

○ REBELLIOUS BODIES AND SUBVERSIVE SNIGGERS?

EMBODYING WOMEN'S HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER IN COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

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This article challenges orthodox interpretations of the relationship between laughter and agency among women in nineteenth-century colonial Australia. It seeks to complicate functionalist accounts of laughter and play as always representing a working-class challenge to the imposition of middle-class values: not by denying such accounts, but by opening up debate on the relationship between laughter, class and place. While it is true that laughter could operate as an affront to male authority and the repressive colonial penal system, this article suggests that it was a contested discourse, reliant on social class and a sense of place in the colonial order of things. Through a re-reading of the infamous Cascades bottom-slapping incident, it explores the ways in which women's humour and the corporeal expression of their laughter functioned to draw the contours of social class. This article has been peer-reviewed.

In his unpublished study *The Convict*, written in 1886, catechist Robert Crooke wrote despairingly of the 'most horrible indecencies' and 'grossest obscenities' that had once echoed within the walls of Hobart's female factory (Crooke 1958: 21). He described women of 'abandoned character' and 'without discipline', remorseless and ungovernable (Crooke 1958: 3, 21). The full extent of the women's depravity was exemplified, he claimed, in a particular incident involving 300 convict women who cheekily mocked the sensibilities of the penal authorities, including the Lieutenant-Governor and his wife, Sir John and Lady Franklin. The incident he recounted has since thrilled the imaginations of feminist historians and features prominently in narratives of convict women's resistance. In Crooke's account the convict women, 'having listened to the platitudes of the Governor and his Lady for upwards of an hour', and finding themselves threatened with the prospect of a sermon from the Parson, decided spontaneously and collectively to rebel:

The three hundred women turned right around and at one impulse pulled up their clothes shewing their naked posteriors which they simultaneously smacked with their hands making a not very musical noise. This was the work of a moment ... and when all did the same act ringleaders could not be picked out (Crooke 1958: 25).

If Crooke's account of the incident were to conclude at this point, it would provide a compelling and uncomplicated illustration of humour's intimate relationship with subversion and resistance. It would present a form of resistance that finds its natural expression in working-class laughter and play, whose obvious enemy, in the words of Mary Douglas, would be the sober restraint of 'polite company' (cited Damousi 1997: 62).

To sustain this interpretation, however, historians have had to casually omit Crooke's depiction of how the official party reacted. Damousi, in particular, follows Crooke's account until it ceases to support her thesis, at which point she draws upon historian Kathleen Fitzpatrick's description of the official party's response. In Fitzpatrick's account, the men were 'horrified and astounded' (Fitzpatrick 1949: 80–81), while the women laughed in what Damousi understood as 'a rare act of collusion' (Damousi 1997: 60). Their laughter was necessarily collusive, for in Damousi's analysis women's laughter is synonymous with transgression and subversion. Yet Crooke suggests something quite different. In his words:

The Aidecamp ... burst out laughing, and could not restrain himself. Laughter soon becomes infectious and when the shock was over the Governor looked at her Ladyship and her Ladyship at the Governor, and both looked at the Parson, and eventually ... all joined in a hearty laugh. Strange as it may appear, when these women saw that they were laughed at, they became ashamed ... and wished they had not acted as they had done (Crooke 1958: 25).

Not only did the members of 'polite company' laugh, they laughed in a way that re-affirmed the very norms of feminine propriety and convict subservience that the joke attempted to transgress. Theirs was a laughter that rendered precarious the links between laughter, play and resistance; revealing such bonds to be neither natural or inevitable, but rather contingent and always open to challenge. It was an incident that problematises the popular assumption, posited by historians such as Richard Waterhouse (1995), Deborah Oxley (1996) and Joy Damousi (1997), that laughter and play were the exclusive province of working-class culture and a challenge to the imposition of middle-class values. For the shaming laughter of the official party reveals one of laughter's other, less celebrated uses: its ability to function as an agent of social control. Its capacity for transgression should not be underestimated, but nor should its capacity for coercion.

This article explores laughter as an act whose meanings were constituted in and through gender and class. Laughter was integral to the production and policing of nineteenth-century bourgeois femininity, which in turn monitored the content of women's humour and shaped their expression of laughter. For convict women, laughter was a form of resistance and a means of maintaining their customary values. Convict laughter and play did not spontaneously arise within the prison walls, as Damousi suggests, but were drawn from collective counter-knowledges imprinted with the long tradition of Carnival. I draw upon the analysis of Carnival developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), with its focus on corporeality and festive inversions of hierarchy, as a useful lens for accessing the meaning of convict women's laughter. However, unlike Bakhtin or Damousi, I argue that neither the state nor the bourgeoisie were immune to laughter. Rather, they attempted to regulate the forms which laughter assumed. Women's laughter was to be channelled into the private sphere and was to conform to the norms of bourgeois femininity: quiet, submissive, mannered and restrained. Thus, although women did indeed use laughter as a means of localised resistance, the way that it was interpreted, as well as its style and content, were always mediated and shaped by the class positions they held.

THE CORPOREALITY OF LAUGHTER

Exploring the gender and class dimensions of colonial women's laughter involves exploring the gendered body. When people laughed, their bodies laughed, and these bodies spoke social relations. The body was often invoked in nineteenth-century discourses of laughter as a means of making culturally-appropriate forms of laughter more intelligible. Such discourses linked the individual's laughing body to that of the social order and ensured that it was appropriate for their gender and class positions. Thus, when members of the bourgeoisie wrote of themselves laughing they distinguished their own hearty laughs from the ribaldry of the lower classes and thereby marked their laughter as a correct or authentic expression of feeling. In Victorian discourses of the emotions, the heart was the seat of feeling. It was associated with health, hearth and feminine purity, all of which were safely located within the home. As a sign of emotion, laughter was discursively relegated to the private sphere, where it became imbued with the qualities of benevolence and restraint. It was available for women, yet became infinitely less threatening as its capacity for judgment or transgression was circumscribed within the bounds of Victorian morality. When laughter rang out from the private sphere, according to nineteenth-century physiognomist Joseph Simms, it was as a sound of 'sweet merriment that ripples from the throat of a cultivated woman' (Simms 1873: 396). It was therapeutic, as 'hearty laughing has a tendency to promote the secretions and open the pores'. Yet if it was not tempered by 'good manners and restraint', or was 'wholly meaningless', then it became 'one of the most obvious and repulsive indications of imbecility' (Simms 1873: 396).

Belief in the therapeutic qualities of laughter was founded in the nineteenth-century belief that the expression of one's inner feelings was essential for individual and social health (Stedman 2002: 48). The body, as the medium for this expression, was thus moved to centre stage and placed under scrutiny as a reflection of the inner self. However, the need to give external expression to inner truths in itself conflicted with the cult of privacy that grew throughout the nineteenth century. Thus, as middle and upper-class restraint was set against the disorderliness of the working classes, the ability to suppress the sound of one's laughter and constrain its convulsive effects became an important mark of social distinction. Such was the advice of one Australian etiquette manual which noted: 'the suppression of undue emotion, whether of laughter or anger or mortification ... is a mark of good breeding' (Anon. 1980: 281). Similarly, the genteel Rachel Henning, travelling to Australia in 1854, wrote to her sister of a 'dumpy little German lady' on board ship, who had 'the most remarkable manners. She was screaming with laughter... and... took [Annie] round the waist and gave her something between a shake and a hug' (Henning 1969: 19). For Henning, the woman's laughter betrayed a self that was not totally under control (see Russell 1994: 92–126). Not only was her body unable to contain the effects of her laughter; her exuberance threatened to spill out and disturb the comportment of those around her. Without manners, laughter could shift from healthy individuated laughter that sprang from the heart to a laughter that was contagious and infectious, spreading through the surrounding bodies and collapsing their physical boundaries. Laughter thus became an important means of policing the bounds of rank and class, the responsibility for which, as Penny Russell has argued, was ultimately borne by women (Russell 2002). Middle and upper-class women monitored each other's bodies with a vigilant eye, and choreographed the movements of their own laughing bodies to the muted tones of feminine propriety.

Yet as much as Victorian discourses on the emotions attempted to fix and classify the meanings of laughter, or to dilute its potency through situating it within the private sphere, the ambiguity and multiple possibilities of mirth persistently undermined such efforts. Although laughter could be seen as a physical expression of feeling, it was also characterised by an *absence* of feeling, requiring, in the words of philosopher Henri Bergson, ‘a momentary anaesthesia of the heart’. Bergson judged in 1911 that ‘laughter has no greater foe than emotion. Indifference is its natural environment’ (Bergson 1911: 12). Laughter’s intimate relationship with humour and its collusive appreciation of a joke’s transgression of norms implicated it in the operations of power and knowledge. Thus stripped of feeling and serving only to express control over language and knowledge, humour and laughter found their natural homeland in the public sphere, not the private. In this guise they expressed distinctively unladylike traits that ought to be foreign to the pious, nurturing and submissive bourgeois woman. William Congreve in 1895 went so far as to declare that ‘women not only have no humour in themselves, but are the cause of the extinction of it in others’ (Congreve 1964: 32). Invoking the Aristotelian notion that humour is what separates civilised ‘man’ from nature and the beasts (Aristotle 1965: 37), Congreve ascribed women’s supposed lack of humour to the fact that ‘women in every way correspond to and are representative of nature’. Thus, for Congreve, women were naturally pre-destined to be the ‘unlaughing at which men laugh’ (Congreve 1964: 9).

Underpinning these diverse and competing discourses lay some consistent, implicit anxieties and an attempt to regulate the potential of laughter and humour for transgression or subversion. When laughter was construed as an expression of heartlessness, power and aggression, it was discursively located within the public sphere quarantined from the reach of women. When it was perceived to be an expression of feeling, it was circumscribed within the moral boundaries of the private sphere and imbued with the qualities of ‘sweetness’ and ‘merriment’ (Simms 1873: 396). Within these ambiguities lay opportunities for women to harness the power of laughter. The meanings attached to their mirth varied according to their proximity to the ideal of Victorian femininity.

Laughter could also be a mark of European superiority and distinction. It functioned as an important cultural symbol in the colonising mission, as the wit and bodily restraint of genteel women was defined against the ‘insensible’ white grin of a ‘black faced barbarity’. The propriety that genteel women displayed through their style of humour and their manners was an embodiment of European civility, part of the European visual code that helped to legitimate the theft of Indigenous land. Those who could not corporeally exhibit their belonging to European culture and mores should, according to this code, give up their land for those who were visibly superior (New 1997: 21).

Rachel Henning, who settled permanently in the North Queensland countryside in 1861, had numerous interactions with the Indigenous people who lived near her property. When they worked as her servants they were ‘not allowed to dine with the white aristocracy. They “takes their meals in the wash-’ouse”, or in other words, on a bench outside the kitchen’, she wrote (Henning 1969: 157). Not only could they not speak the coloniser’s language ‘correctly’; they laughed at the most curious things and indeed never seemed to stop laughing. According to Henning they found violent quarrels ‘a source of great delight’ and would gather around to watch them with ‘considerable amusement’. They would ‘stand in front of their camp’ whenever people were fighting, ‘and hold up their hands and roll about with laughter’ (Henning 1969: 157). The

Indigenous people described in Henning's letters also 'grinned very much' (Henning 1969: 182). In 1862, Rachel wrote of them to her sister Etta as:

the queerest looking mortals certainly, with their long lean legs and arms without an atom of flesh on them, more like spiders than anything human. Their costume is usually a shirt and nothing. Men and women wear the same, they laugh and show their white teeth whenever you look at them (Henning 1969: 92).

Similarly, the Indigenous Australians of Louisa Ann Meredith's 1847 publication *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales* had a 'fiendish aspect' and a grin permanently fixed upon their faces. It was a grin, however, that immediately spread throughout their bodies erupting in 'violent contortions and movements' and the 'unearthly sounds of their yells' (Meredith 1844: 91). Grinning suggests an animalistic baring of teeth that alluded to their 'sub-human' status. It was a partial and slightly conspiratorial smile that seemed to signify the threat of the unknown.

There are strong parallels between the discursive constructions of Indigenous laughter and the laughter of convict women. Both groups were deemed to lack the manners to contain the bodily eruptions of their laughter, and as a result, their laughter seemed insensible or foolish. Where Indigenous Australians simply 'grinned whenever you looked at them', or 'rolled around with laughter' at the prospect of a fight (Henning 1969: 92), convict women laughed at all things 'serious and regular' (Guthrie in Oxley 1996: 209), such as church sermons, authority and sex. This affirms historian Joy Damousi's assertion that convict women were constructed as a 'race apart' (Damousi 1997: 62) and regarded as a primitive 'other' by virtue of their lack of feminine decorum and civility. It also reveals the way that laughter operated within colonialist discourses as a mark of European superiority and distinction.

LAUGHTER AND TRANSGRESSION

The chaste and restrained ideal of Victorian femininity demanded its counterpart: the 'disorderly swill' of working-class women. If the ideal of feminine laughter was a vision of soft smiles that would soon dissolve into tears, its obverse was loud, vociferous and ribald. In early nineteenth-century Australia, convict women embodied this obverse, and their laughter functioned as a cultural symbol highlighting both their difference and their menace.

Convict women's laughter seemed indicative of a dangerous, collective counter-knowledge that had been passed down through the ranks of Britain's 'criminal classes'. Henry Mayhew and John Binny wrote of laughter as a defining feature of criminal behaviour. They observed vagrants in England to be 'very noisy and disorderly, coarse and ribald jokes were freely cracked, exciting general bursts of laughter among them' (Mayhew and Binny 1862: 43). Similarly James Guthrie, an Ordinary at Newport prison, commented upon 'the stupidity and hardness of these unthinking and miserable creatures' because they 'behaved very indecently, laughed and seemed to make a mockery of everything that was serious and regular' (Guthrie in Oxley 1996: 209). Laughter in these accounts functioned as a symbol of shared meaning and values which were beyond the understanding of the authorities. It was the wrong *kind* of laughter because they were the wrong kinds of people.

However, to laugh about something that was considered 'serious and regular' was to do more than demean its worth. The laughter itself, erupting from a clash between two worlds, alluded

to an alternative and contradictory value system.¹ The lack of propriety of these prisoners and vagrants was connected to their lack of property, and their disrespect for one signified a disrespect for the other. This competing world, existing in perceived opposition to the bourgeois values of law and property, was evoked through the sound of their laughter. It was a laughter that went beyond an individual snigger to articulate a collective knowledge held by a 'dangerous class' that threatened the values of bourgeois society. It promoted a bond between a perceived group of people whose collective power was already feared, as expressed in images of them being 'huddled together' (Crooke 1958: 21)² as a singular and monstrous 'body of prisoners' (Mayhew and Binny 1862: 80). Their collective laughter thus came to symbolise their defiance of a punitive system that exacted its retribution through silence, isolation or separation. Moreover, when the laughter of women was 'noisy', 'coarse' and 'ribald', it exemplified unladylike behaviour. Their raucousness shattered the quietness of the ideal feminine demeanour, and boldly, indecorously, drew attention to themselves. Laughter thus provided a means to measure these women against the standards and norms of feminine propriety, and to find them most evidently lacking.

As the norms of feminine propriety intersected with bourgeois transformations of the senses, it became imperative for female prisoners to be seen but not heard. Ideally, they would be 'permanently visible' (Foucault 1979: 201) in accordance with the new disciplinary techniques of surveillance, and 'quiet and gentle' in accordance with the peculiar sensibilities of their sex. Laughter, however, is a very sensory activity, and thus it was the *sounds* of convict women's laughter that became a symbol of transgression. Their 'loud ribaldry and oaths' (Griffiths 1875: 209) were cast in opposition to the 'quiet order of a Lady's home' (Ruskin 2002: 46). Their laughter rang out as the audible representation of a body in the throes of pleasure. It was a sound that extended and animated the space around it, and undermined the meaning of the place it filled. Jane Franklin, writing to the Quaker prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, complained that in the Cascades Female Factory 'silence is not only not enforced, but the utmost confusion of tongues prevails in every yard and every room' (Mackaness 1947: 28). Similarly, where Governor Griffiths complained that 'on all sides the ear is assailed by awful imprecations' (Oxley 1996: 95), James Bonwick wrote of the prison 'walls echo[ing] with the shrieks of passion, the peals of foolish laughter' (Damousi 1996: 139). In all these accounts, the women's noisiness and ribaldry were implicitly set against the quiet demeanour expected of women. These were sounds and gestures that symbolised pleasure and defiance, and thereby undermined the punitive purpose of the prison environment. The repetition of concern reveals the way that space, as historian Henri Lefebvre has argued, is 'first of all *heard* (listened to) and *enacted* (through physical gestures and movements)' (Lefebvre 1991: 200). Where quiet and sedentary bodies would affirm the meaning of the prison as a place of penance and remorse, noisy pleasure-filled bodies transformed it into a place of perceived hedonism and ritualised indulgence.

As the sounds of their laughter drifted over the walls of the prison, the prison's tangible foundations began to appear less effectual. In colonial Australia the prison's ability to contain the 'contagion' of convict women, and prevent their laughter from seeping through its walls, was always under question. As one magistrate's report anxiously noted of the Parramatta Factory in 1826, 'the side walls are only fifteen feet in height, and so slightly built, as to admit a person on the outside communicating ... with the women who are inside'.³ Convict women's laughter both defied and affirmed this spatial dichotomy between 'outside' and 'inside'. Laughter was one form

of pleasurable communication that in its raucousness could spread beyond the prison walls to infect the rest of society. Like images of convict women's disease, pollution and dirt, it congealed on the margins of society and seemed difficult to prevent or contain. Nonetheless, while authorities certainly endeavoured to suppress convict women's laughter, they also wrote loquaciously of its occurrence. A symbol of pleasure and idleness, it was often invoked precisely to affirm their beliefs in the reason and utility of the bourgeois social order. Depicting the Female Factories as discrete entities characterised by, in the words of Reverend H. P. Fry, 'feasting, complete idleness and indulgence' (Clark 1950: 119) helped make them seem disconnected from the *real* world of rational commerce and work.

Convict women's laughter also became implicated in discourses of convict reform, which favoured marriage and assignment over institutionalisation (Daniels 1998: 69). For their laughter to be imbued with the 'health' and 'merriment' of a lady's giggle, it would have to be channelled into the private sphere, where its disorderliness, sexuality and ribaldry could be subdued. Indeed, Jane Franklin wrote to Elizabeth Fry of how the Cascades Factory made the women 'worse than it finds them, hence the constant endeavour of the authorities here to remove the women at once from the ship into private service' (Mackaness 1947: 24). Within the institutions, the laughter of women was an expression of their collective power. It erupted *between* women and adopted a style and content perceived to be more appropriate for men. Their unashamed sexuality, exemplified in the case of Mary Murphy who was charged with 'indecently exposing her person as a number of prisoners were passing' (Murphy in Tardif 1990: 27), destabilised male control over sexual knowledge and threatened the construction of chaste femininity. Through channelling their bodies and their laughter into the private sphere, they were to be inculcated with the values of domesticity and propriety, which would in turn restore their laughter to 'health'. Just as their sexual feelings were only to be expressed through love in marriage,⁴ so too was their laughter to be expressed through their relationship with men.

Similarly, within prison reform debates, it does not appear that the intention was totally to silence women's laughter, but rather to replace it with a form more befitting their femininity. Elizabeth Fry was vehemently opposed to regimes of silence, believing instead that 'frequent intercourse with sober and well conducted people would be the wisest plan' (King 1909: 85). Jane Franklin heeded this advice when in 1841 she formed a short-lived 'Ladies Society', whose aim was to 'bring about the moral and religious improvement' of the women prisoners at Cascades through 'regular visits'⁵ to the prison. The gaze of the bourgeoisie was intended to inspire politeness and passivity in the women prisoners, as they learned through example and would be rewarded for their conformity.

The laughter of convict women would also be subdued through their engagement in more 'feminine' work and duties. Newgate female prison in England was celebrated as an example of what could be achieved if the disciplinary practices of hygiene, order and regularity were followed (Rose 1980: 87). In 1818 Elizabeth Fry established the rules that were to govern the Newgate prison. The first rule stipulated 'that the women be engaged in needlework, knitting or other suitable employment'. The second rule stated 'that there be no begging, swearing, gaming and playing, card-playing or immoral conversation' (Rose 1980: 87). According to the report of a Select Committee which investigated the prison only two weeks later, the rules had attained their desired effect: the prison was now a place 'where stillness and propriety reigned'.⁶ The women's

recalcitrant bodies – their laughter, their playing, and their immoral conversation – had been successfully repressed, it seemed, through the introduction of new forms of propriety, femininity and industry.

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Similar changes in prison policy occurred in the Australian colonies. In the late 1820s and 1830s Governor Darling began to shift the emphasis from isolation and punishment towards quelling rebelliousness through disciplinary practices. Following the inquiry into transportation conducted by Sir William Molesworth (1838), reforms were implemented more systematically. Assignment was abolished and the prison transformed into a penitentiary. Where Magistrate Roger Therry reminisced in 1829 about the effectiveness of keeping refractory women at Parramatta on bread and water so as to ‘starve them into surrender’ (Therry 1974: 218), the Molesworth Report sought to ‘enforce discipline by a graduated scale of rewards and punishment’ (Molesworth 1838: 41). Just as the women’s marks would be ‘obtained by industry and obedience, so should they be forfeited by idleness, insubordination or any infringement of established rules’ (Molesworth 1838: 47). This is not to suggest that the prison was to be transformed into a place of arduous work and stultifying silence. As stipulated in *The Rules and Regulations of The Cascades Factory*, built under Governor Arthur in 1828, it was to be a place of ‘cleanliness – quietness – regularity and submission’.⁷ In the words of prison reformer Arthur Griffiths, prison was to be a ‘happy home of quiet and decorum’ (Griffiths 1875: 209). ‘Happy’ certainly suggests that the women would be allowed to laugh, however it would emerge as a sound more soothing to the ears of the authorities, and less confronting to the eyes of men.

While it is possible to unravel the discursive construction of convict women’s laughter, and interrogate its meaning as a cultural symbol, it is more difficult for the historian to ascertain what laughter and play actually meant to the women themselves. Lacking extant evidence from convict women themselves, it is difficult to ascertain the precise content of the joke. There is nonetheless a tendency in historical narratives of convict women’s laughter to analyse their laughter as though it spontaneously arose, to resist and subvert the immediate prohibitions that the prison placed upon their lives. Sometimes the assumed connection between laughter, humour and resistance seems to arise from historians’ too literal reading of nineteenth-century regulatory discourses, which counterposed the boundless bodily laughter of working-class women with the demure restraint of middle and upper-class ladies. They were discourses that imagined and constructed convict women’s laughing bodies as sites of dangerous pleasures and excessive passions, that threatened to erupt into riotous disorder if not repressed and contained. Thus Damousi, for instance, places convict women’s laughter within a Foucauldian framework, conceiving of it as a form of resistance that was produced by the repressive norms and prohibitions that structured the nineteenth-century prison environment. Her study is predicated upon Foucault’s notion of power as multiple and ubiquitous – as necessarily extending beyond the limits of the state. Thus, for the women, laughter was a site of localised resistance that enabled them to challenge the boundaries of the sexual, the feminine, the body and spaces of power (Damousi 1997: 59–84).

However, I would contend that just as the norms that defined such boundaries had a history that extended beyond the prison walls, so too were convict women’s laughter and play imprinted with a history of working-class culture and resistance. Nineteenth-century regulatory discourses

were not monolithic, and were complicated by those discourses of the emotions that emphasised the therapeutic effects of laughter and conceived of humour as a mark of civility and culture. For Damousi, the laughter of convict women has no history beyond the immediate repressions and norms that produced it. She limits her interpretation of their laughter and play to the ways that contemporary authorities perceived it, as an inherently rebellious act (Damousi 1996; Damousi 1997). In contrast, Kay Daniels in *Convict Women* celebrates the continuity of what she terms 'rough culture', yet she, too, seems to view laughter and play as separate to this tradition.⁸ Where 'rough culture' was characterised by 'conviviality', collective struggle and 'truly subversive behaviour' (such as trafficking), laughter and play were merely 'isolated acts of insolence' that were occasionally indulged in by individuals and thus meaningless to the group as a whole (Daniels 1998: 151). On the other hand, those historians who have historicised convict women's laughter through locating it within a tradition of working-class entertainment have then proceeded to judge it via a bourgeois moralistic frame. Thus Babette Smith's otherwise brilliant study *A Cargo of Women* (Smith 1988) reduces convict women's laughter to being merely 'an act' that they would have happily forsaken if it meant being given the opportunity to become 'respectable women' (Smith 1988: 72).

Such analyses suffer from their failure to conceive of laughter as a necessarily shared activity that does not exist outside of social relations. The laughter of an individual may express discomfort or scorn: the laughter of a group such as the convict women represents shared enjoyment of a collective counter-knowledge. It was an expression of shared values, experiences and beliefs that affronted, or were simply misunderstood by those who were not a part of their culture. Working-class culture had evolved over time, from the slums of England to the prisons in Australia, and had adapted to suit the new colonial conditions. Richard Waterhouse has suggested that convicts (in *toto*) were able to maintain their customary values and rituals 'because they had money to spend on leisure time. They also had the time' (Waterhouse 1995: 33). While this may have been so for male convicts, the situation of female convicts, especially those on assignment, was more complicated. They were underpaid and, as historian Paula Byrne has argued, bodily owned (Byrne 1993). Their humour and laughter thus served as a means of maintaining, celebrating and remembering their customary values, and of articulating subversive knowledges that were otherwise so vehemently and effectively suppressed.

In the 'Inquiry into Female Convict Discipline in Van Diemen's Land', convict Mary Haigh described how for women on board convict ships 'singing, dancing and telling Histories of their past lives beguiled the time away' (Daniels 1998: 151). Her words reveal the complex interplay and fusion between the women's past lives and their present forms of entertainment. The content of convict women's humour and the forms that it assumed did not spontaneously emerge within the Female Factories or on board convict ships. Rather, as Waterhouse has astutely observed of colonial working-class entertainment, it bore the imprint of 'the long traditions of Carnival' (Waterhouse 1995: 33). Bakhtin's study of Carnival (Bakhtin 1984) and its art form, grotesque realism, likewise provides a useful analytical lens through which to interpret the historical meaning of convict women's laughter and play.

For Bakhtin, Carnival was drunken revelry and entertainment for the lower orders, as well as a festive critique of the high culture through the inversion of hierarchy. It included various genres of 'Billingsgate', by which Bakhtin designated curses, oaths, abuses and humour that

pertained to the 'bodily lower stratum' (Bakhtin 1984: 50–51). Similarly, its art form also emphasised the 'bodily lower stratum', depicting bodies that were bulging, inseparable and always in the process of 'becoming', of transgressing their own limit (Bakhtin 1984: 319). Carnival was a world of 'sexuality and sedition' (Darnton 1984: 99), where the lower orders were able to impose a counter-view of society, through playfully inverting hierarchies and rendering arbitrary norms that were deemed universal and timeless.

Examining the Cascades incident through this framework allows us to venture beyond what was seen through the eyes of the official party to attain a closer understanding of the women's motives and the history of play that they drew upon. The spatial hierarchies that their burlesque inverted are important. The official party were on an 'elevated dais' (Crooke 1958: 21), raised above the women like classical monuments to the law and the state, anticipating passive admiration from below (see Stallybrass and White 1986: 21). The women were expected to 'gaze up' towards the officials, as they spoke of the 'higher' knowledges of religion, statecraft and reason. However, in this instance the women refused to gaze. They turned their backs to the officials, exposed their bottoms and collectively created a 'not very musical sound' (Crooke 1958: 21). In one instant, they had upset the spatial hierarchy and turned the world of the prison upside down. The 'low' of their bottoms had mocked and momentarily triumphed over the 'high' of statecraft and reason. The pleasure and indulgence of play overrode the solemnity and seriousness of officialdom. Further, like the bodies of grotesque realism, their bodies seemed joined or at least intimate with the surrounding bodies, as they all performed in perfect synchronicity and timing.

Similar elements of the Carnavalesque appear in the Cascades superintendent Reverend Hutchinson's report to the Inquiry into Female Convict Discipline in Van Diemen's Land, where he described himself nonchalantly stumbling upon five convict women engaged in sexual play. He informed the Inquiry that the women were

perfectly naked, and making obscene attitudes towards each other, they were also singing and shouting and making use of the most obscene language ... [T]he disgusting attitudes towards each other were in imitation of men and women together (Daniels 1998: 152).

Historians have quarrelled over whether this incident was a satire of heterosexual behaviour, or evidence of lesbian sexual play.⁹ In the long traditions of Carnival, however, I would suggest that the incident was both. The women performed a satire of their bodies' movements to the cultural script of heterosexuality. Yet through indulging in their own desires and pleasures they were liberated from its normative demands. In the words of Bakhtin, they joyously brought the 'body down to flesh' (Bakhtin 1984: 318–319) and rendered the sacred profane. Their 'obscene language' was no doubt replete with references to the 'bodily lower stratum', yet it was a language of laughter and desire as much as an expression of contempt for 'official' speech. It was perhaps the collision between their own sexual knowledge and desires, and the repressive norms which denied them which made these women laugh. When they were asked to explain their actions, their first defence was that it was 'merely a joke' (Damousi 1997: 60). While this was most probably an attempt to disclaim their actions so as to avoid the punitive sanctions that awaited them, it also reveals that these women thought it culturally possible to construe such a scenario as humorous.

The women may also have harboured a vague hope that the authorities would see the humour in their actions. The Court to which they appealed evidently did not, and sentenced them all to six months hard labour (Damousi 1997: 60). Nonetheless the women realised, as subsequent historians have not, that the state was not immune to laughter. I suggested in my introduction that laughter is an unstable act, and that humour's capacity for coercion and social control should not be underestimated. It is to this idea that we now turn.

STATES OF PLAY: THE LAUGHTER AND HUMOUR OF COLONIAL ELITES

As evidenced in the mocking laughter of the Cascades penal authorities, those who were employed in the service of the state or had an interest in upholding the status quo would often use laughter to reinforce norms and police class hierarchies. The major problem with Bakhtin and historians such as Damousi, Waterhouse and Oxley is that they ascribe to the state a certain monolithic and ubiquitous seriousness. They seem to accept uncritically the state and the bourgeoisie's self-projected image of sobriety and solemnity, which in turn exaggerates the rebelliousness of working-class laughter. This tendency imputes an inherent subversiveness to the very eruption of laughter, and thus effaces one of its other important functions, as an instrument of social control.

Humour was often an effective weapon in efforts to maintain social order, although those who relied upon it had to ensure that it was of the correct variety. This was something that could be linguistically secured and harnessed through narrative. Crooke's account of the Cascades incident, written decades after its purported occurrence, is less interesting for its 'truth' status than for the language and metaphors he deployed in articulating class and gender boundaries. When the official party at the Cascades Factory 'all joined in a hearty laugh' at the convict women, Crooke distinguished their own laughter, which sprang from the body's higher regions, from the 'low' form of humour that erupted from the 'bottom' of the social hierarchy. He shifted the joke from the buttocks to the heart, from the site of impurity to the site of health, and from the ranks of the 'low' to the ranks of the 'high'. The officials' mocking laughter transformed the convict women from the subjects to the objects of humour and rendered them and their transgressive behaviour absurd. Laughter also functions in this narrative to conceal the authorities' unease, as they struggle to reassert control over a volatile situation. As Crooke noted, the women acted collectively so that the ringleaders could not be picked out. Thus the usual coercive mechanisms of the state could not be readily employed. In Crooke's narrative, laughter was the official party's last line of defence, projecting a confident air of indifference over a social group that was in reality deeply troubling.

Magistrate Roger Therry employed a similar mocking and defensive humour when describing an uprising at the Parramatta Female Factory. According to Therry, the women had broken up their furniture which they used as weapons to ward off an army that had been sent in to quell the rebellion. In what Therry derisively referred to as 'the Battle of the Amazons', the women were able to defend themselves against the army as 'the soldiers fled laughing ... back to their barracks' (Therry 1974: 218–219). The women had momentarily won, yet the soldiers had claimed the last laugh. The soldiers' laughter allowed them to distance themselves from their failure, and relax in the knowledge that the state would almost inevitably regain control. It was also a laughter that denied the women their agency and their femininity. The soldiers perhaps

laughed at their 'unladylike' behaviour, while Therry rendered them the alien 'Amazonian' objects of his derisive and contemptuous humour.

That laughter could be directed vertically in society at those less powerful than oneself seems to have been largely overlooked in historical narratives of colonial Australia. Yet in a social terrain characterised by class fluidity and contestation, laughter became a particularly crucial weapon in maintaining class distinction. For women of the gentry, as Russell suggests, laughter could represent momentary declarations of superiority over encroaching 'commercial classes'. It could allude to the preciously guarded knowledge which defined their membership of the gentry, whilst simultaneously mocking those aspiring to their ranks. Further, there is a certain flippancy or feigned indifference inherent to the act of joking, which functioned for the women as a form of emotional disguise. It concealed the anxieties which stemmed from their 'inferior' colonial status, and masked the precariousness of their social power in a competitive commercialised world (Russell 1994).

Integral to the gentry's claims to social superiority was the construction of Society as 'desirable and imitable' (Russell 1994: 63), yet simultaneously elusive to all but its elite inhabitants. The precariousness of this balance was manifested in dance and dress, two contested sites that were rigorously monitored by the acerbic wit of genteel women. Anna Josepha King, who came to Australia in 1799 as the wife of the New South Wales governor Phillip Gidley King, found herself frequently amused by the behaviour of other 'ladies' on board ship. She wrote in her diary about the merriment of Christmas day celebrations, where her fellow passengers 'had a little dance for about two hours'. Distancing herself from the inferior performances of those around her, Anna recorded in her diary how 'it was much amusement for us to look at them. Some attempted Irish, others Scotch steps and in truth, I could scarcely make out any sort of step, but a country jump' (Clarke and Spender 1992: 50).

Much later, in 1859, an acutely disparaging yet rather anxious Annie Baxter Dawbin created an opportunity to vent a similarly malicious humour. Humorously alluding to her 'vastly superior' breeding was at this time particularly vital for Annie, as her own precarious financial position and at times 'unladylike' behaviour threatened her with the prospect of social exclusion. While staying with her friends (and future creditors) the Learmonth's, Annie initiated a dance among the people who were there.

'Sir Roger de Coverley' was danced and not knowing the proper air I made them figure away to 'Drops of Brandy'— and anybody being acquainted with 'Portland and its manners', will say a most appropriate tune ... How did I laugh to see them all trying to dance the country dance (Frost 1998: 65).¹⁰

Annie's relationship with the Learmonth's had become strained, and the power imbalances between them were marked. It was a relationship characterised by the Learmonth's patronage and financial assistance on one side, and the Dawbin's dependence and impending debt on the other. The dance thus offered Annie an opportunity to turn the tables on her friends. Gleefully playing a sailors' drinking song she thought peculiarly appropriate to her company in place of the sprightly country air they expected, she at once exacerbated and mocked their clumsy attempts to adapt their steps to her playing. She thus positioned herself above her company, imperiously laughing at her 'colonial friends' as they performed their poor imitations of a dance which she had inherited

from birth. Further, she implicated her friends in the inferior manners (and perhaps alcoholism) of other Portland residents, forcing them to dance their way unawares into her scornful joke.

Emphasising one's Britishness through laughing at colonial customs also enabled genteel women to reaffirm the class distinctions of the Old World in an attempt to control the social fluidity of the New. Genteel women often wrote of colonial society as a place of social topsyturvydom, where traditional values seemed inverted and class hierarchies were often ignored. Humour provided a means for genteel women to assert the continued relevance of 'good breeding' in a world where, as Russell has noted, 'luck and hard work' seemed too often to outweigh the privileges of 'ancient lineage' (Russell 2002: 432). To blatantly condemn or criticise a society which seemed oblivious to one's 'natural' right to social leadership might have seemed a little vulgar. Subtlety, and a certain feigned indifference were part of what the gentry thought distinguished them from the commercial classes. Thus humour became the perfect mode of attack.

In 1843 the genteel, clever and slightly disparaging Louisa Ann Meredith devoted much of her first book to exposing colonial and commercial pretensions. In *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales* she described her task as being to discover the 'true metal' that lay beneath the 'counterfeit's gilding' (Meredith 1844: 4). In Meredith's world the apparel never proclaimed the man, for class was immutably inscribed upon the body. As she mused:

You may often see a man of immense property, whose wife and daughter dress in the extreme fashion and finery, rolling home in his gay carriage from his daily avocations, with face and hands as dirty and slovenly as any common mechanic (Meredith 1844: 50–51).

All the trappings of wealth and rank could not remove the stains of a working-class background, and it was genteel women's role to expose them. They employed humour and wit to lift the veil of 'fashion and finery', and would rejoice in the discovery of unsavoury pasts.

* * *

According to writer Victor Hugo in *L'homme qui rit*, 'resounding laughter has served to denounce civilisation in every age. The most destructive lava which the crater of the human mouth spews out is hilarity' (cited in Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 112–113). Hugo's sentiments encapsulate much of the cultural symbolic meaning which was invested in women's laughter in nineteenth-century Australia. It was not so much women's laughter but women's hilarity – their loud, vociferous, boundless bodily play – that was deemed destructive of 'civilisation'. This style of laughter belonged peculiarly to convict women. Their laughter simmered on society's fault lines and, like lava, could potentially spread beyond control. It became a symbol of their 'excessive passions', their uncontained sexuality and their subversive knowledges. Indeed, their laughter was possibly imagined by the bourgeoisie far more than it was ever heard. The more restraints and prohibitions bourgeois society produced to govern their own bodies, the more repetitively they wrote about the body of the Other (Stallybrass and White 1986: 92). Convict women's laughter and humour thus served as both a counterpart and a threat to nineteenth-century notions of restraint and the construction of ideal femininity. The more it mocked and affronted the values of Victorian femininity, the more it was evoked to reinforce those norms. It was against the chaste and restrained ideal of Victorian femininity that their laughter was imagined, measured and 'corrected'. Through

channelling it into the private sphere it was to be subdued and restored to 'health'. The transgressive and subversive potential of their laughter was to be circumscribed within the bounds of femininity, propriety and industry.

However, their laughter was only ever *potentially* transgressive, for laughter itself is never a stable act. It can serve to denounce civilisation, or invert social hierarchies as easily as it can proclaim and affirm their worth. Whether laughter would be used as an agent of social control or as a means for social disruption depended upon one's class and gender positionings. These positionings structured and policed the style and bodily display of laughter as much as laughter could be used to structure and police class and gender relations. In the fluid social terrain of an increasingly industrialised and commercialised society, laughter could be a particularly effective weapon in maintaining class distinction. For genteel women, it projected a confident air of indifference towards social groups who were deeply troubling, at the same time delicately alluding to preciously guarded knowledges that permitted membership to their elite ranks.

That laughter and humour could be employed in the service of those who had an investment in the status quo has generally been overlooked or ignored in historical narratives of laughter and resistance. Since laughter is configured as the sound of a group breaking the rules, historians have ascribed a certain muteness to those who make or maintain the rules. Both sides seem to exist in a static world, where the middle and upper classes tirelessly resurrect and maintain the normative frames that the working classes delight in destroying. Effacing the ambivalence and tensions that laughter is capable of harbouring also effaces the tensions that underscore class relations. For the *transgressive* laughter of middle and upper-class women was one of profound ambiguity. The ambiguity arose from their realisation that the frame which inhibited their growth as women also supported and reinforced their class interests. Laughter contained within it an irreconcilable tension, representing as it did genteel women's complicity in shaping the frames that they so often contested.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This was exemplified in Bishop Ullathorne's account of the prisoners at Norfolk Island. He described the prisoners' value system as being diametrically opposed to the values of a bourgeois, Christian society. 'So perverse was their language', he wrote, 'that in their dialect, *evil* was literally *good* – and *good, evil* ... the human heart seemed inverted, and the very conscience reversed'. See Ullathorne in Therry 1974: 217.

² This is also echoed in the writings of Roger Therry, who describes the women at the Female Factory in Parramatta as 'Four and five hundred of the worst abandoned women of the Empire huddled together' (Therry 1974: 217).

³ *Report by Magistrate on Female Factory*, 13 February 1826, HRA 111, Vol.6: 286–287.

⁴ This argument is inspired by Joy Damousi's study of female sexuality in Damousi (1996).

- 5 'Report by Lady Franklin on the Formation of the Tasmanian Ladies' Society', Hobart, 22 September,
1841, in Mackaness 1947: 32. The Society folded after only two meetings, most of its members
withdrawing when the local press published their names and ridiculed their objectives.
- 6 Report of the Select Committee on the Prisons of the Metropolis, 1818, cited in Rose 1980: 88.
- 7 'The Rules and Regulations for the Management of the House of Correction' (Tardif 1990: 1747).
- 8 This separation may be a result of Daniels constructing her argument in almost polemical opposition
to the work of Damousi. Thus in Daniels' account, there is very little amusement to be found in the
incident at Cascades, for its collective nature relegated it to the humourless category of 'Rough Culture'.
According to Daniels it was more a 'sign of contempt' than an example of play (Daniels 1998: 151).
- 9 Joy Damousi described the incident as 'obvious sexual play' (Damousi 1996; Damousi 1997). Kay
Daniels (1998) disputed her interpretation, suggesting that their behaviour was more satirical.
- 10 'Sir Roger de Coverley' is an English country dance; 'Drops of Brandy' a tune of the British Navy.

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