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What's So Funny? Laughter in Shota Rustaveli's *The Man in the Panther's Skin* and the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes

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Abstract: In a conference paper on good and bad speech in *The Man in the Panther's Skin* and the romances of Chretien de Toyes, I included a short segment on laughter, more for helpful suggestions from the audience than because I had insight into its occurrence in the literature. In the absence of any suggestions, I remained stymied for some time before finding sources that would lead to understanding. The purpose of this paper is to analyze episodes of laughter from the perspective of modern studies of the psychology of laughter and from the ethical views of Plato and Aristotle.

Key Words: *Shota Rustaveli, Chrétien de Troyes, Laughter*

Since 2013, I have been fascinated by the parallels between these works by Shota Rustaveli and Chrétien de Troyes, separated by half a continent in distance and a few decades in time. Their greatest similarity is in their shared attributes of courtly love and knightly values. In a conference paper on good and bad speech in these poems, I included a short segment on laughter, more for helpful suggestions from the audience than because I had insight into its

occurrence in the literature. In the absence of any suggestions, I remained stymied for some time before finding sources that would lead to understanding. The purpose of this paper is to analyze episodes of laughter from the perspective of modern studies of the psychology of laughter and from the ethical views of Plato and Aristotle.

In rereading the medieval literature, I searched for all forms of the word *laugh* and laughing words like “ha-ha” and compared several translations, bearing in mind that you cannot prove a negative: the absence of references to laughter in episodes of obvious joy or merrymaking does not mean none occurred, only that it isn’t pointed out. But the focused search produced more laughter than I had remembered; it just hadn’t always stood out.

The most famous laugh in Chrétien, arguably, is near the beginning of *Perceval*. When the comical would-be knight reaches King Arthur's hall, a maiden laughs when he greets her. Sir Kay, ever rude, slaps her to the ground and kicks the jester into the fire because the jester had often said that the maid would not laugh until she “has seen the man who will be the supreme lord among all knights” [2, p. 394]. This is only a single laugh, but it echoes throughout the story. Perceval sends each knight he vanquishes to King Arthur's court as a prisoner to explain what has happened and furthermore to speak to the maiden who laughed.

Another significant episode occurs in *Erec and Enide* at the end of the Joy of the Court scene when the maiden learns who Enide is: the maiden “could not keep from laughing. She was so overjoyed that she completely forgot her sorrow” [2, p. 113]. Now that Erec and Enide have restored their own balance between private and public life, they are able to restore the same balance that had been lacking in Maboagrain and his wife.

There is also spiteful laughter in Chrétien. In *Yvain*, when Arthur’s court comes to see the wonder of the magical spring, Yvain, now its defender, has to fight one of them. Kay, eager as ever to have the honor even if he isn’t the most qualified, claims the right to the challenge. Yvain knocks Kay off his horse, and the court mocks the

rude knight: “Ha! Ha! Look at how you, a man who mocks others, are lying there now!” [2, p. 323].

When Lancelot leaves Meleagant’s imprisonment to fight in the tournament that the maidens have arranged at Arthur’s court, his willingness to obey Guinevere’s command to “do your worst” earns him scornful laughter and disdain: “The knights who had praised him before now laughed and joked at his expense” [2, pp. 276-7]. The narrator continues: “Soon all those deluded, mocking men, who had spent much of the past night and day ridiculing him, would be astounded: they had laughed, sported, and had their fun long enough!” [2, p. 280].

In *The Man in the Panther’s Skin* (*MPS*), the national treasure of Georgian literature written around 1200, I had previously noticed five major episodes of laughter, all but one in the later part of the poem. The first occurs near the beginning of the poem when Avtandil, trying to cheer up a gloomy King Rostevan, challenges him to a contest in hunting. Roused by his knight’s challenge, he and Avtandil “laughed, they sported like children, lovingly and becomingly they behaved” [7, v. 69]. After the hunt has ended, they continue their laughter: “Each said laughingly to the other, ‘Tis I that have won!’“ [7, v. 79]. Cooling down afterwards, Rostevan and Avtandil see a strange knight sitting sadly, weeping beside a stream. In a scene very similar to some in Chrétien, the knight doesn’t even hear the men Rostevan sends to find out about him, he kills or maims those who are sent to capture him, and he rides away so quickly when the king and Avtandil approach that he seems to disappear magically. After a year of fruitless searching for him by Rostevan’s men, Tinatin, Rostevan’s daughter, commands Avtandil to search on his own for three years. Before he leaves, she and Avtandil pledge their love. Avtandil goes in search of the knight, and the heart of the story is set into motion.

Just before the end of the three years, Avtandil finds the knight, Tariel, and learns that the mysterious knight is searching for his own love, Nestan. Having been espoused by her parents to a foreign king, she had told Tariel to kill the bridegroom but without a

disturbance. He bungled the disturbance part and had to flee into exile. Nestan's maid Asmat accompanied him, because Nestan's aunt had servants kidnap the princess, and no one knew her whereabouts. In the course of Tariel's search for Nestan, he had come upon Pridon, king of Mulghazanzar, and the two had become friends. Avtandil and Tariel form their own firm friendship, a sworn brotherhood, because they both are lovers separated from their beloved. Avtandil reports back to Tinatin, who gives her consent for him to take up the search for Nestan for the sake of this sworn friendship.

Within another year and a week, Avtandil himself visits and becomes friends with Pridon, and then continues his search. When he learns where Nestan is, he returns to tell Tariel, who is near death from despair: "Avt'handil was speaking to him laughing, he smiles, he opens his coral (lips), the flash from his teeth quivers; he said: 'I have learned tidings which will please thee; now the flower will be renewed, the rose hitherto fading.' " Tariel is so elated that the two friends begin laughing together as they return to the cave where he stays. When Asmat sees them, she is astonished at their laughter: "When they saw her they shouted to her, laughing and showing their teeth..." [7, v. 1313, 1333]. Avtandil has given Tariel the hope that he'd lost. Interestingly, this episode is similar to the restoration at the end of Chrétien's Joy of the Court episode.

En route to rescue Nestan, they stop in Mulghazanzar in order to include Pridon in the rescue. Tariel decides to play a joke on him by rustling his horses. When Pridon and his soldiers come to rout the thieves, Tariel removes his helmet so that Pridon will recognize him; he laughs and teases Pridon: "Why doth our coming annoy thee? Bad host! Thou meetest us to fight" [7, v. 1356]. Pridon is overjoyed to see them and not at all offended by the joke.

When the three friends plan Nestan's rescue, Avtandil and Pridon both offer suggestions in which each assigns the major role to himself. Tariel instead proposes a plan in which the three sworn brothers play equal parts, and they laugh together at the best and fairest plan: "... thereupon they, the eloquent, wise-worded ones,

laugh, they joke one with another, with merriment beseeming them" [7, v. 1383]. With the successful recovery of Nestan, she and the three friends leave for Pridon's kingdom, laughing together: "The three sworn brothers crossed the seas together, again they confirmed by their word what they formerly affirmed; singing and laughter were beseeming to them..." [7, v. 1424].

I have deliberately chosen to repeat the phrase "laugh together" in most of the above episodes from *MPS* because shared laughter is the key difference between the two writers. Once I realized this, I understood why I'd failed to notice the other occurrences of laughter. The positive laughter in Chrétien is among friends, as are the additional episodes of laughter in Rustaveli, but these more frequently represent isolated incidents instead of recurring among the same friends throughout the works. If you search for the word "laugh", you will find it. But only Rustaveli's repeated shared laughter stands out.

Robert R. Provine's 2000 book *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, helped me analyze the laughter I'd found. His extensive research into this subject demonstrates that laughter is spontaneous, an involuntary response that's hard to fake [6, p. 49]. It's also contagious: once there's laughter, others tend to join in [6, p. 129]. Less obvious is his finding that most laughter is not in response to something funny. Instead, it is more about personal relationships [6, p. 3]. We know you can laugh with or at someone or some group. On the positive side, laughter creates harmony, inclusion within the group at no one's expense. But it can also have a negative effect by isolating a person or group at whom the laughter is directed [6, p. 2]. In this sense, laughter produces disruption in society. Provine notes that scornful exclamations like "Ha!" are not genuine laughter because they are voluntary responses, a form of strictly controlled laughter in speech [6, p. 50]. Instances of this abound in Chrétien, and sometimes it is not clear whether it's an exclamation or a real laugh. I generally discounted these if they seemed scornful unless they were accompanied by a reference to laughter.

In *MPS*, the laughter reflects the joy in successful accomplishments, but even more in the three heroes' sworn brotherhood. I found no negative laughter in Rustaveli's poem. I attribute this to its elevated, courtly language and tone, some of which I've quoted, as well as its narrow focus on the main characters, all of whom are friends.

By contrast, Kay's rude treatment of others in *Yvain* and *Perceval* shows us that he is the isolated one himself because it is so common a reaction from him that the others chastise him and move on or laugh at him. It does, however, create a disturbance in the court. On the other hand, the mocking laughter at Lancelot reflects his quick fall from favor after doing his worst in the tournament.

Provine's book provided even more help than merely analyzing the nature of laughter; it included a section on the history of the philosophical study of laughter, which led me to Plato and Aristotle.

Since few of the works of Plato and Aristotle were known in twelfth-century Western Europe, especially their ideas about laughter, I was unable to link their philosophy to Chrétien's romances. However, Elguja Khintibidze, Diane Farrell, and other *MPS* scholars agree that Rustaveli would have received a classical education, particularly a study of Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists, because he was a member of King Tamar's court, possibly her treasurer.

In his *Philebus*, Plato has Socrates remind Protarchus of two guiding principles: "Know thyself" and following the "measure" or "mean." To understand the ridiculous, he describes three aspects of self-knowledge: in wealth; in some area of physical superiority, like good looks or strength; and in moral and intellectual excellence. In the aspect of possessing less intelligence than they believe they have, those individuals who lack power and influence are considered ridiculous if they cannot defend themselves when mocked. But those who are powerful are frightening. "For the ignorance of powerful people is dangerous as well as shameful—it is a menace to anyone near whether in real life or in fiction" [5, 48c-49c, pp. 47-49].

Although we have no evidence that Chrétien would have been following Plato in this, Sir Kay is a good example of a person who has a higher esteem of his capabilities than he actually possesses. All three of Rustaveli's heroes display appropriate self-

knowledge, particularly Avtandil. Tariel is so distraught at losing Nestan that is he dysfunctional, but his rational self-knowledge returns when Avtandil brings the news of where Nestan is.

Aristotle likewise values the mean, or measure. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, he says that "those who carry humour to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons, striving after humour at all costs, and aiming rather at raising a laugh than at saying what is becoming and at avoiding pain to the object of their fun.... But those who joke in a tasteful way are called ready-witted" [1, 4.8]. He addresses joking in particular by saying, "Such, then, is the man who observes the mean, whether he be called tactful or ready-witted" [1, book 4.8].

I suggest that the emphasis on the mean by both Plato and Aristotle is clearly indicated through word choice in the most significant laughter episodes in *MPS*. In Avtandil and Rostevan's hunting challenge, "lovingly and **becomingly** they behaved". When Tariel and Avtandil play the horse-rustling joke on Pridon, Tariel says, "Pleasant is **good joking".** As the three agree on the rescue plan, the narrator describes them as "**eloquent wise-worded ones**" who "joke one with another, with merriment **beseeming** them". And finally, as the three sworn brothers return with Nestan, "singing and laughter were **beseeming** to them" [emphasis mine]. The reiteration of the descriptions of moderate laughing and joking lies at the heart of Plato's and Aristotle's instruction in the mean rather than in excess or deficiency. Rustaveli wants no doubt that his heroes are measured and tactful.

The traditional excessive lamentations and weeping by courtly lovers certainly lie outside Plato's and Aristotle's admonitions to adhere to the mean. Avtandil, Tariel, and the lovers in Chrétien bemoan fate, weep when they are separated, debate whether to speak of their love, and experience love-madness. Tariel even goes into a three-day faint after seeing Nestan for the first time. However,

Rustaveli's narrator's voice is restrained throughout the entire body of the story in wording and tone, unlike the conversational and even humorous tone of Chrétien's narrative voice.

In summary, both poets portray laughter in their works, even though very little of it is actually in response to something funny. Chrétien's laughter is usually positive, but he includes spiteful laughter as well. There is no supportive evidence that the laughter reflects the ethics of laughter that Plato and Aristotle laid out, but it is consistent with what psychologists tell us about laughter's effects. Rustaveli's laughter aligns with psychologists' research as well, but he takes pains to include words to indicate the well-bred background of his characters, and he maintains a similar tone in his narrative voice. In short, *MPS* reflects the real theme of this poem, sworn brotherhood that includes the kind of laughter consistent with Plato and Aristotle.

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