

Cheerfulness in the history of psychiatry**Olivier Walusinski**

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Abstract

In 1762, Louis-Antoine Marquess de Caraccioli (1719–1803), a prolific writer of the eighteenth century, dedicated a book to a psychological theme that medicine has forgotten: ‘*gaieté*’ in French, which we will translate as ‘cheerfulness’. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this work inspired two doctoral theses in medicine, one defended in Montpellier, the other in Paris. In their texts, Louis Monferran (1785–?) and Vincent Rémi Giganon (1794–1857) explored the therapeutic benefits of the medical prescription of cheerfulness. In addition to lifestyle recommendations, they focused on the psychotropic substances available to them: alcohol, coca, hemp and opiates. In an original and novel way, Giganon introduced and recommended ‘*le gaz oxydule d’azote inspiré*’ or inhaled nitrous oxide gas.

Keywords

Cheerfulness, cognitive-behavioural therapy, history of psychiatry, nitrous oxide, psychopharmacology

The word ‘cheerfulness’ occurs rarely or not at all in contemporary psychiatric writings. Nonetheless, this theme was studied and led to new therapeutic concepts in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since mainstream magazines frequently cover happiness and pleasure to help their readers attain and enjoy them, should current psychiatry draw inspiration from old writings to conceive of a cognitive-behavioural therapy that introduces cheerfulness in the treatments proposed by today’s physicians?

First, let us explain our terminological choices. The word we are translating as ‘cheerfulness’ is the French word ‘*gaieté*’. Because the word ‘gaiety’ exists in English, we will lay out our reasons for deciding against it as a translation of *gaieté*. Before we examine the ways in which *gaieté* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries lent itself to medical definitions and practices, we will start with a brief comparison of *gaieté* and ‘gaiety’ in both historic and modern contexts.

We consulted five French dictionaries, ranging from the nineteenth century to the 1960s the 2000s, for the meaning of *gaieté*.¹ In four of the five dictionaries, some form of *bonne humeur* is referred to. This term can be translated by ‘good humour’ (unidiomatic but preserves the link with the humours of Hippocrates), ‘good spirits’ or ‘good mood’. A ‘mood’ may best describe this state of mind, which arises spontaneously, comes and goes, and is ultimately superficial. By contrast, in three of the five dictionaries, *gaieté* is also an inclination, a disposition, a taste for, a readiness, or a permanent good mood. In this way, the notion of the French *gaieté* tends to couple mood with an innate configuration, both procuring laughter, fun and vivacity. Littré’s (1873) dictionary captures this by introducing a key component of *gaieté*: ‘*Vivacité de belle humeur franche et communicative*’. The French is concise, elegant, and difficult to translate while retaining all its meaning: ‘Vivacity arising from unbridled high spirits that evokes similar feelings in others’;² which is to say, *gaieté* is ‘communicable’, tending to spread in a group.

In one of the three contemporary English dictionaries consulted (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2024), this communicable quality also comes through, but the meaning seems more expressive or boisterous.³ In the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* (2024), gaiety is not only ‘the quality or state of being gay or cheerful’; it also refers to ‘merrymaking, entertainment, festivity’.⁴ In addition to an external, energetic sense of ‘communicability’, there are two things to notice here: first, merrymaking and cheerfulness, both of which date back to the definition of gaiety in Samuel Johnson’s 1755 dictionary; and second, the role of being cheerful. In all three modern English dictionaries consulted, cheerfulness is a synonym of ‘gaiety’ (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2024). But cheerfulness has further meanings. In Johnson’s 1755 dictionary, it is freedom from dejection and gloom. Indeed, in the etymology of ‘cheerfulness’, ‘elevating the

spirits' dates from the mid-fifteenth century, and the meaning 'that which promotes good spirits' is from the late fourteenth century. Cheerfulness not only dispels; it favours a light-hearted mood – a less raucous form of the collective effect.

In examining the modern meaning of 'cheerfulness', we find that it illustrates the French notion of *gaieté* better than the English 'gaiety'. *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* defines 'cheerful' as follows: 'marked by cheer or by spontaneous good spirits arising from a carefree sanguine attitude and a hearty bright lively disposition'. We have the variable elements of spontaneity and 'good spirits' (*bonne humeur*) along with an innate disposition. The argument can thus be made that cheerfulness is the more apt definition of *gaieté*. For this reason, we have decided to translate 'gaiety' as 'cheerfulness'.

In none of the French and English dictionaries we consulted did we find any medical meaning. In fact, the definition of 'gay' found in *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* uses the words 'excited' and 'joyous exhibition', in sharp contrast to the medical definitions of *gaieté* we will present below, which refer explicitly to the medical context and use such words as '*douce*', '*douceur*' (gentle/gentleness) and '*tranquillité*'.

We will now explore whether those lacking in cheerfulness can find some semblance of liveliness and good spirits through psychiatry, in the past and in the present.

Louis-Charles-René Macquart (1745–1818) gave this definition in the *Encyclopédie méthodique* edited by Félix Vicq d'Azyr (1748–94):

Cheerfulness is a felicitous gift from nature that is almost always accompanied by good health; it is a way of being perfectly agreeable for others and for oneself; it serves as a companion in solitude and often as wit in society; it is youth's charm and the only amenity in old age; it is the opposite of sadness, as joy is of sorrow. (Vicq-d'Azyr, 1793)

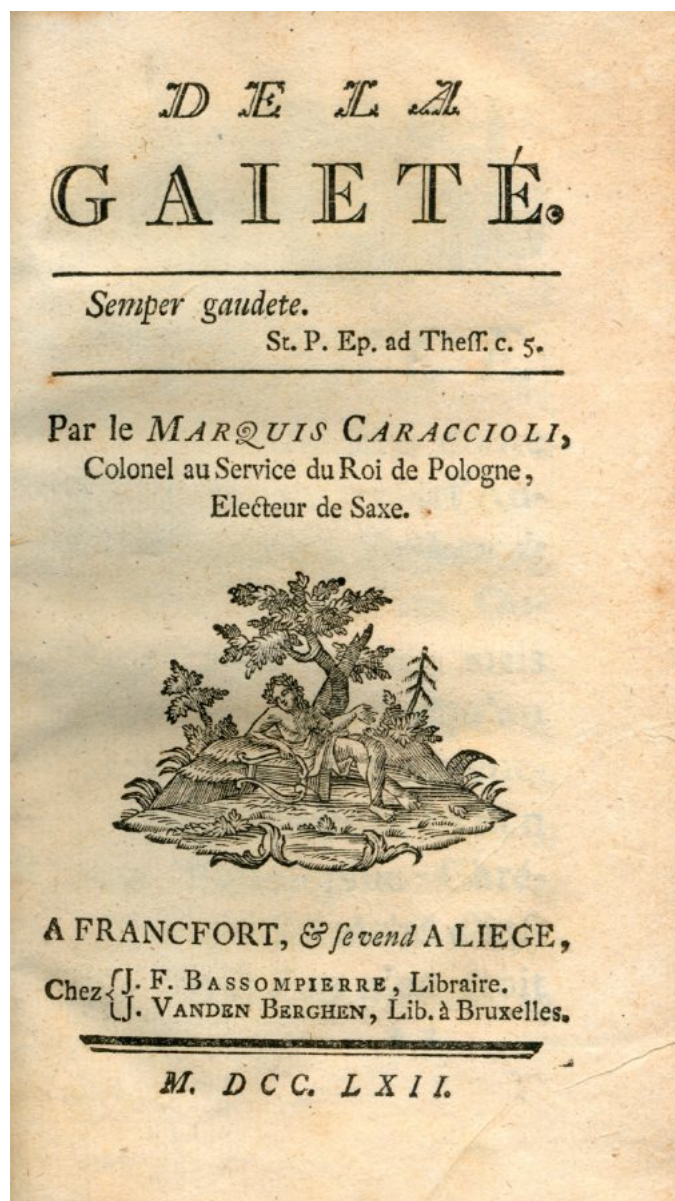
The contemporary French philosopher André Comte-Sponville (2013: 431) sees in cheerfulness 'an inclination to joy that makes it easy, natural, and spontaneous, as if it could exist even before any reason to be joyful⁵ Its force lies in its superficiality'. He goes on to compare his psychological complexus to that of the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533–92): 'I was more talented for thought than for life, more inclined to anxiety than serenity, to melancholy than cheerfulness' (Comte-Sponville, 2020: 387). We will begin our exploration with a polymathic writer of the eighteenth century, before fleshing out our subject with two theses defended at the start of the nineteenth century in France.

Louis-Antoine de Caraccioli (1719–1803)

Louis-Antoine Marquis de Caraccioli was a prolific author working in Paris, after travelling and teaching in Poland and also in Italy, the land of his ancestors. Known for his cheerfulness, his vivacious mind, and his talent for imitating voices and gestures, he brought his ironic wit to bear through the anecdotes, persiflages and travelogues he presented at several Parisian salons. Aside from a few works with a theological connotation, Caraccioli left us some amusing writings that were nonetheless mocked by philosophers, particularly *La Jouissance de soi-même* (Caraccioli, 1741), *La Conversation avec soi-même* (Caraccioli, 1753), and his unusual *Le livre de quatre couleurs*, printed in green or red and in various formats starting in 1759 (Caraccioli, 1759). His typographical experiments offered an example of the relationships between writing and printing by exploring the influence of colours on his readers' emotions. Caraccioli also satirised the habits and customs of high society. His books were so popular that translations followed in English, German, Italian and Russian.

Caraccioli noted in *La Jouissance de soi-même* that 'it should be clear that our mind, limited and in no way having infinite resources, necessarily falls into trifles after it has rigorously applied itself' (Caraccioli, 1741: 3). Undoubtedly finding this book to be incomplete,

although he had dedicated a chapter ‘on the pleasures of reflection’, 20 years later he published a new 341-page book entitled *De la gaieté* (Caraccioli, 1762) (Figure 1). ‘In vain would hypocrisy dare to denigrate cheerfulness, which must be understood as the outpouring of a philosophical soul on inconsequential things that the imagination embellishes’ (p. 3).



Caraccioli distinguished between two types of cheerfulness: ‘that of temperament and that of character; the former is a disposition of the organs and the latter a turn of the mind’ (p. 5). These two types could be interpreted as an innate disposition, on the one hand, and culture and social conditioning, on the other.⁶ Caraccioli added the role played by imagination to his definition:

It is difficult to fathom the extent to which imagination and cheerfulness reciprocally serve each other: they are two wings that support the soul in its flight, despite sadness and dissipation, and they are two foundational stones of its throne of wisdom (p. 10).

As a distraction from fatigue and pain, cheerfulness offers consolation to those in sorrow and drives away boredom. Caraccioli reviewed the various forms of cheerfulness at different ages,

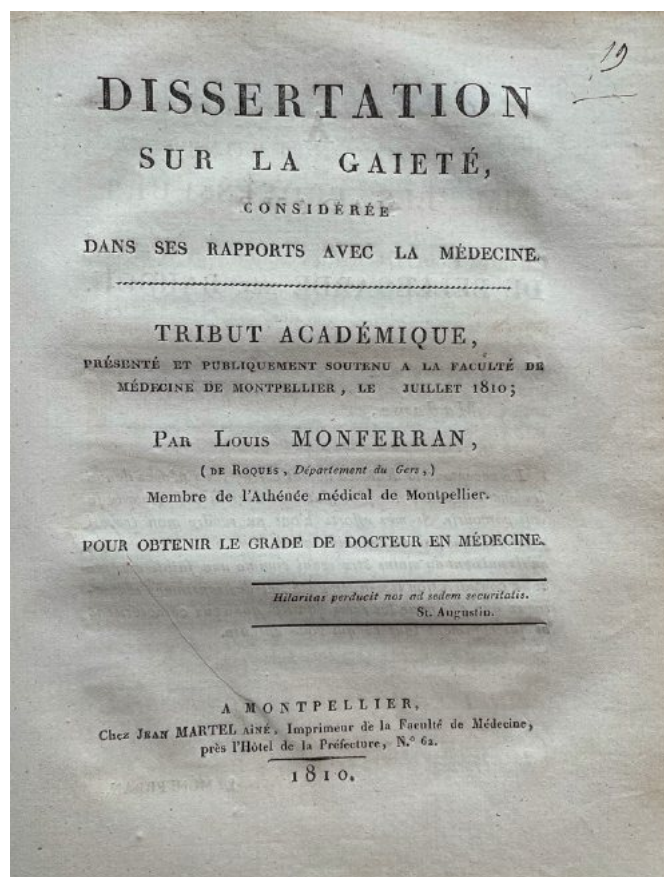
from the innocence of children to the ‘habitual cheerfulness’ of the elderly (p. 20). The constraints of court life prevented the highest-ranking socialites from experiencing it because they ‘feared erring in matters of etiquette’ (p. 24). As to the ‘cheerfulness’ of the rich, it ‘would be much better if they knew restraint and how to enjoy themselves in an honest way’ p. 24). Caraccioli also considered that ‘the most miserable of the poor [had] their own type of cheerfulness which, through the compensation of Providence, is as keen as their sorrows’ (p. 26). Caraccioli was a master of the art of expressions: ‘Cheerfulness can be called the enamel of style and thought: it lends a touching and enchanting colour’ (p. 122), or ‘cheerfulness cannot exist without liberty. Slavery smothers cheerfulness’ (p. 238). For him there was no doubt that: ‘cheerfulness contributes to well-being’, for ‘cheerful men do not age at all, and always seem in good health, given that cheerfulness suspends illness in such a way that we scarcely perceive of it’ (p. 133). ‘Most sick people desire a cheerful physician, and many doctors have earned their fortune by their cheerfulness more than by their skill.’ (p. 144). William Osler (1849–1919) had a similar view: ‘Courage and cheerfulness will not only carry you over the rough places in life, but will enable you to bring comfort and help to the weak-hearted and will console you in the sad hours’ (Osler, 1932: 214).

To those wanting to find cheerfulness, Caraccioli recommended a light diet rich in fruit, especially apples, thought to dispel melancholy. But this regimen also included ‘the wines of Champagne, coffee, and tobacco’ (p. 290), though not chocolate. For him, ‘only cheerfulness begets these agreeable impromptus that Society offers for its amusements’, whereas ‘suspicion destroys cheerfulness’ (p. 276). In contrast, Caraccioli (1762: 135) wrote, ‘Sorrow along with anger, these two scourges of humankind, imperceptibly destroy individuals from all walks of life’. He portrayed those suffering from sadness, whom we would call depressed, as ‘plaintive shadows of themselves, with an air of the tomb; they experience their own existence solely through the impression of an insidious sorrow that quietly annihilates them without their knowing the nature nor the cause’ (p. 138).

Thesis of Louis Monferran, 1810

In 1810, Louis Monferran (1785–?), born in Roques in the Gers region of southwestern France, defended his thesis in Montpellier with Pierre Marie Auguste Broussonet (1761–1807) presiding. This work was entitled *Dissertation sur la gaieté considérée dans ses rapports avec la médecine* (Monferran, 1810) (Figure 2). He introduced his findings as follows: ‘I had no model to imitate’ (p. 4). However, although he never cited Caraccioli’s book, his thesis contains numerous ideas and arguments from his predecessor.

Monferran referred to the Latin *Hilaritas* to define cheerfulness: ‘A moral situation or, more aptly, a gentle affection that, whatever its cause, always arises from an inner contentment and leaves the mind free to experience and expand its pleasures’ (p. 7). For Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), *Hilaritas* was synonymous with cheerfulness and high spirits; that is, ‘the faculty to brighten upon hearing lightsome words or seeing droll images. Contagious and unifying,⁷ *Hilaritas* exemplifies goodly interactions between human beings and offers gentle comfort in order to mitigate the harshness of life’ (Spinoza, 1677/1966: 92). Monferran (1810: 6) introduced a distinction between momentary cheerfulness and lasting cheerfulness: ‘Momentary cheerfulness delights the soul without perturbing it, evokes laughter without ridicule, and refines pleasures without corrupting them.’ Almost intellectualised, ‘lasting or internal cheerfulness is based on an inner contentment, a blameless conscience, and the secret applause that follows a good action; this joy is more perfect than momentary cheerfulness’. Pleasure differs from cheerfulness, which is ‘a happy and beneficent passion that gently rocks humankind in felicity and hope and which banishes worry and dissipates sorrow. In short, it is the tutelary power of health and the balm of longevity’ (p. 6).



Monferran discussed the various attitudes and behaviours generated by cheerfulness at various stages of life. Then, adopting the ancient medicine of the humours, he depicted cheerfulness as a function of the temperaments, distinguishing between those closest to this disposition and those furthest from it: sanguine humour ('florid and laughing face'), bilious humour ('glittering, keen eyes in a thin, often yellow face'), phlegmatic humour ('tranquil physiognomy without expression'), and finally, melancholic or atrabilious humour ('sad physiognomy, pale face with penetrating, sunken eyes') (p. 10).

Without ever citing him, Monferran followed in the footsteps of Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801) who introduced physiognomy (Lavater, 1781: 22–7): 'A habitual affection in a man gives his face and gaze an expression analogous with said affection ... Those with a cheerful and jovial character are incapable of expressing a sad face'. He described the cheerful face as having 'half-closed eyes, retraction of the angles of the mouth, space between the wings of the nose, with a small dimple that often appears between the large and small zygomata, the result being a new consonance in the whole of the face'. For Monferran (1810: 13), the benefits of cheerfulness had a physiological explanation; they excited 'the vital movements', 'by opening all the nervous networks and by facilitating circulation throughout the body'. In making this argument, Monferran showed that he was a serious disciple of the medical doctrine of the Montpellier School, based on vitalism and developed by Théophile de Bordeu (1722–76) and Paul-Joseph Barthez (1734–1806). But this did not mean that Monferran renounced Hippocratic humourism: 'Each humour encounters its pathways arranged according to the refinements it will undergo; each excretory conduit is open to the humour it must let pass' (p. 14). Monferran also wrote

Cheerfulness exerts its effects on the intellectual faculties; it reinvigorates mind and body, such that sentiment and thought seem renewed. There is no longer any dissonance between understanding and will, and the disturbances of the imagination cease to exist,

such that a felicitous harmony holds the soul and suspends it between passion and sense.
(p. 15)

In addition, he argued that since ‘cheerfulness embellishes every day of our existence, it is a drop of celestial liquor distilled in the cup of human life so that this life cannot be insipid, and so that we have assistance in tolerating it’ (p. 16). Moreover, Monferran did not fail to stress its communicative nature. He saw in this behavioural replication the therapeutic potential he advised physicians to use in caring for their patients.

Monferran raised this question: ‘Can physicians apply moral therapy as well as physical therapy?’ He proposed fighting sadness with cheerfulness, ‘which acts to restore the fixed spasm on the tripod of life: faith, hope, and love’ (p. 17). For the physical condition, sadness is ‘a slow poison that insidiously undermines life ... Sleep flees from the eyelids, appetite is lost, digestion and nutrition fail to function, and health flags, all of which opens the way to all chronic diseases’ (p. 18). To fight this sadness, Monferran advised ‘games, amusements, performances, and light-hearted conversations’ (p. 20), walks in gardens in bloom, listening to melodious sounds that enchant the ears, fresh air, and so forth.

Thesis of Hippolyte Giganon, 1818

Vincent Rémi Hippolyte Giganon (born on 24 January 1794 in Montluçon, in the Allier region of central France) defended his thesis on 7 February 1818, presided over by the obstetrician Amédée Désormeaux (1778–1830) (Giganon, 1818) (Figure 3). First serving as a military physician, he finished his career as a practitioner in Orléans (Loiret, north-central France) where he died on 23 February 1857.

Giganon added a note to his thesis: ‘Philosophy and cheerfulness are sisters; the first enlightens our soul, the second puts our body in the most favourable configuration for good health’ (p. 8). He defined cheerfulness by plagiarising Caraccioli:

Cheerfulness is the outpouring of a philosophical soul on inconsequential things that the imagination embellishes; this sentiment takes on all sorts of nuances to distract us from our weariness, to dull our pain, and to render our heart an asylum of tranquillity. Its sensations render man drunk on thought, whereby he savours the pleasure of existing (p. 8).

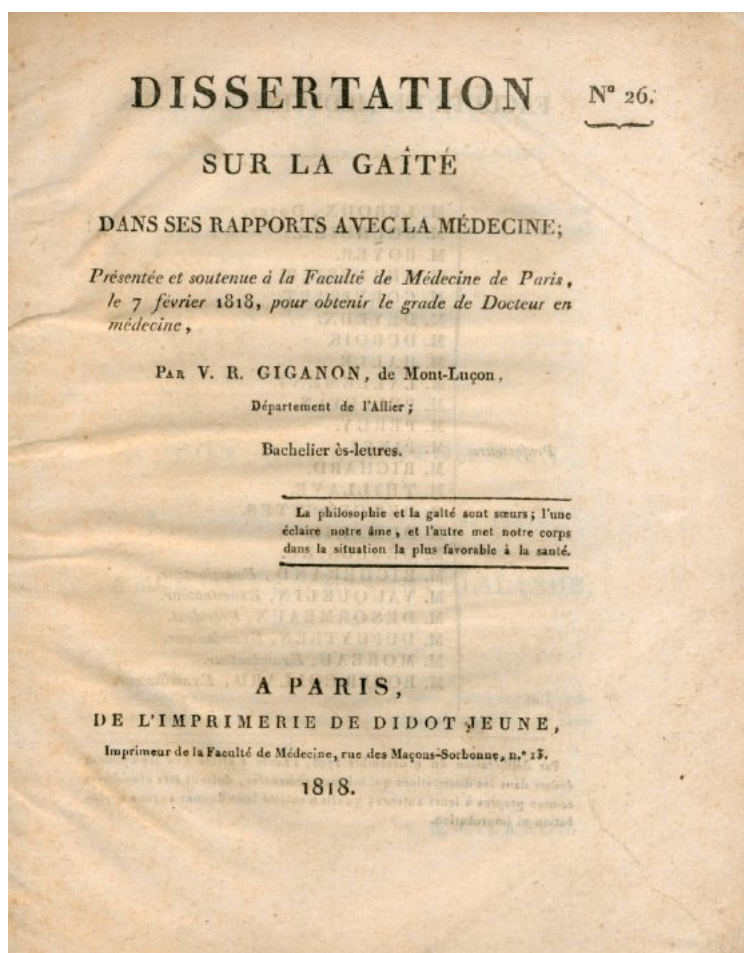
Copying liberally from Caraccioli, but without citing him, he wrote the following: ‘Cheerfulness could be called the enamel of style and thought’. Giganon then depicted the behavioural expression of cheerfulness:

Cheerfulness manifests itself in the physical body by distinct general characteristics; all traits are radiant; the augmented movement of the heart and its arteries gives the skin tone the softest shades; contrary to sad affections, the contraction of the muscles transversally broadens the face and presents the most mirthful appearance; the forehead is calm, open, without any wrinkles; the eyebrows are raised with a slight outward slant; sensual pleasure itself seems to be enthroned in the eyes and their gaze offers a charming expression: they are half closed, as if to retain a pleasing image; and the angles of the mouth are slightly retracted. (p. 9)

For him, cheerfulness is the innate sentiment that gives us strength, the very exteriorisation of health. As a corollary, its absence is ‘the scourge of domestic virtues’ (p. 11), a citation he acknowledged borrowing from the *Lettres Persanes* of Montesquieu (1689–1755).

As to the physiology of cheerfulness, Giganon admitted his ignorance but did refer to the activity of the spleen, heart, and ‘phrenic centre’ along with the circulation of bile and good and

bad humours, concluding, ‘From the instant we want to assign [cheerfulness] a location, we set foot on the vast field of hypotheses, in truth a twisted maze’ (p. 12).



After making some lifestyle recommendations – ride horseback often, go hunting – Giganon reported on using drugs to stimulate cheerfulness and the well-being of the mind: ‘In the most poisonous species, such as nightshades, umbellifers, poppies, and buttercups, nature in its reign over the plants offers us the most certain means after moral upsets to enjoy momentary cheerfulness, which does not fail in its charms’ (p. 16). *Datura stramonium*, a magical plant used since time immemorial, ‘sustains the delirium of pleasure and excites desire’. Referring to Philippe Pinel (1745–1826), whose teachings he may have heard, he advised ‘the opiate composition’, a source of hallucinations; ‘taken in small quantities, it has the singular property of momentarily eliciting cheerfulness, joy, and a sort of drunkenness accompanied by laughter and the excitation of all the senses’ (p. 16). He added, ‘Like all spirituous liquors, this delicious beverage has a very remarkable influence on the encephalic organ and the emotions of joy’ (p. 16). Could doctoral candidates today use such terms in their theses?

Giganon attempted to put his precept – ‘the art of acting on the mind as on the body is what makes the true physician’ – into practice. Even more surprising, in addition to coffee and tobacco in ‘small quantities’, he used ‘inhaled nitrous oxide gas [which] produces a very agreeable sensation and procures a sort of drunkenness and remarkable cheerfulness, hence the epithet of “laughing gas”’ (p. 17). In Giganon’s time, the domestic production of whipped cream depended solely on the energetic turn of the pastry chef’s wrist, whereas it is now possible to aerate cream with siphons using nitrous oxide; unfortunately, these devices are often misused.

This gas was discovered by Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) (Priestley, 1772: 159–64) and was called ‘laughing gas’ by Humphry Davy (1778–1829) in his book on it (Davy, 1800). This substance entered the Parisian pharmacopoeia less than 20 years later, but its anaesthetic effect remained unknown until the dentist Horace Wells (1815–48) began using it in 1844, although it was not widely used as an anaesthetic until 1960.

As a likely disciple of Pinel, Giganon shared the idea that ‘moral medicine [was] very powerful’ (Giganon, 1818: 13) and thus that cheerfulness was a therapeutic tool that practitioners could turn to: ‘Laughter, song, wordplay, and jargon dispel doubts and allay suspicions by double meanings’ (p. 19).

Discussion

The words related to cheerfulness – joy, gaiety, laughter, merriment – appear in the titles of numerous poems, songs and theatre pieces; a street in Paris is even called ‘*rue de la gaieté*’. But Caraccioli’s book seems to be the first to elaborate on this theme. The two doctoral theses that followed its publication borrowed liberally from Caraccioli without citing his name. But we can take pleasure in their agreeable language and style.

For those suffering from depression, cheerfulness seems an unattainable dream. However, the recommendations on healthy practices of daily life, already recommended in the works presented here, remain perfectly applicable and appropriate. The recommendation to go out, walk, pay attention to nature or to the hectic pace of city life is simple but effective. The visual environment plays a role in improving well-being, that is: home decor with its colours and its flowers and their scents; music (our authors recommended the waltz); and attractive place settings at the dining table and the food on display. But rarely do physicians recommend them in detail. However, patients would see such a personal recommendation as a welcome gesture of empathy. The advice around entertainment, music, reading, films and other images would enhance this perception and stave off boredom, sadness and worry. Pinel’s moral treatment adopted this attitude (Pinel, 1798).

In a recent editorial Roger Ladouceur (2019), a Canadian family physician, observed that physicians have the skills to treat dyslipidemia, a depressive state, but do not know how to prescribe happiness, intricately linked to cheerfulness. In the abundant correspondence that the editorial generated, Ladouceur’s Canadian colleagues made multiple recommendations (Wilberforce et al., 2019), such as those listed above, but all of them stressed physical activity, especially walking (Droit and Agid, 2022).

It should be noted that humans have always sought out drugs, in the pharmacological sense of the word, in order to artificially sharpen their perceptions of cheerfulness, satisfaction and pleasure. Alcohol, coca, hemp and opiates have been used since time immemorial, in countries where these plants, containing psychoactive molecules, were prepared for consumption. Giganon’s recommendation to use ‘inhaled nitrous oxide gas’, mentioned above, made him a precursor, and unknowingly, he opened the way for the French alienist Jacques Joseph Moreau de Tours (1804–84) and his therapeutic tests on hashish in 1845 (Moreau de Tours, 1875: 184), thus advancing psychopharmacology in general (Caire, 2017; 2019: 73–94). Moreau de Tours wrote,

One of the effects of hashish that most struck me, and which is generally referred to, is this sort of maniacal excitation always accompanied by a sentiment of cheerfulness and happiness; nothing could evoke this for those who have not experienced it. I see in this the means of effectively fighting the fixed ideas of melancholics by breaking the chain of these ideas and releasing these patients from their exclusive attention on one subject or another. (quoted by Caire, 2018: 83)

The exaltation of mood with an over-excitation of psychic functions, which characterise a manic state, can mimic cheerfulness. Subjects are buoyant, and their eyes shine; they wink at people they do not necessarily know, they laugh, they sing. But the loss of attention, the association of superficial ideas lacking logical construction, the disorders of memory, the exalted imagination with flight of ideas, and the euphoric but unstable mood cannot, in fact, be considered synonymous with cheerfulness as we have presented it here.

There are multiple personality scales that vary according to continents and cultures (Oishi et al., 2013). The CANOE model (Big Five personality traits) – Conscientiousness (control, constraint), Agreeability (altruism, affection), Neuroticism (negative emotions, nervousness), Open-mindedness (originality), Extraversion (energy, enthusiasm) – includes in its extraversion category, alongside traits such as sociability, activity, affirmation and positive emotions, a subcategory related to cheerfulness (Roccas et al., 2022). Psychology and sociology have taken an interest; when will medicine do the same?

As for brain imaging to study the neuronal circuits of cheerfulness, it remains to be explored.

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¹ Littré, 1873; and the following online dictionaries (in January 2024): *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 2024; *Dictionnaire Larousse*, 2024; *Dictionnaire Le Robert*, 2024; *Trésor de la langue française*, 2024).

² All English translations of quoted words are by Anna Fitzgerald.

³ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

⁴ *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*.

⁵ An example of the French definition of *gaieté*, where there is spontaneous emotion coupled with a disposition, is: the joy is there before the joy.

⁶ Could this also refer to a disposition versus external factors, the former being an inclination to play and laugh and the latter being merriment and excitement?

⁷ This recalls the definition of *gaieté* in Littré's (1873) dictionary: '*Vivacité de belle humeur franche et communicative*' or, less concisely, '*Vivacity arising from unbridled high spirits and evoking similar feelings in others*'.