

# The Dreadnought and the Rhetoric of Unlaughter

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In 1910, HMS Dreadnought was the newest, biggest and most powerful man o' war in the Royal Navy, the flagship of the Home Fleet, and the prototype of a new class of warship. In those years of a naval arms race between Britain and Germany that soon after erupted into the Great War, the warship was viewed by the nation as symbol of the superiority of the British Navy.

One afternoon, the Admiral received a telegram from the Foreign Office announcing the imminent arrival of "Prince Makalen of Abbysinia" [sic] and his suite, requesting a tour of the ship. Thirty-five minutes later, the Royal party arrived: four bejeweled princes in turbans and flowing robes, accompanied by an interpreter and an official from the Foreign Office. They were received with full honors: flags flying, officers in their gold braided finery, the ship's company drawn up at attention, and the ship's band playing. The band did not have a copy of the national anthem of Abyssinia so they played the anthem of Zanzibar instead. The visitors were given a tour of the ship, exclaiming in appreciation at every new wonder. They politely declined a 21-gun salute, and they also said no to the offer of dinner, explaining that they could only eat specially prepared food. Finally, they were ferried back on shore to catch the train to London.

In fact, the Abyssinian royals were hoaxers in blackface, wearing elaborate Orientalist costumes and speaking an impromptu language of Swahili and remembered passages of Virgil

and Homer. They declined dinner not on religious grounds, but for fear of the damage to their false whiskers. Horace De Vere Cole, a renowned and almost compulsive practical joker, was the ringleader of the group. The rest of the party included his friend Adrian Stephen, who wrote a detailed account of the hoax many years later. The others were Hugh Duncan, Anthony Buxton, and Adrian's sister Virginia, in cross-cultural cross-dress attire. She was Virginia Stephen then but we now know her as Virginia Woolf.

In his account Adrian Stephen stresses the many close calls that almost caused the hoax to fail. One of the senior officers who welcomed them aboard turned out to be Adrian and Virginia's cousin, but he did not recognize them.<sup>1</sup> The officers commented among themselves about the “rum language” of their guests. The visitors were told that there was one man in the fleet who knew Abyssinian...but sadly he was on leave. One man's fake moustache almost came off after he sneezed, but they managed to stick it back on. But despite everything, the hoax went off just as planned, and they all got back home without anyone being the wiser.

Two days later, Horace Cole told the press. Not satisfied with that, he also called the Foreign Office and clued them in too. The question is, why? The hoax was executed perfectly, and the conspirators would have been able to recount the story and enjoy their success for years to come. The hoaxers had agreed among themselves NOT to tell the press, and Stephen for one was annoyed that Cole had broken the agreement. He thought that Cole was simply seeking publicity.<sup>2</sup> By going public, Cole alerted the ship's officers and the Admiralty that they had been fooled, and ensured that the whole nation knew about it. This attention could not fail to add to

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<sup>1</sup> This account draws upon the following sources: Stephen 1983 [1936]; Stansky 1996 @17-46.

<sup>2</sup> Cole had done the same thing five years previously, when he, Stephen, and other friends dressed up as the Sultan of Zanzibar and his suite and successfully hoodwink the mayor and corporation of Cambridge.

the discomfiture of the Royal Navy, making it all the more likely that their response would be an unhappy one.

Predictably, when the hoax became public it aroused both supportive and critical responses. On the positive side, the affair received a lot of coverage in the British press—and later in India and the antipodes. Most of the press coverage was favorable. Many stories praised the technique of the joke and the effrontery of the jokers: The Cardiff Evening Express called it a “gorgeous hoax.” Similarly, the Dorchester Mail said it was “daring and skillfully perpetrated.”<sup>3</sup> Several papers included puns in their stories. For instance, The *Dorchester Mail* wrote that Virginia, the only woman among the bogus princes, “had stepped into the breach and the breeches.” On February 1 the *Daily Mirror* printed the following cartoon response:

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<sup>3</sup> *Cardiff Evening Express* 24 February; *Dorchester Mail* February 18; see also Stansky @34.



Thus virtually all the newspapers either praised the hoax or extended the joke with jokes of their own, in effect “laughing” with the jokers.

*The Pembrokehire Herald* managed to express support and mild disapproval at the same time. It was “an amazing and amusing hoax,” they wrote, but also a “somewhat reprehensible joke.” The Herald added a detailed account of how the Abyssinian “princes” behaved on board: “The princes were shown everything: the wireless, the guns, and the torpedoes, and at every fresh sight they murmured in chorus, ‘Bunga, bunga,’ which, being interpreted, means Isn't it

lovely?”<sup>4</sup> Although Adrian Stephen claimed that none the party ever uttered the words bunga-bunga, they became a byword for the whole affair, as we shall soon see.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the revelation of the hoax also produced disapproval at several levels. Adrian Stephen wrote that many people, especially his relatives, were “profoundly shocked at the idea of hoaxing the Navy. I had an elderly relation, for instance, who... felt bound to state his opinion that ‘His Majesty’s ships are not suitable objects for practical jokes.’” (Stephen @57). Officials in the Admiralty and the Foreign Office seriously considered taking legal action against hoaxers, but after some time, decided against it for fear of arousing more attention from the press and even more ridicule of the navy.

The ship’s officers were not so circumspect. They took matters into their own hands, kidnapping two of the hoaxers to administer ritualized canings until they deemed that the honor of the Navy was satisfied (Stephen @52-56). As already mentioned, one officer was cousin to both Adrian and Virginia. He called on his cousin to demand apologies from everyone involved. “What he minded even more,” Adrian wrote, “was the behavior of the little boys in Weymouth... apparently the Admiral was unable to go on shore without the words Bunga-bunga being shouted after him in the streets” (Stephen (@49-52).

I wish to call your attention to the fact that the various negative responses were no accident. Were the Dreadnought hoaxers dismayed by the disapproval? I think not; instead, they relished it, mocking the officials and the naval officers for their failure to be amused. Writing years after the affair, Adrian Stephen ironically ridicules the officers:

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<sup>4</sup> Pembrokeshire Herald, February 18.

<sup>5</sup> A contemporary music hall performer made a song about the affair, using the “bung-bunga” phrase to great effect (Stansky 1996).

I should be sorry, indeed, if anything I wrote were taken as intended to cast doubts on the bravery of naval officers. These men have very particular feelings on this point. Bravery is as much a matter of professional pride to them as is the quality of his potatoes to a greengrocer (Stephen@60).

This aspect of the reception of jokes is not unusual. On the contrary, it is common enough that I think it is helpful to have a label for it. That label is *unlaughter*, a term coined by Michael Billig in 2005, defining it as the absence of laughter at a point when laughter might otherwise be expected (Billig 2005@189-94). In the wake of a joke (that is, any utterance or performance that is framed as humorous), laughter or something like it is normally anticipated. Its absence at this moment is much more than silence; rather, but a meaningful communicative act in its own right.

To keep this concept useful, “laughter” must be understood as a metaphor for humor support in all its forms; thus its absence, *unlaughter*, refers to a lack of support. It is well established in humor studies that literal laughter is just one of many options available to the humor audience for expressing amusement, appreciation and/or agreement with a joke: smiling is also a common response, as are applause, verbal expressions of appreciation, extensions of the joke, and so on. Given the variety of ways of responding positive to jokes, Jennifer Hay suggested the term *humor support* instead of laughter to refer to positive responses to jokes (Hay 2001). Building on this concept, the term *unlaughter* refers to all the various ways to convey failure or disapproval of an utterance that is framed as humorous. We have seen a number of these in my brief account of the aftermath of the Dreadnought hoax: shaming; legal action; even violence.

Some unlaughter arises from flawed performance, when jokes are imperfectly formed or not understood. Such unlaughter is usually considered a regrettable sign of failure by either jokers or audience. I say “usually” because there are meta-jokes whose proper execution is designed to induce unlaughter as a way of embarrassing the audience.

The second kind of unlaughter follows jokes that have been properly executed, recognized, and understood, but which the audience is unable or unwilling to support. In these cases, unlaughter expresses disapproval of an ethical or moralistic color; it says, “We get the joke, but we find it offensive and do not approve of it.” Today, such unlaughter often gives rise to lengthy arguments between supporters and critics, arguments that take a predictable form and rest upon culturally accepted and commonly understood ideologies of what humor is and how it works (Kramer 2011; Lockyer and Pickering 2001). In extreme cases, moralistic unlaughter may take the form of legal action or even violence (Smith 2009). Today, shaming through social media is a particularly virulent form of unlaughter. The global reach of social media magnifies the dynamics of unlaughter (e.g. Ronson 2015).

One might object that “unlaughter” is simply a fancy name for failed humor, but I disagree. In her recent book on failed humor in interaction, Nancy Bell posits that failed humor is any departure from perfect humor; any utterance that is intended to amuse but does not (Bell @4). Following this conception, perfect humor is intended to amuse and does so. The difficulty with this concept of perfect and failed humor is that not all jokes are intended to amuse all audiences. Examples of deliberately offensive humor come readily to mind; indeed such jokes are so common that it is illogical to lump them all under the rubric of failed humor. A successful joke may be one in which unlaughter is not avoided, but actively courted and managed.

This is the case with the Dreadnought hoaxers, who seemed to welcome the unlaughter of the Navy and the respectable older generation. They could do so because many others were “laughing”, that is, supporting their joke, in various ways. With this support, the hoaxers were able to take the unlaughter with equanimity and ridicule it.

This function of unlaughter arises from culturally recognized assumptions about humor and laughter. Unlaughter itself is culturally recognized with meanings that rest upon locally accepted ideologies of humor, what it means and how it is valued. Thus unlaughter is itself subject to critique or even ridicule, as in the “We are not amused” trope. The idea expressed humorously in these memes is also applied quite seriously to mark some social imaginaries as psychologically or culturally incomplete persons. Given the vast importance that “a sense of humor” has in contemporary western culture as an essential part of a complete person, unlaughter is readily attributed to various out-groups as a form of mockery and a distancing mechanism. Humorlessness is a regular stereotype in ethnic jokes, for instance. In our times unlaughter is also regularly attributed to feminists (or even women generally); and in very recent times the same trait has been attributed to fundamentalist Muslims (or even all Muslims). Unlaughter then, may be depicted or even deliberately induced to heighten the conceptual boundaries between “them” and “us,” whether the boundaries are based on gender, generation, nationality, or religion.

Unlike the concept of failed humor, which is accidental and unintentional, unlaughter is a communicative act in its own right. It is not simply “non-laughter,” not a mere byproduct of failed humor, but a deliberate choice by the humor audience. As such, it comes in a variety of forms and is available for use for a variety of rhetorical purposes. One such purpose is to



heighten the difference between the jokers and salient out-groups, sometimes even by deliberately provoking unlaughter to show up the supposed differences.

I would go further. When Horace Cole went public, he was actualizing unlaughter that was present hypothetically in the Dreadnought hoax from the beginning. In the case of tendentious jokes, even if everyone is laughing, there remains an awareness that some others would refuse to laugh. This hypothetical unlaughter indexes the transgressiveness of the joke: its boldness, its obscenity, or whatever characteristic sets it apart as not innocent. Even if no-one expresses unlaughter, those who support such jokes are aware that such unlaughter is possible; in fact, it is this possibility that makes humor support so critically necessary. Similarly, when individuals do express their unlaughter, they do so in the awareness that there are or may be others who approve of the joke. The tension between laughter and unlaughter contributes a good deal to the appeal of tendentious humor.

Since laughter is predicated upon the real or hypothetical existence of unlaughter, and vice-versa, I submit that unlaughter deserves much more attention from humor scholars than it has received to date.

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