
H-France Review Vol. 13 (June 2013), No. 73

Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011. xi + 278 pp. References and index. \$85.66 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-253-35619-2; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-253-22302-9.

Review by Alleen Pace Nilsen, Arizona State University.

Christie Davies' *Jokes and Targets* is a well-written and well-researched book. Besides relying on his own previous research, including his 1990 *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis*, Davies worked with nearly 500 online and print sources ranging from Sigmund Freud's 1905 *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* to a 2004 online article "Hungary to Ban Blonde Jokes?" published on the *Unma.com Muslim Forum*. He was supported by a research fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust in 2008-2009 which allowed him to spend extended periods of time working in the Folklore Archive at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Schmulowitz collection at the San Francisco public library. He also worked in the Cummings Library of Humour at University College Cork in Ireland. He used original source material ranging from the works of Geoffrey Chaucer to Bennett Cerf, from Honoré Daumier to Sigmund Freud, from P. G. Wodehouse to Henny Youngman, and from Anita Loos to the creators of the 1996 *Report of the Homosexuality Policy Assessment Team* at the London Ministry of Defence. A sampling of the scholars whose work he incorporates includes Salvatore Attardo, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Jan Harold Brunvand, Emil Draitser, Richard Hofstadter, Guiselinde Kuipers, Richard Lederer, Gershon Legman, Paul Lewis, Elliott Oring, Victor Raskin, Walter Redfern, and Henry D. Spalding.

After a twenty-page introduction entitled "Why Study Jokes and Targets?" Christie presents six fully developed chapters followed by a twenty-five page conclusion. Readers of *H-France* are most likely to be interested in the second chapter, "Blondes, Sex, and the French," which at forty-four pages, is one of the longest and also the most interesting. Davies begins his section on "The Desirable Blonde" with one of his own little jokes, "When it comes to sex jokes, where are the blondes rooted?" A few lines later he concludes the paragraph with "There is less in blonde hair than meets the eye" (p. 69). He explains that because so many blondes have achieved their status through wigs, bleaches, dyes, and tints, the whole idea is built on deception and is therefore comical.

For each point Davies makes, he cites jokes, which will bring readers varying degrees of amusement. The older (i.e., more trite) the joke is, the better it supports Davies' cultural observations, while the newer jokes provide the most humor because they are fresh and therefore more surprising. Davies writes that sex jokes about blondes can be traced back to vaudeville and the music hall where, long before the "dumb blonde" jokes of the late 1980s and 1990s, American, British, and French comedians used such allusions as "luscious blonde," "gorgeous blonde," "big blonde," "well-endowed blonde," and "blonde bombshell" as a way to alert listeners to the fact that the joke was going to be about sex.

But an even older and more ubiquitous tradition is for comedians to use French-related allusions to communicate that a joke will be *risqué*, which is itself one of the words that English speakers have borrowed from French, along with such sexually-related terms as *amour*, *boudoir*, *coquette*, *décolleté*, *demi-monde*, *femme fatale*, *lingerie*, *negligee*, *paramour*, *peignoir*, and *roué*. These words add a *frisson* of French

naughtiness. They go along with such mock French phrases as *Ooh la la*, *pièce de la résistance*, *vive la différence*, and *cherchez la femme*. We English speakers and writers value this French connection so much that in writing we are willing to go to the extra trouble of putting in the accent marks. In oral performances, when speakers tell “sexy” stories, they employ a “stage-French” accent by having flirtatious women roll their *r*’s, pronounce *th* as “zee” or “ss,” and *i* as “ee,” and ask such questions as “eet is ‘ow you say?”

English borrowings from French are a far cry from the kinds of practical or mundane words that French speakers borrow from English, e.g., *le parking*, *le weekend*, and *le fairplay*. Davies writes that our purpose as English speakers in using either the sophisticated French terms and phrases listed above or such vulgate terms as “French kiss” and “French tickler” is for the opposite reason than the one we employ when we use such Latinate terms as *coitus a tergo*, *membrum virile*, or *pudenda*. With the French terms we are drawing attention to sexual matters, whereas with the Latinate terms we are trying to be subtle as we communicate about “unmentionables.”

Davies is careful to point out that the American, British, and German humor that began developing about French sexuality as early as the 1700s did not describe the actual sexual behavior of the French population at the time. “The broad masses of France, particularly in the provinces, sought neither a lively night life nor sinful adventures. Many expressed a sense of *l’atrophie de désir*, boredom with it all” (p. 82). Davies argues that the image of French sexuality can be traced at least as far back as the court of Louis XV, and the French age of rococo (1715-1775) when the nobles did not live on their own estates, but were forced to come and live at court so they could be controlled and kept from plotting treason.

This French court exemplified the age of gallantry and of the erotic as entertainment. Davies quoted from Sarane Alexandrian: “Debauchery generated art, and art taught debauchery” (p. 88). The French Ministry of Culture still restores and displays elegant brothels as tourist attractions, while the whole world cherishes the suggestive paintings “verging on the indecent” of such French artists from the 1700s as Boucher, Fragonard, Jean-Baptists Greuze, Watteau, and Jean Honoré Fragonard. A century later, Bohemian artists including Toulouse Lautrec, Degas, Walter Sickert, Picasso, and Édouard Manet (“Where there’s muck, there’s Manet” [p. 101]) were painting exciting portraits of models, dancers, actresses, and prostitutes, which encouraged the creation of all kinds of pornographic material that was exported throughout Europe and America.

In his exploration of the history of France and how it came to be associated with sexual matters, Davies explores three major themes; adultery, oral sex, and sex-related tourism. Adultery has “always” been a theme in the world’s sexual jokes. The cuckolded husband is a target of ridicule because he has been deceived and does not know about it. But in French jokes, the husband was complicit in his wife’s adultery, hence the phrase *ménage à trois*, meaning “a household of three.” This phrase dates back to 1891 and is another of those French phrases borrowed directly into English, complete with the accent mark. Germans have a similar phrase, but they acknowledge its French origin by retaining the word *trois* for “three.” A 1980 collection of French jokes made by Mina and André Guillois contained ninety-one *ménage à trois* jokes. In 1923, the painter Max Ernst glorified the idea with elegant murals hinting at, or overtly showing his own, *ménage à trois*. As Davies points out, “Only in France can such murals be found.” Also, only in France do the most prestigious museums and libraries preserve paintings and writings showing “the ruling class as luxurious, salacious, and decadent” (p. 92).

In 1778, Jean Baptiste Moheau suggested that one reason that the French birthrate fell faster than it did in the rest of Europe, was the idea of “three’s company, four’s a crowd.” Threesomes did not want to have children because of the complications of tracing the paternity of the offspring. Also, in noble families, three-way relationships were usually undertaken only after the wife had produced one or two heirs for her husband. Moheau’s theory was never fully accepted, but Davies writes, “[i]t is significant that a Frenchman should have even thought of, let alone express in writing, an account of an important

social phenomenon in terms of an adultery that was not only connived at but expected.” Davies concluded, “It is the stuff of which jokes, though not children, are made” (p. 79).

Davies also mentioned many jokes and stories about the Frenchman’s pursuit of mistresses, which probably has a stronger relationship to the falling birthrate because mistresses and prostitutes were more likely than wives—at least by reputation—to engage in oral sex. *Cunnilingus* and *fellatio* are the Latinate words, but the everyday terms have come from the French verb *gamahoucher* and the numerical metaphor *soixante-neuf*. These terms were directly translated into English as “to go down on” and “sixty-nine.” Still today if a prostitute in an English-speaking country mentions “French,” “French lessons,” “Frenching,” or “French tricks,” listeners interpret these as code words for oral sex.

In this section, Davies repeats some of the funniest jokes, especially ones gleaned from the work of Gershon Legman. He also talks about how, at least in folklore, French nobles are given the credit for inventing the bidet and subtle perfumes because of their fondness for oral sex. Many jokes hint at the idea of widespread oral sex, but Davies writes that “standards of hygiene in the countryside and among all but a small elite in the towns were too low to make this at all likely” (p. 82).

The most important contributing factor to the lower birthrate was probably *coitus interruptus*, which was called the “French sin” and was spoken of by French Roman Catholic priests as “conjugal onanism,” a term which also included mutual masturbation known as “*les plaisirs de la petite oie*” or “the pleasures of the little goose.” Informal terms for *coitus interruptus* included jumping off while the train is still running; fireworks on the lawn; knowing how to blow one’s nose; and plowing on the inside while winnowing on the outside.

While much of the early sexual material had started out as high class and sophisticated, with time it gradually lessened in sophistication and became an opiate to the masses. Davies writes that we should “[n]ever underestimate the power of the uneducated to work things out and pick ideas up, as they did with the Greeks and homosexuality, or the democratizing influence of the printing press and the translator” (p. 90). He wants readers to understand this so they will refute the nonsensical idea that the British were the ones who invented the image of the French as dissolute. His thesis is that the French invented themselves, and were happy to export elegant pornography to the world. In exchange, the “British exported images of political liberty to France” (p. 91).

On February 16, 1899, France’s President Félix Faure became over-excited while receiving a blow job from his mistress, Marguerite Steinheil, the wife of the painter Adolphe Steinheil. He died within a few hours, and the incident gave rise to numerous jokes and observations, which a century later were still providing fodder for French humorists when they began making fun of the “obsessive legalism” and the “clumsy and hypocritical way” that Americans handled the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky affair (p. 84). For some Americans, this was the first time they had learned about the custom, and many people decried that the term “oral sex” had now come into such common use so that even children were learning about it from mainstream news stories.

The third theme that Christie develops relates to sex tourism and France. Today, people travelling for actual sex are more likely to go to Southeast Asia, just as people looking for pornography have many sources that resulted from the softening of censorship laws, as happened in Denmark in the mid-1900s. But, the French had a head start. Starting in the 1800s until after World War II, France was a relatively poor country and the exchange rate favored foreigners. There are many funny stories about “innocent” American visitors and their expectations, which were usually not met. Travel agents were said to explain to American men that the cost of a trip to Paris would probably be only half as much if they took their wives. The implication was that single men would be so excited that they would throw caution to the winds and spend all kinds of money on sex. Actually, rube tourists from America were not allowed into the most elegant brothels and places of entertainment because of the belief that “too many Cook’s

[an allusion to a famous travel agency] spoil the brothel” (p. 93), but these tourists were nevertheless well aware of what was being offered for sale and so they “gawked” from the outside and took home such souvenirs as an inkwell shaped like a breast or a chamber pot with an eye painted inside (p. 99).

Various wars played a big part in causing German, British, Australian, Canadian, and American soldiers to be sent to France, and as Davies quotes from Mary Louis Roberts, “[w]hen facing the possibility of death tomorrow, soldiers tend to seek sex with the local women” (p. 105). After World War II, the French parliament ruled that “the child of any unmarried woman who claimed that the father had died in the fighting was, by a decision of the French parliament, automatically legitimized.” The number of children thought to have been fathered by “visiting” soldiers was estimated to be over 200,000 (p. 107). When the sons of soldiers who had been in France during World War I were called back to France during World War II, many of them “reveled in anticipation [of carrying on] the sins of their fathers” (p. 106). But as Davies quoted from French writer Sacha Gramont, “[t]he lip-smacking manner the Germans adopt when recalling the pleasures of Paris under the occupation is a form of tribute its citizens could do without” (p. 108).

Davies wrote that “Old jokes never die, they merely fade away—and they do so very slowly” (p. 109). They also undergo changes and adaptations to new situations. For example, in recent history, when Americans were angry that France would not support their invasion of Iraq, many of the old jokes were brought out and adapted as anti-French jokes. For example, television comedian Conan O’Brien said, “You know why the French don’t want to bomb Saddam Hussein? Because he hates America, he loves mistresses, and he wears a beret. He is French!” (p. 110). Davies ends his chapter with the following observation: “French jokes refer to real people—not to the average French person, but to certain highly visible minorities and to particular explicit sexual images that were exported or known about. This is a common pattern in ethnic jokes in which a distinctive and visible and often quite atypical minority becomes the basis of jokes about a whole people, as in French jokes about stuffy English aristocrats, phlegmatic men in *chapeaux melons* (bowler hats) and laconic Empire builders and their ugly wives’ big teeth, or humor about upper-class army officers. Things are always as they look but never how they seem” (p. 112).

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ISSN 1553-9172