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**D. H. LAWRENCE ON TRIAL YET AGAIN:  
THE CHARGE? IT'S *RIDICULOUS*!**

JUDITH RUDERMAN

The case against D. H. Lawrence has been on the docket many times, not only in his lifetime but after his death as well, and mostly he has been found guilty – by magistrates in a literal courtroom, and by literary critics, college professors, students, and the general reader in the court of public opinion. His presumed offences are manifold: pornography, obscenity, misogyny, racism, fascism, sexism, antisemitism, colonialism, homophobia, homophilia, “antipathy to England and all forms of English civilization” (to quote a publisher’s rejection of the manuscript of *Women in Love* in 1917 [WL xxxiv]), and even, in Mark Spilka’s view, wife battering.<sup>1</sup> As if that list were not long enough I am adding yet another accusation to this litany of complaints, putting Lawrence on trial on the charge that he is ridiculous. At the same time, however, I am cross-examining whether the charge itself is ridiculous. In these “proceedings” I will both channel the prosecutors and serve as the defence attorney, presenting the readers of this essay – the jury – with a body of evidence ranging from reactions to the quality of Lawrence’s prose and the merits of his themes to Lawrence’s own use of ridicule and the ridiculous in several of his writings of the mid-to-late-1920s.

The obvious work to place first, and most intensively, on the evidence table is *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), a major source of Lawrence’s status in the 1960s but also of his fall from favour a couple of decades later. Both positions relate to that little matter of sex. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, informs us just how much of a divide there was in England between pre- and post-World War I depictions of human sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Before 1914, the word “intercourse” was presumed to mean only non-sexual

relations, and an "erection" referred to a hat. During the war, the repressive powers of the authorities struggled to keep the traditional values of England as stable and resistant to attack as possible, as demonstrated, for one, in the prosecution of Methuen for publishing *The Rainbow* in 1915. After the war, however, a word like "intercourse" or "erection" would be recognised as a double entendre at the least. Lawrence conveniently exemplifies Fussell's point. In his first novel, *The White Peacock* (1911), Lawrence uses a phrase about a flowered erection with reference to a lady's ornate hat, whereas in his last novel, of 1928, Lawrence presents a literal flowered erection when Connie Chatterley hangs forget-me-nots and other flora (one hopes not poison ivy) on the gamekeeper's penis. Those familiar with this novel will agree that this is certainly a forget-me-not scene. Many readers in the 1960s, just after the novel was widely available in unexpurgated form, resonated with Lawrence's portrayal of sexual awakening, just as they resonated in the Vietnam era of the 1960s and 1970s with his anti-war and anti-authority sentiments.

Indeed, Lawrence's bold views on sexual matters helped to usher in the era of sexual freedom that many today experience, if not necessarily enjoy (judging from students' frustration with the hook-up culture on college campuses in the USA). Ironically, to quote a psychologist called to the defence of *Lady Chatterley* at the 1960 London trial, the novel was "a positive antidote to the shallow, superficial values of sex", which he said were "widely current" at that time; surely Lawrence would not be pleased that shallow, superficial values are widely current more than a half century later.<sup>3</sup> But equally ironic is that Lawrence's views on sex have played a part in diminishing some readers' receptivity to his ideas. With the passing of the decades, the scene with the flowered erection, which was daringly beautiful to the 1960s generation, began to seem downright silly to many in the 1980s and beyond. On this score it is instructive to browse in Gary Adelman's 2002 book *Reclaiming D. H. Lawrence*, in which Adelman provides the reactions to Lawrence of 44 modern novelists who responded to his

request for their opinions. The word “silly” appears often in those reactions – not only to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* but to all of Lawrence’s writings on what he called, in his Foreword to *Women in Love*, “Eros of the sacred mysteries” (WL 485). Commentators also employed the adjectives “ridiculous” and “ludicrous”, to make an even more emphatic point. As one respondent, Richard Powers, wrote to Adelman, the problem is that “in an era of license, anyone who was once seen as a prophet of transgression is likely to seem dated”.<sup>4</sup> Even many of the writers who said they admired Lawrence attributed much of their appreciation to their younger days, as if one needs to outgrow this passionate writer – as if one must be embarrassed to take seriously a flowered erection, or, for that matter, the exultant cry “I am risen!” that the man who died utters in a classic double entendre in the novella that bears his name (VG 159).

Decades before Adelman’s interviewees described Lawrence’s works as silly, ridiculous, or ludicrous, accusations on these same counts were levied against the author. The 1960 prosecution of Penguin Books for its printing and intended dissemination of the unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was initiated by the publishing house in order to test the law against distributing obscene materials – that is, to convince a jury that the novel was a work of high literary merit. It was inevitable that Lawrence’s writing style, which was closely allied to his ideas, would come in for ridicule as well as condemnation by the prosecution. As the published proceedings of the trial indicate, a major issue was Lawrence’s use of repetition, not merely because the chief prosecutor, Griffith-Jones, thought it a bad literary device, but because so many of the repetitive words were, in the prosecution’s opinion, indecent. Griffith-Jones cross-examined literary scholar Graham Hough about this aspect of Lawrence’s style, and the portion of the transcript about wombs and bowels openly reveals the prosecutor’s scorn, *especially* if read aloud.

The prosecutor instructs Hough: “Would you turn to page 140, and the paragraph starting a little down the page ‘Connie went

slowly home ...?'"<sup>5</sup> Then Griffith-Jones begins to read from his own copy: "Connie went slowly home, realizing the depth of the other thing in her. Another self was alive in her, burning molten and soft in her womb and bowels, and with this self she adored him. She adored him till her knees were weak as she walked". The prosecutor stops and asks Hough, "I suppose that is good writing, or is that ludicrous?". "Not to me", responds Hough. But Griffith-Jones is not finished pressing the issue. "'In her womb and bowels' – [he stops] again we have got the same two parts of her anatomy coupled together within three lines – [he resumes] 'she was flowing and alive now ...'". He looks up. "I do not want to be unimaginative, believe me, but can one flow and be alive in one's womb and bowels?". "Metaphorically I think one can", answers Hough. – "Even metaphorically?" – "Yes", insists Hough.

Griffith-Jones goes back to the text: "... and vulnerable, and helpless in adoration of him as the most naïve woman. It feels like a child, she said to herself; it feels like a child in me. And so it did, as if her womb ...".<sup>6</sup> And here he stops reading and looks at Hough. "[A]nd so we have 'womb' for the third time?". "Yes", says Hough, simply. "Is that really good writing?", Griffith-Jones asks, no doubt with confidence that he has proved his point, along with some exasperation at Hough's obtuseness at not seeing it. Hough's response sounds a bit desperate: "I think he is trying to describe a woman in a highly emotional and disturbed condition, and this is his method of doing it". This apologia evokes the prosecutor's haughty rejoinder:

We can all "try to describe". A mere child learning to write his first composition can "try to describe". That is not what I am asking. I am asking: do you regard that as good writing, to repeat again and again "womb and bowels", "womb and bowels", and "bowels and womb"?

Hough replies, "In the context, yes". Griffith-Jones perseveres: "And it does not finish there, because if we can go on to the next

page, almost at the end of the first long paragraph ‘womb’ appears?”. “Yes”, verifies Hough, no doubt wishing by now that he could ask for a bathroom break and take his own bowels out of the witness chair. Griffith-Jones has one more barrage of wombs and bowels: “And it does not finish there, because if we can go on to the next page, almost at the end of the first long paragraph ‘womb’ appears?”. “Yes”, responds Hough. “Then a little bit further down on page 141, towards the bottom, at the end of that longish paragraph the two words ‘womb’ and ‘bowels’ appear again?”. “Yes”, repeats Hough, who, to the relief of Lawrentians then and now, will eventually offer that Lawrence uses repetition of words that are *not* “womb” and “bowels” – that repetition in general is a favoured technique of this author.<sup>7</sup>

The entire exchange about wombs and bowels has the effect of low comedy, partly because those words are not usually linked in common parlance, partly because they could indeed seem strange even in the context, and partly because any two words repeated over and over might come to sound nonsensical. The prosecutor’s tone of voice itself must have fully expressed how ridiculous he thought the whole business was, especially because he ended his recitations from the text with a rising inflection as if these were actual questions he was asking instead of exclamations of disbelief. Indeed, in reporting on the trial, Sybille Bedford noted that he had delivered his opening address in “a voice quivering with thin-lipped scorn”, and his cross-examination of Cambridge don Joan Bennett was insultingly sarcastic: “If you can come down to our humbler level from your academic heights will you answer my question [?]”.<sup>8</sup> Clearly Griffith-Jones attempted throughout the trial to make the jury see Lawrence and his novel as ludicrous as well as obscene, not worthy of their attention as serious readers. As one piece of evidence, he quoted to Graham Hough Katherine Anne Porter’s own assessment of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* from a recent essay, where she called the novel “a dreary, sad performance with some passages of unintentional, hilarious low comedy”.<sup>9</sup> And

Rebecca West, when she took the witness stand for the defence, reinforced the judgement of Porter and Griffith-Jones:

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* is full of sentences of which any child could make a fool, because they are badly written. He was a man with no background of formal education in his home. He also had a great defect which mars this book. He had absolutely no sense of humour. A lot of pages in this book are, to my point of view, ludicrous, but I would still say this is a book of undoubted literary merit.<sup>10</sup>

That Lawrence had "absolutely no sense of humour" is an opinion widely held by readers misled by Lawrence's intensity. Even the defence attorney at the *Lady Chatterley* trial, in his summation, remarked that Lawrence "was always a most uneven writer with very little sense of humour".<sup>11</sup> ("Very little" is better than "absolutely none", but not by much.) When I first studied Lawrence during the U.S. feminist movement of the 1970s, I held the same opinion; there seemed to be a great deal at stake, and I, like many others – male as well as female – did not feel we had the luxury of letting up or letting go. Interpreting Lawrence was serious business. But the case for Lawrence's humour was decisively made by the 1996 collection of essays edited by Paul Eggert and John Worthen, titled *Lawrence and Comedy*. The humour of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is eloquently addressed in that book in an essay by John Bayley about the kinship between Lawrence and the next-generation poet Philip Larkin.<sup>12</sup> Bayley concentrates on what Larkin saw and admired in Lawrence: the bemusement of the detached and sceptical onlooker, a bemusement that requires the reader to stand with him and take his point of view, or else to become one of "them", the scorned, and thus fail to realise the comedy of the situation. "[W]hat is so marvellous about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*", says Bayley, in presenting Larkin's opinion, "is that it is wonderfully and liberatingly laughable ... when it is being, for Lawrence's more engaged and responsible critics,

something which is unfortunate because it might be laughed *at*".<sup>13</sup> Certainly the *Lady Chatterley* trial transcript amply demonstrates that the prosecution and even some on the defence team *did* laugh at Lawrence, or at least took the funny bits as unintended comedy of the lowest sort.

Bayley also comments on the important fact that Lawrence uses humour "for the dual purpose of promoting 'doctrine' and letting that doctrine be tacitly criticized, or even mocked (without, however, being discredited) from a rival centre of awareness".<sup>14</sup> When Hannele and Hepburn in *The Captain's Doll* quarrel about love in the open-sided touring car, for example, Bayley quotes that "[h]er tone was derisive". He notes the comedy of the situation as the vehicle swerves and the arguing lovers fall upon each other; I would add that the rushing wind makes them scream their words, a humorous counterpoint to the intimate content of the exchange. Many other examples would support Bayley's discussion of Lawrence's "dual purpose", especially Ursula's pushback to Birkin in *Women in Love* (1920); but Bayley's main point, which was Larkin's, is that Lawrence required detachment in his relationships. As Larkin wrote of Mellors:

It's funny how Mellors never really swears love, or even *wants* love: whenever Connie tries to fix him with her eye, a "mocking grin" comes over his face, or some such ... This is enormously important, I think, & [John Middleton] Murry is wrong when he treats it as just something L. just dreamed up to "avoid" love—it is something that is "*true*".<sup>15</sup>

I have no argument with Larkin or Bayley on these interpretations; and yet there is another way of looking at this issue. I think it helpful to bring a different perspective to bear on the subject of humour in general and the ridiculous in particular. For *Lady Chatterley's Lover* provides obvious, ample, and dramatic evidence that although Lawrence required detachment in the love relationship he also required connection – no student of D. H.



Lawrence would dispute that point. Three scenes in the novel are salient for demonstrating that the objective, we might say comedic, view is only half the story, though a critical half.

The first scene is when Connie first comes across Mellors washing himself outside his hut in the woods. The sight of Mellors's half naked body engaged in this private act gives her a shock, though she is not sure why, since a man washing himself is only a "commonplace" experience:

Yet, in some curious way, it was a visionary experience: it had hit her in the middle of her body. She saw the clumsy breeches slipping away over the pure, delicate white loins, the bones showing a little, and the sense of aloneness, of a creature purely alone, overwhelmed her. Perfect, white solitary nudity of a creature that lives alone, and inwardly alone. And beyond that, a certain beauty of a pure creature. Not the stuff of beauty, not even the body of beauty, but a certain lambency, the warm white flame of a single life revealing itself in contours that one might touch: a body! (*LCL* 66)

Here we take note of the word "loins", another favourite of the author's, like "womb", and another word some might poke fun at. We see the repetition of "alone", reinforcing Hough's objection to the prosecution's harping on "womb" and "bowels". And we are struck by both the colon after the phrase "the warm white flame of a single life revealing itself in contours that one might touch" and the exclamation point after the word that ensues: "a body!". The colon flashes us forward to the end-point of the paragraph and the point of that paragraph, the body, while the exclamation point underscores the shock and the delight of the epiphany. Lawrence's punctuation plays a characteristically important role here.

In this paragraph, Connie's reaction is visceral, literally. But she, after all, is a Lady, and thus must resist this response. So Lawrence immediately provides a follow-up paragraph:

Connie had received the shock of vision in her womb, and she knew it. It lay inside her. But with her mind she was inclined to ridicule. A man washing himself in the back yard! No doubt with evil-smelling soap!—She was rather annoyed. Why should she be made to stumble on these vulgar privacies! (*LCL* 66)

Lawrence ends three of the final sentences in that section with an exclamation point, and here these three exclamation points underscore the intensity of her resistance, in counterpoint to the immediately preceding intensity of her delight. Connie's mind leads her to denigrate the scene as vulgar and to construct the experience as an annoying impingement on her sensibilities. Of course, she will come to adore her lover's body, as he will hers, and through their physical relationship she will be born again, as will he. But along the way there are two additional pertinent scenes about the inclination to ridicule that have to do with the sex act itself. I should note by way of introduction to those scenes that in the *Lady Chatterley* trial proceedings, a bishop testifying for the defence stated that Lawrence was rightly trying "to portray the sex relationship as something essentially sacred".<sup>16</sup> The bishop was quoting an archbishop, no less, who "once said that Christians do not make jokes about sex for the same reason that they do not make jokes about Holy Communion, not because it is sordid, but because it is sacred".<sup>17</sup> But Lawrence actually does make jokes about sex, and this fact is "something that is 'true'", if I may adapt Larkin's phrase about keeping a distance in the love relationship in order to apply it to the equally true, and related, fact of facilitating a connection.

The second time that Connie and the gamekeeper have sex, she feels left out, self-willed into separateness. And that separateness – the objectivity of comedy, as it were – causes her to muse on the sex act: "That thrust of the buttocks, surely it was a little ridiculous! If you were a woman, and apart in all the business, surely that thrusting of the man's buttocks was supremely ridiculous. Surely the man was intensely ridiculous in this posture and this act!"

(*LCL* 126). This same sense of ridiculousness overcomes her on another occasion as well, when, in the midst of their intimacy:

she lay with her hands inert on his striving body, and do what she might, her spirit seemed to look on from the top of her head, and the butting of his haunches seemed ridiculous to her, and the sort of anxiety of his penis to come to its little evacuating crisis seemed farcical. Yes, this was love, this ridiculous bouncing of the buttocks ... It was quite true, as some poets said, that the God who created man must have had a sinister sense of humour, creating him a reasonable being, yet forcing him to take this ridiculous posture and driving him with blind craving for this humiliating performance. (*LCL* 171–2)

This last paragraph, and the line about the “ridiculous posture”, factored into the trial, when Raymond Williams was asked about its literary merit (of all things). Williams said, quite rightly, that the section needed to be seen in the context of the novel as a whole and that it represents a stage in the development of the love affair in which Connie Chatterley is not being carried along and thus feels detached and cold.<sup>18</sup>

To my mind, Lawrence can't leave well enough alone when he comments, “Cold and derisive her queer female mind stood apart” (*LCL* 172). And, not surprisingly, she has an immediate change of heart, resulting in an immediate repetition of sexual intercourse (since Mellors is seemingly ever ready), this time to a satisfactory conclusion for both, for Connie is “born: a woman” (*LCL* 174). Yet the sacred and visionary experience does not obviate the first reaction, whether to the commonplace of washing or the inelegance of the sex act: the duality is always there with Lawrence. Surely God or nature did have “a sinister sense of humour” in necessitating this ridiculous posture to perpetuate the race, and Lawrence has a “sinister sense of humour” in putting the ridiculousness of the posture before us (*LCL* 172). If anything, making a joke of sex only enhances the wonderment that something so ungainly, even at times

farcical, can also be so beautiful – even “sacred”, to quote the archbishop. And one more comment on this subject, harking back to the flora amid the genitals, and noting also the protagonists’ naming of their genital organs. None other than Barney Rosset, owner of the Grove Press, which appealed against the U. S. Post Office ban of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and won the case in 1959, considered such aspects of the novel silly.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps other readers can relate to that attitude. I have found that how I react to those scenes depends on my mood. Teaching a Lawrence seminar for two decades starting in the early 1990s meant that I re-read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* many times. Sometimes I took the perspective of Lawrence the “priest of love” and sometimes I was with Lawrence the detached onlooker; sometimes, that is, I found the scenes lovely, at other times silly, even ridiculous. Both elements are present in the text because they were as intertwined in Lawrence’s psyche as the flowers in that scene. With what today would be called emotional intelligence (Harry T. Moore phrased it as an “intelligent heart”, the original title of his path-breaking biography),<sup>20</sup> Lawrence had a firm grasp not only of his characters’ temperaments but also of his readers’ potential responses.

*Lady Chatterley*, the novel and the character, are prime evidence of the uses that Lawrence made in his fiction of a woman’s detachment that manifests itself in ridicule. In several other of his works of the mid-to-late-1920s, female characters much older than Connie evidence an even more entrenched “Cold and derisive ... queer female mind” (*LCL* 172) than hers. I offer three salient examples in which ridicule by and of an older woman plays a significant role: the short stories ‘The Lovely Lady’ and ‘The Blue Moccasins’, and the novella *St. Mawr*.

Pauline Attenborough is the so-called lovely lady in the ironically titled story of that name, published just a few months before *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. At 72, with hair only streaked with grey, she takes pains to maintain a youthful appearance and demeanour. We are told that this woman “jeered” at her first son for wanting to marry an actress; in fact, her scorn is said to have

"broke[n] the boy's courage" and caused his decline and death (WWRA 254). Her niece, Cecilia (or Ciss) is well aware of Pauline's propensity to ridicule, and the powers of her ridicule. "When Aunt Pauline knew things, she seemed to be able to kill them with a smile. Her mysterious power of mockery, jeering at one, made one go all tangled up and perverse inside" (WWRA 259). At the end of the story, again the author mentions Pauline's "hideous jeering" and her "jeering evil leer", as well as the "jeering look" she fixes on Ciss when relaying the news that there will be nothing for her in the will (WWRA 270, 272, 273).

But by this time Pauline's power has been neutralised, and she is the one whose frazzled nerves mark her imminent demise. She has been undone not by her passive second son, but by her scornful niece. For ridicule is lauded as well as lambasted in this story; it all depends on who is doing the jeering and scorning, and for what purpose. There is a difference between Pauline's mockery, which stems from a deficiency of character, and Ciss's, which acknowledges how badly things have gone awry. To Ciss sunbathing up on the roof, and inadvertently hearing through a drainpipe her aunt's spoken ruminations on the patio below, it is "awful and ridiculous!" that Pauline should be talking to herself like an old woman; Ciss feels "very sardonic" at this revelation of her aunt's vulnerability (WWRA 255). Devising a way to use the drainpipe to her own advantage, playing on the old lady's guilt and fears, Ciss decides never to tell Robert about her "ridiculous" ploy to combat the decidedly unlovely woman by speaking down the pipe as if she were the ghost of son number one (WWRA 268). The ploy may be ridiculous, but it is effective in breaking down and obliterating an evil force who – like the Mater in *The Virgin and the Gypsy* – must be destroyed if the young are to live.

'The Lovely Lady' appeared in 1927 and again in the posthumous 1933 collection of the same title. 'The Blue Moccasins', originally published in 1929, was appropriately included in that collection. For here we have another older woman (in her late fifties, white-haired) who thinks herself young-looking

and who is literally wed to a man young enough to be her son, as Pauline Attenborough is figuratively wed to Robert, her second son. It is hard to think of the protagonist Miss McLeod as Mrs Percy Barlow because she is virginal, cold and aloof; indeed, a local young widow, Alice Howells, states that “it’s quite impossible to think of her as anything but Miss McLeod”, and at key points in the story the narrator reverts to calling her Miss McLeod (VG 168 *passim*). Her young husband puts her on a pedestal – “she’s miles above me”, he says – making her into a princess like Dollie Urquhart in Lawrence’s ‘The Princess’; indeed, those two works have much in common, since both women are older than they like to think of themselves, both employ ridicule as a weapon against men they consider beneath them, both would rather retreat into worlds of their own than lose themselves in a love relationship, and both are vanquished by a dark other.

In ‘The Blue Moccasins’, Percy Barlow asks his wife if she thinks it undignified for a bank manager to perform in an amateur theatrical. In response, she “look[s] at him mildly, disguising her real feeling. ‘If you don’t feel *personally* humiliated,’ she [says], ‘then there’s nothing else to consider’” (VG 171). Her actual opinion is that this is a childish, unfitting endeavour. What she does not know is that the play requires Percy to dress “as a Moor, his face darkened” (VG 172), and to enact an on-stage romance with that young widow who is in costume as a harem girl. Percy has taken for a prop, without his wife’s knowledge, the blue moccasins that she had brought back from New Mexico, purchased from an Indian guide she treated as a lowly subordinate.

When Miss McLeod decides to see the play, she is shocked to witness not only the obvious connection between the two leads but also the use of her moccasins in facilitating the romance on stage. In both cases, her possessions have got away from her. When Alice Howells recites the line “Away, shoes of sorrow, shoes of bondage!” and flings herself into Percy’s arms, it is all too much for the “viper of the little elderly woman” in the audience (VG 174–5): Miss McLeod interrupts the performance to ask for her shoes back.

Between acts, Percy tries to cajole her that it is only a play, and a silly one at that, but the hall is packed and they need the shoes for the final act. He has actually been unaware until this point that in costume as a dark Moor he is expressing his physical needs; but his wife has recognised it: "He looked so ludicrous, with his dark-brown face and butter-muslin bloomers. And his mind was so ludicrously innocent. His body, however, was not so ridiculously innocent as his mind, as she knew when he turned to the other woman" (VG 176). Miss McLeod refuses to have her precious moccasins used in this fashion: she thinks, "No, it was useless to yield to so ludicrous a person. The vulgarity of his wheedling, the commonness of the whole performance! ... 'I'd so much rather they weren't used for this kind of thing ...' She stood with her face averted from the ridiculous couple" (VG 177). But Alice, who has taken the lead in this burgeoning love relationship, easily substitutes her blue bedroom slippers for Miss McLeod's moccasins, in an obvious indication of her soon-to-be sexual relationship with Percy. The little, elderly wife is not only ridiculed by those slippers, but vanquished as well.

A third older woman plays a prominent role in the 1925 novella *St. Mawr*, which also evidences a double attitude toward ridicule and the ridiculous. Rachel Witt, the grey-haired mother of the protagonist, Louise, is yet another of Lawrence's ladies of a certain age for whom his writings of the 1920s express ambivalence bordering at times on disdain.<sup>21</sup> With "her face like the face of Medusa at fifty, a weapon in itself" (SM 37), Mrs Witt often feels "contempt" (SM 22, 101, 102, 105) and delivers cutting *bon mots*. When her daughter marries the son of a baronet and becomes Lady Carrington, Mrs. Witt "sardonically" takes up residence in a nearby hotel: "And her terrible grey eyes with the touch of a leer looked on at the hollow mockery of things. As if *she* knew of anything better!" (SM 23). In this work, English society, as exemplified by Lord Carrington among others, does indeed merit derision, but the key point is that Mrs Witt does not know of "anything better". This kind of "Witt" can corrosively tear down, but it cannot build up.

Riding in Piccadilly, she looks “down her conceited, inquisitive, scornful ... nose” at all she beholds (*SM* 25). She is unfailingly sarcastic toward others and takes pleasure in being rude without their suspecting it; her irony, Lawrence notes on more than one occasion, is acidic. How reminiscent she is of Pauline Attenborough when she gives “that queer, triumphant leer from her grey eyes, and queer demonish wrinkles” seem to “twitter on her face” (*SM* 44).

The Welsh groom, Lewis, knows how to handle her, though, by keeping an emotional distance – “Even if she made a fool of him, something in him would all the time be far away from her, not implicated” (*SM* 103). In Lawrence’s familiar rhetorical strategy of presenting thesis and antithesis in a back-and-forth pattern, Mrs Witt thinks of Lewis with alternating attitudes of awe and derision. She sees the “mystery of power” in the man but always wants to “jeer at it” (*SM* 104). In this context one thinks of the scene in Lawrence’s final novel in which Connie Chatterley, with conflicting feelings of wonderment and ridicule, observes the gamekeeper washing himself. In Connie’s case, wonderment will triumph over ridicule; in Mrs Witt’s case, Lawrence’s phrases “then again”, “and yet”, “but then”, “yet also” express her ambivalence about Lewis, with its alternating currents of scorn and regret, but ultimately “the full sarcasm [comes] back into her tones” when he refuses to be married to a woman like her – a woman who looks at him with “contemptuous mockery, raillery”, and speaks to him “cuttingly” (*SM* 103–6, 112).

The second exotic other in the novella, the part-Indian employee Phoenix, also strives to keep himself aloof and hence intact. His strategy for doing so is to employ sarcasm with his eyes and smile as well as his words. Having no truck with bossy overseers, Phoenix shows a “glint of ridicule”, a “faint smile of derision”, and a “sardonic smile” when reprimanded by Lou or her husband (*SM* 47–8). Lou is “not in any mood to be jeered at”, yet she recognises a “peculiar” kind of courage in Phoenix’s attitude, and she also knows how to jeer when the spirit moves her (*SM* 84). Like her



mother, Lou is exasperated by the state of things, a fact that Lawrence underscores by iterating a familiar word three times: "How ridiculous everything is [Lou thinks], how ridiculous, ridiculous!" (*SM* 53). It is a bad sign, in fact, when, fed up with her jejune husband, Lou writes in a letter to her mother, "My sense of humour is leaving me: which means, I'm getting into too bad a temper to be able to ridicule it all" (*SM* 116). Unlike her mother, Lou knows exactly what it is that she seeks to regain her equanimity. She says to Mrs Witt, "I want the wonder back again, or I shall die. I don't want to be like you, just criticizing and annihilating these dreary people, and enjoying it" (*SM* 62). Away from England, on the ranch in New Mexico, is where Lou wants to live, at least for now, to gather herself into herself until the point at which she can find a man with whom to be worthily mated. Her sense of humour restored, she mocks her mother for even suggesting the possibility that such a man exists now. And when Phoenix's behaviour toward Lou indicates that he entertains the possibility of a sexual liaison with her, she knows that he is "ridiculously mistaken" (*SM* 137) to think that she is in the market for another meaningless attachment, no matter how *de rigueur* such attachments are in her society.

Rachel Witt does have her admirable qualities, unlike Pauline Attenborough or Lina McLeod; chief among them is that she refuses to let the horse St. Mawr be gelded and she denigrates her effete son-in-law, whom she regards as already gelded himself. As Paul Poplawski has written, in an essay on Lawrence's "satiric style" in this novella, Mrs Witt "serves as both object and agent of satire. She is ... satirised for her cynicism, but at the same time her cynicism provides us with a necessary critical perspective on the hypocrisies and false enthusiasms of the other characters".<sup>22</sup> We have no way of knowing whether on Las Chivas ranch Mrs Witt will be any less scornful than she was before, but she has the last word in the novella and I read the final line – her statement that the ranch is "cheap" at twelve hundred dollars (*SM* 155) – as a serious commentary and not a sarcastic remark. I take my cue from her

earlier realisation of the lack of meaning in her own life, when she admitted to her daughter that “it’s just as great a mistake to laugh at everything as to cry at everything” (*SM* 92).

In Lawrence’s works, in short, “laughing at everything” has different connotations depending on the person and the circumstance. Laughter can take the form of jeering, scorn, derision, and the milder version, sarcasm. Characters who hold these attitudes are often negative role models, who destroy rather than create. Prosecutor Griffith-Jones, ridiculing the wombs and bowels in Lawrence’s novel, almost reads like one of those characters. Laughing can also evidence sheer happiness, as one of the *Lady Chatterley* trial witnesses characterised the lovers’ relationship: “something joyful and exuberant, ... playful even”.<sup>23</sup> Laughing can also take the form of justifiable ridicule, when the situation demands it (and for Lawrence, the situation often demanded it). For readers of Lawrence, it is not always easy to differentiate between these forms of laughter; rarely are Lawrence’s characters and plots as one-dimensional as those in ‘The Lovely Lady’ and ‘The Blue Moccasins’.

Lawrence was himself sensitive to ridicule, his propensity to dish it out notwithstanding. As a youth he was easily wounded, as scenes in the autobiographical *Sons and Lovers* (1913) suggest. He did not like to be held “cheap”, as he complained to Edward Garnett when Garnett criticised his novel in progress (2*L* 166). Not surprisingly, a favoured word in his later vocabulary was “insouciance”: an attitude of unconcern about the impression one is creating, and hence an armour against ridicule. (Yvette in *The Virgin and the Gipsy* adopts such armour against her relatives’ onslaughts.) Yet Lawrence was willing to risk being the butt of ridicule. Just a year before the *Lady Chatterley* trial in England, an essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* discussed the appearance on the literary scene of a bold new crop of Jewish-American authors; and the words this commentator used to characterise *them* could have been used by those who defended Lawrence in 1960, and by those who would defend him today. These authors, said the

essay writer, showed "a willingness ... to take chances, to trust [their] own instincts and insights and standards, to risk a crushing failure and even ridicule".<sup>24</sup> When Lawrence was thinking of giving up teaching for a writing career, he wrote to Louie Burrows that such a step would be risky, but "for myself, I don't mind risk – like it" (1L 303). This risk-taking aspect of Lawrence's personality is a trait that one of that bold new crop in the 1950s, Bernard Malamud, picked up on. Malamud's novel *Dubin's Lives* (1977), about a biographer of D. H. Lawrence, is full of references to risk. When asked by his daughter why he has picked Lawrence to write on, Dubin responds, "He picked me. There's something he wants me to know".<sup>25</sup> Taking a risk for love is a primary lesson that Dubin learns from Lawrence.

True, taking a risk means that one might face ridicule and rejection. But what if Louisa Lindley in 'The Daughters of the Vicar' had not made the first move toward Alfred Durant, asking if he wants her to stay and declaring her love? What if Mabel Pervin in 'The Horse-Dealer's Daughter' had not asked Dr Fergusson if he loves her when he pulls her out of the water? What if Ciss Attenborough did not force the issue with Robert, in 'The Lovely Lady', asking if he loves her and enjoining him to try? What if Alice Howells had not decided to combat the "viper" Miss McLeod by playing her role so deliberately, thus awakening Percy Barlow to passion and manhood? Without societal approval, each of these women shows herself to be "individual, self-responsible, taking her own initiative", to use the words Lawrence employed in 1914 to describe the essence of the novel he was working on, which became *The Rainbow* (2L 165). These women evidence emotional bravery in facing potential derision, refusal, and shame.<sup>26</sup> They are the other side of the coin to those women who stand aloof and mock. But as Lawrence's final novel indicates, it is not only woman who takes the initiative. What if Oliver Mellors had not reached out to touch Connie Chatterley, a woman forbidden to him in more ways than one, when he saw her tears fall as she held that chick? In typical Lawrence fashion, none of these stories, including *Lady*

*Chatterley's Lover*, has a pat, happily-ever-after ending, but the tentative hope for meaningful, lasting connection, even resurrection, is present in all of them nonetheless.

As a self-declared “priest of love”, Lawrence delivered his sermons with earnest conviction. The very earnestness of *Lady Chatterley* is a quality that for some of his erstwhile admirers as well as his detractors has been sufficient to render it silly. Barney Rosset felt this way about that aspect of the novel, much preferring Henry Miller’s *The Tropic of Cancer*.<sup>27</sup> But Lawrence was aware that earnestness was not and should not be immune to ridicule. As he stated in his essay on Edgar Allan Poe:

And the Holy Ghost is within us. It is the thing that prompts us to be real, not to push our own cravings too far, not to submit to stunts and high falutin, above all not to be too egoistic and willful in our conscious self, but to change as the spirit inside us bids us change, and leave off when it bids us leave off, and laugh when we must laugh, particularly at ourselves, for in deadly earnestness there is always something a bit ridiculous. The Holy Ghost bids us never to be too deadly in our earnestness, always to laugh in time, at ourselves and at everything. Particularly at our sublimities. Everything has its hour of ridicule—everything. (SCAL 73)

And as he wrote to Mabel Dodge Luhan in January 1924:

I am sure seriousness is a disease, today ... So long as there is a bit of a laugh going, things are all right ... Now it takes far more courage to dare not to care, and to dare to have a bit of a laugh at *everything*, than to wallow in the deepest seas of seriousness. (4L 555).

Sex itself comes in for ridicule in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, yet the something that is “a bit ridiculous” does not take away from, but even enhances, the something that is life-affirming. I take issue

with A. S. Byatt's remark in response to Gary Adelman's questionnaire: she said, "Sex is not such a big deal as it was for Lawrence in the days when more things were forbidden and had the glamor of being forbidden"; and with Eric Kraft's statement that sex today is not interesting "as an adventure, a discovery, or a manifestation of the life force. People have had enough of sex".<sup>28</sup> As an observer of college students for several decades, I believe that the opposite is true: that the ease and ubiquity of sexual encounters on campus, often lubricated by alcohol, have left students unsatisfied. They recognise that Lawrence may have placed so great an importance on the sex act that his sacred mysteries of Eros may be unattainable and even at times laughable; but they appreciate both his didacticism about coming into touch with the cosmos and his optimism about the regenerative powers of touch.

One of Gary Adelman's students remarked that "Lawrence's views on women, class, race, and homosexuality are blatantly sexist, fascist, racist, and homophobic. So it is completely unrealistic to expect anything other than general hostility towards Lawrence".<sup>29</sup> I think it is not so "completely unrealistic" after all, based not only on my own experience of writing on these negative qualities but also on the assessments of the Duke University undergraduates who have immersed themselves in Lawrence for an entire semester. Reviewing comments from my anonymous course evaluations from 1995 to 2011, I find a range of reactions to Lawrence, but not hostility. The closest to hostility I uncovered was one comment that the student had done a lot of thinking "trying to come to peace about what that damn Lawrence was about". But another student gushed, "Now have a huge appreciation of Lawrence. Always was able to see the beauty [he] imparted". Others said, "It took a while to start understanding Lawrence, but you can't help but get absorbed", and "D. H. Lawrence's novels and stories and essays are extremely challenging and require prolonged intellectual engagement. Be prepared to experience frustration!". I offer just two more remarks, which can serve as

bookends, if you will. One appreciative student wrote, “I am always looking forward to reading what the crazy bastard will write next”. But another, obviously referring to the amount of required reading for the course, complained, “D. H. Lawrence had only one idea. He should have written one book and been through with it. He had no BUSINESS being this prolific”.

Perhaps prolixity should be added to the list of charges levelled against Lawrence. Certainly, the charge of being ridiculous must remain on that list, but only if it is nuanced by reference to the many factors that mitigate the charge, including Lawrence’s own willingness to acknowledge the ridiculous in himself and his ideas. Readers of Lawrence would do well to keep an open mind, and to defend him when necessary. The poet Tony Hoagland regretted not doing so, as he recorded in his poem ‘Lawrence’, from which, to conclude, I provide this excerpt:

On two occasions in the past twelve months  
I have failed, when someone at a party  
spoke of him with a dismissive scorn,  
to stand up for D. H. Lawrence,

a man who burned like an acetylene torch  
from one end to the other of his life.  
These individuals, whose relationship to literature  
is approximately that of a tree shredder

to stands of old-growth forest,  
these people leaned back in their chairs,  
bellies full of dry white wine and the ovum of some foreign fish,  
and casually dropped his name

the way pygmies with their little poison spears  
strut around the carcass of a fallen elephant.  
“O Elephant,” they say,  
“you are not so big and brave today!”

It's a bad day when people speak of their superiors  
with a contempt they haven't earned,  
and it's a sorry thing when certain other people

don't defend the great dead ones  
who have opened up the world before them.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Mark Spilka's view of Lawrence as a wife-beater, see the chapter 'Hemingway and Lawrence as Abusive Husbands', in *Renewing the Normative D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Progress* (Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 1992), 193–247.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford UP, 1975), 23.

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Rolph, ed., *The Trial of Lady Chatterley: Regina v. Penguin Books Limited* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 118.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. Gary Adelman, *Reclaiming D. H. Lawrence: Contemporary Writers Speak Out* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2002), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Rolph, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley*, 47. Sybille Bedford referenced this exchange between the prosecutor and Hough in her account of the trial, reported for *Esquire* magazine in 1959–60. She did not repeat the scene in its entirety but noted pointedly that it was one of "wilful bullying ... embarrassing to watch": see the reprint of Bedford's account, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, intro. Thomas Grant (London: Daunt Books, 2016), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Rolph, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley*, 48.

<sup>7</sup> The charge that Lawrence's repetition is bad writing was also levelled by Lady Ottoline Morrell in reference to *The Rainbow*. As she described in her memoirs, "I was shocked in reading it by what then seemed to me to be the slapdash amateurish style in which it was written, and the habit when he then first began of repeating the same word about ten times in a paragraph. I counted the word 'fecund,' I think, twelve times on one page" (2L 314 n. 4).

<sup>8</sup> Bedford, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 12, 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Rolph, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>12</sup> John Bayley, 'Lawrence to Larkin: A changed perspective', in *Lawrence and Comedy*, eds Paul Eggert and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 192–209. Bayley does not include Larkin's witty lines about the demise of Victorianism, which I here abbreviate: "Sexual intercourse began in 1963 ... between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles' first LP". Brenda Maddox, for one, repeats this line in *D. H. Lawrence: The Story of a Marriage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 422.

<sup>13</sup> Bayley, 'Lawrence to Larkin: A changed perspective', 194.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 204

<sup>16</sup> Rolph, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 70–1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Menand, 'People of the Book: Two Faces of Publishing', *New Yorker* (December 12, 2016), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Harry T. Moore, *The Intelligent Heart: The Story of D. H. Lawrence* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Young: 1954).

<sup>21</sup> I explore this motif in 'D. H. Lawrence and Women of the Third Age', *Journal of Aging and Identity*, vol. 1.4 (1996), 223–37.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Poplawski, 'Lawrence's Satiric Style: Language and Voice in *St. Mawr*', *Lawrence and Comedy*, 158–79, 162.

<sup>23</sup> Rolph, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley*, 119.

<sup>24</sup> T. Solotaroff, 'A Vocal Group: The Jewish Part in American Letters', *Times Literary Supplement* (1959); qtd. Morris Dickstein, 'Promised Lands', *Times Literary Supplement* (April 15, 2016), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Malamud, *Dubin's Lives* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977), 171. As we learn from the memoir of Malamud written by his own daughter, taking a risk in an extramarital affair is exactly what Malamud did in real life. See Janna Malamud Smith *My Father is a Book: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 192–211.

<sup>26</sup> I explore this issue of risk-taking by women in 'Louisa Victrix: Female Initiative in "Daughters of the Vicar"', *Journal of the D. H. Lawrence Society* (December 2009), 1–20.

<sup>27</sup> Menand, 'People of the Book: Two Faces of Publishing', 81.

<sup>28</sup> Adelman, *Reclaiming D. H. Lawrence: Contemporary Writers Speak Out*, 29.



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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>30</sup> Tony Hoagland, 'Lawrence', *Ploughshares*, eds Howard Norman and Jane Shores (Winter 1997–1998): <<https://www.pshares.org/issues/winter-1997-98>>. Hoagland reads the complete poem on YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsWxo6nGjZ4>>.