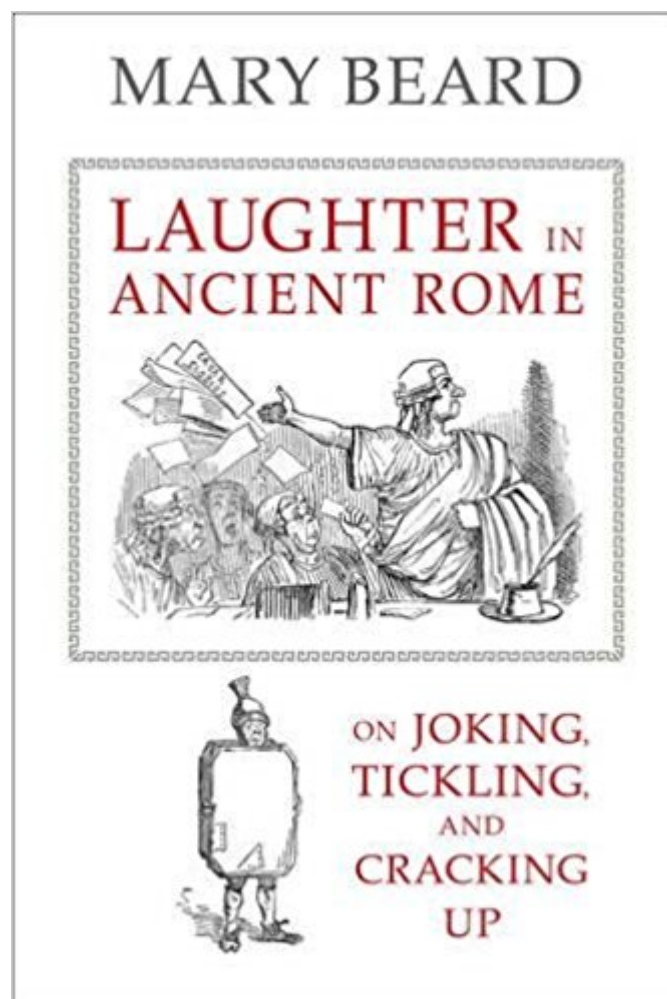




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# Laughter In Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, And Cracking Up (Sather Classical Lectures)



## Synopsis

What made the Romans laugh? Was ancient Rome a carnival, filled with practical jokes and hearty chuckles? Or was it a carefully regulated culture in which the uncontrollable excess of laughter was a force to fear? A world of wit, irony, and knowing smiles? How did Romans make sense of laughter? What role did it play in the world of the law courts, the imperial palace, or the spectacles of the arena? *Laughter in Ancient Rome* explores one of the most intriguing, but also trickiest, of historical subjects. Drawing on a wide range of Roman writing—from essays on rhetoric to a surviving Roman joke book—Mary Beard tracks down the giggles, smirks, and guffaws of the ancient Romans themselves. From ancient “monkey business” to the role of a chuckle in a culture of tyranny, she explores Roman humor from the hilarious, to the momentous, to the surprising. But she also reflects on even bigger historical questions. What kind of history of laughter can we possibly tell? Can we ever really “get” the Romans’ jokes?

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“*Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*, which has just been published, is an engaging exploration of what made the Romans laugh—bad breath, among other things—but it also explores dimensions of Roman sensibility that have become elusive to us.” (Rebecca Mead *New Yorker* 2014-09-01) “Few things are more tiresome than seeing a joke analyzed. . . . Beard’s book avoids pedantry but also its opposite, the archness that preens

itself on 'not taking humor too seriously' and signals inane wordplays with 'pun intended!' More importantly, her treatment makes one look with new eyes . . . even at works she does not herself discuss . . . [a] stimulating book." (Gregory Hays New York Review of Books 2014-07-10)"[Beard] makes the Romans come alive and through them, gets readers to ponder that most fundamental and uniquely human facility—laughter. The phenomenal Ms. Beard has written another cracking book, one of her best, I think." (Yasmin Alibhai-Brown The Independent 2014-05-29)"Expect to be engaged by an enthralling book." (Harry Mount The Spectator 2014-06-07)"[Beard's] central question is simple: what made the Romans laugh? Her answers are pleasingly complex. . . . Beard is always enlightening, and writes with a perfect balance of forensic detail and wide-ranging intellect." (The Scotsman 2014-06-15)"Superbly acute and unashamedly complex. . . . To our vision of the solemn grandeur that was Rome, she restores a raucous, ghostly laughter." (Iona McLaren The Telegraph 2014-07-01)"Written in Beard's trademark combination of erudition and effortless prose, *Laughter in Ancient Rome* is a fascinating combination of history, psychology, linguistic exploration and humor. This is scholarly writing at its best." (Pamela Toler Shelf Awareness for Readers 2014-07-01)"You can read hundreds of books on Roman emperors and conquests; this represents a valiant attempt to bring a little understanding of a smaller, but no less important, part of what made Rome run." (Rob Hardy Columbus Commercial Dispatch 2014-07-21)"Rich and provocative." (Roy Gibson TLS 2014-08-13)"Like a great piece of archaeology, '*Laughter in Ancient Rome*' allows us to glimpse ourselves in the cracked mirror of a distant culture." (John Domini Washington Post 2014-09-17)"What made the Romans laugh? It's an incredible, almost childlike thought to have. But in this characteristically brilliant book by Mary Beard, this simple thought becomes a mental projection that conjures up the world of Rome as well or better than any book in recent memory." (Jonathon Sturgeon Flavorwire 2014-12-03)"Beard has posed excellent questions about Roman laughter . . . Her engaging style of writing draws the reader into the discussion. . . . A must read." (John R. Clarke American Historical Review 2015-12-01)"A fun read . . . accessible yet academic." (Sarah Norfolk Bookworm 2015-04-27)"This is a very sensible, readable, and useful volume. . . . A valuable contribution to scholarship on a difficult topic." (Kristina Milnor Bryn Mawr 2015-10-18)Beard's ability to draw together a wide array of ancient and modern references in her discussions is impressive... *Laughter in Ancient Rome* succeeds in leading sympathetic readers on a stimulating journey through Roman laughter. (Phoenix)

147; *Laughter in Ancient Rome* is a masterwork, simultaneously a sophisticated work of historical

and literary scholarship and an unputdownable read. Beard never loses sight of the specificities of Roman culture, yet she encompasses an extraordinary range of ancient and modern theorizing. Her book will appeal to psychologists and anthropologists, as well as to classicists and indeed anyone who has ever thought about the much-debated question of why we laugh. —William V. Harris, William R. Shepherd Professor of History at Columbia University, and author of *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity* —With a bounty of suggestive and unfailingly intelligent conclusions about the situation of laughter within ancient Roman culture, Beard's remarkable learning is displayed on every page. *Laughter in Ancient Rome* is unmistakably a work of scholarship, but it is also an unpretentious and inviting exploration available to anyone who is interested. As a literary attainment, this book is marvelous. —Dylan Sailor, Associate Professor of Classics at University of California, Berkeley

Normally, dissecting what makes us laugh is as distant from humor as dissecting a human body is from cuddling. All the parts of a joke can be labelled and parsed, or the nerves can be traced to their endings in the skin, but the result merely indicate a way to look at humor or affection, thus removing you to a point distant from the reality of either state. Normally. But in Mary Beard's book, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, the dissection is done with such innate wit and verve that, while we may not slap our knees and guffaw while reading this beautifully written and impeccably researched essay, we are led gently, with affection, toward a greater understanding of what makes those ancestral jokesters our absolute kin.

In the fall of 2008, noted classicist Mary Beard gave the Sather (Classical) Lectures at Berkeley. Those lectures, and five years subsequent thinking over what she said there led to this book, and a fine piece of scholarship it is. Starting from the question, what made Romans laugh, she discusses a range of topics: what is laughter for? And what is humor —joking among its most prominent forms —for? Especially what role did joking play in status and power obsessed classical Rome? How transgressive and aggressive was Roman humor and laughter at different times during the imperiate? How much did Roman views on the role of laughter and of humor descend from Greek views and where was it different? In the brilliant penultimate chapter she meditates on an ancient compendium of jokes, the *Philogelos* (it contains —“some 265 jokes —”), and asks: did Rome invent the idea of the joke as an exchangeable commodity? (Almost every other aspect of Roman life was commodified.) Her observations on all these topics are carefully considered, weighed with ambiguity at times as is

fitting on the study of texts so distant in time and mores from ours, and corrupted, even lost, in their transmission from scribe to scribe. Indeed, one of the most fascinating lessons of this rich study is how complicated it is to tease meaning from ancient artifacts and thus how provisional any conclusions reached from study must be. There are widely variant texts, missing parts, in some cases only fragments left or even less, just descriptions of the texts in other writers' equally fragmentary works. Scribes have made grievous mistakes in transcribing, to the point that whole passages no longer make sense. Words are so badly written down as to be indecipherable. Beard cautions other scholars to move carefully in emending or filling in content in order to make obscure texts clearer: the risk of distortion is great. Some meaning we will just not uncover this far past when the texts were initially composed. This is a sage and very interesting book and for so specialized a topic and approach, one that will probably be read widely in scholarly circles. (It's already been praised in the London Times Literary Section and in the New York Review of Books.) It requires careful attention while reading: the points she makes require detailed analysis of words and passages as well as sometimes extended discussion of other scholars' interpretations. As to the secondary literature on her chosen subject, she seems to have read virtually everything, and her grasp of the primary sources is wide, catholic and inventive. She is generous in her judgment of her peers. (Because I had the opportunity to hear him speak a few years back and later to review a book by him, I noted especially her approving treatment of Simon Critchley's work on laughter and joking.)

I am a huge Mary Beard fan in general and I only bought this book because she wrote it. She also has a very distinct writing voice and style that I think people either love or hate; I happen to love her style but I couldn't recommend this book to everyone. If you do like her style, though, this book is amazingly critical and skeptical of traditional scholarship and casts really interesting doubt on conventional wisdom. She somehow managed to write a book about humor that, far from killing jokes by analyzing them, somehow manages to be really funny in and of itself in many places. It's great.

Great book by Mary Beard, as always. Admittedly, I'm a cultural relativist, but still I think that some of the examples she cites are still funny--funnier than she thinks. The Greeks, of kinder disposition than the Romans, also had very lively humor!

this author is great. not the 1st book from mary beard i have read.

I was looking for illustrations of what made Romans laugh, as a way to try to know them better. Ms. Beard seems more interested in ancient philosophical theories of the nature of laughter, which weren't helpful.

So unexpected a subject; so obvious in retrospect. Written with a critical eye and great fun it exudes the humor of the "Don's life" Don. Another wonderful book.

The jokes told in old Rome are still funny today. Only problem is it is a text book.

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