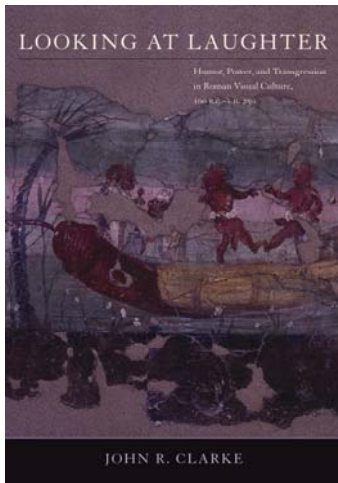


Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C – A.D. 250 / John R. Clarke.—Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.—322 p.: ill.—ISBN 978-0-520-23733-9 (cl., alk. paper): \$55.00.



This book is an apt sequel to John R. Clarke's earlier work *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 315* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). The focus remains on the non-patrician spectrum of Roman visual culture but in this latest work, Clarke puts a finer point on the aesthetic context by drawing from it what Romans found funny and why. *Looking at Laughter* presents a series of case studies based on frescoes, metonyms, mosaics, and sculpture that illustrate how humor was represented, the purpose it served, and what it reveals about daily life or quotidian concerns in ancient Rome. The book is arranged in three parts—visual humor, social humor, and sexual humor—with careful consideration throughout for *apotropaia*, the notion of warding off evil spirits or the "Evil Eye," with laughter. More than just a motif, *apotropaia* was a ubiquitous defense mechanism, influencing Roman humor and visual representation of that humor.

Clarke begins with a brief sociological analysis of humor and how it applied to ancient Roman society. This is useful because what normally would strike the modern reader as obscene or lewd is framed in a specific and complicated sense of humor. This holds true, in particular, for the phallus motif. Clarke spends a significant amount of time deciphering visual representations of the phallus in everyday Roman life and one of the book's strengths is his distinguishing the phallus as a powerful *apotropaion* from phallus as comic relief. A prime example is the Antioch House of Evil Eye mosaic (a misshapen hunchback with a huge phallus rejecting the Evil Eye) which, at first glance, seems raunchy or bizarre but, contextualized, reveals an important use of humor to reject or disarm malevolent forces with laughter. From tavern paintings and floor mosaics to pendants, lamp ornaments, and theatre masks, the reproductions in the book - despite the poor quality of some - are incredible, oftentimes hilarious examples of Roman humor. It would in fact be hard to accept some of Clarke's arguments without the visual proof found in these domestic, plebeian works.

Clarke's treatment of humor encoding social or hierarchical transgressions, particularly as played out in visual or public spectacle, presents an uglier, more gruesome aspect of ancient Roman humor. Unfortunately, this analysis is brief and provides only a sketch of the more unpalatable aspect of Roman humor. As a result, particularly when considering the title, the work is somewhat unbalanced as the focus of the study is really on understanding the lurid but harmless aspects of Roman wit. In addition, given the prevalence of the phallus or more generally the object-as-*apotropaion*, it is surprising how immune the "higher-brow" humor apparently was. Perhaps the next iteration of this study will include all social groups in ancient Rome, juxtaposing the visual representations of elite, erudite humor with that of the lower orders.

Nevertheless, *Looking at Laughter* is an intriguing and engaging study, bringing the reader in on the joke and accentuating a fascinating if not sometimes curious tradition of day-to-day humor in ancient Rome. This is a smart, succinct text, well-illustrated with a rich bibliography and notes. It crosses a variety of disciplines and is suited, at the very least, to a general undergraduate humanities research collection. It would be a sound complement to any upper-level academic research collection.

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