Laughter & Medicine

Deadline: Mar 15, 2025

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We invite proposals for contributions to an edited volume exploring the interfaces between laughter and medicine. Developing from a British Academy/Wellcome Trust-funded conference held at the University of Birmingham in November 2024, this volume will put the medical humanities in dialogue with healthcare provision and the medical sciences so as to bridge the divides between the clinic, the laboratory, cultural history, literature, and the arts in Western cultures from the classical period to the present day.

The volume aims to present a transdisciplinary account of the cultural, social, diagnostic, therapeutic, and physiological implications of the laughter that characterizes—and is elicited by—real and fictional interactions among physicians, patients and the general public, inside and outside the clinic. Laughter is not always the “best medicine”, nor is laughter linked only to comedy and enjoyment. Without excluding the curative or the comic, this project hopes to uncover the more complex and sometimes darker aspects of the relationship between laughter (both voluntary and involuntary) and medicine that are often obscured by facile idioms and clichés. “Healing laughter” differs markedly in character and effects from pathological laughter; hysterical laughter; forced or bitter laughter; laughter serving to mitigate awkwardness in, or failures of, communication; laughter intended to deceive; or laughter signifying fear, discomfort or aggression. The irony and other double-coded signifiers that abound in comic and parodic representations of medical practitioners and their patients, as well as in medical metaphors and allegories deployed in diverse discursive contexts, often reveal medicine’s paradoxical place in various cultural imaginaries and in individual and collective experience.

Submissions may respond to questions including, but not limited to, the following:

• How and why is laughter represented, elicited, and mobilized in connection with medicine in the temporal and spatial arts (literature, cinema, print and digital media, performing arts, sculpture, etc.) in particular historical and cultural contexts and moments? What ideological, aesthetic, cultural, and other issues are bound up with or thought through the nexus between laughter and medicine?
• What does synchronic and diachronic comparison reveal about the specificity of particular representations of laughter and medicine and about the historical evolution of their cultural construction? How do evolving cultural and artistic representations inform, and how are they informed by, the development of medical science and practice?
• How and why does laughter occur in the context of illness and death, as well as in routine healthcare provision? What is its significance? What functions does it serve?
• What are laughter’s causes and effects from a physiological and psychological standpoint?

What does the phenomenon of laughter reveal about the relationships between mind and body and between physical, mental, and emotional health?
• How and with what stakes has the relationship between laughter and medicine been theorized at different moments in intellectual and cultural history? How does the thinking of laughter in medical contexts fit into larger cultural formations and reflect or revise scientific models?
• What are the poetic and ideological effects and stakes of the ludic medicalization, in various discursive contexts, of aspects of life and culture that are not (necessarily or customarily) imagined in medical terms?
• What are the implications of the relationship between laughter and medicine from a philosophical perspective?
• What are the sociological implications of the nexus between laughter and medicine, especially in relation to contexts and patterns of (mis)communication and to the negotiation of social identities linked to profession, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.?
• What roles does laughter play in relation to disability and disability studies?

In order to accommodate the different disciplinary norms corresponding to the diverse fields that will be represented in the volume, we will accept proposals for chapters ranging in length from 3,000 to 10,000 words. Each chapter should make a contribution in its own discipline while making an effort to remain intelligible to an interdisciplinary academic audience.

Chapter proposals should take the form of a 500-word abstract including a title; a brief overview of scholarly or scientific contexts; a concise articulation of the research question and/or aims to be addressed; the tentative theses, conclusions, and/or arguments to be advanced in the chapter; and an estimated word count for the chapter. Authors should also provide an abbreviated CV.

It is hoped that the volume proposal will be submitted in July 2025 to the Proceedings of the British Academy series, which has expressed interest in the project. Contrary to what its name might suggest, this series, currently published through Oxford University Press, produces high-quality, rigorously peer-reviewed themed volumes developing from conference projects that have earned support from very competitive British Academy grants. Following notification of the acceptance of the book proposal, contributors will be asked to submit their completed chapters within six months.

Submissions should be sent to both p.barta@surrey.ac.uk and lucas.wood@ttu.edu by March 15, 2025.

Reference:

CFP: Laughter & Medicine. In: ArtHist.net, Jan 17, 2025 (accessed Nov 12, 2026),

<https://arthist.net/archive/43711>.