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Keywords: Kierkegaard; humor; moral; choice; Mao

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Over yonder they have slapsticks

David Ritchie[1]

Abstract

This is the fourth in a series of essays, linked thoughts about change over time; I expect they will become a book. Like many nineteenth century men, Kierkegaard considered one of the choices available to him was the life of an urban wit. Imagine coming from the countryside because agriculture is changing and you wish to escape moral boundaries, which were enforced in part by humorous play. An idle young man who wasn't wealthy? How would he eat? And what might come of this invention? Would there, in a hundred years or so, be a whole posse of folk sitting in cafés writing short stories or thinking existentialism into existence? The second point is that the urban/countryside split with regard to humor should be understood in the context of other changes of mind.

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Under the regimes of Mao and Pol Pot the countryside was considered the fount of right and wise behavior; when seeking moral guidance everyone was told to look to the peasants, except of course when their practices were deemed superstitious or they otherwise constituted a challenge to Party doctrine. In this context it is interesting to think about the comedic art known as *Xiangsheng,* a kind of crosstalk act which Westerners today liken to vaudeville. It was banned during the Cultural Revolution but before that it was accepted, being "of" the people. It is now experiencing something of a revival.[2] That Kierkegaard, a king of France and Alan Alda have roles in a general reconsideration of how we should think about the history of comedy and its relation to morality in town and countryside may come as a surprise. I promise therefore that wandering towards that understanding will be an interesting journey.

We come in on a young man sitting at a café in Copenhagen, middle of the nineteenth century. He's not a real young man, he's born from the imagination of Søren Kierkegaard, but he represents reality; there were such people. He thinks himself a flâneur, which being a French word, tells us that he has heard or read of folk walking up and down in Paris, doing little but observing and thinking, though not with the intensity and drive of early science. Our man wants to walk up and down and be witty. How odd this aspiration might seem to someone new in town is the point I want to make. Imagine coming from the countryside because agriculture is changing and there are rumors of money to be made in cities and finding that what some young people want to do is be idle. Idle is what out-of-work and hungry agricultural workers are. Idle is the fear of fam-

[1] Independent scholar.
[2] https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/glossary/crosstalk/.

ilies living on the edge, of people who want to turn like Dick Whittington towards the source of work and wealth. Of course there had always been the idle rich. But an idle young man who wasn't wealthy? What was Kierkegaard thinking? And what might come of this invention? Would there, in a hundred years be a whole posse of idle folk sitting in cafés writing short stories or thinking existentialism into existence? Here I hear Wallace Shawn in the "Princess Bride" say, "Inconceivable!" And yet that is history; it happened.

There were antecedents. One might say Kierkegaard was thinking he'd like to be Cicero, someone from outside Rome who, by virtue of his words and wit, enjoyed privileges of the city, but Cicero got where he did by joining the dance, by playing and manipulating the rules of a community.[3] Kierkegaard's man wants to be both funny and living at a distance from the swirl around him. He'd like to think of those on the edge of his perception as "over yonder." The alternative was Montaigne, someone who had enough money to retreat to a quiet room in a castle or college or monastery. There one might ask, "*Que sais-je*?" What do I know? But if one did not have means, there were not a lot of alternatives to joining a barter and credit economy – where one had to go along to get along, and eat – or joining an organization, the military for example, which would feed you.

Wit and humor have roles in all cultures, but they were once hemmed in by the need to eat (which I use as shorthand for all cultural pressure). They were also *formed* by those pressures. Some things have always been regarded simply to be funny: a bad person slapped or slipping is the example that comes to mind. But when Mary Beard says we "get" Roman jokes, she doesn't mean that all of us find them funny; she means I think that we see that they're supposed to be funny. They may raise a smile or a laugh in some percentage of the population. Humor changed over time and was different in different locations.

So the question we might ask of Kiekegaard is who he expects to laugh when he thinks of something witty to say? A group of blades, young city folk who have the necessary cash to carry swords? Coffee house wits? There had been coteries in cities for as long as cities were cities, but for someone without social standing to find his way in? We may guess he aspires to amuse other flâneurs, sophisticated people, lilies of the city, or thinkers and revolutionaries like Jenny and Karl Marx.[4]

Why do we not think of the countryside as a source of humor? Robert Burns was pretty funny, addressing a louse crawling on a proud lady's hat. In *Footnotes,* Peter Fiennes refers to the "wistful English vision, polished over the years, of pure, unsullied village life" and quotes George Orwell on "old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings." A trip to the Imperial War Museum's store will remind a visitor how much the unsullied countryside, the arcadian perfection of hedgerow and weather, figured in British propaganda posters of the First and Second World Wars. In medical charts doctors complained that patients were the worst kind of city folk and praised the hearty boys who volunteered from agricultural occupations. We have inherited a nostalgia for an imagined landscape and past, a sense that even when the weather is bad there are cosy pubs in which to sit, and say very little.

Fiennes continues,

[3] Not being a classical historian, I rely on the account of Mary Beard, *SPQR: a history of ancient Rome* (New York: Norton, 2015).

[4] Karl wrote a piece of comedic fiction, *Scorpion and Felix.* He regarded himself as a wit http://www.autodidact-project.org/quote/marx-comedy.html. Jenny was also funny. Mary Gabriel, *Love and capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the birth of a revolution* (New York: Little and Brown, 2011).

> Today the brutal wind is making it hard to get a fix on Swanage. A mucky brown scruf has gathered in foamy clumps where the sea meets the shore. It is especially thick at the groynes, where occasionally it is whipped up and flung onto the esplanade, scatting into tiny flecks that fly through the air before fizzing out on the windscreens of neatly parked cars. Inflatable beach toys are bucking against each other in the shop fronts, shaking off sprays of sleet and squeaking in plastic distress. Damp bunting is pressed against the awnings. The shops and streets are almost deserted. It's cold outside, but inside the Ship, [snip] . . . they are showing a Premier League football match on the wall-filling TV and there's the close, happy atmosphere that all good pubs have when the afternoon is young, the weather is wild, a fire is burning, and everyone has decided that they might as well stay for another.[5]

But surely wit is a national trait, shared by city and countryside? I'd argue that this idea is a translation of small group behavior onto a city and then national scale. Some British people are convinced that what foreign persons or even whole nations lack is the happy-go-lucky sense of humor that got Londoners through the Blitz. William the Conqueror? He had "little or no sense of humor."[6] But how is this different from regarding people over yonder, those who inhabit space on the edge of where one lives, as funny beings? The thing to note about Kiekegaard's aspiration is that it splits an audience into those who are flâneurs and those who belong over yonder.

The greeting "hello" is an important marker here, a word invented to suit telephone conversation. Before that, greetings, like humor, were locally determined, "*We* are the folk who say, '*Grüß Gott*." To illustrate this point: while walking with our children once, as we passed each group who were treading the prescribed measure from cruise ship moored in a fjord, through a landscape and back, I nodded and pronounced an invented greeting, "*Skgrøgit*." Smiles and nods in return, delighted our kids. We were on the inside of the behavior; though the others passed close, they were over yon.

In top restaurants the world over, people want food straight from the farm or ocean, wherever it can be authentically (isn't that a word) "sourced." Yon delivered hither. To the extent that in the t.v. program *Portlandia* a couple wanted to know the name of the chicken they were to be served.

On November 6, 1849, Charles Dickens described his views on Punch to Mary Tyler,

> In my opinion the street Punch is one of those extravagant reliefs from the realities of life which would lose its hold upon the people if it were made moral and instructive. I regard it as quite harmless in its influence, and as an outrageous joke which no one in existence would think of regarding as an incentive to any kind of action or as a model for any kind of conduct. It is possible, I think, that one secret source of pleasure very generally derived from this performance. . . is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstance that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about, without any pain or suffering.[7]

Punch was first of all a mixed drink, possibly named with a loan word from Hindi or from

[5] Peter Fiennes, *Footnotes: a journey round Britain in the company of great writers* (London: Oneworld, 2019), 12.
[6] Stephen Clarke, *1000 years of annoying the French* (London: Transworld 2010), 23.
[7] https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/thats-the-way-to-do-it-a-history-of-punch-and-judy.

the English puncheon, a particular size of barrel; sources do not agree on the etymology. When transformed by Jamaican rum the drink became very popular in cities, but had fallen out of fashion by the time Dickens published in *Household Words*, an article titled, "A Bowl of Punch."[8] But the Punch Dickens had in mind here was a character derived from *Commedia dell Arte*, a masked figure, cunning, a rebel with many dualities. The Italian source is described as a "man without dignity [who is] nevertheless indispensable to us all: without [him]…none of his countless 'bosses' could ever escape from the awkward tangle of troubles in which they find themselves. [He] is everyone's savior, saved by no one."[9] Punch had some of these characteristics. He came to London as a marionette who proved so popular that for a while there was a theatre devoted to Punch productions. The character endured, but as a glove puppet that entertained people in the streets. Today we think of Punch as an entertainer of children, particularly beside the sea where in my youth puppets hitting one another with sticks was regarded pretty much as Dickens described – harmless entertainment like pantomime (which was also derived from *Commedia dell Arte*). Not real at all, and with no moral consequence.

Within a week another letter by Dickens was sent to and published in the *Times* of London. It reacted to a scene we might today call "Dickensian." Beside Mr. Edwards' Tenter Ground, where sometimes cloth was hung on tenterhooks – a practice that gives today's metaphor its meaning – Dickens came upon 30,000 people who had gathered to witness an execution:

> When I came upon the scene at midnight, the shrillness of the cries and howls that were raised from time to time…made my blood run cold. As the night went on, screeching, and laughing and yelling in strong chorus of parodies of negro melodies, with substitutions of 'Mrs. Manning' for 'Susannah' and the like, were added to these. When the day dawned, thieves, low prostitutes, ruffians and vagabonds of every kind, flocked to the ground, with every variety of offensive and foul behavior.

Particularly bothersome to Dickens was that in addition to fighting and whistling and singing songs, there were "imitations of Punch, brutal jokes and tumultuous demonstrations." Dickens described the sun rising "brightly," gilding upturned faces, "so inexpressibly odious in their brutal mirth."[10]

Victorian humor often seems unfunny to contemporary ears, but there's something else to notice about it – what amuses the city and the countryside may be similar, but city humor was thought superior. "Why are London jokes always appropriated by country newspapers? Because they are capital jokes." What would be an example of such a joke? " 'Why is a London dustman like the goddess of war? Because he is a bell-owner.' Explanation: *Bellona* – Punch."[11]

What was this *Punch*? It was a magazine which took its name both from punch the drink *and* from the puppet Punch. [12] And the full name of the publication? *Punch or the London Charivari.*

Charivari was a longstanding folk custom of

[8] https://www.diffordsguide.com/g/1129/punch-and-punches.

[9] Antonio Fava, Judith Chaffee, and Oliver Crick, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 111.

[10] Shaun Usher, *Letters of note: an eclectic collection of correspondence deserving of a wider audience* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), 43.

[11] https://londonist.com/2015/06/11-rubbish-victorian-jokes-about-london.

[12] Founded in July of 1841. Its original owners sold to Dickens' publishers.

Europe and North America. While the essence is easy to understand – a parade with several purposes – the many expressions of charivari are reflected in alternative names: a skimmington (the reference is to a ladle with which a woman might beat a man), rough music, ran tanning, tin-panning…other references to noise and disorder.[13] The important thing to understand about charivari is its moral dimension. In communities where there was no police force and Authorities did not concern themselves with minor matters, charivari offered opportunities for folk to reveal what they considered to be transgressions or threats to the good of the whole. Possibly the best-known version of charivari occurs in a film overseen by a well-known historian, Nathalie Zemon-Davis. The commune of Artigat in Southern France is concerned that a young couple have not produced babies. Obviously if the village is to survive, it must reproduce. So the peasants dress themselves in costume to convey that the opinion comes not from an individual but from an relatively anonymous character or type. They make up "funny" rhymes about infertility. One of them symbolically cuts off the "incapable" husband's testicles. Point made.

It was, of course, often the case that people moved from the countryside to the cities in hope of escaping this kind of group think. One went "over yonder," beyond the gaze of the village, sometimes to where they had technology designed to help you laugh: slapsticks, which were real sticks, yoked together to amplify blows in a pretend confrontation. Slapsticks were unserious threats, tools akin to Punch or his ancestors in comedy brandishing a peasant weapon – a stick, or fork or club.

The essence of the word "yonder" is that whatever being described is a long way away but within sight. For much of human history this was a useful concept; we lived within the distance people could see. Beyond was different.

Phillippa Gregory describes a Catholic fresh landed from the sea during the English Civil War. "He felt for the gold crucifix that he wore under his fine lawn shirt…"[14] Notice the lawn (linen) shirt, the seaside location, the countryside encountering the town. Also, the crucifix, a representation of the world's most famous two pieces of wood, ones to which, for more than two thousand years, people raised their eyes in search of moral improvement or at least guidance through parable and story. By contrast, two pieces of wood joined together and called, in Italian, *Batacchio* or *Bataccio,* were the central device, the technological aid, in what we call today "low" comedy, humor of the unsophisticated.

Sophisticate comes to us from Chemistry. It means to mix, to cause to become less natural.

Jesus dying on a cross and someone being hit with a slapstick were worlds so far apart some may regard it as blasphemy to mention the two so close together. Jesus was unique; *commedia dell'arte* dealt in stock types, characters who, as we now say, "need no introduction." They would perform in town, standing on the beds of wagons. They were, in the words of a New York Times critic the "vulgar roots" [of theater] which would "evolve toward a greater refinement."[15]

Bear with me a while longer. When Kierkegaard says that people "perform" their work, which is their living, performance in industrialized cities was not what it had been earlier or in the countryside, where one knew who was who and what. You see this in the senior Renoir's complaint, "When I was a young-

[13] Those who write of the possible origin of the term tin pan alley do not seem to have made the connection with charivari; I'll suggest there could be one.

[14] Philippa Gregory, *Tidelands* (New York: Atria 2019), 16.

[15] https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/06/theater/reviews/06glorious.html. In fairness I should add that the critic was summarizing what he took to be the book writer, Lynn Ahrens', view.

ster, workmen were proud of their profession. Carpenters wore baggy corduroy trousers and a blue or red flannel sash round their waist, even on Sunday; house painters wore a beret and a flowing tie. Now they've replaced pride in their profession by this idiotic vanity of trying to look like the bourgeoisie. In consequence, the streets of Paris seem to be filled with supers out of a play by the younger Dumas. And…it's all the fault of the English."[16]

Among the differences between performance in the nineteenth century city and performance in the past was that over there and back then one put on a costume to make plain what the moral concerns of the community were. One performed charivari to set people straight. Because the barter system and close-living required trust, one dressed a part to express moral choices.

I'll now explore relationships among dance, humor, order, and decision making in hope of casting light on what Kierkegaard may have meant by "the crowd is untruth." I would argue that he was very much a man of his time, someone who grew up in a household described as austere and serious, with some allowances made for youthful joy. To a young man the city offered more of all of this, also dread, freedom, choice, individuality of dress and expression.

To control urges humans have prescribed much. To help people maintain the rules of the primate troop we have been inventive in the balance of reward and pain. In hamlet and city there developed a sense that absent edict from the lord or king or clergy, local custom was the law. Then came a population explosion; people began to view "over yonder," city living, to be normal and necessary.

Which did what to wit? To slapstick? To the moral aspect of humor?

The first person to pay attention to is Louis the Fourteenth. His dad died when he was four-ish and so his mother and a regent reigned and he took lessons in ballet and other stuff, while war and rebellion were taken care of by those who acted in his stead until he reached about fourteen, when he decided he was ready to assume his role. Then, when faced with the problem of how to impose his will on others, he came up with an extraordinary answer. Instead of (or possibly in addition to) saying, like Cicero, "I need allies, particularly people who have experience in applying violence," he decided to dance. He decided to become a Sun King by dancing the role of the Sun, at dawn in an all-night ballet, and thus inserting an image into public consciousness in the manner so beloved of PR consultants in our day and age.[17]

People had to watch him dance at some early, country hour. I don't think Louis XIV invented image packaging; Henry VIII and Elizabeth I in England were surely not unique in trying to control how they were perceived by citizens. Louis contributed a new idea; he made dance a city thing, belonging to high culture and power, removed from the humor and vivacity and social policing of the countryside. He dressed in a costume like someone in Charivari, adopted a disguise, but he did not dance as a peasant danced. His was disciplined dance, an art that rose above (in many senses) measures peasants trod and which, like fencing with light rapiers, controlled the potential for subversion and wild fracas you see expressed in the paintings of Pieter Bruegel. The city subsequently reached into the countryside to

[16] Jean Renoir, *Renoir, my father* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 72.
[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTJIlFhg85Q.

discipline its joy, which you see, for example, in Italian dance steps being introduced into Scottish Highland dances.[18]

The history of comedy usually concentrates on published work – the Lord Chamberlain shutting down Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Victorian Jokes.[19] When we look elsewhere we come sooner or later to the word "vaudeville," which is French. It means alteration by the influence of a *ville* or town. So the opera or the theater might produce a Racine or a Corneille or a Shakespeare and vaudeville would translate it, debase it, produce a satirical version which was accessible by those who had moved from the countryside to the city or who had been born in the city but received no education.

There is some parallel here with printed broadsides sold at a hanging or other public events.[20]

But vaudeville's start was in the countryside. The web says vaudeville was first associated with satirical singing in the Calvados region of Normandy, with peasants making fun of things in a manner that avoided retribution. Like Charivari.

And burlesque? Also about exaggeration and parody; the connection with nudity comes at the end of the nineteenth century, a very late addition of meaning to a term that had been in circulation since at least the seventeenth century. Its roots are in making fun of the ludicrous, the ugly.

British and American comedy as they emerged from the nineteenth century shared a common sense that it was O.K. to make fun of types: outcasts and oddities, immigrants, people who behaved in the manner of Chaucer's characters, the types in the *Commedia Del Arte*, those beyond the Pale. Burlesque included: minstrel shows, the Keaton Houdini Medicine Show (from which Buster Keaton emerged), a show in which Alan Alda's parents worked.

Like participants in charivari, those who performed in burlesque and vaudeville had other lives in the world. But they were not entirely "of" it, or accepted by it. Alda, born Alphonso Joseph D'Abruzzo, writes that those who were not inside burlesque were known as "civilians," and were regarded as uncomprehending, in the manner vetrans sometimes view those who have not been to war.[21]

Punch was a conservative publication, making fun of proposals for change and of those who challenged the status quo.[22] The visual messages were often conveyed by poses, like those struck in Victorian melodrama and, subsequently, silent movies. A noted absence from those pages I've seen are *flâneurs;* nothing funny or challenging about such people apparently.

What follows is the development of stand-up comedy, and documentaries about how comedians felt disconnected and ill-at-ease, not "of" society, sometimes because of war experience but maybe also because they are Kierkegaard's people: kids who were told in school or growing up elsewhere that they had no choice but to conform, that wit was for adults only and that though making people laugh seemed like a way to bring them together, it was potentially dangerous. Why do we not teach humor in schools? Either because we feel a sense of humor will develop in a person or because it is somehow even more trivial that other things

[18] When my grandmother would ride a cart to the village *ceilidh*, she worried they wouldn't let her in if her white gloves showed dirt marks.

[19] New York Times, May 13, 1858, Why were the people of England, in the time of Charles 1, like David Crocket? Because they first made sure they were right, and then went ahead.

[20] Edward J. Cowan and Mike Paterson, *Folk in print: Scotland's chapbook heritage 1750-1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007).

[21] Alan Alda, *Never have your dog stuffed, and other things I've learned* (New York: Random House, 2005).

[22] Brian Maidment, *The presence of Punch in the nineteenth century*, has a fine bibliography on Punch. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-28607-0_2.

we deem unworthy of public support. Humor is something some people feel should have moral boundaries. This, I believe, is partly due to how humor developed as we moved from a rural to an urban existence.

The moral of Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (among my favorite movies) is that to sit on the sidelines, like Kierkegaard's man, would be a lonely business. Ours is the human comedy and the choices we face include how, when, where and with whom to laugh.

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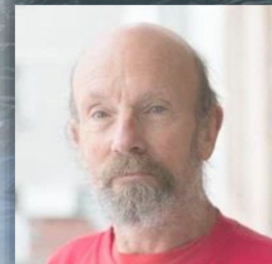

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