

**Relational Forms XI
'No Laughing Matter':
Ethics, Politics and Laughter
in Literature and the Arts**

**an international conference hosted by the
Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto, Portugal
and organised by CETAPS
3-5 December 2026**

Confirmed keynote speakers:

Aileen Douglas | **Andrew Gibson** | **Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin**
(Trinity College Dublin) | (Emeritus, Royal Holloway) | (Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry)

Laughter has helped shape the products of the human imagination from early stages in every known civilisation. Its importance as a cultural factor has often involved a lot more than entertainment. Indeed, its deployment, its choice of agents and targets, and the reactions it obtains, has often seen laughter bring out the ethical and political framework of a given community.

In European cultures, this is evident from Antiquity, when comedy proved a decisive element in the civic, festive and religious practices of Athenian society in the 5th and 4th centuries BC – with laughter driving comic plots to foreground conflict, but also the social recomposition brought by their ending. In such contexts, established powers could be risibly targeted, but the fact that this was only possible under festive licence also signals a crucial aspect of our theme: how sensitive those in power could be to seeing their persons, actions and offices treated as laughing matter.

Any historical consideration of the acceptability of laughter, when directed at figures of authority, or at the public or institutional values of any one community, cannot but note a dreary record of repression and violence unleashed upon the agents of such challenges. But such an overview will also highlight the cultural resilience of laughter (both satirical and benevolent). Certain frameworks provided sanctuary and nurture – as with the carnivalesque freedom of certain medieval festive practices, or the obliqueness of dramatic fictions in some early modern comedy. The traditions of political satire developed and championed by key eighteenth-century authors were to find inflections and continuities under Enlightenment conditions, and into sociopolitical modernity. And, in our era, the diversity of media for creation and communication has confirmed the continued attractiveness of laughter in political action and cultural response – but also the persistence of the censorious drive, even in markedly liberal environments.

This conference engages with such concerns by inviting contributions on laughter as creative asset and (potential) ethical and political liability in literature and the arts. Honouring the Relational Forms tradition of embedding particular commemorative designs in its annual conferences, we derive our inspiration this year from the centennial of a momentous publication: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). As always, this will not be *the* object of the conference, but rather a specific foothold in cultural memory that may inspire discussions of other objects from a very broad literary and artistic landscape.

As indicated by the number in its title, this is the eleventh regular event to reflect the concerns of the eponymous research group (*Relational Forms*), based at CETAPS (the Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies). The group's rationale and remit entail that we centrally address the cultures of the

Anglophone world, with a particular focus on Ireland and Britain – but we accept contributions bearing on other literary and artistic cultures.

Relational Forms XI will welcome **proposals for 20-minute papers in English** responding to the above. Suggested (merely indicative) topics include:

- laughter, ethics and politics: literary and artistic modernity
- laughter, ethics and politics: the literary and artistic past
- satire: laughter as punishment
- irony: laughter, indirection and ambiguity
- ‘no laughing matter’: authority and the repression of verbal or visual creations
- laughter and the traditions of public entertainment: street, stage, screens
- laughter, authorship and authority
- remembering Swift: satire, didacticism and *saeva indignatio*

Submissions should be sent by email to relational@letras.up.pt

Please include **RF11** in the subject line of your email and organise your proposal into **two separate files**:

- a file containing the full title and a 200-to-250-word description of your paper;
- a file containing the author’s data: name, affiliation, contact address, paper title and author’s bio-note (150 words).

Please name these two documents as follows:

Surname_Name_Abstract_RF11

Surname_Name_AuthorInfo_RF11

Deadline for proposals: 30 June 2026

Notification of acceptance: 20 July 2026

Deadline for registration: 6 November 2026

Registration Fee: 90 Euros

Student fee: 70 Euros

Registration details will be posted online in September 2026

All delegates are responsible for their own travel arrangements and accommodation.

More information available at <https://cetaps.wixsite.com/relationalforms11>

Organised by the Relational Forms research area

<https://www.cetaps.com/research-area/relational-forms-medial-and-textual-transits-in-ireland-and-britain/>

Executive Committee:

Rui Carvalho Homem (coord.) | Márcia Lemos (vice-coord.) | Jorge Bastos da Silva | Miguel Ramalhete Gomes | Jorge Almeida e Pinho | Katarzyna Pisarska | Mark Wakefield

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