

“So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”

HOMENAGEM A MARIA HELENA DE PAIVA CORREIA

Organização

Comissão Executiva do Departamento de Estudos Anglísticos

Alcinda Pinheiro de Sousa

Angélica Varandas

Isabel Fernandes

John Elliott

Maria Cecília Lopes da Costa

Mário Vítor Bastos

Teresa Cid

Teresa Malafaia



**Título:** “So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”.  
Homenagem a Maria Helena de Paiva Correia

**Organização:** Alcinda Pinheiro de Sousa, Angélica Varandas,  
Isabel Fernandes, John Elliott, Maria Cecília Lopes da Costa,  
Mário Vítor Bastos, Teresa Cid e Teresa Malafaia

**Edição:** Departamento de Estudos Anglísticos  
da Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa

**Layout e Paginação:** inesmatus@oniduo.pt

**Execução Gráfica:** Textype

**ISBN:** 978-972-8886-10-3

# **“Let’s in and Laugh, and Weary out this Tyranny”: The Laughing Ladies of Joseph Arrowsmith’s *The Reformation***

*Jorge Figueroa Dorrego\**

## **1. “Let’s in...”: Introduction**

In the last lines of the “Epilogue” to *The Reformation* (1673), Joseph Arrowsmith addresses the ladies in the audience and claims that he hopes to have won their favour because he is on their side: “Since ’tis the first design of poetry / Both how to gain and give [them] liberty” (33-34)<sup>1</sup>. Actually, one of the alleged aims of the “Reformation” mentioned in the title is to free women from male tyranny. For instance, one of the “reformers”, Antonio, asks Leandro to swear that he will “endeavour the extirpation of tyranny, that is, the government of husbands and fathers by sisters, aunts, nurses, and all other officers depending upon that usurpation” (II. 1. 112-115); and when Leandro later abandons their cause and arranges to marry Ismena, another “reformer”, Pisauro, rebukes him, saying: “How dares thou sin after this rate and rob a woman of her liberty, which thou hast sworn to defend at least, if not procure?” (IV. 1. 288-290). That Reformation does not succeed in the play, but the young lovers manage to marry according to their desires, and there are promises and hopes of freedom and respect for the female characters. So, in spite of that failure and some ambiguities, we must agree with Derek Hughes (1996: 134) that the play satirises male tyranny over women.

Moreover, practically all the female characters of this comedy are openly critical of patriarchal oppression. Ismena and Mariana are some of the most witty and

---

\* Universidade de Vigo

In memory of the successful 15<sup>th</sup> SEDERI Conference that took place in Lisbon, 24-27 March 2004, where Professor Maria Helena de Paiva Correia was an excellent, elegant and professional hostess, and a shorter version of this paper was presented.

Much of the research undertaken for the composition of this paper has been facilitated by the support of the Spanish Ministry of Education (MEC, MICINN), through its programme “Promoción General del Conocimiento” (Project HUM 2006 – 09252/FILO).

<sup>1</sup> All references to this play are from the edition recently prepared by Juan Antonio Prieto-Pablos, María José Mora, Manuel J. Gómez-Lara and Rafael Portillo (Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2003), and are cited parenthetically in the text stating the corresponding act, scene, and line(s).

outspoken heroines in Restoration comedy (cf. Canfield 1997:148). In the domestic confinement imposed by their father, they complain about women's miseries, and call for rebellion. This happens from their first appearance, in Act I, scene 3, as can be observed in this impressive and revealing dialogue:

MARIANA: We women are most miserable creatures, sister; brought up at first by some severe parent or kinswoman; and, when we grow most sensible of bondage, deliver'd over to the tyranny of a cruel husband.

ISMENA: Or clap't into a nunnery to spend our lives in thinking and contemplation, though I persuade myself there's little of religion in't; but, from the small remembrance we have of men, scratch their pictures on the walls, and wish; and, the first opportunity we have of being sick, make use of the confessor.

MARIANA: Thou'rt a wild wench. Will nothing tame thee?

ISMENA: 'Twould make a dog wild to be tied up thus, I wonder we can never muster courage up for to rebel. I have read of women that have been famous for't, and I'm persuaded I myself have courage enough to be a general.

MARIANA: My brother talks of some design he has; I wish we would complete it at once.

ISMENA: Were I but a man, I'd make myself renown'd in the women's quarrel, work them all deliverance, and then share the best of them. (33-51)

Then Mariana points out that men are interested in keeping them enclosed, and comments: "I dread my father's anger, and the very thoughts of liberty torment me worse than this imprisonment" (60-61), to which Ismena replies: "Dread! I'm ashamed to hear you name it. Let's in and laugh and weary out this tyranny" (64-65). Mariana really cherishes her sister's strong character and good humour: "'Tis thy mirth that keeps me still alive," she says (66). The transgressive nature of these sisters and other female characters, such as Juliana and Lelia, is expressed not only in their protestation, but also in the witty repartees they engage in and in their use of humour. This paper attempts to analyse how mirth and laughter help them "weary out this tyranny" and keep them alive and together, at the same time as they challenge traditional images of femininity and scoff at masculine comic figures such as the cuckolded husband and the affected fop.

## 2. "Let's ... laugh, and weary out this tyranny": On mirth and women's laughter

Mirth, laughter and wit are the three components of humour, related to its emotional, physiological and cognitive experience respectively. Humour can be offensive and create distance between its subject and object, or it can be defensive and create closeness. Both possibilities are present in *The Reformation*, which, on the one hand, is a harsh satire on several aspects of Restoration society and culture but which, on the other hand, celebrates mirth as a liberating and integrative power

that helps people survive and confront anxiety and oppression<sup>2</sup>. So, to that extent, this play combines the two main traditions of comedy: the one resting on derision and that based on merrymaking. Arrowsmith's usage of the concept of mirth as a kind of emotional need of his oppressed heroines reminds us of Nicholas Udall's words in his prologue to *Ralph Roister Doister* (1552), which link comedy to mirth, that is to say, not with scornful laughter but with well-being and companionship: "For Mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health, / Mirth recreates our spirits and voideth pensiveness, / Mirth increaseth amity, not hindering our wealth" ("Prologue" ll. 8-10. Udall 1984: 101). This positive emotional state created by humoristic stimuli has been noted by several philosophers and writers throughout history, for instance, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Robert Burton, Immanuel Kant, and Sigmund Freud, and it is also why humour is used by many present-day therapists to help their patients cope with tough experiences<sup>3</sup>. Laughter favours an optimistic frame of mind, provides both muscular relaxation and a sense of control over our daily mood, is a means of letting go of our fear and anger, and boosts our energy. So, no wonder Ismena resorts to laughter in order to endure patriarchal tyranny, and her merriment keeps Mariana alive.

Yet, not all thinkers have had a positive view of laughter. Humour theorist John Morreall has found three basic objections to humour: 1) that it can be hostile, humiliating, and even cruel; 2) that it is often irrational and absurd; and 3) that it is a non-serious activity in which people overlook their responsibility. To this we could add that humour can be irreverent, self-asserting, rebellious, and subversive; it can unmask hypocrisies and the weaknesses of dogmas, and it can provide an empowering collective consciousness to members of subordinate groups, as well as a sense of impunity. For this reason, people with authority keep a wary eye on humoristic activity.

---

<sup>2</sup> The satirical purpose is already patent in the epigraph inscribed in the original title-page: "Sunt, quibus in Satyra videor nimis acer..." taken from Horace's *Satires* 2.1, which means: "There are some who think I am too harsh in my satire" (see footnote 2 of the abovementioned edition).

<sup>3</sup> In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle gives an intrinsic value to enjoyment and humorous conversation if they comply with his rule of the golden mean and his concept of *eutrapelia*, since "relaxation and amusement are thought to be a necessary element in life" (1128b, 1998: 104). Aquinas combines this idea of Aristotle with similar comments by Cicero and Augustine – although, obviously, conforming to Christian morality – in his *Summa Theologica* (II, ii, question 168). For Burton (2001: 119), mirth is a possible remedy for dejection, and that is why doctors prescribe love, joy, and merriment "as a principal engine to batter the walls of melancholy, a chief antidote, and a sufficient cure of itself". For Kant (1986: 199), humour "exerts a beneficial influence upon the health" because it enlivens the mind and leads to pleasure. Finally, Freud (2001: 118) also argues that jokes give pleasure, basically because they save psychical expenditure.

For that reason too, feminist humour theorists have pointed out that patriarchal society has always made humour incompatible with femininity<sup>4</sup>. Women have been expected to be passive, amiable, sympathetic, responsible, respectful, unsullied and submissive. Common subjects of humour, such as politics or sex, and common attitudes shown in jokes, such as poking fun at the misfortune of others, or at religious dogmas or at the clergy, and so on, have all been considered inappropriate for women. Cultural prohibitions have always and everywhere curtailed women's participation in humour (cf. Apte 1985).

The pious, chaste, silent and obedient woman of the Early Modern Period was not expected to laugh much, let alone make others laugh. For Spanish Catholic humanist Juan Luis Vives, laughing was "a sign of a very light and dissolute mind, let her [woman] see that she laugh not unmeasurably" (Aughterson (ed.), 1995: 73). Explaining how maidens must behave, Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger referred to St Paul's advice not to say evil words nor indulge in "foolish ribaldry talking, nor light jesting, which are not comely, but be occupied in prayers and thanksgiving" (Aughterson (ed.), 1995: 108). In *The Book of Matrimony* (1564), English Protestant preacher Thomas Becon mentioned the quotation from St Paul's *Epistle to the Ephesians*, and asserted that an honest wife must "provide that her words be utterly estranged from all wantonness, jesting, filthy speaking, and whatsoever may offend chaste ears" (Aughterson (ed.), 1995: 112). Disapproval of women's laughter and joking was therefore widespread, and certainly lingered in time. Eighteenth-century conduct books warned women that a man would never marry a witty female because critical humour and domestic happiness were incompatible, that laughter belied innocence (Gregory, 1996: 27), and that sorrow was more appropriate to women (Fordyce, 1996: 185-8; Gregory, 1996: 27).

Considering this great objection to female laughter, it is easy to conclude that women have given vent to their comic impulses in private and in women-only groups, and that even so this has meant breaking free of cultural restraints which enforced a particular notion of femininity. If humour can be liberating and transgressive, when practised by women it is always so, because it offers some sort of challenge to patriarchal society. For this reason, Regina Barreca (1991: 181) argues that when a woman laughs she is breaking through a barrier, and this is a feminist gesture. Anthropologist Mahadev Apte (1985: 78) claims that "when women act collectively many of the behavioural constraints that they must observe as individuals can be disregarded." In women-only groups, humour flourishes as an expression of hostility to male hegemony, particularly when women suffer more repression, as men become the usual topic of humoristic exchange (76). For Nancy Walker, women's humour reveals a collective consciousness and often engages in a

---

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking, for instance, of Regina Barreca (1988, 1991 and 1994) and Nancy Walker (1988 and 1991), among others.

“we-they” dialectic in which men are the “they” and those who have made the rules women must live by (1988: 13). And, as happens among members of other marginal groups, humour creates solidarity and self-confidence, since “laughing at the oppressors minimizes their authority, and the ability to make fun of one’s own oppression provides a psychic distance from it” (1991: 58). Laughing with others evinces shared values and perceptions, and therefore it can bring women together “in a feeling of common humanity that is necessary to work for full liberation” (77).

### 3. The Laughing Ladies of Joseph Arrowsmith’s *The Reformation*

Because of all that has been said in the previous section, I think it so interesting to see how Arrowsmith manages to show us his female characters laughing together as a response to the restrictions enforced by a male-dominated society. We have seen before how in Act I, scene 3, Mariana and Ismena complain about women’s dependence on men, which often leads to a confinement at home or at a nunnery, or to an unwanted marriage to a cruel husband. In their case, their father is obsessed with keeping them locked up at home, which makes them long for liberty. As Ismena states: “Our bodies by a father are confin’d, / But there’s no man can rule a woman’s mind” (68-69). The two sisters resort to humour in order to cope with their misery and to voice their wishes and grievances.

In Act III, scene 2, we witness another striking, powerful dialogue that exposes the willing and unruly nature of these sisters, particularly Ismena’s. They long for the mirth of England, i.e. for all the outdoor entertainments which they were told were common in that country, and which contrast with the captivity in which their father keeps them. Notice as well the ironic contrast between the socio-religious life of Catholic Venice and Protestant England:

MARIANA: This England must be a blessed place: my brother talks so much of it.

ISMENA: Would I were there, that I might be acquainted with these men; I have such a tickling runs through me when I see them.

MARIANA: And there it is commoner for them to go to a treat than for us to go to church. Never a day but this lord’s or that knight’s coach awaits on you and hurries you to a play, thence into the park, then there’s such perpetual masquerades and balls, that ’tis carnival all the year.

ISMENA: And here, if we have a little liberty before Lent, we are sure to pine for’t, so that the whole year scarce recruits us again.

MARIANA: They have no such thing there; they account it almost sin not to eat flesh when ’tis forbidden by the Church.

ISMENA: That’s a life worth something. I wonder why these old men live; sure there they all die when they’re young, or else the women never knew their fathers. For my part, I wish I had never known mine; I’m sure he’s grievous troublesome.

MARIANA: Fie, Ismena, consider he is your father,

ISMENA: Fie me no fies, Mariana. I wonder who disturbs his telling of money, or anything he has a mind to. Does he think because he had the pleasure to get us we are bound to be his slaves? If he had not been my father 'tis odds but somebody else would; I've heard them say my mother was a handsome woman (1-27).

Ismena's confrontation of patriarchal authority is here patent and irreverent. Her father is not present in the scene, but is certainly despised in a significant manner. Mariana asks her sister to be more respectful to their father, but confesses she herself is weary of so much needlework representing the "virtuous stories of constant wives" (34). Then Ismena mocks the images of female virtue they are weaving: Mariana's is Penelope, and hers is Lucretia. Her comment on the latter is certainly impressive: "it may be she was virtuous, but it would never grieve one to kill oneself so one was well ravished first" (38-40). Her sister tells her she is mad for saying so, and it is certainly not like Ismena to say such a thing, she who has complained about male tyranny and who has defended women's dignity and right to express and satisfy their desires. Ismena explains that: "We may say anything amongst ourselves. If we did not talk merrily how should we be able to live?" (42-43). So she claims she was just joking. We have already seen that her confinement is so oppressive that she uses humour as a liberating force which helps her to survive. Her comment should not be seen as an apology for rape, an act of male tyranny rather than of female desire, but as an expression of her repressed sex drive. As Freud (2001: 147) has argued, humour implies a relief of restrained psychic energy, and Ismena longs for a sexual relationship.

In the same scene, there is another laughing situation, because Mariana and Ismena shake and tease the nurse who watches them because she is old and ugly. So this time the heroines' laughter is not merely relieving or a means to cope with their misery, but has an element of scorn and is even accompanied by physical aggression. They are quite cruel to her saying she is "too ugly to be a bawd" and that even the devil loathed to suck her milk (III. 2.70-73); but the nurse somehow deserves that treatment because she is an agent of their father's tyranny, and is envious of their youth and beauty. Using Harry Levin's terminology, she and Camillo are the "killjoys" who try to prevent the "playboys" – and "playgirls" – from being free and happy. They are old authority figures unable to accept the playful activity of the young, but they end up being deluded. This conflict between generations is overt in *The Reformation*, because the nurse says she hates all beautiful young women, as they attract all men; Pedro tells the nurse: "Thy being old is enough to make us hate thee" (III. 2. 136), and at the beginning of the play Antonio argues that the old enviously impose strict morals on the young once they are "past pleasures themselves" (I. 1. 75). As usual, the young win the generational conflict, as they manage to get the match they desire, but they cannot avoid marriage because they need social acceptance and parental money. Pedro and Antonio promise not to be unfaithful or jealous, so they are not expected to be as tyrannical as other husbands. Thus there is an element of social regeneration – of *reformation* rather – at the end,

which is marked by Mariana's statement: "we are wives, and yet are free" (V. 3. 260).

Other female characters also engage in humorous activity. In Act I, scene 2, Juliana tells her cousin Lelia she is weary of her husband Lysander because she has married him for money, more precisely, in order to maintain her lover Pisauro. Yet she prefers that situation rather than to marry for love, because "[l]ove, added to a husband's power, makes him perfect tyrant" (39-40); however her gallant depends on her. She laughs at her husband, whom she considers a "[p]oor fool" (99), and states that men may boast of their wisdom, but they are easily outwitted by women's gift for dissembling. Nevertheless, it must be said that she does not know that Lysander also keeps a lover, and that he also believes she is a "[p]oor doting fool" (89), who does not realise he is dissembling. Theirs is a relationship based on hypocrisy and feigning. Lysander does not worry much when he finds out his wife is unfaithful, because he also has a lover and from then on he will give less money to Juliana: "The world may laugh, and names of scorn invent; / But to be cuckold's nothing if content" (IV. 3. 244-245). Although he makes an interesting complaint about honour affecting men more than women, Lysander does not care much for honour: killing Pisauro would mean exile or death, and he prefers to live in his country with his mistress, ironically taking advantage of the privileges that patriarchal society affords him. As for Juliana, she does not care for honour either, but it is easier to sympathise with her because she is a witty woman who voices interesting comments on married life from a female perspective, and whose womanliness makes her socially vulnerable at the end.

Finally, Lelia laughs at Pacheco in Act IV, scene 3. As this "most egregious fop" (60-61) woos her in such an affected manner, she tells Juliana: "He would make a nun laugh that's just profest, and that's the sorrowful'st time I can think of. (*Laughs*) All I wonder at is that I live" (9-11). She makes a funny description of Pacheco's mannerisms: all his saluting, shrugging, strutting, combing, flaunting, gossiping and so on. When Pisauro comes, she adopts several ridiculous postures to show him how she has behaved with Pacheco in order to attract him. It must be a very amusing scene when acted on stage, and even more so in the Restoration period, when the fop was a common comic figure. As we all know, the Restoration fop was usually a mannered, frenchified, feminised character, who acted as a foil to the witty, rakish heroes. Social affectation, overt effeminacy and lack of true wit were the most notable characteristics of this figure, and those which made him laughable (cf. Williams 1995). Pacheco has the common features of the fop, and is the laughing stock of practically all the characters, but Lelia's ludicrous description and imitation is probably more impressive and meaningful, not only because it is quite extensive, but because it is done by a woman, and precisely the woman who will become his wife. Yet, it must be said that the laughter Pacheco generates is not totally unfriendly. He is a fairly tolerated fop, because he is no rival for the heroes, but he is brother to Mariana and Ismena, and a "reformer". Therefore he is closely related to the protagonists and his participation is crucial for the final outcome of the plot. Nevertheless, like all fops, he is finally duped by wittier characters. Following his

principles, he gets married for love, with no regard to economic considerations; but Lelia is only interested in his money, considers him a ridiculous person, and even laughs at his mannerisms publicly, as we have seen before. For Douglas Canfield (1997: 154), Juliana and Lelia exemplify the category of subversive women tricksters in Restoration comedy who are part of a team of con artists who prey on society, particularly on the institution of marriage.

#### 4. Let's out: Conclusion

Bearing in mind what has been said in the previous sections of this paper, I contend that the four female characters that have been analysed prove to be witty, outspoken women who react to men and patriarchal society in a critical manner. They denounce the miseries of women, who either depend on a tyrannical father or on a jealous or unfaithful husband. Under domestic duress, Mariana and Ismena resort to mirth and laughter in order to "weary out this tyranny". They find in humour an efficient means to cope with their hardships, to foster optimism, and to boost their energy; that is, humour is one of their survival skills. They use it also to voice their rebellious nature and create a collective consciousness in order to confront male dominance. The mere act of laughing was in itself transgressive at the time, since it was contrary to the established concept of exemplary femininity. As happens to other heroines of Restoration comedy, wit and humour make Mariana and Ismena stray a little from the right path of feminine virtue, yet – or therefore – they gain the audience's favour. As for Juliana and Lelia, their double-dealing and materialism may make them less morally acceptable, but some of their critical comments about men are remarkable. Their laughter also questions male supremacy, and their approach to marriage is certainly subversive. No doubt the way in which these four women use humour as a strategy of resistance and as a relief of their anxieties is one of the main attractions of Joseph Arrowsmith's *The Reformation*.

#### Bibliography

- Apte, Mahadev. *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1985.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *The Summa Theologica*. Trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd and rev. ed., 1920. Online edition by Kevin Knight, 2006. 7 December 2007. <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>>
- Aristotle. *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Trans. David Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998.
- Arrowsmith, Joseph. *The Reformation* (1673). Ed. Juan Antonio Prieto-Pablos, María José Mora, Manuel J. Gómez-Lara and Rafael Portillo. Barcelona: Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona. 2003.
- Aughterson, Kate. (ed.). *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook. Constructions of Femininity in England*. London: Routledge. 1995.
- Barreca, Regina. (ed.). *Last Laughs. Perspectives on Women and Comedy*. New York:

- Gordon and Breach. 1988.
- . *They Used to Call Me Snow White ... But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humour*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1991.
- . *Untamed and Unabashed. Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 1994.
- Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Ed. Holbrook Jackson. New York: New York Review of Books. 2001.
- Canfield, J. Douglas. "Women's Wit: Subversive Women Tricksters in Restoration Comedy." *The Restoration Mind*. Ed. W. Gerald Marshall. Newark: University of Delaware Press. 1997. 147-176.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* (1905). Trans. James Strachey. London: Vintage. 2001 (Hogarth Press. 1960).
- Hughes, Derek. *English Drama 1660-1700*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement* (1790). Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1986.
- Levin, Harry. *Playboys and Killjoys. An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987.
- Morreall, John. "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought." *Philosophy East and West* 39 (1989): 243-265.
- Udall, Nicholas. *Roister Doister* (1552) In *Four Tudor Comedies*. Ed. William Tydeman. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1984. 99-205.
- Walker, Nancy. *A Very Serious Thing. Women's Humor and American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1988.
- . "Toward Solidarity: Women's Humor and Group Identity." *Women's Comic Visions*. Ed. June Sochen. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 1991. 57-81.
- Williams, Andrew P. *The Restoration Fop. Gender Boundaries and Comic Characterization in Late Seventeenth-Century Drama*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press. 1995.

