Why is it funny to expose one’s genitals or bottom? The Renaissance physician Laurent Joubert had an answer: “Because that action is ugly, yet not worthy of pity, it incites those who see it to laugh.” In a full-scale Treatise on Laughter, which appeared in 1579, Joubert developed this thesis at length. He tried to fix the boundaries of the laughable. Nothing, he argued, could kill a good joke like pity. “If someone were to come along and put a red-hot iron” on the exposed arse, for example, our “laughter would give way to compassion.” But not every branding of an exposed buttock would provoke pity. When the hot iron was applied as the punishment for stupidity and coarseness, its touch would make the onlookers laugh even harder than the victim’s bare arse had on its own.

Joubert identified some actions as too harsh ever to be funny: “If, in order to avoid a greater evil, you desire, with or without his consent, to excise a man’s penis, it is not possible to laugh because the ensuing pain by which pity surprises us and checks us as, in an ecstasy of displeasure, we contemplate that operation.” Readers of the fifteenth-century manual on witchcraft, the Malleus maleficarum, will recall the striking passages in which its Dominican authors described castration as a basic practice of witches who menaced European society.

No social task is harder than explaining a joke to someone who does not get it. And no intellectual task is harder than trying to understand what made jokes funny in another society, or in the earlier history of one’s own. Confronted with an ironic or
satirical work of great originality, like Thomas More’s *Utopia*, historians of ideas notoriously find it impossible to agree about which of the stories and proposals it contains were meant only to amuse, which to point up the real horrors of European society, which to suggest concrete remedies for them. Many a PhD thesis forms part of the tribute that modern incomprehension pays to the past humor we can no longer fathom. Can any scholar hope to trace—much less too write—the history of this endlessly mutable, always dangerous subject?

M. A. Screech thinks so. In his lavishly erudite, digressive, provocative *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, he seeks to show that laughter played a special—and a vital—role in Renaissance thought and religion. Joubert, he declares, was only one member of the horde of intellectuals who attacked the subject, which they saw as extremely—if not deadly—serious. Philosophers, theologians, and medical writers took laughter as a defining characteristic of the human race, one that had received close attention from the greatest ancient thinkers and that played a vital role in the Bible itself. The Renaissance, Screech argues, witnessed the revival not only of ancient texts and artistic forms, but also of ancient ideas about laughter and ways of provoking it—ideas and forms which, in the explosive context of early sixteenth-century Christianity, helped to provoke a revolution in religious, as well as social, sensibility: “Laughter echoed round the Western Church as it set out to purify itself, and sought its soul.”

Michael Screech commands the intellectual and literary history of the sixteenth century. His published works include definitive editions of Rabelais; a delightfully readable translation of Montaigne; and a long series of learned, original essays and monographs on the sixteenth-century intellectuals he has always liked best. A longtime habitué of the great libraries of Europe, Screech is a master investigator of historical and bibliographical niceties as well as an accomplished reader of sixteenth-century Latin scholarship. Rumor has it that he uses the huge volumes of the 1703–1706 Leiden edition of Erasmus’s complete works as his bedtime reading. No one who works through the erudite
Laughter, Screech begins by showing, pervades the Bible—once one begins to look for it. Elijah laughed at the prophets of Baal. Abraham and Sarah laughed when told that she would bear a child—he in joy, she in incredulity. Children laughed at the bald Elisha—and bears killed forty-two of them. Even biblical texts that did not mention laughter turned out to describe it. For the medieval and Renaissance critic, each biblical line acted like a hyperlink on the Internet once trip on any verse in the New Testament and one confronted not twenty-nine distinct damnations, but twenty-nine parallel tags in the prophets and the Psalms. Analyzing the mocking of Christ in the Gospels, Erasmus found evidence in Isaiah and Zechariah that the Jews not only tormented, but laughed at, the crucified Christ. Drawing on the Psalms as well as Paul, Erasmus also found that God the Father laughed—harshly, chillingly—at sinners. Christ himself, another ingenious interpretation showed, poked ironical fun at the apostles who slept at Gethsemane. Screech traces now-forgotten paths across the biblical text, making clear that sixteenth-century readers explored its territories in ways that now seem very strange indeed.

Screech, however, has more in mind than revealing the ingenuity of Renaissance exegetes. The Catholic humanists on whom he concentrates—above all, Erasmus—set out to reform both Church and society. Screech sees them as the soldiers of an army
of intellectual liberation. They swarmed into the world of learning in the years around 1500, using the printing press and their own formidable powers of invective to attack the arteriosclerotic habits and habitués of the universities—the culture of scholastic theology which had its principal base at the University of Paris. In their hands, old forms of laughter proved an effective weapon against modern folly and superstition. Lucian’s laughing attacks on the superstition of his own time, which horrified the orthodox, gave Erasmus his chief literary model for the satires in which he excelled. The unruly scatology of the Middle Ages gave Rabelais not only central elements of his comic art, but also powerful ways of revealing what it meant not to be a Christian.

Above all—and here Screech returns to themes that have long occupied him—Erasmus and Rabelais saw laughter as the proper response to madness. In believing this, Screech shows, they saw themselves as followers of Plato. In the Philebus, Socrates argues that laughter forms the proper response to agnoia (ignorance)—or at least, he has done so since Ianus Cornarius emended the text in his influential mid-sixteenth-century edition of Plato’s works. The earlier edition by Aldus Manutius, however, left out a gamma, turning agnoia (ignorance) to anoia (madness). Even though Marsilio Ficino had followed a Greek text that read agnoia, when making his immensely influential translation of Plato, Erasmus and Rabelais, who used the Greek, continued to connect laughter with madness. Not for the last time, a textual error had profound intellectual consequences.

If Christianity had to do with laughter—and laughter with madness, or folly—then Christianity must really represent, as Erasmus argued in his Praise of Folly, the rejection of the wisdom of this world. Man—a creature characterized by the ability to laugh—was naturally designed to be Christian, a belief that Erasmus and other optimistic humanists always cherished. But, in becoming a true Christian, man committed himself to following a code that the wise and authoritative would condemn, and that would condemn them in turn—a belief that underpinned the radicalism of Erasmus’s and Rabelais’s satires. The Christian folly for
which the humanists stood represented a unique synthesis of the
classical and the Christian, the philological and the associative,
the subversive and the comforting.

In the end, for Screech, the charitable quality of Christian laugh-
ter overcame the Lucianic mockery of fools and villains, Erasmus
tried to restrain himself, not always successfully, from personal
attacks; Rabelais insisted, in the *Quart Livre*, that the wise man
responds even to folly with generous charity. A sketch toward
a genealogy connects the Renaissance satirists—who could not
bring themselves to revel “in the endless and ingenious torture of
the damned” which much later theologians, like F.W. Farrar, who
finally rejected the doctrine of eternal torment—and by doing so
made it impossible for Christians to “enjoy, from a belvedere in
Paradise,” the endless panorama of monsters and torture devices
over which the theological, poetic, and artistic imaginations had
brooded and gloated for centuries. Ancient laughter turns out to
be one of the roots from which modern tolerance grew.

Screech takes the reader down many paths in this absorbing
book. Many of his arguments—like his wonderful analysis of
how publishers and humanists tried to neutralize the radical mes-
sage of Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*—rest on minute and convincing
examinations of texts and images. More important, he makes us
see the northern Renaissance, and early modern Christianity more
generally, from a new vantage point. The deepest questions of life
and death, Michael Screech shows, were for Erasmus and Rabe-
lais literally a laughing matter. By doing so, he makes clear how
great a cultural distance stretches between their creative schol-
arship and our Alexandrian collection of details—between their
religion, which knew how to laugh, and our religions, which take
themselves and everything else with equal, deadening seriousness;
between their age of joyful anger and our age of flame wars, in
which the sense of humor and the sense of humanity both seem
strange, lost qualities of a better past.

Anthony Grafton