



# Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up (Sather Classical Lectures)

By Mary Beard

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What made the Romans laugh? Was ancient Rome a carnival, filled with practical jokes and hearty chuckles? Or was it a carefully regulated culture in which the uncontrollable excess of laughter was a force to fear—a world of wit, irony, and knowing smiles? How did Romans make sense of laughter? What role did it play in the world of the law courts, the imperial palace, or the spectacles of the arena?

*Laughter in Ancient Rome* explores one of the most intriguing, but also trickiest, of historical subjects. Drawing on a wide range of Roman writing—from essays on rhetoric to a surviving Roman joke book—Mary Beard tracks down the giggles, smirks, and guffaws of the ancient Romans themselves. From ancient “monkey business” to the role of a chuckle in a culture of tyranny, she explores Roman humor from the hilarious, to the momentous, to the surprising. But she also reflects on even bigger historical questions. What kind of history of laughter can we possibly tell? Can we ever really “get” the Romans’ jokes?

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## **Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up (Sather Classical Lectures) By Mary Beard Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up,' which has just been published, is an engaging exploration of what made the Romans laugh—bad breath, among other things—but it also explores dimensions of Roman sensibility that have become elusive to us."

(Rebecca Mead *New Yorker* 2014-09-01)

"Few things are more tiresome than seeing a joke analyzed. . . . Beard's book avoids pedantry but also its opposite, the archness that preens itself on 'not taking humor too seriously' and signals inane wordplays with 'pun intended!' More importantly, her treatment makes one look with new eyes . . . even at works she does not herself discuss . . . [a] stimulating book."

(Gregory Hays *New York Review of Books* 2014-07-10)

"[Beard] makes the Romans come alive and through them, gets readers to ponder that most fundamental and uniquely human facility—laughter. The phenomenal Ms. Beard has written another cracking book, one of her best, I think."

(Yasmin Alibhai-Brown *The Independent* 2014-05-29)

"Expect to be engaged by an enthralling book."

(Harry Mount *The Spectator* 2014-06-07)

"[Beard's] central question is simple: what made the Romans laugh? Her answers are pleasingly complex. . . . Beard is always enlightening, and writes with a perfect balance of forensic detail and wide-ranging intellect."

(*The Scotsman* 2014-06-15)

"Superbly acute and unashamedly complex. . . . To our vision of the solemn grandeur that was Rome, she restores a raucous, ghostly laughter."

(Iona McLaren *The Telegraph* 2014-07-01)

"Written in Beard's trademark combination of erudition and effortless prose, *Laughter in Ancient Rome* is a fascinating combination of history, psychology, linguistic exploration and humor. This is scholarly writing at its best."

(Pamela Toler *Shelf Awareness for Readers* 2014-07-01)

"You can read hundreds of books on Roman emperors and conquests; this represents a valiant attempt to bring a little understanding of a smaller, but no less important, part of what made Rome run."

(Rob Hardy *Columbus Commercial Dispatch* 2014-07-21)

"Rich and provocative."

(Roy Gibson *TLS* 2014-08-13)

"Like a great piece of archaeology, 'Laughter in Ancient Rome' allows us to glimpse ourselves in the cracked mirror of a distant culture."

(John Domini *Washington Post* 2014-09-17)

"What made the Romans laugh? It's an incredible, almost childlike thought to have. But in this characteristically brilliant book by Mary Beard, this simple thought becomes a mental projection that conjures up the world of Rome as well or better than any book in recent memory."  
(Jonathon Sturgeon *Flavorwire* 2014-12-03)

"Beard has posed excellent questions about Roman laughter . . . Her engaging style of writing draws the reader into the discussion. . . . A must read."  
(John R. Clarke *American Historical Review* 2015-12-01)

"A fun read . . . accessible yet academic."  
(Sarah Norfolk *Bookworm* 2015-04-27)

"This is a very sensible, readable, and useful volume. . . . A valuable contribution to scholarship on a difficult topic."  
(Kristina Milnor *Bryn Mawr* 2015-10-18)

Beard's ability to draw together a wide array of ancient and modern references in her discussions is impressive... *Laughter in Ancient Rome* succeeds in leading sympathetic readers on a stimulating journey through Roman "laughterhood".  
(*Phoenix*)

#### From the Inside Flap

"*Laughter in Ancient Rome* is a masterwork, simultaneously a sophisticated work of historical and literary scholarship and an unputdownable read. Beard never loses sight of the specificities of Roman culture, yet she encompasses an extraordinary range of ancient and modern theorizing. Her book will appeal to psychologists and anthropologists, as well as to classicists and indeed anyone who has ever thought about the much-debated question of why we laugh."

—William V. Harris, William R. Shepherd Professor of History at Columbia University, and author of *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity*

"With a bounty of suggestive and unfailingly intelligent conclusions about the situation of laughter within ancient Roman culture, Beard's remarkable learning is displayed on every page. *Laughter in Ancient Rome* is unmistakably a work of scholarship, but it is also an unpretentious and inviting exploration available to anyone who is interested. As a literary attainment, this book is marvelous."

—Dylan Sailor, Associate Professor of Classics at University of California, Berkeley

#### About the Author

**Mary Beard** is Professor of Classics at Cambridge University. Her many books include *The Roman Triumph* and *The Fires of Vesuvius*.

## Users Review

#### From reader reviews:

#### **Maryanna Kuhns:**

Here thing why this particular Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up (Sather Classical Lectures) are different and trusted to be yours. First of all reading a book is good however it depends in the content from it which is the content is as tasty as food or not. Laughter in Ancient Rome: On

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