. We are far less familiar, however, with the duodecimo jestbooks and comic miscellanies put out by mainstream London booksellers—those involved in the production of the classics, sacred literature, expensive scientific or metaphysical works, and what we now think of as "polite" literature. One of Richardson's publishers (the firm of Hawes and Hitch in Paternoster Row) was also responsible for some of the cruelest and filthiest mid-century jestbooks. For many booksellers, these more expensive jestbooks seem to have been a source of steady income comparable to almanacs. Most are well printed, on good quality Dutch paper, with engraved frontispieces and rococo ornaments.





Figure 2. *Joe Miller's Jest*s, the best known eighteenth-century jestbook and one of many attributed to famous actors (c.f. *Colley Cibber's Jest*s, *Spiller's Jest*s, *Quin's Jest*s, *Garrick's Complete Jester*, etc.). Well printed, with an engraved frontispiece in the French style, packed with topical humour, and selling at 1s6d, it was produced for fashionable urban readers with considerable disposable income. *By permission of the British Library.*

It is not easy to establish actual ownership of these texts: jestbooks seldom show up in library sale catalogues, with their predictable lists of classical literature, sermons, theological treatises, and scientific or topographical works. We know that Walpole, Wilkes, Boswell, and Mrs. Thrale owned jestbooks; the sale catalogue of Goldsmith's library refers to various "*ana*" and "*facetiae*"; Sterne had many volumes of "wit and humour"; Henry Fielding clearly owned jestbooks.<sup>21</sup> But these texts were more often consigned—with topical pamphlets, farces, and other "subliterary" materials—to the "miscellanea" or "bundles of old volumes" that appear at the bottom of the catalog. There can be no doubt, however, that the mainstream duodecimo jestbooks were intended for middle and upper-class readers. On the basis of price alone, they were clearly produced for those with considerable disposable income—even artisans or small shopkeepers would have struggled to scrape together the necessary shillings. They appealed to readers very different from the barely literate paupers who bought the Dickey chapbooks, offering little of the folk humor of the chapbook tradition—the antics of Tom Merryman and other native tricksters—and fewer of their pratfalls, soilings, and beatings. Many jestbook situations are specific to urban readers with money: jokes about gentlemanly debts or tailors' bills, about stupid footmen and other trouble-

some servants. There is much topical metropolitan humor: accounts of celebrated “frolicks” and “humbugs”; jokes about the London stage and high politics; about famous courtiers or men of fashion. There are learned puns, literary in-jokes, and jests that demand considerable knowledge of history or the classics. The very terminology of these books—readers are offered “bons mots” and “smart repartees,” rather than the “bulls,” “pranks,” or “merry adventures” of the chapbook tradition—clearly appeals to a higher audience. More surprisingly, the books seem designed for both sexes; Mrs. Thrale, at least, delighted in them.<sup>22</sup>

But these texts also include much humor that we would instinctively identify as “low”: not just cruel taunts to hunchbacks and blind women, but extremely coarse sexual and scatological jokes. The following, for example, frequently appears, and provides a fascinating instance of what was acceptable wit to those who could afford these books:

Some unlucky Boys, the Scholars of Dr. *Busby*, at *Westminster*, be-smear'd the Stairs leading to the School with something that shall be nameless; the Doctor, as it was designed, befoul'd his Fingers very much in it; which so enrag'd him, that he cry'd out; He would give any Boy Half a Crown, that would discover who had a Hand in it; upon which, an arch Boy immediately told him . . . *Why then . . . you had a Hand in it, or it would not have been so besh—t.*<sup>23</sup>

There are ribald tales, extremely broad sexual innuendoes, and innumerable jokes about flatulence, incontinence, and other unwanted indignities of the human body. It is all highly incongruous to modern readers. *The Jest*s of *Beau Nash*, an expensive text from which I have taken Nash's joke about the hunchbacked lady, alternates between instances of the “polite” repartee for which Nash was famous and nasty jokes about the disabled. It offers explicit obscenities and filthy quips about arse-kissing.<sup>24</sup> In the midst of *The Merry Medley*, a comic miscellany produced every Christmas for families (fig. 3), one reads about a “young gentleman” who is caught defecating in St. Paul's Churchyard, with his face to the wall and his backside in full view. He couldn't turn the other way, he explains, for “that's the Way to be seen: every Body knows my Face, and no Body knows my A—se . . .” A few pages later, one learns about some young blades and their violent revenge on a stubborn bawd: having stripped her naked, they cover her with tar and feathers and march her through the streets—all of it “to the great Diversion and Surprize of the Mob.”<sup>25</sup> Given our frequent assumptions about the increasing separation of “polite” and “popular” culture in this period, it is striking to find expensive jestbooks—and texts that were produced for women as well as men—offering almost the same uncomplicated cruelties, the same ribald or scatological tales, the same cast of scolds or cuckolds, and the same stale jokes about deformity and disability, as the crudest chapbooks.

How were these books used? Many jestbooks were produced—in this age when dullness was the worst of social vices—as “how-to” manuals for those wanting to shine in company. “The Art of Jesting” was the subtitle of many texts.<sup>26</sup> Prefaces frequently offer instructions about how to recite or perform such jokes “so as to engage the Attention of the Audience, and excite in them Mirth and good Humour.” *The Nut-Cracker*, a popular jestbook compiled by Christopher Smart for John Newbery, begins by advising its readers how to recite a joke (“crack

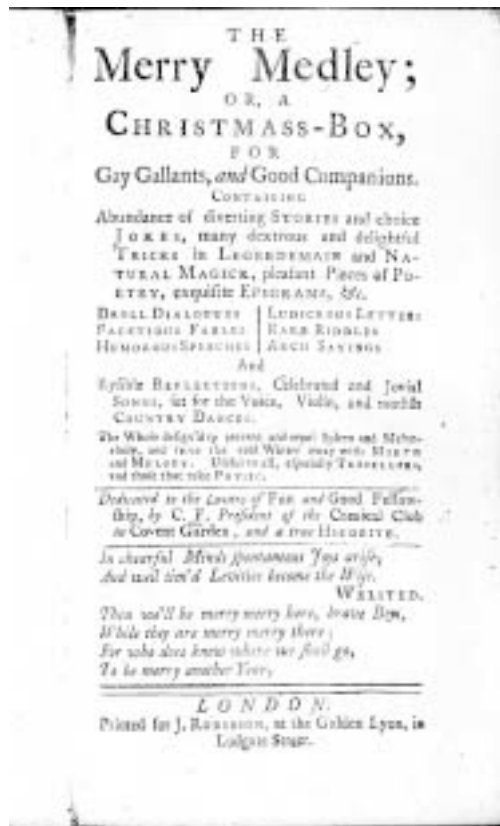


Figure 3. *The Merry Medley*, published every Christmas to “drive the cold Winter away with MIRTH and MELODY.” A jumble of several hundred jests, comic monologues, exchanges of love letters between rustic idiots, and humorous tales of the fabliau sort. There are songs and instructions for country dances, riddles and puzzles, and even directions for parlor tricks (“to make an Egg move upon a Table...”). At 3s or even 5s, miscellanies were some of the more expensive jestbooks. *By permission of the British Library.*

a *Nut*”) with success (fig. 4). Don’t tell a joke that has nothing to do with the conversation, Smart advises; liven it up with a few “cheerful Looks and whimsical Agitations.”<sup>27</sup> There were even book-length guides for would-be wits, with appropriate jokes for different contexts.<sup>28</sup> One biographical anecdote illustrates this practice: George Bubb Dodington—“the egregious Bubb,” rolypoly friend of Frederick Prince of Wales—used to pore over a great commonplace book of witticisms for an hour or so before he went into company.<sup>29</sup> That printed jestbooks were used in the same way is suggested by the marginal marks that, in many surviving copies, identify favorite jests out of the random sequence of hundreds. Later in the century, Mrs. Thrale recorded all sorts of crude and nasty witticisms in her commonplace book (although it is impossible to know whether she was stocking up to amuse the Johnson circle or merely diverting herself in her closet).<sup>30</sup> Jestbooks, then, taught their readers to be witty in an original way. Anyone could sneer at a hunchback or someone with no nose; it took a real wit to ask a hunchback if she had come “straight from home” or to tell the noseless man that he had nowhere to hang his spectacles. On the evidence of these texts, such taunts were a regular way of promoting good cheer in company.

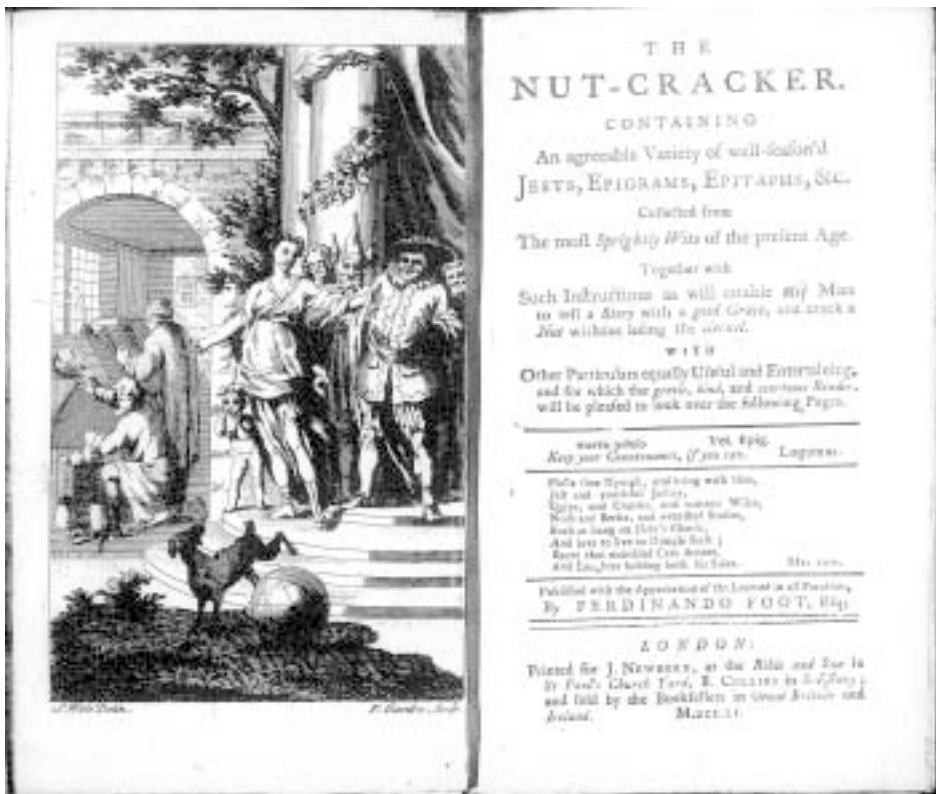


Figure 4. *The Nut-Cracker*, a popular jestbook compiled by Christopher Smart for John Newbery, with a long preface advising readers on how to deliver its jokes or “crack a nut” in company. On the evidence of this text, Smart was particularly fond of jokes about speech impediments. *By permission of the British Library.*



A number of qualifications must be made. First, I am not making a general claim. Such jokes were clearly becoming problematic in many contexts. Neither pious dissenters nor the politest of middle-class women would have bought *The Merry Medley* or *The Jest* of Beau Nash. They would not have laughed about cripples and blind men, nor at the bawdy and excremental humor that seems to have been such standard jestbook fare. They would not have recited such jokes in company. Levels of sympathy clearly varied enormously between individuals and in different contexts. And no one could deny that the forces of reform were gathering steam in mid-century England.

Indeed, an increasing number of jestbooks seem to reflect these changing standards, at least claiming to eschew coarseness or malice. A number offered themselves specifically to polite readers: publications like *The Prudent Jester* (London, 1756), *The Polite Companion* (London, 1750, 1760), or *The Delicate Jester*, subtitled “Wit and Humour divested of Ribaldry” (London, 1760, 1772, 1780, etc). Others manifest an occasional sensitivity about the cruelty of their jokes. Beau Nash was a little “too apt to say cruel Things, and to sacrifice Decency and Good-nature to a Jest,” concedes the editor of his “Jests”—who goes on, howev-

er, to give us all the usual jokes about blind men and hunchbacks.<sup>31</sup> Readers are intermittently reassured that the victims of violent pranks are not seriously wounded: the old apple-seller is not actually blown up by the gunpowder in her charcoal; a cripple is only bruised or covered in mud by her fall into the kennel. Jokes about the deformed and disabled, certain jestbooks claim, were corrective rather than malicious: it was not the person's physical misfortune that made people laugh, but the affectation that things were otherwise. "Altho' the Infirmities of Nature are not proper Substance to be made a Jest of," declares the compiler of *Joe Miller's Jests*, "yet when People take a great deal of Pains to conceal what every Body sees, there is nothing more ridiculous." (This, of course, is the satirist's most traditional justification: "He spared a hump or crooked nose," wrote Swift in his defense, "Whose owners set not up for beaux." Fielding makes the same distinction in his preface to *Joseph Andrews*).<sup>32</sup>

But such justifications are rare—and generally unconvincing if not entirely insincere. Most mid-century jestbooks offer even the nastiest of their jokes entirely without qualification. Many, indeed, boast that their humor had not been refined away, that they had preserved the "meat" or "marrow"—the essential, nourishing part of the jest. "Wit with the Gravy in it" is the subtitle of *Jemmy Twitcher's Jests*, a popular collection of malice and *doubles entendres* that first appeared in 1770 (fig. 5). Title-page declarations that a jestbook is "free from Obscenity" or contains "nothing that could offend the chastest Ear" are usually ironic: they are part of the joke, a thumbing of the nose at over-refinement or puritan humorlessness. Thus *Rochester's Jests* (London, 1766), in which the pranks of this culture's most notorious libertine are preceded by pious protestations about their decency and didactic force. Often, indeed, the disapproving reader is simply told to like it or lump it: "All those that do not like of this Epistle," declares the author of one popular miscellany, "Let them lay down the Book, and go and whistle."<sup>33</sup> Cruel and filthy humor was a profitable commodity to the booksellers and continued to be enjoyed without self-reflection or shame.

It would be dangerous, of course, to oversimplify. A joke is a highly complex speech act; its pleasures are complex and variable—and a printed joke is different again. To read a jestbook, even to read its jokes out loud in company, is not the same thing as laughing at a cripple or taunting a blind woman on the street. Many jokes, now as in the eighteenth century, are funny precisely because they do violate standards of decency or taste. In many contexts, one imagines, jokes about cripples or excrement must have encountered the same sort of groan that allows modern academics to enjoy cruel or tasteless jokes—all the time demonstrating that they are appalled. The increase in jestbook production during this period suggests that printed texts or readings from printed texts were providing substitutes for pleasures that could no longer be openly indulged. In this sense, obviously, the widespread enjoyment of these jokes does not so much disprove the rising tide of politeness as confirm it.

Then there are the formal qualities of these jokes, the verbal play that distinguishes many jestbook witticisms from the crudest chapbook humor. According to Freud's famous theory of humor, the punch line (usually a pun) is the crucial mechanism of the "joke-work"—the means by which the joker is able to express some socially unacceptable sexual or aggressive impulse. Verbal humor,



Figure 5. *Jemmy Twitcher's Jest's*, a collection attributed to the famously witty Lord Sandwich. Puns, comic tales, drinking songs, and extended accounts of fashionable “humbugs” are combined with filthy *double entendre*, of which the title page gives a sample. The frontispiece, with its boozy circle guffawing over a copy of the jestbook, gives some indication of how such books were used. By permission of the British Library.

says Freud, allows us to evade repression, to indulge instincts that “because of obstacles standing in the way, we could not express openly or consciously.”<sup>34</sup> In many eighteenth-century jestbook witticisms, a “low” comic situation is somewhat refined by a play on words. Framed as a pun, the joke about Dr. Busby and the shit makes it into a polite jestbook as chapbook-style scatology might not. The blatant bawdiness of traditional popular humor is often elaborated with some complex *double entendre*. Sneers at physical deformities frequently appear as instances of verbal wit. (And of course such jokes remain common to this day). Arguably, then, such jokes were acceptable in polite society only because of their verbal framing, just as the circumlocutions or obfuscations of Augustan poetic diction—Pope’s “imbrownings” and “sable streams”—made it possible to discuss base or repugnant things without violating linguistic decorum.

But only up to a point. Many crude or malicious jokes appear without even the barest linguistic sophistication. The pranks against the pie-vendor and apple-seller (quoted above) are typical of any number of situational jokes that appear with little if any verbal cleverness. For Freud, the success of any joke depends upon its novelty or verbal inventiveness. But one would be wrong to take

Freud's claims as universal. Punch lines seem to have been far less crucial to early-modern jokes, many of which depend more upon a comic situation—some insult, pratfall, or scatological prank—than a concluding play on words. This verbal framing, one is tempted to speculate, may have become increasingly important in later stages of the “civilizing process,” as a mechanism for controlling the obscene or aggressive content of the joke.<sup>35</sup> (Verbal framing is noticeably less important, for example, in Tudor and Stuart jestbooks, with their repetitive and uninventive cruelties against blind folk and old maids). At any rate, verbal play—like euphemism or periphrasis—is never simply obfuscating: such devices signify even as they claim not to. The concluding puns of these eighteenth-century jokes, it seems to me, work less to obscure the basic comic situation—the humor of sex or sewerage or physical deformity—than to enrich it, to add an extra layer of wit. By framing their cruel jokes as inventive *jeux de mots*, the jestbooks turned age-old comic scenarios into the sort of witty conceit that would amuse polite society (the eighteenth century, as Addison and others complained, was inordinately fond of puns). But the malicious kernels of these jokes remain—and they correspond, as I should now like to demonstrate, to widely practiced forms of humor.



What evidence is there that the middle and upper-class readers who bought jestbooks in such quantities actually laughed at such things? In what follows, I attempt to move beyond published jokes and explore the everyday laughter to which they correspond: this culture's widely shared delight in the sufferings of others. This, of course, is a riskier undertaking. It is impossible to recover the lived experience of a long-dead culture. Strictly speaking, as we have been repeatedly warned in recent years, one can never go beyond discourse or representations. But simply avoiding the question of experience has its own limitations and produces its own distortions. I should like, therefore, to weigh the evidence in an exploratory way.

The situations represented by these jokes—the gentleman's cruelty to a hunchback, the pair of aristocrats who torment an old street vendor, the husband who cheerfully beats his wife—seem to reflect the comic incidents of everyday life. Many jestbooks boast of real-world sources: their jokes, they announce, were recorded in the coffee-houses of Covent Garden, the “Politest Drawing Rooms,” or the “Genteel Resorts of the Beau Monde.” *The Jestes of Beau Nash*, its editor informs us, records repartee “between him and Personages of the first Distinction” in the assembly rooms of Bath.<sup>36</sup> Of course there is no evidence that Beau Nash ever told a hunchback that she must have got “warpt on her way”; this and most of the other jests attributed to him in this collection are ubiquitous. The most that one can say with certainty is that this was the sort of joke that readers might plausibly associate with a celebrated wit like Nash (or Joe Miller, Mrs. Pilkington, or Lord Chesterfield).

But these compressed witticisms seem to take us strikingly close to lived experience. The situations they describe—encounters with some deformed or helpless person, comical exchanges in the street or coffee-house, ludicrous conversations with the deaf—ring with authenticity. They are anchored in concrete mi-

lieux: named London streets, taverns, and coffee-houses; theaters and law courts; even the Grove at Bath, that archetypal locus of polite culture. Their formal condensation—their easy comprehensibility to eighteenth-century readers, the sheer *self-evidence* of what are to us the most obscure and laconic conceits—suggests a highly familiar form of humor. In their very uniformity, these jokes seem to reflect everyday comic situations and almost automatic attitudes. Thus the endlessly repeated vignette of the joker sallying over to torment some unfortunate soul:

The lord Mohun and the earl of Warwick being on the ramble, they took notice of an old woman, who early and late was boiling codlings near Charing-cross . . .

A *Gloucestershire* Gentleman, a Man of great Wit and Humour . . . going along the Street, and seeing a little, crooked Gentlewoman on the other side of the Way . . .

Honest *Joe Miller*, going one Day along *Fleet street*, and seeing old *Cross* [a well-known deaf actor] on the other side of the Way, told his Acquaintance he should see some Sport . . .<sup>37</sup>

And one does not have to look far to find far more evidence—fragmentary, but cumulatively unmistakable—of this almost habitual impulse. In the space remaining, I can provide no more than the smallest sample, but it seems important at least to suggest the range and the force of this evidence, to explore something of the real-world context of mid-century jestbook humor. Because it has received particularly little scholarly attention, I limit myself to evidence for just one variety of this pitiless humor—laughter at deformity and disability.<sup>38</sup>

Published jokes about the deformed and disabled, it soon becomes clear, preserve a widespread reaction. Blind men, cripples, and amputees were standing jokes in the mid-eighteenth century, almost automatic figures of fun. The mere appearance of a hunchback produced a volley of taunts and insults, wrote William Hay, a diminutive M.P. with curvature of the spine who published a short memoir in 1754. Some wag would step up and address him with a mock-dignified title (“My Lord,” “Your Grace,” and so on)—followed, no doubt, by questions about whether he had come “straight from home” or was “bent” (determined) on some purpose.<sup>39</sup> The most inventive range of taunts and nicknames was available for the deformed. “Don’t abuse the gentleman,” one bystander might tell another who was mocking a hunchback—“don’t you see his back’s up?” Someone with bandy legs might be asked whether he had “bought his boots in Crooked Lane.” There was an enormous variety of nicknames: a lame man was “Mr. Hopkins”; a blind man was “Cupid” (who was commonly painted with a blindfold); someone scarred by smallpox, less inventively, was “Stub-face.”<sup>40</sup> Jestbook insults correspond to habitual witticisms, the sort of waggery that would earn one the reputation of a wit or “droll fellow.”

The deformed and disabled suffered not only verbal taunts, but also violent practical jokes. Apprentices and laborers, according to mid-century moralists, delighted in confusing the blind or poking sticks at cripples. The bookseller James Lackington, describing his mid-century childhood, recalls all sorts of boyish cruelties against a miserable old woman. He and his chums would jostle her in

the street; they would kick the lantern from her hands, leaving her to fumble about in the dark; they would fasten objects to the back of her coat or nail up her door.<sup>41</sup> On holidays and hanging days, report the newspapers, mobs of drunken youths would surge through the streets breaking windows, tormenting the old and infirm, and knocking over disabled street vendors or ballad singers. But these cruelties were equally prevalent, according to many sources, among the aristocrats and gentlemen who sallied out of the London taverns for some nocturnal “sport.” They would, reported the press, steal dogs from the blind, toss beggars in blankets, and beat half-crippled old watchmen. Ostensibly, these reports are censorious, full of complaints about the violence and cruelty of the times. But it is impossible to ignore a vein of amusement in their oddly extended descriptions of the miserable victims and the droll insults to which they are subjected, in their almost farcical accounts of tumbles and humiliations.<sup>42</sup>

One form of humor deserves particular attention: the elaborate “freaks” or “frolicks” (orchestrated public pranks) that mid-century men of fashion enacted for their peers and the public at large. These pranks frequently enlisted the deformed and disabled, who would be paid to perform some physical task with hilarious clumsiness, or simply for their sheer entertainment value. The gents might hire waiters with a wooden leg or wobbling hands, who could then be berated or thrown downstairs for spilling the food. John, Duke of Montague, the best known of several celebrated aristocratic pranksters in this period, once organized a dinner of all the stutterers he could find.<sup>43</sup> The octogenarian’s footrace in Burney’s *Evelina*, so ambiguous to modern readers, is typical of many eighteenth-century “freak runs”: ludicrous footraces between the lame or one-legged, the obese or elderly, races in which one of the contestants marched on stilts or went encumbered with stones. David Garrick—in a particularly telling illustration of the sort of prank that was compatible with the *bon ton*—once entertained his London friends by employing a decrepit old man to carry rocks from one basket to another.<sup>44</sup>

Further evidence of this comic sensibility comes from the London stage. Entertainments involving dwarves, cripples, blind men, or amputees were a profitable part of the capital’s entertainment economy, in venues frequented by “polite” and well as “popular” patrons. The farces and pantomimes with which every theatrical program ended in this period were full of hunchbacked scolds or limping fathers who were beaten or tumbled to the floor. In one peculiarly common *burle*, a blind fiddler walks on stage and begins his tune, only to have his instrument broken over his head—a piece of stage business that surely reflects an everyday comic situation (London ballad singers and street fiddlers were almost always blind or disabled).<sup>45</sup> All of this was provided not just for the footmen and apprentices in the second gallery but for the gentlemen and ladies who paid 5s. for each seat in the boxes.

One of the most popular entertainments at mid-century London fairs was a farcical combat between some able-bodied fighter and a dwarf or disabled opponent who would be soundly beaten. At Southwark fair in 1761, Samuel Foote’s booth offered a “whimsical Duel” between “the purblind Major Blinco” and a blustering military type named “Colonel Crackcrown.” Such amusements, contrary to our assumptions, catered to middle and upper-class patrons as well as the rabble: the advertisements promise special entrances for “the quality” and often a

separate gallery with seats at 5s. or even 6s.<sup>46</sup> A favorite interlude at the London variety shows and puppet theaters was a “crutch dance” in which cripples, hunchbacks, and amputees were employed to hobble about in ludicrous imitation of a polite dance.<sup>47</sup> Strikingly, the eighteenth century’s most famous clowns and comic performers all relied upon some physical peculiarity. Dicky Norris, the popular buffoon, was “a tiny man with odd face and voice.” James Spiller, famous for his rustic idiot roles, had one eye. John Hippisley, the celebrated Scaramouch, was disfigured by a great burn scar.<sup>48</sup> In mid-eighteenth-century England, it would seem, any deformity or incapacity was infallibly, almost instinctively, amusing. The cripple’s awkward shuffle; the hunchback’s bent spine; the confusion of the blind; the comically inappropriate responses of the deaf; the stomp-stomp-stomp of a man with a wooden leg—to these and other afflictions laughter was an immediate and almost unquestioned reaction.

What especially strikes one about this response, given the current scholarly concentration on politeness and sentimentality, is its utter lack of compassion—the sheer ability to overlook the human suffering that was staring one in the face. The blind and crippled beggars of the London streets were the most wretched, frail, and hungry members of this society. They lived miserable and precarious lives and died pitiful, lonely deaths. The decrepit ballad singers and public vendors who seem to have been such accepted figures of fun were forced into their wretchedly paid occupation simply to ward off starvation.<sup>49</sup> The indigent cripples or stutterers who took a few pennies to participate in some public prank; the dwarfs or blind fiddlers who were beaten or tripped at the fairground booths; the amputees and dancing midgets of the puppet theaters and Smithfield shows—all these people lived desperate and vulnerable lives. And yet to those who taunted and laughed at them, this suffering was a matter of indifference if not delight.



But laughter, of course, is rarely an uncomplicated response. One must obviously, however cursorily, consider more cultural explanations. This was a culture in which deformity and disability were not only everywhere to be seen, but in which everyone faced the decrepitude and pain of old age, in which a chance accident could maim one for life, in which the mildest conjunctivitis could lead to blindness, in which some sudden disease could destroy one’s appearance overnight (a bout of smallpox left Lady Mary Wortley Montagu not only with a deeply pitted face, but entirely without eyelashes).<sup>50</sup> In these circumstances, it may have been somehow therapeutic or compensatory to laugh at such things—for laughter, as theorists of humor remind us, is a powerful mask for anxiety and fear. To laugh at the deformities and disabilities of others may have been to discharge for a moment one’s own fears of physical degeneration, one’s own sense of the precariousness of the body, of the proximity and near inevitability of disease and disability.<sup>51</sup>

But to explain all such laughter in this way is surely to overestimate the powers of foresight and identification, the ability to see oneself in the afflictions of another. More often, it seems to me, one finds a simpler and less functional delight—a Hobbesian triumph—at the hideous appearance or incapacity of an-

other. To be explained, then, are certain deep-seated cultural assumptions that made the deformed and disabled almost automatic figures of fun—assumptions that go far beyond the mere acceptability of malicious laughter. Scholars of Disability Studies have described the endurance in this period of premodern beliefs about deformity as a curse or sign of evil (beliefs that survive in a secularized form in the wicked disabled or disfigured characters of eighteenth-century fiction). But they have less often explored the *vis comica* of deformity in early-modern England—what, precisely, made people laugh so freely and unreflectively at the sight of a twisted spine or peculiar gait. It is not simply that such people were easy victims: certain bodies, one finds, were almost inevitably amusing in this culture. Any physical peculiarity; any disability or incapacity; any stutter, lameness, or blindness simply made one a standing joke—a reminder, perhaps, of the hilarious intransigence of nature, of the physicality that lay behind all attempts at human dignity. This much is clear from the many traditional games that rely upon temporary handicaps: games such as blindman’s buff or the French *hautes coquilles*. And it accounts for the popularity of scarred and misshapen clowns—“natural” fools, as early modern culture put it, whose defects almost destined them to buffoonery. Deformity seems to have dehumanized these professional performers, to have placed them beyond the range of normal human sympathy (to many theorists of humor, laughter depends upon this temporary silencing of pity, upon a “momentary anesthesia of the heart” in Bergson’s memorable phrase).<sup>52</sup> Other comic performers used and still use masks, face paint, or red noses to achieve this distancing effect, but the deformed and disabled had no need of such aids.

Even those committed to the “project” of sensibility—those who lauded the didactic functions of sentimental literature or put their faith in sympathetic fellow feeling as the “glue” of enlightened human societies—took it for granted that the deformed or disabled were unreliable if not impossible objects of sympathy. Pity, insists Adam Smith, is excited not by physical but by mental suffering. Nothing would be more ridiculous than a tragic hero with a wooden leg. Or consider Diderot’s analysis, in his *Paradox of Acting*, of the superiority of emotions produced by art. Think of a woman weeping, he says, who has some blemish that takes your attention away from her woe. You are diverted just as if she spoke with a comical accent. Sympathy is effectively achieved, he concludes, only on the stage, where characters of perfect beauty might be presented.<sup>53</sup> In the real world, one’s sympathy was too often interrupted by some physical distraction, by some intrusion of the body. The sight of deformity or disability, of course, almost necessarily fixes one’s attention on the body before one—and in the eighteenth century, laughter was a common response.



In conclusion, a few caveats are clearly in order. First, some questions of evidence. There is no such thing as unmediated or “primary” evidence of the past. Each of my sources has its limitations. Farces, fairground drolls, and “crutch dances” are orchestrated performances rather than spontaneous comic situations. For evidence of verbal insults, it is difficult to find sources that do not exaggerate the practices of eighteenth-century speech (fictional dialogues, slang dictionaries,

periodical essays that bemoan the coarseness of contemporary speech). In the aggregate, however, the evidence is unmistakable. The sheer quantity of moralistic diatribes; the sheer *specificity* and *ubiquity* of the verbal taunts, many of them almost opaque to modern readers; the routine appearances of cripples and blind men on the London stage—all of this adds to the evidence of the jestbooks to suggest a widely acceptable form of fun. These pleasures are evident at all levels of society, and among women as well as men. Gentlemen and even middle-class women, one finds, laughed at the deformed and disabled with little more shame than apprentices or serving maids.

This is not, however, to deny the prominence or force of the sentimental movement. For many, it must be stressed, dwarves, hunchbacks, and miserable old men were objects of sympathy rather than figures of fun. Dissenters and middle-class women would not have sneered at the blind or knocked cripples into ditches. It was malicious, Henry Fielding insisted in his preface to *Joseph Andrews*, to laugh at the “Imperfections of Nature”—unless, of course, “Ugliness aims at the Applause of Beauty, or Lameness endeavours to display Agility.” To mid-century literary critics, stock comic characters such as the old deaf fellow (Jonson’s Corbaccio is one of many) or the man with one leg (“Timbertoe,” as he was often dubbed) became problematic.<sup>54</sup> Moralists railed against “inhuman” entertainments such as dwarf shows and “crutch dances.” In a particularly sentimental representation of this humanitarian outrage, one of the charitable projects of Sarah Scott’s community of women in *Millenium Hall* is an asylum for impoverished freaks who had been forced to expose themselves to paying audience.<sup>55</sup>

But the older pleasures endured, even in “polite” circles. Many middle or upper-class readers probably went no further than chortling at a few slightly malicious jestbook witticisms—just as educated people now delight in “sick” jokes of all sorts. But there were others who clearly laughed in the street and who made the commercial entertainments—all the appearances by midgets and blind fiddlers; all the ludicrous dances of cripples and old tars with one leg—so enormously profitable. The agitations of reformers and the exemplary scenes of sentimental fiction seem to have done little to curtail these pleasures, just as they did little to reduce the production of cruel jestbooks. Not until 1836 did *Joe Miller’s Jests* drop the nastiest and most filthy of its jokes (49 of the original 247)—in deference, the editor informs us, to “the greater delicacy observed in modern society and conversation.”<sup>56</sup> The emergence of humanitarian sensibility, we need to remind ourselves, was a gradual process that was only beginning in the mid-eighteenth century.

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#### NOTES

1. *Coffee-House Jests* (London, 1760), 42.
2. *The Jests of Beau Nash* (London, 1763), 65–6.
3. *The Merry Miscellany* (Bristol, n.d. [British Library 12316.bb.37.2.]), not paginated.
4. *Coffee-House Jests*, 42.
5. *Joe Miller’s Jests: Or, The Wit’s Vade-Mecum* (London, n.d. [Bodleian Library Harding E 101]), 75.

6. *The Nut-Cracker* (London, 1751), 42.
7. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651), ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 43.
8. See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 32.
9. *Joaks upon Joaks* (Worcester, n.d. [Huntington Library 150742]), 3. Of all the jestbooks cited in this article, only this one can genuinely be termed “popular.” Cheaply printed on coarse paper, running to only 24 pages and selling for a few pennies, this text was produced for the lowest literate consumers.
10. See, for example, Morris Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1950), W639.
11. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 13; James Beattie, “An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition,” in *Essays* (Edinburgh, 1776), 663–5.
12. Lawrence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, ed. Gardner Stout (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), 174–9.
13. See, for example, Barry Reay, *Popular Cultures in England 1550–1750* (London: Longman, 1998) and the essays in Tim Harris, ed., *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500–1850* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).
14. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1985), chap. 2.
15. A related issue, beyond the scope of this article, is the eighteenth century’s fascination with freaks, talented midgets, monstrous births and other medical curiosities. Amusement seems to have been a rarer reaction at exhibitions of such anomalies than wonder or scientific curiosity. On the basis of advertisements, at least, there is little evidence that visitors were invited or permitted to taunt or laugh at the exhibits. Among the considerable recent scholarship on this topic, see Stephen Pender, “In the Bodyshop: Human Exhibition in Early Modern England,” in Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, eds., “*Defects*”: *Engendering the Modern Body* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000), 95–126; Dennis Todd, *Imagining Monsters: Miscreations of the Self in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995); and Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston, “Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England,” *Past and Present* 92 (1981): 20–54.
16. Adam Potkay, “Hume’s ‘Supplement to Gulliver’: The Medieval Volumes of *The History of England*,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 25 (2001): 32–46, 36. See also his *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 130–4; and Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).
17. A classic instance of this move is G. S. Rousseau, “Beef and Bouillon: Smollett’s Achievement as a Thinker,” in *Tobias Smollett: Essays of Two Decades* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982), 80–123, which accommodates Smollett’s cruelty to the methods of Popean satire. John Richetti attributes Smollett’s violence and malice to a more “inchoate resentment” at societal changes; see *The English Novel in History 1700–1780* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) chap. 6.
18. See, for example, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986).
19. The only sustained discussion of eighteenth-century jestbooks is Ronald Paulson’s “The Joke and Joe Miller’s Jest,” in *Popular and Polite Art in the Age of Hogarth and Fielding* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1979): 64–84). Paulson treats jestbooks as documents of “popular culture” and focuses his discussion on “subversive” jokes—indirect or open insults addressed by peasants to gentlemen or servants to masters; tales of roguish resourcefulness; clever repartee to rulers or judges. He has little to say about the pitiless jokes that interest me here. For detailed studies of earlier jestbooks, see F. P. Wilson, “English Jestbooks of the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 2 (1939): 121–58; see also Paul Zall, ed., *A Hundred Merry Tales and Other English Jestbooks of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Lincoln, Neb.:

Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1963), and Zall, ed., *A Nest of Ninnies and Other English Jestbooks of the Seventeenth Century* (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970). One problem is that survival rates for these texts are extremely low. Not only were they sold in sheets and then read to the point of disintegration, but given their irrelevance to the mainstream narratives of professional historical or literary scholarship, they were rarely collected.

20. *Ben Johnson's Last Legacy to the Sons of Wit, Mirth, and Jollytry* (London, 1756).

21. For the library catalogues of Goldsmith, Sterne, Wilkes, and Thrale/Piozzi, see A. N. L. Munby, ed., *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, 12 vols. (London: Mansell Information, 1971–75), vols. 5, 7, 8. On Walpole, see *Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis et al., 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1937–1983), 16:253 and n., 9:35, 35:565. On Fielding's use of *Joe Miller's Jest*s, see Hollis Rinehart, "Fielding's Chapter 'Of Proverbs,'" *Modern Philology* 77 (1980): 291–6.

22. A certain number of jestbooks were put out specifically for women—*The Female Jester, or Wit for the Ladies* (London, 1778), *Woman's Wit: Or, a New and Elegant Amusement for the Fair Sex* (London, 1780)—but these texts print much the same range of material.

23. *Joe Miller's Jest*s, 9.

24. *The Jest*s of Beau Nash, 4, 30, 65–6, 68–71, and *passim*.

25. *The Merry Medley*, 10, 17–18, 21–2, and *passim*.

26. See, for example, *The Laugher; or, the Art of Jest*ing: *Shewing every Man in his Humour, from the Throne to the Cottage* (London, 1755).

27. *The Nutcracker*, 1ff.; cf. *The Merry Medley*, 1ff. Many eighteenth-century proverb collections were recommended, in a similar way, to those wishing to acquire a reputation for wisdom.

28. See, for example, *The Merry Philosopher: Or, Thoughts on Jest*ing (London, 1764).

29. *Diary of the Late George Bubb Dodington*, ed. Henry Penruddocke Wyndham (Salisbury and London, 1784), 1:194.

30. See Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Thraliana*, ed. Katherine C. Balderston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 1:1–157.

31. *The Jest*s of Beau Nash, 65–6.

32. *Joe Miller's Jest*s, 3; "Verses on the Death of Dr Swift," lines 467–8, in Angus Ross and David Woolley, eds., *Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 529.

33. *The Merry Medley* (London, 1745), v.

34. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 8:103.

35. My general terms, of course, are those of Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982). One scholar, at least, has argued that the "punch-line" has a historical moment of origin: "the punch-line, which is nowadays believed to be the heart and soul of the joke," argues Gershon Legman, "is actually just a modern accretion. . . . The important and universal elements of the joke have all been delivered before the punch-line is reached"; Legman, *The Rationale of the Dirty Joke*, 2 Vols. (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 1:139.

36. *England's Genius: or, Wit Triumphant* (London, 1734); *The Jest*s of Beau Nash.

37. *Joaks upon Joaks*, 3; *Joe Miller's Jest*s, 14–15, 3.

38. We have, for the eighteenth century, nothing like Erving Goffman's fascinating study of the experience of the disabled in modern society, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963). Helen Deutsch has recently explored dozens of malicious attacks on Alexander Pope's deformity and his complex rhetorical exploitation of that physical fact; see *Resemblance and Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996). In general, Disability Studies—with all its work on the discourses

or representation of disability; on the cultural or historical “construction” of disability (as monstrosity, blessedness, object of sympathy, and so on)—has given little consideration to deformity or disability as a comic spectacle; see, however, Robert Garland’s fascinating study of deformity in the Graeco-Roman World, *The Eye of the Beholder* (London: Duckworth, 1995), esp. chap. 5. For a representative selection of new work in the field, see Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997). The fascinating essays collected by Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum in “*Defects*” consider the mockery of disability only in passing.

39. William Hay, *Deformity: An Essay* (London, 1754), 9; cf. Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 3rd ed. (1796), ed. Eric Partridge (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 224–5. Hay does tell us, however, that the jests of his educated friends were often gentler.

40. For a convenient collection of these witticisms—which are everywhere to be found—see Grose’s *Classical Dictionary*.

41. See *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington* (London, 1794), 64. Whether or not these droll anecdotes were, as one of Lackington’s biographers speculates, “furnished by the pen of a friend,” they remain part of the lexicon of eighteenth-century boyish wit; see *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967–68), 11:371.

42. For a synthesis of surviving literary and journalistic reports, see Louis C. Jones, *The Clubs of the Georgian Rakes* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1942). Robert Allen judiciously weighs this evidence in *The Clubs of Augustan London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1933), 105–18. For new research on the official papers related to one particular spate of buckish violence, see Neil Guthrie, “‘No Truth or very little in the whole Story?’—A Reassessment of the Mohock Scare of 1712,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 20.1 (1996): 33–56.

43. Walpole, *Correspondence*, 33:554. Earlier in the century, Addison and Steele found considerable humor in the idea of such gatherings. Addison describes dinners of those with long chins, of squinters (“oglers”) or stammerers (*Spectator* 371: “On Whimsical Notions and Practical Jokes”). On other clubs of human oddities, see *Spectator* 9, 17, 73 (Addison); 30, 43, 78, 474 (Steele); and *Guardian* 91, 92, 108, 121. Among the imaginary London clubs described in Ned Ward’s *Secret History of Clubs* (London, 1709) are a “No-Nose Club” and a “Club of Ugly Faces.”

44. For a well-documented study of such footraces, see Earl R. Anderson, “Footnotes more Pedestrian than Sublime: A Historical Background for the Foot-races in *Evelina* and *Humphry Clinker*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 14. 2 (1980): 56–68. See also Arthur Sherbo’s addenda in the subsequent issue of the journal (313–16).

45. For a representative example, see Charles Coffey’s *The Devil to Pay*, a hugely popular wife-beating farce with merciless taunting of a blind fiddler (London, 1732, etc.).

46. *Public Advertiser*, 21 September, 1761. For accumulated evidence of the mingling of classes at the London fairs, see Sybil Rosenfield, *The Theatre of the London Fairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960).

47. George Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theater*, 2nd ed. (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1990), 121.

48. On Hippiusley, see *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 27. A picture of the scarred Hippiusley, once attributed to Hogarth, is in the Matthews Collection at the Garrick Club. On Norris and Spiller, see Leo Hughes, *A Century of English Farce* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1956), 47, 180.

49. On the desperate and vulnerable lives of these public vendors—all of it a far cry from the colorful portraits of Augustan periodicals or from so many prettifying Victorian lithographs—see Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 58.

50. The extent of old-age disability has not, to my knowledge, been studied for the eighteenth century. But one study of an earlier period suggests the sort of prevalence that one might find. In sixteenth-century Norwich, Margaret Pelling has demonstrated, one quarter of men and women over sixty were severely disabled; see “Illness Among the Poor in an Early-Modern Town: The Norwich Census of 1570,” *Continuity and Change* 3 (1988): 282.

51. I owe this general point to David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993). Comedy, Morris suggests, relies “upon a pain that belongs to the reader or spectator”: their actual pain, or the “ghostly trace” of past or future pain (93–4).

52. Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” in Wylie Sypher, ed., *Comedy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 64.

53. Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. Walter Herries Pollack (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 20, 23.

54. See, for example, James Beattie’s criticism of Smollett’s constant fun with Lieutenant Hatchway, the one-legged mariner in *Peregrine Pickle*: “He who forgets humanity so far, as to smile at such a memorial of misfortune in a living person,” Beattie insists, “will be blamed by every good man” (“An Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition,” 663–5).

55. Sarah Scott, *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762), ed. Gary Kelly (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), 71–5.

56. See Keith Thomas, “The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England,” *TLS*, 21 January 1977, 80.