BOOK REVIEWS


The aim of this study is to investigate the role of humour and irony as constitutive elements of the political culture of medieval England from the Norman Conquest through to the later thirteenth century. The set of case studies chosen for close reading are, in the main, historiographical and epistolary texts, and Katrin Beyer situates her approach to them somewhere between a strictly literary line, which would understand humour and irony in these works as particular rhetorical devices operating within the formal constraints of their genres, and a naive reading that would assume them to be direct reflections of a historical reality. The stated aim is instead to understand the position of humour and irony within the broader structure of medieval political communication: ‘[die] Freilegung der Erwartungshaltungen und Verhaltensweisen im Gespräch auf der Grundlage von normativen Darstellungen, Redeszenen und Briefen, um auf diesem Wege Aussagen über Konventionen und Verhaltensnormen jener Zeit treffen zu können’ (to uncover the inherent expectations and forms of conduct in spoken discourse on the basis of normative representations, literary dialogues, and letters, in order to draw conclusions in this way about conventions and norms of conduct in this period) (p. 21). In the main, Beyer achieves this balancing act quite well, even if one notes that at some points, what she (and her readers) would really have liked to investigate is whether an acerbic display of wit presented in a particularly charged situation actually occurred in the manner the sources would have us believe.

The first three central chapters deal with *facetiae* and the *facete dictum* — witty tales and clever wordplay — as a constituent element of *urbanitas*, an ideal of the new courtly culture emanating from northern France, of which English (or rather: Angevin) curial writers of the period understood themselves to be part. The political deployment of
the *facete dictum* in order to de-escalate conflict and defuse fraught situations went beyond a rhetorical trope, as we are shown through case studies of the well-documented relationships between Henry II and the Carthusian Hugh, bishop of Lincoln (d. 1200), and the king’s cousin Roger, bishop of Worcester (d. 1179), respectively. Yet it is also clear that the success of a *facete dictum* in such circumstances depended on the prior personal acquaintance and, indeed, friendship with the king on the part of figures who were already heavyweight politicians, voices heard seriously at court. The *facete dictum* in this political context was the exception, not the norm, and if deployed inappropriately, or by an individual without the necessary personal standing, reflected badly upon the speaker. The ability to tell witty stories (*facetiae*) effectively, by contrast, was a quality prized more broadly as a mark of distinction for a courtier. As a social rather than an ethical quality, it was not necessarily a mark of character, and so can be found ascribed to individuals otherwise held in poor repute. Skill in the delivery of *facetiae* was taken by some twelfth-century authors as a distinctive feature of national identity—of Britishness, Englishness, or, in the case of Gerald of Wales, Welshness—and they could also be deployed to political effect. Gerald and Walter Map both presented *facetiae* in which a positive connotation lent to the frugality of the Capetian kings was intended to contrast only semi-implicitly with the power-hungry ambition of Henry II, to the latter’s discredit; inverting thereby the original direction of these *facetiae*, which Beyer argues had begun life as orally circulated tales that poked fun at the relative poverty and somewhat feeble territorial jurisdiction of the twelfth-century kings of France.

In the second set of three chapters, Beyer turns to three different spheres of life and thought: law, letters, and satirical literature. The first of these (law) is long and difficult, and starts with the proposition that Anglo-Norman justice saw the death penalty as inappropriate for nobles, even in cases of treason (though not, one might note, for everyone else). Instances in which a treacherous nobleman was put to death at the order of a ruler had, therefore, to be especially legitimized in some way by subsequent narrators of the events. Beyer appeals to the idea of punishments that ‘mirrored’ the crime they addressed, the ‘spiegelnde Strafe’, as part of those strategies of legitimation, and which contemporary historians signalled by the introduction of (invented) ironic statements. Thus, to explain the execu-
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tion of the Mercian nobleman Eadric Streona (d. 1017) by Cnut, later historians like William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon made him responsible for the murder of Edmund Ironside, and then attributed to Cnut an ironic statement towards Eadric of the ‘and now you will get your just rewards’ type. This turns out to be the latter’s execution, with Cnut presented as a man who hated treachery, even when it had worked to his advantage. Eadric was thus ‘deceived’ by Cnut’s irony, just as he himself had ‘deceived’ Edmund Ironside. William of Malmesbury (again) and Orderic Vitalis attribute a similar ironic statement to the future Henry I in the year 1090, having him declare ‘All this will be yours’ to his captive, the rebel leader Conan Pilatus, whilst gazing out from a tower upon the city of Rouen, before hurling Conan violently from said tower to his death, the ‘reward’ for his treachery. What was in reality a usurpation of the juridical authority of Henry’s older brother Robert Curthose, then Duke of Normandy, an act of dubious legality, and a display of distasteful cruelty on the part of a man who had since become king, was then turned into a ‘spiegelnde Strafe’ by Henry’s apologists through their inclusion of this ironic phrase (both were careful to state that it was uttered per hironiam, lest their readers fail to grasp the point). In the context of Beyer’s work, this legal perspective is then placed alongside studies of irony in the works of Matthew Paris, where irony serves to characterize others negatively (especially the French), and of the mockery and scorn that could occur on the battlefield—or require prevention, in the prosecution of successful peace negotiations. All three are taken together as types of ‘agonale Redeszenen’, dialogues in situations of sharp conflict (the adjective agonal is a neologism derived from the Greek ἁγών, without a direct English equivalent), but as an analytical category, it lacks much in the way of useful coherence here.

The final two chapters, on letters and satirical writing, take us more firmly into the literary territory of crafted rhetoric. We learn how jocularity could maintain friendships by letter despite physical separation, but that irony could also be used in letters to stage verbal assaults and shape cutting arguments with which to belabour one’s correspondent. The effect in the latter case was heightened by the ingenuity required successfully to communicate ironic statements on a purely textual level, without the assistance of gestures, expressions, or changes in the tone of voice (or the lame recourse to the declara-
tion that a given statement was meant *ironice*). Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium* and the *De invectio[nibus* of Gerald of Wales are then examined as examples of satirical prose, in which irony was used as one rhetorical device amongst many to defame opponents. Both are really examples of formal invective, but whilst Walter seems to have been a clever satirist of the new Cistercian movement, Gerald comes across as an embittered and vituperative individual who sought to cast blame on others for his failure to secure the bishopric of St David’s. Beyer detects in Gerald’s purple prose traces of the rhetorical strategies by which the case will have been presented and debated at the papal curia, and so establishes a contemporary political dimension to a work that is otherwise very much a product of literary, indeed textual, craft and of the evident inheritance of classical learning.

The Latin texts are quoted at length in the footnotes, which helpfully allows the reader to examine the exact wording of the statements under discussion. It is clear that Beyer has an eye for detecting the ironic, but one would like to know how the episodes singled out for particular examination were chosen, on what grounds the material basis was selected, and why the study was conceived as it is. It is not easy, after the chapters dealing with *facetia*, to grasp the integral coherence of the study, or always to understand whether the features identified are exceptional to particular works, or are representative of broader trends in contemporary political culture. The sharp expression of conclusions and the treatment of the tension between literary technique and historical reality suffer somewhat at the hands of the considerable body of detail marshalled in this study. How Beyer’s conclusions change our existing understanding of the nature of political, and thus courtly, culture in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England is a matter that readers are required to work out for themselves. This reviewer is unconvinced by the contention, outlined in the introduction, that the high status accorded to wit and humour in English society is a historical constant, and so England (or the Angevin Empire) was different in this respect from the rest of Europe, because a comparative angle is never opened.

What, then, of the quality of the humour and wit presented in this study? Beyer notes that scholars of medieval literature have focused more on laughter than on humour, and that few historians have touched on either. The political dimension of much of the humour
that comes to light in this study, however, often only worked through the mechanism of laughter. The examples of humorous *facete dicta* uttered in order to reinforce a collective identity or create a group loyalty work by singling out another for scorn, generating laughter at the expense of a third party. One begins to see what the long-standing ecclesiastical distaste for laughter was getting at. *Facetiae* are more genuinely witty, and one can further admire the oratorical skill and literal quick-wittedness of a Hugh of Lincoln. But with the exception of certain outstanding individuals—those like Walter Map, who gave real thought to constructing humorous episodes—the wit and irony on display is, in itself, often not very sophisticated. The statement accorded to the future Henry I whilst casting Conan to his death, regardless of whether he actually said it, may well be part of an ingenious legalistic strategy to legitimize the act, but it is pretty grim all the same. The courtly milieu of urbane jocularity competes here with a sense of humour inherited from the early Middle Ages, of which Chris Wickham noted recently that ‘what was funny to them (largely mockery and dreadful puns) by no means makes them seem closer to us; they used irony, but it was usually pretty savage and sarcastic’.  


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