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INTRODUCTION

**A Contagion, a Power**

The surest sign of wisdom is a constant cheerfulness.  
Its status is like things above the moon, always serene.  
—MONTAIGNE, “On the Education of Children”

This book studies the multiple forms and uses of cheerfulness from the end of the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century in the Western literary and philosophical imagination. Cheerfulness is an emotional energy that can raise the spirit for a limited time. We have some control over it; we can, as the saying goes, “cheer up.” This sets it apart from the passions, which are traditionally understood to seize the self, and distinguishes it from happiness or melancholy, which cannot be willed or controlled. You can “make yourself” cheerful. This feature is not, of course, unique to cheerfulness; we can “calm down,” as well. But cheerfulness is also shaped by our interactions with others. As we will see in what follows, cheerfulness is a subjective emotion that is also social. It operates outside ourselves, even as, paradoxically, we seem to be able to harness it for our own well-being.

Cheerfulness does not take us “out of ourselves,” as do anger and joy. It is modest. It involves a subtle readjustment of the emotions in regard to the immediate future. It is a kind of temporary lightness, a moderate uptick in mood: “A good hour may come upon a sudden; expect a little,” writes Robert Burton in his 1638 book, *Anatomy of Melancholy*: “Cheer up, I say, be not dismayed.” “Expect a little.”

It is possibly because of its modesty that cheerfulness has been overlooked by writers about literature and philosophy. They tend to focus on more intense emotions, such as anger, joy, and melancholy. This book aims to bring attention to cheerfulness as a force in self-understanding and a factor in writing. I want to study both the forms and uses of cheerfulness. That is, I am interested both in what people have said *about* it, and in *how it functions* as a concept, or key term, in stories and philosophical arguments. Through this double focus we will be able to trace the history of an emotion and follow its movements across many different types of writing, from theological commentary in the Reformation to modern aesthetics.

The philosopher Baruch Spinoza singles out cheerfulness as distinct from other movements of the self. Whereas some pleasures can overwhelm the body, says Spinoza, cheerfulness, which he claims resides in both mind and body, helps to *temper* their interplay. Pleasure, for example, can be excessive and can have negative consequences. The antidote to excessive pleasure is the same as the antidote to melancholy — cheerfulness. “Cheerfulness is always good,” says Spinoza, “and cannot be excessive.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, when considered within the self, cheerfulness operates as a balancing force.

Classical and early modern medicine and philosophy provided an entire inventory of the passions, which were understood to seize and shape the self in various ways. The examples most frequently discussed by philosophers were anger and melancholy. Cheer, however, fits uneasily into these categories. It is not happiness, what Aristotle called *eudaemonia*, which implies a certain moral stability. The philosopher David Hume calls cheerfulness a “quality of mind.”<sup>3</sup> Yet it is often ephemeral. It moves. It is not optimism, which is strategic and narrative. Nor is it hope, which is philosophical and messianic. Cheerfulness is too modest to fall into step with these emotions. Barack Obama built a successful political campaign in 2008 on the single word “Hope,” but no one could be elected on a platform of cheerfulness. You might express cheerfulness to put the voters at

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ease, but that would be performance, not policy. Cheerfulness offers no political program. It is largely corporeal and often fleeting. And yet it can transform the moral self.<sup>4</sup>

Much of our vocabulary for discussing ourselves stems from a kind of disjunction between our inside and our outside. In the Renaissance, this break was described through such notions as dissimulation, and *sprezzatura* — the idea, developed in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, that the most effective form of action is one that disguises all effort and strain. In this formulation, everything from the composition of verse to expertise at fencing should appear effortless. This disjunction between the striving interior and the cool, accomplished exterior of the courtier emerges as a given at the close of the Middle Ages, when our story begins.<sup>5</sup> It finds its modern inversion and analogue in the anxious Freudian subject, massively beset by drives she cannot understand or control, yet struggling to maintain the external semblance of balance in order to function in "normal" society.

This simple paradigm of the social self, of inside and outside, is complicated by the presence of cheer, which bridges and mediates the relationship between the interior of the self and its exterior. The English word "cheer" comes from an early word meaning "face," and cheerfulness is consistently associated with that body part. I will say more later about the etymologies and meanings that hover around the emotion. Yet even when unassociated with the implications of the English word, the movement of cheerfulness (of *gaieté* in French, of *Heiterkeit* in German) links the "inside" of the self and the "outside," shaping their relationship, making it possible for us to imagine them at all. This point is made clear by the French writer Germaine de Staël, in her widely read 1810 book *On Germany*. There, she stresses the importance of conversation for the emotional well-being of the self. She offers an account of the movement of "gaiety," the synonym generally used in French for our English word "cheerfulness": "The desire to appear amiable leads one to take on an expression of gaiety, no matter what the interior disposition of the soul might be. The facial

expression influences, bit by bit, what one experiences. And what one does to please others ends up shaping what one feels oneself.”<sup>6</sup>

De Staël offers a useful description of one way that cheerfulness works as it moves from the outside inward, shaping body and spirit. Her location of the origins of gaiety in conversation (the desire to appear “amiable”) is, of course, not universal. It is rooted in her own aristocratic context and in the French tradition of valuing witty conversation. However, the movement she describes — the outside affecting the inside; the face shaping the soul — is depicted by any number of writers, from the Renaissance to the present day. In our own time, it has been recommended by everyone from Buddhist spiritual teachers to psychotherapists. We will see different versions of this movement as we go.<sup>7</sup> It means that cheerfulness can be a technique, a way of managing oneself and influencing others. It falls into the category of what the philosopher Michel Foucault called the “technologies of the self” — those techniques and practices through which we make ourselves into particular kinds of subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Cheerfulness has something in common with the affects, “those intensities that pass from body to body,” as two recent scholars have described them.<sup>9</sup> The affects of the self have become a topic of scholarly research in the humanities and social sciences in the past several decades. Affect, in Sara Ahmed’s memorable phrase, is “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.” For political philosopher Antonio Negri, affect is a “non-place,” a site where the individual can resist the late-capitalist totalization of exchange as the measure of all things.<sup>10</sup>

Scholarship on affect is often rooted in a celebration of difference. It tends to focus on what one scholar calls “the singularity of one’s affective experiences . . . the idea of one’s difference from all other subjects.”<sup>11</sup> However, cheerfulness, as I noted earlier, also is consistently linked by poets and philosophers to the texture of community. It is social and may emerge from or toward others. It is a force, a form of energy that can influence those around us. The philosopher Hume calls it “a flame” and “a contagion.” It can take over a group and

change the interactions of its participants. For the gloomy French philosopher Blaise Pascal, this social dimension is also a tool of domination. In his *Pensées*, he complains that people rich in imagination are “imperious” and cheerful (or “gay”) in conversation: “Their gaiety often wins over the opinion of their listeners.” For Pascal, gaiety is something added to social exchanges, something in the conversation that diverts us from the argument. It doesn’t shape the argument, but it makes us more likely to accept it. This recognition of cheerfulness as something “extra” — as a coloration, a supplement, or an addition — is something we will see repeated across our discussion. It may help explain why Ralph Waldo Emerson calls cheerfulness a “power.”<sup>12</sup> And because cheerfulness has a social dimension — one that can shape others, as well as oneself — it is something that can be *used*. Cheerfulness can be appropriated, used as a tool, both for managing emotional life and for affecting others.

We can refine our description of the object of study here by pointing to the distinction between melancholia and cheerfulness. In classical accounts of physiology, which endured in the West from the Greeks well into the nineteenth century, the body is governed by the interplay of four humors, the sanguine, the phlegmatic, the choleric, and the melancholic. The emotional state that we call melancholy is the result of a humoral imbalance, coming from an excess of black bile in the system. Melancholy is conventionally set in opposition to the sanguine humor, which is associated with the blood. Cheerfulness is frequently linked to sanguinity. However it is not a humor. It is a force, almost a spur, that can stimulate sanguinity and counter melancholy. It is a technique, a “technology,” to recall Foucault’s term. Because you can make yourself cheerful, you can deploy cheerfulness as a weapon against melancholy, even if you are not, yourself, of a sanguine humor. And cheerfulness can be generated or stimulated through the practices of everyday life. Early modern medical writing and manuals of comportment from the Enlightenment offer advice about how to stimulate cheer. As an anonymous author from the seventeenth century in England recommends, “Generous Wine” and

“Musick Instrumental as well as Vocal” are useful techniques for generating cheer and combating melancholy.<sup>13</sup>

While the relationship between cheerfulness and melancholy may be a cliché, the generative power of cheerfulness is disruptive. It moves things about and unsettles them. To take a somewhat random example, we can point out that in Herman Melville’s well-known sea story *Billy Budd* (published posthumously in 1924), the handsome sailor Billy is consistently described by the narrator with the adjective “cheerful.” His superior, John Claggart, whose fascination with Billy leads to both of their deaths, stares miserably at him through melancholy eyes. As Claggart’s hostility and fascination with Billy grow, he is described as watching “the cheerful sea-Hyperion with a settled meditative and melancholy expression.” Much of the plot of the story turns on the ways in which Billy’s cheerfulness — the cheerfulness of the handsome, ambitious young male — unsettles the rigidly hierarchical community of the ship on which he serves.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that cheerfulness functions differently according to the social identity of the character through which it is enacted and to whom it is attached. It shapes different characters in diverse ways. It has different uses. A bit later, we will look at the relationships between cheer and gender identity and cheer and race. And our discussions of Charles Dickens and Horatio Alger will consider the uncomfortable relationship between cheerfulness and male ambition hinted at in Melville’s story.

The distinction between melancholy and cheer has interesting implications for the study of literature. An important strand of aesthetic thought in the European tradition focuses on the importance of melancholy as a factor in poetic composition. Poets are said to be melancholy. Albrecht Dürer’s famous image *Melancholia I* is often taken as a figure for the artist. Here again, cheerfulness is overlooked. For there is a counterhistory, which I will be tracing here, that links cheerfulness to both poetry and literary interpretation. I want to see how cheerfulness raises questions about literature itself, about how reading and writing may or may not be cheerful activities.



I will show that cheerfulness has an aesthetic dimension to go along with its moral and psychological aspects. My interest extends to the history of aesthetic forms and, in particular, to the workings of artistic creation. At the present moment, as we watch the demise of traditional literary culture, that history might be useful.

My own approach, while drawing on some of the themes of affect studies, takes shape as well through an engagement with philology — that is, the study of the history of words — and with intellectual and literary history. The historical and linguistic dimensions of this project are crucial, since much work on emotion in the humanities and social sciences focuses on the present, on our life in the media-saturated world of late capitalism, on film or video. Cheerfulness, however, takes its modern shape at a much earlier moment, as I will show. It is first conceptualized in relationship to late medieval practices of piety and spirituality. While cheerfulness may be both empty and ubiquitous today, it has been an important concept in past spiritual and collective life. What we live today as “cheer” (cheerleaders, Cheerios, Cheers!) is the distant echo of that earlier moment, now largely stripped of its spiritual underpinnings. I want to listen to the resonances and echoes of that earlier history.

But first we must sketch out some parameters for the project. Much ancient moral philosophy privileged a state of stable well-being. The Greeks, from the time of the pre-Socratic Democritus, called it *euthymia*. As Democritus’s biographer Diogenes Laertius puts it: “The end of action is tranquility [*euthymia*] . . . a state in which the soul continues calm and strong, undisturbed by any fear or superstition or any other emotion.” The Roman Stoic Seneca translated *euthymia* as “tranquillity of mind” (*tranquillitas animi*): “A steady and favourable course . . . a peaceful state, being never uplifted nor ever cast down. This will be ‘tranquillity,’” writes Seneca.<sup>15</sup> Later scholars have occasionally rendered this idea into English as “cheerfulness.” We will certainly hear echoes of this Stoic tradition as we go, especially in such writers as Montaigne and Hume. However, as we will see, modern notions of cheerfulness imply a much more active and,

indeed, social model of well-being. The modernity of these notions is part of the story told by this book.

No less important, as a kind of technical term in the classical world, is the Latin word *hilaritas*, from which we derive our words “hilarity” and “exhilarate” and which is used to describe lively conversation, general gaiety. This is a word we will see consistently translated into English as “cheerfulness” in the early modern period. Our focus will be on how that process of translation—centrally important to both the English-language Bible and other key texts—generates new layers of meaning that are in turn picked up by later writers. Together, these layers of meaning shape modern ideas of cheerfulness. But this book is not a “word study.” We will also trace how the effect of cheerfulness circulates like a cloud through certain texts, even when the word “cheer” itself is absent.<sup>16</sup>

It is also worth distinguishing cheerfulness and *euthymia* from such notions as the Chinese *le* and *wan*, which, as Michael Nylan has demonstrated, are quite different: “Upon close examination,” writes Nylan, “the semantic units routinely translated as ‘happy’ or ‘cheerful’ in English have well-defined but different social valences in classical Chinese.” As Nylan goes on to point out, “The vocabulary for several American virtues relating to happiness (the virtue of ‘cheerfulness,’ for example) does not seem to exist in the classical writings in China, though an absence of literary evidence does not ensure that cheerfulness was absent from daily life.” It is also worth pointing to the important Sanskrit Yogic tradition, which stresses characteristics of equanimity that are often translated as “cheerfulness” (linked to *sumuka* and *sumana*) as the consequence of a purification of the mind. This is, again, quite different from the modern Western notions of cheerfulness and gaiety I explore below.<sup>17</sup>

Yet at the same time, even in the Western tradition, because of its median position and its modesty, cheerfulness often risks turning into some less appealing version of itself, such as what the seventeenth-century moral philosopher Obadiah Walker called “mirth.” Mirth, says Walker, is a vice that seems “like a virtue,” but is no

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such thing. Cheerfulness, by contrast, *is* a virtue, at least for Walker. However, “the exact limits and boundaries [are] difficultly fixed” between the two.<sup>18</sup> Our task will be to study the shifting edges of the nonecstatic sensibility manifested by cheer. Just as cheerfulness can counter melancholy, it borders on more extreme forms of bliss — joy, transport, Dionysian rapture — without becoming them. It lives on the edge of these more intense emotions. As one of the characters notes in *Mademoiselle de Scudéry’s* popular seventeenth-century prose romance, *Clelia*, there is a difference between cheerfulness and joy. Joy may suddenly arise in even the most melancholic persons, whereas cheerfulness functions differently. “Joy sometimes causes sighing, when it is extreme, whereas laughter is the perpetual effect of cheerfulness. Joy can never arise of itself alone, it must always have some extraneous cause. ’Tis not so with cheerfulness, which arises of itself. Joy is an infallible consequent of all passions when they are satisfi’d; cheerfulness subsists without aid, though it may be augmented by causes from without.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, cheerfulness has much in common with a kind of moderation, a form of light-hearted decorum blending body and spirit. And because of its socially moderated character, cheerfulness can be counterfeited, as we will also see. Indeed, if the excessive version of joy is a kind of unbridled ecstasy, and if the extreme of melancholic thoughtfulness is psychic paralysis, the flip side of cheerfulness is not joy, but a manufactured cheerfulness, a fake gaiety that often motivates strategies of “passing” or the strategic manipulation of social relations. This “fake cheer” will emerge through our discussion of how cheerfulness shapes literary fiction-making.

Through a series of interlocking chapters, this book tells a story of cheerfulness from the end of the Middle Ages in Europe to twenty-first-century America. It offers an account of the forms and uses of cheerfulness in the emergence of modernity. The book falls easily into three parts. Chapters 1 through 5 study the early modern period, locating cheerfulness both in medical writing and in the theological discourse of the period. Here we will study the politics

of cheerfulness, depicted in Shakespeare, as well as the important reinvention of cheerfulness by the French philosopher Montaigne. Chapters 6 to 9 focus on the rise of modernity in the age of capitalism, taking us from the moral philosophy and social psychology of the Scottish Enlightenment (David Hume, Adam Smith) to the development of the classic English novel (Jane Austen, Charles Dickens) and Romantic poetry (William Wordsworth). Here we see cheerfulness interwoven with accounts of economic life, of ambition, of work, of gender identity. The last chapters study modern cheerfulness, beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche, two writers who reimagine cheerfulness in aesthetic terms and take us into the changing function of cheerfulness in the consumer capitalism of the mid-twentieth century. We end with a consideration of the philosopher Theodor Adorno, who wrote against cheerfulness in art, and the jazz musician Louis Armstrong, who reinvented cheer against a background of African American performance.

We will see that cheerfulness migrates from one intellectual discipline to another. For the early modern period, it is deeply connected to ideas of Christian community and to theories of a healthy spiritual and physical life. In the Enlightenment, it reappears in discussions of social virtue, in ideals of philosophical conversation and friendly colloquy. In the nineteenth century, under the pressure of an emerging capitalist economy, it moves from common spaces into the individual personality, becoming a character trait, a factor in ambition or psychological healing. In the modern era, it slips its spiritual and communal moorings, to be taken up by the somber heroisms of the Boy Scouts and the slogans of the snake-oil salesman.

My approach will be not to abstract concepts from words, as if they existed apart from their specific appearances or contexts. Nor do I attempt to describe how human beings “really” are, in the ways that a psychologist or a sociologist might do. I am interested in fiction and in language. In the early sections of the book, I will look in particular at the history of key words and at the residues of historical and social experience inside those words. This is because late medieval

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and early modern culture is more linguistically variegated than our own, as writers shuttle between Latin, Greek, and various emerging national vernaculars. Much of the history of cheerfulness can be unpacked from the history of the word itself, which is, of course, a term in English. Yet we can responsibly approach this topic only comparatively. Whenever possible, I will expand my reach to fold in discussions of non-English terms and concepts, shadings that add texture and relief to our English vocabulary of cheer. By toggling between languages, we can sense and describe the connotative penumbra around certain words. I am interested in how words accrue layers of meaning and in how semantic nuances power philosophical arguments and fictional stories as tools for evoking and describing how certain characters act or feel. I want to build our discussion on the different terms across the European languages that seem to refer to the emotional state, whether we call it, in English, “cheerfulness” or “cheer,” in German *Heiterkeit*, or in French *gaieté*. I want to explore the resonances and limits of those words and their cognates. Our inquiry will begin in the study of words — in etymologies and translations — but will quickly expand to trace the circulation of effects, images, and scenarios in imaginative writing.

But why focus on literature and language? And how do we know that when different writers are talking about cheerfulness, they are talking about exactly the same thing? Obviously, we don’t, any more than we know everything that the word “democracy” connoted in fifth-century BCE Athens. Whether a philosopher in the nineteenth century would “feel” the same kind of cheerfulness as a mystic in the fourteenth century, we cannot know. But we *can* notice that the language around cheerfulness — the metaphors, the technical terms, the examples — remains remarkably consistent across time, languages, and forms of writing. Of this we will see undeniable evidence. Literature gives us history in words. It imagines the situations in which certain words are used to describe certain kinds of feelings or actions. It gives us insight into what it feels like to say those things, what they mean, what their reach is, when they are used. It initiates

us into the meaning world of people who are not us, living in different spaces and times.

Moreover, because literature is fictional, it provides multiple ways for us to look at emotional and ethical valences in language. When we read *The Tempest*, we can study *both* what Shakespeare's character Prospero says about cheer and what it means that Shakespeare puts that particular word in the mouth of an Italian wizard/prince who is trying to get his kingdom back. This access to another world's language and sensorium is one of the things that literature gives its readers. As we will see, even very abstract writers, such as the philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, take refuge in literary examples, in fictional scenarios that can help us gauge what they mean by cheerfulness and what they think it can and can't do. Fiction drops us down into the swamp of meaning in ways that other forms of documentation do not. And, in this case, since we are often toggling between languages — looking at moments of translation, echo, citation, and so on — that swamp of meaning is particularly dense and fertile.<sup>20</sup> To explore this terrain, we will need a certain amount of literary fieldwork, or what is sometimes called “close reading.” Though often detailed, this should not, I hope, be a slog for the reader. In any event, attention to detail is necessary, since it alone can show us not only what is said about cheerfulness, but what cheerfulness *does*.

The largely northern European and English-language tradition on which I focus here has emerged as the area of richest inquiry during my research. This is not to say, obviously, that there are not cheerful people outside of the traditions studied here. It only means that for the writers examined in the chapters to follow, cheerfulness is an explicit topic of reflection. My readings outside of the tradition that occupies me here have not revealed the same types of nuances and shifts that I trace in what follows. For example, it is simply not the case that we find the kinds of slippages and openings that we find around “cheerfulness” in the Spanish word *alegría* — a word derived from the Latin *alacritas*, which we will meet along the way. Or to take a literary example, the most influential early modern

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Italian poet, Ludovico Ariosto, strikes comic poses and deploys a light-hearted attitude in his epic poem *Orlando furioso* (1532). Yet the *language* of cheer is missing. As he winds up his long poem, he proclaims a generalized climate of *allegrezza*. However, his *allegrezza* is rejoicing. It is not cheer.<sup>21</sup>

What follows, then, is a story of texts that take cheerfulness as both a concept and a force, as something to be explained and something to be used. It is the story of a flame, of a fleeting force that nonetheless plays a role in the emotional history of modernity. Cheer begins our history as a quality of the body, but it quickly takes on social, philosophical, and even theological implications. It thickens into a concept that accrues psychological nuances, moral implications, and aesthetic force. It helps to shape selfhood, generate stories, and structure philosophical arguments. It becomes a tool—for theology, economics, manners, poetry, social advancement, and political reconciliation. It names a form of power that has been overlooked and, perhaps, undervalued.

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