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Pubs, Clubs and Intoxicating Humour

This paper explores some of the connections between intoxication, humour and politics, particularly with reference to my own area of study, which is early modern England.¹ Nevertheless—since this event is about the past and the present—it is worth keeping in mind that these issues are still prevalent today.

Intoxication is still very much part of political culture today, and if we turn to wit and humour, we can also find them to be similarly alive and well in politics. Take, for example, David Cameron's final prime minister's questions in July this year [2016]: there were several tributes, but one especially rings true for my theme today, when Ken Clarke not only praised Cameron's 'debating eloquence', but also 'the wit and humour' that he brought to the House. Members of Parliament are far from alone in valuing a certain wit in political debate, we just think of the lively satirical culture of television, radio, and print in the UK. All of this suggests a widely held confidence that there is something powerful about using humour to make political points and this is backed up by research conducted by social scientists. Since the 1970s, the study of laughter by anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists has picked up pace and scholars have repeatedly argued that a satirical tone has particular persuasive and communicative power, indeed especially so in our present day digital age where political put-downs and jokes can very swiftly 'go viral' online.² What this paper does, then, is to take a long view on how humour, intoxication and politics manifested in the pubs and clubs of seventeenth and eighteenth-century England, thereby offering some historical context to the things that we can still see going on in different ways today.

Ken Clarke's admiration for wit in political forum is part of a venerable tradition. The rhetorical value of laughter was firmly established by thinkers in the ancient world. In the writings of Cicero and Aristotle on oratory and rhetoric, and the works of the early satirists Horace and Juvenal, the value of laughter and wit to persuade and engage audiences of arguments that were political or otherwise, and of ridicule to belittle an opponent, was highlighted. Being witty was also thought to be appealing and impressive.

¹ This paper draws on material from my PhD thesis 'Ned Ward and a Social History of Humour in Early Eighteenth-Century England', University of Sheffield (2016).

² See for example, Mark Boukes, Hajo G. Boomgarden, Marjolein Moorman and Claes H. de Vreese, 'At Odds: Laughter and Thinking? The Appreciation, Processing, and Persuasiveness of Political Satire', *Journal of Communication* (2015); Elsamari Botha, 'A Means to an End: Using Political Satire to go Viral', *Public Relations Review* (2014).

Cicero argued that an ability to provoke laughter would bring goodwill towards a speaker by relieving solemnity, indeed he likened wit in conversation to good seasoning in a meal: it was both a pleasing and crucial. Moreover, since wit required a measure of invention and imagination, it also revealed a speaker to be mentally agile and such cleverness would be respected.³

During the Renaissance, ideas such as these gave wit particular cultural force.⁴ As such, it attracted scrutiny and fascination from some of the most notable philosophers of the time, and admiration for the quickness of mind displayed in a witty comment remained strong. Thomas Hobbes, for example, cast wit as one of the ‘Vertues Intellectual’ – it consisted of a ‘Celerity of Imagining, (that is, swift succession of one thought to another)’. In this succession of thoughts, he continued, ‘there is nothing to observe ... but either in what they be *like one another*, or in what they be *unlike*’.

Those that observe their similitudes, in case they be such as are but rarely observed by others, are sayd to have Good Wit.⁵

Some of the political putdowns we see today would qualify as such, especially some of the set piece repartee of Prime Minister’s Questions— for example, when Corbyn refused to step down after the EU referendum, Cameron likened him to the mortally wounded Black Knight in the famous Monty Python sketch. His arms and legs severed he cries out - ‘it’s just a flesh wound... I’ll bite your legs off’.

This similarity spotting was also a frequently used device in early modern England. One common trope was to liken politicians to watermen: their double-dealing made them like an oarsman, who would look one way but row another. Or, to take a more specific example, we can look to the works of Ned Ward who was a satirist who was active in the early eighteenth century. He had many gripes with Queen Anne’s Government and he decided to go after them in, what he called, ‘a Jestling Manner’, in his pamphlet *Hudibras Redivivus* (1705-6). Chief among his concerns was Anne’s failure to deliver on her promise to protect the integrity of the Church of England from dissenting factions: as he wrote in verse, she ‘like a friend so kindly spoke’, but had since ‘put upon them such a joke’. He went on, ‘a Sack of Fair Promises avail but little, like too rich pycrust They’re too Brittle... Good Deeds become an English Heart, Fine words don’t

³ Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator* translated and edited by James M. May and Jakob Wisse (Oxford, 2001)

⁴ Phil Withington, ‘Intoxicants and Society in Early Modern England’, *The Historical Journal* (2011)

⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651).

countervail a Fart'.⁶ Likening the Queen's words to a fart was a big deal—this extract from his pamphlet landed him in the pillory. For the government, humorous similes could be a real threat, but the key point in terms of wittiness was that these kinds of likeness had to be more than a simile; they had to be unexpected: promises like brittle pie crust, words like a fart. Just as Hobbes had maintained, it was their inventiveness and ingenuity that made them surprising and hence able to trigger laughter.

So where do the pubs and clubs come into this? More often than not, the political jokes and wit we can recover from the early eighteenth century are those that appear in print, like Ward's remarks. But these kinds of pamphlets were designed to be read aloud in a sociable setting, like a tavern or coffeehouse. And perhaps it would have looked something like this frontispiece from an eighteenth-century jestbook, which clearly imagined a collective audience for its contents. Like the ballads that we will be hearing more about this evening, political wit and jokes formed part of a print and oral culture that flourished as public sociability expanded over the early modern period, spreading debate about current affairs throughout society, especially in urban areas.

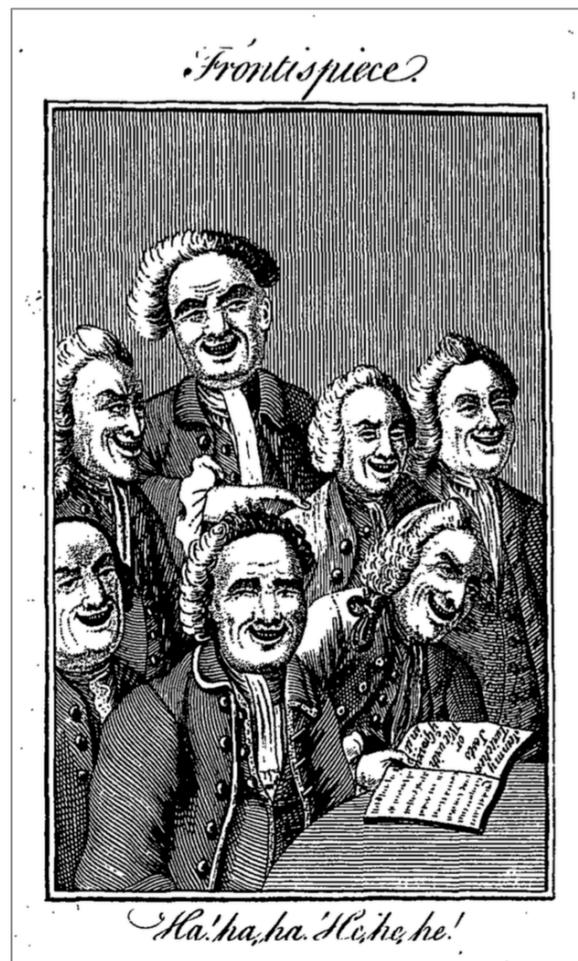


Figure 1: Frontispiece from Daniel Gunston, *Jenny Twitcher's Jests* (London, 1770)

⁶ Ned Ward, *Hudibras Redivivus*, V (London, 1706); The National Archives, Records of the Court of King's Bench, Crown Rolls KB 28/17 Easter 5 Anne.

In fact Ned Ward, our pilloried satirist, ran drinking establishments in London throughout his career and sold his publications from them. His tavern—The Bacchus—on Moorfields became known as a hotbed for men who shared his Tory politics. And it was there that, as one biographer recalled, he afforded his patrons a 'pleasurable entertainment' with his 'wit and humour' as well as 'good Liquor'.⁷ We don't know much about the men who met at the Bacchus to talk politics because, like a lot of these kinds of associations, they were informal and the records simply don't exist. What we do know is that in the divisive political context of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries these sorts of informal 'clubs' sprang up around the Capital. Lots of these clubs were political, but they didn't have to be.

In another of his works, Ned Ward turned his satire to London club life. Mixing real clubs with fictitious creations, he recounted over 30 different clubs from the Kit-Kat club, through to the dancing club, the lying club and the surly club—the test for membership was to answer all questions as rudely as possible—and there was the club of ugly faces, which comprised people who were fed up of getting bantered on the streets about their looks and came together so that they could respond to one another in kind.⁸ I'll spare you the details of the farting club, but the point of the satire was to play on the sense that almost anything could be used as an excuse to socialise as a club. Another social observer, John Macky, noted the 'infinity of clubs and societies' in the 1720s, which he maintained were often for the 'keeping up good humour and mirth'.⁹

And the keeping up of humour and mirth is an important point because, increasingly, it became the worst of all social crimes to be considered a dullard. Hence, across the early modern period you can find guidance on how to behave in company that often returned to the theme of wit and laughter—from Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courter*, first printed in English in the mid sixteenth century, through to Jonathan Swift's *Treatise on Polite Conversation*, published in 1738, and beyond. Whether delighting company with repartee, silencing a 'conversational bore', or soothing passions and tempers of 'brangling disputers', wit came to be seen as a centrepiece of social life and culture.¹⁰ As one writer exclaimed: 'we may as well think of separating... goose from

⁷ Giles Jacob, *The Poetical Register: or, the Lives and Characters of all the English Poets, with an Account of their Writings*, 2 vols (London, 1723).

⁸ Ned Ward, *A History of the London Clubs* (London, 1709).

⁹ John Macky, *A Journey through England* (London, 1724).

¹⁰ Kate Davison, 'Occasional Politeness and Gentlemen's Laughter in 18th Century England', *The Historical Journal* (2014).

Michaelmas-day, as that we can live at ease without laughter, “the chorus of conversation,” and the union of social intercourse’.¹¹

We have considered clubs and pubs but where does *intoxication* more specifically come into this? Drinking establishments were important as physical places where people could come together to socialise and read the latest news, but the drinks themselves—and their effects—also had an important part to play. There were two common observations about wit: first, that it exercised and displayed the powers of the mind, and secondly, that it was a social phenomenon: it happened between people. On both counts, practices of intoxication were well placed to lend a helping hand.

One pamphlet called *Ebrietatis Encomium: or, the Praise of Drunkenness*, published in 1722, captured this spirit (pardon the pun...). The pamphlet was divided into several different chapters, each contributing to its argument that drinking was a good thing. These included ‘That one Must be Merry’, and following on, ‘That Wine Drives away Sorrow and Excites Mirth’; along with later chapters, ‘That Wine Makes one Eloquent’ and the headline act: ‘That Wine Creates Wit’, which argued that,

As Wine increases the Quantity of animal Spirits, by the Fumes it sends to the Brain, it is easy to comprehend, that it cannot but be of great Advantage to dull and heavy Wit... by warming the Thoughts, it renders them more acute, and inspires a greater plenty of witty Sallies.

There was a sense that intoxication altered the workings of the mind, loosening up the thoughts and rendering them more inventive and hence wittier. The importance of drinking as a social activity was emphasised in its chapter, ‘That wine acquires Friends’, which maintained that the most effective means of attaining good company was through taking a ‘friendly Bottle’ in ‘pleasant and delightful Company’. The power of drinking to forge social bonds was underlined in its ‘Rules to be observed in getting drunk’. Second only to ‘not too often’, was ‘in good company’, which consisted of ‘good friends, People of Wit, Honour, and good Humour’.¹² In a world in which meeting and mixing was celebrated—and wit held in high prestige—intoxication was considered an important means to enhance both.

Another satirist and friend of Ned Ward, Tom Brown, wrote *An Oration in Praise of Drunkenness*. He reportedly had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the capital’s watering holes and was thus perhaps well placed to argue for the benefits of drinking. His key

¹¹ *Olla Podrida*, 26 May 1787.

¹² Albert Henri de Sallengre, *Ebrietatis Encomium: or, the Praise of Drunkenness* trans. Boniface Oinophilus de Monte Fiasco (London, 1745).

argument was that drinking ‘makes the Dull ingenious’: it enhances imagination, a clever sort of inventiveness and creativity. Moreover wine ‘enlivens the Conversation’ and therefore, he wrote, ‘I advise and exhort you all to be Drunk’. He concluded with a final plea:

‘tis highly reasonable, that a Custom establish’d and continu’d since the beginning of the World to this Day, ought to be preserv’d inviolable; that a Custom fram’d and cemented by Nature, supported by Reason, and practised with success, ought to be deliver’d down to Posterity and be maintain’d with Honour, and had in Veneration by all succeeding Ages.

A sentiment that reminds us of the *deep* history of practices of intoxication in society.

In the pubs and clubs of seventeenth and eighteenth-century London, it was not just the drinks that were flowing, but also the political debate and the jokes that went with it. In the ideas surrounding these practices we can see the survival of a classical legacy that elevated wit to a position of high cultural prestige. This is something that might play out differently today, but our own admiration for witty political point scoring suggests that a similar sentiment is still at work.