Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender
Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender
Historical and Cultural Perspectives

Edited by
Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist
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We also wish to thank the individual contributors of this volume for their excellent work, prompt timings, and professionalism throughout the completion of this volume. We would like to extend our thanks to our indexer Lewis Webb for fashioning the index at short notice. At last but not the least a fair share of gratefulness goes to our families and friends for their emotional support and for sharing many good laughs.
Laughter, its meaning, and propriety have occupied the minds of philosophers, moralists, and dramatists as far back as Antiquity. In a modern context, laughter is typically associated with humor and joy, but not all laughter is the fruit of the former and even less so the latter. On the contrary, laughter has been associated with ridicule, degradation, and the vulgarity of the lower classes. As such, laughter’s rebellious and disciplining impact has been both acknowledged and feared. The notion of laughter as a positive, involuntary physical reaction associated with harmless joy is, at least in the Western world, a modern construct with a short history. On a more theoretical level, laughter may be defined as a fundamental human behavior with a strong social aspect that is often but not necessarily related to humor. It is a particular kind of facial and vocal expression that can be inviting and repelling, inclusive and exclusive, evoke sympathy, and mobilize derision. Thus, we can both laugh at and laugh with others. Depending on who is laughed at and from which social position, laughter can be disciplining and rebellious, repressive and subversive, or self-ironic and self-degrading.

Correspondingly, humor can be both inclusive and exclusive and, with respect to prevalent norms, affirmative or destabilizing. On a more theoretical level, comic effect may arise from the disparagement and degradation of others, from the incongruity between what is expected according to social and cultural conventions and what actually takes place, or from the momentary suspension of social restraints. While humor plays on ambiguity, incongruity, and role reversal, laughter is highly contagious and works by mobilizing and evoking emotional
responses—all properties that provide humor and laughter with powerful rhetorical potential.

Gender in turn is strongly performative and as such dependent on constant recognition and affirmation, which is precisely where gender connects and intersects with laughter and humor. Thus, the basic assertion of present volume is that humor and laughter not only are fundamental to the construction and reproduction of gender norms and identities, but also provide powerful rhetorical tools for subversion and change. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have been invited to reflect on this claim with the sole restriction of choosing a premodern research period, that is, before the nineteenth century. The result is 12 individual studies spread over an extended time span and geographical and cultural regions ranging from classical Athens to eighteenth-century Sweden, from Iceland in the west to China in the east. The explorative nature of the present study should be seen against the backdrop of the current state of research. To date, historical analyses of laughter and humor typically focused on social class and popular culture rather than gender, with two notable exceptions—the theme of cuckoldry and henpecked husbands and the misogyny of gendered jokes in genres like early modern jestbooks and medieval fabliaux, both also represented in this volume.

The book has been divided into two sections, the headings of which—“Reconsiderations of Misogynistic Representations and New Perspectives on Female Agency” and “The Rhetoric of Manhood”—indicate the major aims of this study: to reconsider already researched themes and present new perspectives, and to note and discuss parallels, differences, and continuities over time and across cultures as the basis for further and more systematic comparison. To meet these ends, each section has been provided with a more comprehensive introduction and presentation of the individual contributions.

Notes


PART I

Laughter, Humor, and Misogyny—
Reconsiderations and New Perspectives
Premodern concepts of gender, laughter, and humor have often been interpreted as primarily rigid, binary, misogynistic, and patriarchic. In feminist scholarship, studies often analyze the association of women with evil, the non-normative or the other abound, across disciplines and cultural contexts. Mythology, epic, and forms of folklore have certainly displayed the ability for female heroines to scheme against others (women or their patriarchs), exercise power behind the scenes, use their sexuality, and manipulate their surroundings. Early feminist scholars interpreted these negative female paradigms as a consequence of a binary patriarchal order. In her book *Le Rire de la Meduse*, Hélène Cixous, like Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, traced the battle between the sexes back into Graeco-Roman antiquity, specifically classical Greek literature, performance, and oral tradition as a way for phallocentric societies to control women. By projecting the Greek myths of Medusa and Abyss, Cixous argued that apotropaic, laughable portrayals of mythical women in the past were a means to cast them away and to alienate them from civic processes. In the same breath, and throughout history, women are often portrayed as scheming, corrupt, selfish, and with hegemonic tendencies. For example, there is a long tradition of using Roman upper-class women to illustrate the corruption of Roman society. In Roman literature the scheming, sexually voracious, and uncontrollable woman is often used as a negative paradigm. Tacitus and other writers such as Dio Cassius and Suetonius used Messalina’s sexual voracity to illuminate the corruption and decay of the Roman Empire rather than to represent accurately historical womanhood in Rome. As a result, the idea of using women’s behavior to represent the corruption of or deviation from
societal norms has become a common device in both ancient and contemporary portrayals. The hegemonic shrewd behavior and lack of chastity of women are represented as symptomatic or interrelated to the societal corruption.

The vast majority of evidence about women is often filtered through male viewpoints, let that be material (archives, inscriptions, paintings, mosaics) or literary. Due to anachronistic receptions and misconceptions of social history, scholars concerned with gender have tended to interpret ancient concepts of gendered humor as primarily rigid, binary, misogynistic, and patriarchal. Women tend to be spoken to instead of speaking of themselves, and therefore their appearance in historical records needs to be considered in that light. Indeed, women who deviate from the norm have been a part of literature, history, and popular culture since the dawn of recorded text and permeate almost every narrative, especially before the advent of feminism. Recent research, however, has delved more deeply into concepts of gender in both macro- and microhistory, and consequently concluded that these older interpretations suffer from historically restricted assumptions, the outcome of adopting hierarchically stratified categories of analysis. In Classical Athens for example, the notion that female seclusion characterized gender relations is therefore currently considered an ideological ideal perpetuated by earlier male-dominated discourse, whereas earlier, binary oppositions (man–woman, citizen–noncitizen, etc) fail to describe and articulate societal dynamics in Greek culture adequately. Therefore, current gender theory adds further complexity to the nexus of gender and humor in antiquity and beyond.

Females who deviate from pervasive norms of femininity and into the sphere of comedy have more or less always populated the pages of literary works in disparate societies and cultures and historical eras. They have invariably occupied a conspicuous place in popular culture. Beyond first and second wave feminist theoretical approaches, feminist theory proves to be a powerful tool for a stark sociocultural analysis at any given time and context. Against this backdrop, the present section explores how comic portrayals of women have been often interpreted as misogynist, and correspondingly how such gendered comic narratives can be interpreted within a feminist framework. The aim of contributions in the first section is to question modern stereotypical expectations by delving into the ambiguities of jokes in genres with a traditional reputation for misogyny. Contributions deal with classical Greek texts, Byzantine mimes, Ottoman poetry, and medieval fabliaux.
Reconsiderations of Misogynistic Representations

David Konstan’s essay, “Laughing at Ourselves: Gendered Humour in Classical Greece,” discusses Greeks and Roman misogyny. He argues that ancient Greek humor was not in principle hostile to women; rather, that the butt of the joke was often men themselves, and their comically absurd expectations of the other sex. His case studies of this self-deprecating style of gendered humor include: Homer’s Odyssey, Semonides’s satirical poem on women, Aristophanes’s Assemblywomen, an epigram by Marcus Argentarius (a contemporary of Ovid), and Plautus’s comedy, Casina (based on a Greek original by Diphilus).

Accordingly, Martha Bayless’s contribution discusses how Medieval comic genres establish a mini-Utopia, a world of abundance and enjoyment. Her study inquires into the rules and characteristics of that Utopia, asking whether women enjoy equal access. Deconstructing the misogynistic morals appended to comic tales, it becomes clear from an analysis of fabliaux and jest-book tales that the fundamental elements of the comic mode—appetite, satisfaction, pragmatism, cleverness, and bodiliness—are identified with women, who are in turn identified with the human condition, so that in fact medieval comic tales evince a radical and unexpected configuration of gender.

Lisa Perfetti’s chapter analyzes how female labor satirized women who might attempt to wield the power rightly belonging to men. A man doing housework signified a world turned upside down, and men must uphold their proper roles by ensuring that their wives stayed in their place. Perfetti focuses on the relationship between labor, gender, and humor in the figure of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and the mostly lower- or middle-class heroines of late medieval drama. Although these texts in many ways can be seen to reinforce gendered divisions of labor, they also point to the economic and social value of women’s work and question the norms relating to the lower status accorded it, showing that women’s work, no matter how laughable, was to be taken seriously.

New Perspectives on Gender Subversion and Female Agency

Returning back into the Roman east, Anna Foka’s “Gender Subversion and the Early Christian East: Reconstructing the Byzantine Comic Mime” brings together scattered evidence about a largely improvisational, comic entertainment. Her case studies include earlier broad outlines of the late Roman mime, narratives about popular performers
(Theodora, Pelagia), and the Christian polemic of the genre. She discusses how these reflect the frequent association of the comic mime with immense sexuality, gender ambiguity, and prostitution. She concludes that humor—and the consequent censorship of these performances—can be understood as both challenging and enforcing the new, early Christian social order.

Kristine Steenbergh’s “Gender and laughter: City women in the early modern theatre” audience discusses Ben Jonson’s comedy The Staple of News (1626) and how it features four female spectators among its characters: the gossips Mirth, Tattle, Censure, and Expectation. These four gossips take center stage during the interludes between the Acts, commenting on the comedy as well as the qualities of the actors. This chapter explores how the affective experience of the comedy by these four women relates to their position in the public sphere of the theater in early modern London, as well as how the role of these four spectators may have been experienced by actual women in the audience at the Blackfriars theater. If we view relation between gender and humor from the perspective of the female spectator, we may catch glimpses of possibilities for resisting the view of women in the playhouse as victims of patriarchal judgment; indeed, it may allow us to see female mirth as empowering.

Didem Havlioğlu’s contribution discusses the use of humor in early modern Islamicate world as socially pervasive. She specifically includes case studies such as the puppet theater and representations in miniature paintings. In particular, the consistent use of mockery while dealing with sexuality in both classical and folk literatures points out to the dual and paradoxical function of humor: allowing liberation and enforcing gender roles. The double function manifests itself through layers of meaning that were clear to the audience. In other words, humor as an artform is one of the legitimate ways to achieve ambiguity which was considered the highest form of artistic expression. As a case in point, the early modern Ottoman court poetry showcases various ways poets used humor for their advantage. For instance, while it can help a male poet to enforce gender roles, in the hands of a woman poet such as Mihri Hatun, it can become useful to challenge the traditional poetics from within.

Notes

1. Gilgamesh, Kalevala, Icelandic Sagas, Homeric Epic, to name but some.


In this paper, I illustrate a certain strand of ancient Greek humor concerning sexuality, and more particularly, concerning adulterous wives. I suggest that, on the basis of this evidence, Greek males were not as uptight about controlling their wives as we might have expected, given their reputation, by no means undeserved, for misogyny generally and for anxiety about women’s infidelity more specifically. My conclusion is that we may need to modify in some respects—only in some—our sense of early Greece as the kind of honor culture in which men’s self-respect was radically bound up with the comportment of their women. This claim is not entirely new—it was made forcefully by Gabriel Herman (Herman 1993)—nor are the texts I deal with unfamiliar. By bringing them together, and by offering perhaps novel ways of viewing them, I hope to provide a slightly different image of gender relations in classical Greece.

That the Greeks had a misogynistic streak is undeniable, and there is no need to demonstrate it at length here. Eva Keuls (1985) made the case in a book that has weathered time and criticism, and others have followed in her footsteps. In a review of Pierre Brulé’s book, *Women of Ancient Greece* (2003), Janet Burnett Grossman (2004) concludes: “The strength of Brulé’s work is that it is almost completely based on primary sources, with very little theorizing. He lets the ancient authors provide us with the misogynistic picture that inevitably develops,” and many
other scholarly works confirm this dismal image. It is plausible to suppose that such a negative attitude toward women would be reflected and affirmed through humor, which, as Laurie O’Higgins (2003) observes, works to establish a bond among those who laugh together and at the same time serves to exclude or demean those who are ridiculed. O’Higgins argues that humor among women in classical Greece was different in kind from the jokes that men tended to tell about women. Women’s humor was often ribald, and was connected with women’s cults; as such, it promoted solidarity, whereas men’s jokes, which were characteristically at women’s expense, worked to sharpen the divide between the sexes. Sometimes, however, rather than manifesting hostility to women, men’s humor was directed against themselves and their silly expectations of the other sex.

At the beginning of Book 4 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus’s son Telemachus, in search of news about his father’s whereabouts, arrives together with Nestor’s son Pisistratus at the palace of Menelaus in Sparta. While the two lads pause at the doorway to the palace, Eteoneus, a servant of Menelaus, sees them and races to report the matter to the king:

> Two strangers are here, O Menelaus, nurtured by Zeus, two men, who resemble the race of great Zeus. 
> Tell me, shall we unbridle their swift horses, or send them off to another who may receive them? (4.25–29)

At this, Menelaus replies angrily:

> You were not foolish, Eteoneus, son of Boethous, previously, but now like a child you’re saying foolish things. 
> We ourselves, because we ate the guest offerings of other men, arrived here. May Zeus in future put an end to our suffering. But unbridle the horses of the strangers, and lead the men themselves in to the feasting. (31–36)

What is the purpose of this curious exchange? Stephanie West (1988, 195 ad 4.20ff) explains it as follows: “Eteoneus’ uncertainty about admitting the strangers, despite their obvious respectability, no doubt is meant to reflect the peculiar circumstance of the wedding celebrations [mentioned at 4.3–14] rather than a failure to recognize the normal
obligations of hospitality or a caution engendered by the disastrous results of extending a welcome to a young man of princely appearance a quarter of a century or so earlier.” Steve Reece (1993, 78), however, notes that Eteoneus's cold reception “is a very strange behavior . . . , the motivation for which is difficult to decipher.” Reece too suggests that the wedding celebration may be a factor, although, as West rightly notes, it is entirely forgotten once the guests are inside the palace, as well as “the notorious results of a previous experience with a guest in Sparta,” and he adds as a possible explanation that “Eteoneus’ impropriety” may act “as a foil for Menelaus’ magnanimous hospitality.”

Why are West and Reece so quick to dismiss a possible allusion to Helen’s elopement with Paris and to offer in its stead the rather implausible explanation of the wedding, of which there is no further mention? Menelaus and Helen are about to receive the two young men like a good bourgeois couple, though not without a hint of malice toward each other. It is surely not amiss to perceive a touch of humor at the beginning of what will, after all, be rather a light-hearted episode. Helen might well still seem, at least in the eyes of a servant, a tad fickle, thereby raising a doubt, even before we meet the couple, about the secure and happy resumption of their married life.

One might object that a comparison between Telemachus and Paris is not very likely: Telemachus is on a mission to find out about his father, and nothing in the poem so far suggests that he is prepared for a dalliance with an older woman. But no youth is insusceptible to Aphrodite’s lure, as Theseus avows in Euripides’s Hippolytus (967–969), and Telemachus is no longer just a boy; he is described as entering upon manhood and now possessing beauty or kállos (18.219), a word associated above all with sexual attractiveness and applied in the Homeric epics particularly to Paris as well as to Helen. Indeed, when Helen first sees Telemachus, she wonders who he is, and says: “Shall I lie or tell the truth? But my heart bids me: I say that no one has ever seemed more similar, neither man nor woman—awe seizes me as I gaze at him . . . as this man resembles the son of great-hearted Odysseus” (4.140–143). She is right, of course: but mightn’t one have thought for a moment that she was rather on the point of naming Paris?

The joke with the doorkeeper serves, as I have said, as the prelude to the description of the domestic life of Menelaus and Helen. Familiarity has perhaps dulled our appreciation of the audacity of this episode in the Odyssey. Homer calls attention several times in the poem to the contrast between Odysseus’s homecoming and that of Agamemnon: Penelope
remained faithful, though she was besieged by 108 suitors, whereas Clytemnestra conspired with her lover to slay her husband. But Menelaus and Helen occupy a kind of middle ground: she ran off with a lover but was recaptured, and the couple now enjoy what appears to be a tranquil married life (when Helen enters, she is discreetly compared to Artemis rather than to Aphrodite, 4.122). To be sure, they can still bicker in a genteel way. After Helen recounts how she recognized Odysseus when he was on a spying mission inside Troy but kept his secret, since by now she was eager to return home to her daughter and her handsome husband (4.259–264), Menelaus counters with a story about how Helen, with the encouragement of Deiphobus, who took her as wife after Paris’s death, tried to expose the Achaean soldiers inside the wooden horse by calling to them in the voices of their several wives; the Greeks were saved only by the astuteness of Odysseus, who saw through the trick (4.274–289). But if this banter reminds us of Helen’s sordid past, it does not disrupt the domestic tranquility that reigns in the Spartan household. Bygones are bygones.

In the eighth book of the *Odyssey*, the bard Demodocus, who is in residence at the court of the Phaeacians, recites a hilarious tale about Ares’s adultery with Aphrodite, and how the smithy god Hephaestus, Aphrodite’s husband, trapped them in his own bed with unbreakable chains, to the amusement of the other gods (but not goddesses). Indeed, when Apollo asks Hermes whether he’d want to sleep with Aphrodite despite the bonds, Hermes replies: three times as many chains, and all the gods and goddesses could look on (8.339–342). Critics have remarked on how this broadly comic tale can be read as an inversion, or indeed a reflection, of Odysseus’s own situation, down to the detail that Hephaestus’s lameness might echo Odysseus’s hesitation to engage in a footrace with the Phaeacians, since his knees are weak from so long a time spent at sea (8.230–233). But surely Hephaestus’s case is far closer to that of Menelaus himself, who recovered his wife after she ran off with a man more handsome than he—an analogy that modern critics have largely overlooked, though it was noticed in antiquity by a particularly astute reader of Homer, the fifth-century AD poet, Quintus of Smyrna, in his *Posthomerica* or “After Homer,” where Helen herself compares her adultery to that of Aphrodite (14.45–57).

What is going on here? Are we expected to laugh at Menelaus as a feckless figure, so dazzled by Helen’s beauty that he submits to a farce of a marriage of the kind Odysseus would not tolerate for a moment? Are men supposed to imagine that they are more macho than poor Menelaus, and take a malicious delight in his humiliating situation?
I have in the past noted that the Homeric poems are curiously free of any hint of romantic jealousy on the part of Menelaus or of Odysseus, for that matter, and I attributed this absence in part to a conception of marriage as a man’s possession of his wife rather than as a sentimental relationship depending on mutual, and potentially alienable, affection.6 Without abandoning that view, I would like to suggest that the humor in the scene at Sparta serves also to loosen up social constraints and allow the men in the audience to sympathize with Menelaus, recognizing that they too might take back a woman like Helen of Troy, or even their own wives. The faintly ridiculous role of Menelaus undercuts the gender politics of the epic, and allows us to see that we need not all be Odysseuses and Penelopes or else suffer the consequences as Agamemnon did. The scene offers an escape from these stark alternatives, and in the process lets men laugh at themselves.

The humor in the Menelaus and Helen episode of the Odyssey is relatively subtle, and takes its place in the context of a fairly gory narrative of possessiveness and revenge. I turn now to a shorter poem, and one that has generally been interpreted as the most explicitly misogynistic work in Greek literature: the satire on types of woman composed by Semonides of Amorgos (fragment 7). Semonides asserts that the god created the minds of women according to different models, one pig-like, slovenly and rolling in mud; another wily like the fox; another nosy as a dog, whom her husband can’t restrain even by knocking out her teeth; one’s compacted of earth, lazy and gluttonous; another from the sea, and equally variable; one’s stubborn as an ass, and just as lewd; another’s weasel-like, sex-mad and thieving; the woman born of a horse daintily disdains all work and prettifies herself; the offspring of the monkey is worst of all, ugly and vicious.7 Only one type gains Semonides’s approval, the woman who comes from the bee: she is modest, loving, and gracious. But no sooner does Semonides describe this type than he returns to his obsessive critique: the foul species stick by their husbands, and the greatest evil that Zeus contrived is women: if you have a wife, it is impossible to remain in a good mood all day; hunger will be a constant guest in your home, she’ll always find something quarrel over, will be inhospitable to her husband’s friends; and the worst of it is that the one who seems most chaste and reasonable is most guilty. Her husband gapes in admiration, but the neighbors delight in his mistake: everyone praises his own wife and criticizes the others, since we don’t see that we all have the same lot. For this unbreakable fetter is the greatest evil created by Zeus, since the time when Hades received those men who battled for a woman’s sake.
Taken in earnest, the poem seems of a piece with Hesiod’s grumpy evaluation of women: one can’t live with them, one can’t live without them (*Theogony* 590–612); they are a punishment from the gods, and men would have been better off if women had never been created. Centuries later, the prissy Hippolytus, in Euripides’s tragedy, will voice the idea in a still more absurd form, wishing that men could simply deposit a sum of money in a temple and obtain a child of equivalent value, without benefit of women (616–624). But to read Semonides’s poem in this petulant way is to miss the delightful irony of it, which changes the entire picture. We may begin by asking why the bee woman, the good wife, is introduced, only to be forgotten in the sequel as Semonides condemns the whole female tribe. The reason is surely that she provides the image of what every husband believes about his wife—including Semonides himself, who at this point speaks in the first person plural: in fact, we men dote on our spouses, and we are all deceived. The allusion in the final verses to Helen and the Trojan war reads almost as though Semonides had in mind precisely the episode of Menelaus and Helen at home: he is happily married to the woman who caused all that grief and left her family in the lurch, though the doorman doesn’t seem to have been fooled into thinking that Helen has necessarily changed. Semonides’s poem is less a critique of the vices of wives than a satire on the fatuousness of husbands. Nor is he attempting to make men more suspicious: this is the way things are, and it is best to accept the situation with good grace and humor.

The point is that Greek men do not seem to have been so fanatical about controlling the behavior of their wives as to have lost all sense of the absurd. Had they been as obsessed with women’s honor as they are sometimes made out to be, they could not, I imagine, have enjoyed such spoofs on their credulousness. Semonides exploits the tropes of misogyny, to be sure, but in the end he disarms them and leaves everyone laughing.

I turn now to Aristophanes, who happily makes use of the conventional stereotypes, according to which women are bibulous, libidinous, deceitful, idle, and given to luxury, but in the spirit of carnivalian license these traits are not so much motives for reproach or hostility as for good-natured enjoyment. In the *Ecclesiasuzae* or “Assemblywomen,” the last of Aristophanes’s comedies about women, women conspire to dress as men, pack the assembly, and argue that the governance of the state should be turned over entirely to women, on the grounds that the men are constantly innovating and thus ruining public affairs, whereas women maintain traditional customs: they wash wool in warm water.
as they always have, carry things on their heads, bake cakes, afflict their husbands, take lovers, get drunk, love to screw... (214–228). The inventory of their habitual practices veers toward the absurd, or rather, invites the men in the audience to imagine that they are being let into the secret lives of their wives, which Praxagora, the women's leader, includes in the trial run of the speech she intends to deliver publicly in the assembly. Some men, I suppose, might have told themselves that their wives weren't like this, the way Semonides suggests all husbands do; but Semonides had shown that this was self-deception. How did Aristophanes and the other comic playwrights of his time get away with imputing such behavior to women without arousing anxiety in the spectators?

As it happens, the women's scheme is successful, but when they take over the state, they prove anything but conservative. They immediately abolish private property and class distinctions (590–594) and decree an end to sexual exclusiveness in marriage; from now on, men can sleep and produce children with any woman they choose (613–615). Praxagora's husband, when he hears the news, is alarmed, because he fears that young and handsome boys will monopolize the pretty women, but Praxagora has thought of that and explains that the ugliest will always have preference with anyone they desire (628–629). The result will be that children will not know their own parents, but will consider all elders to be their fathers (635–637), just as Plato prescribed for the ruling class of his ideal republic. With this, Blepyrus, the husband of Praxagora, declares himself content, though he protests that there are some he'd prefer not to call him Daddy and give a big kiss. Praxagora pictures the men emerging from the common mess halls, and women (gunaikes, which can also mean “wives”) waiting for them in the streets, declaring “Come to our place, there’s a pretty young woman inside,” and another calling out from an upstairs window, “I have the nicest and fairest: but first you must sleep at my place before her” (693–701). The description suggests that these are not the homes of citizen women but rather of hetairai, that is, mistresses of brothels, summoning men to make love to their attractive young girls (conceivably, their daughters). Doubtless, this softened the image of wives like Praxagora exposing their own daughters to the whims of any passing man, beginning with the least attractive; but the new regime inaugurated by the women clearly opens the way to such pandering.

But if a mature man like Blepyrus is cheered at the idea that he can have his way with the pretty girls (he likes it a lot, he says, 710), what does he make of his wife enjoying sex with any man who asks her—or
whom she asks? It is curious that he doesn’t seem to contemplate this consequence, even though, immediately after this exchange, Praxagora makes it clear that she will put a stop to all whores (pornai, 718–719) so that these women (Praxagora here points to the chorus) may have the pick of the young men. It isn’t right, she says, that prettified slaves should rob free women of Aphrodite’s pleasures, but they should sleep only with other slaves (720–724). To this, Blepyrus exclaims: “I’m sticking close to you, so that everyone sees me and says, ‘Aren’t you amazed at the generalissima’s man?’” (725–727). It is possible that Blepyrus understands Praxagora to mean that legitimate wives will no longer have to compete with courtesans for their husbands’ attention, but in light of her new rules of sexual freedom, it is hard not to think that citizen women will now be free to solicit just as slaves had done before; who else, after all, will be summoning men to their quarters if the whores can no longer ply their trade?

Did the male spectators, who were bred on the stereotype of hyper-sexed women who lack the self-control that is characteristic of the male, regard Praxagora’s proposals as silly and let it go at that? Or was there something cathartic about acknowledging women’s passion in the contained space of the theater and even enjoying the fantasy of letting go of their split vision of the genders and their own possessiveness? Critics of the play have largely ignored this question in favor of philosophical or political interpretations, such as the relationship between the women’s regime and Plato’s ideal republic or possible allusions to contemporary leaders and events, or else have glossed over it as carnivalesque inversion, in the spirit of Bakhtin. I would like to suggest that the men in the audience—we still don’t know whether women attended the dramatic festivals—laughed at themselves in just the way they did when they recited Semonides’s lyrics at their symposia or listened to rhapsodes perform the Menelaus episode in the Odyssey and Demodocus’s naughty anecdote about the gods.

After some bickering among the men about sharing property, the comedy returns to the sex theme in a hilarious scene, in which the mutual desire of a young man and woman is thwarted by the appearance of three progressively more hideous old women who demand, according to the new rules, first dibs.10 The scene begins with the first old woman at her window, having painted her face and on the lookout for some man; she is answered by the girl, who sings in turn to attract a lover; it has been suggested that she evokes the posture and attitude of professional prostitutes, though this would again contradict the new
law that banishes the trade. The old lady boasts that her amorous skills are better, and she’ll stick by her man; the girl replies that she’s the sexier. But she soon begins to worry that her boyfriend (hetairos) has not yet appeared, even though she’s alone and her mother is away (911–913). Now, the reference here to a mother but not father may indicate something about the social status of the girl; to indicate how, we may compare a Greek epigram by Marcus Argentarius (AP 5.127 = 12 G-P) dating to the end of the first century BC.

I was much in love with a maiden [parthenos], Alcippe, and one day I prevailed on her and held her secretly on her bed. Both hearts were beating, lest anyone come near, lest anyone see the secrets of our surpassing passion. But her mother noticed […] and looked in suddenly and said, “Hermes in common, my daughter.” (trans. Gow and Page 1968, modified)

As Gow and Page explain, “the finder of things lost was expected to go shares with any witness of his luck, and Hermes was the god who brought good luck” (cf. Apostolius 7.94, Theophrastus Characters 30.9). “Hermes,” then, stands in here for hermaion, that is, a lucky find. Michael Hendry (1991), however, has pointed out that the Hermes of the herms was typically equipped with an erect phallus, and that the joke here is again a double one, the reference being both to something shared and something bared. The point of this poem, then, depends on an unexpected sexual innuendo by way of a double entendre.

Now, the opening verses, in which the poet professes to have seduced a young virgin, are shocking enough if we understand the girl to be a respectable maiden. The name Alcippe is not specific to courtesans and may suggest she is a free girl. She seems to have resisted, at least for a while, the advances of the poet, and when persuaded she, like the poet, is terrified lest someone chance to intrude upon her in the act of lovemaking. That it is her mother who does so is racy enough, but that she demands a piece of the action makes of her one of the sauciest matrons in ancient literature. But in fact, Alcippe may not be a modest maiden swept off her feet by a sophisticated lover but rather a novice hetaera; and the mention of her mother may be precisely the clue to her status.

What kind of “mother” is she? We may get some sense of her role by comparing the case of Roman elegy, which was more or less contemporary with Marcus’s epigrams. The elegiac poet typically represents himself as an independent adult, that is, not in patria potestate; nowhere
is there mention of a father as an obstacle to the poet’s affair, as is often the case in New Comedy. Propertius indicates that his mother and father are dead (2.20.15), and in a passage that recalls Andromache’s words to Hector in Iliad 6 describes Cynthia as constituting his parents and whole household (tu mihi sola domus, tu Cynthia sola parentes, 1.11.23), Tibullus, in turn, imagines his mother and sister, but no male relatives, weeping at his funeral (1.3.5–8). Nor is the elegiac mistress under the control of a male guardian. Cynthia has neither brother nor son (Propertius 2.18c.33–34), although Propertius does mention her mother and sister (2.6.11–12; cf. 2.3.26, 2.15.20). So too, Tibullus speaks of Delia’s mother (1.6.57–58) and of Nemesis’s deceased sister (2.6.29), and Lygdamus imagines Neaera’s mother weeping over the death of her son-in-law (Corpus Tibullianum 3.2.13–14). I suggest that the presence of a mother does not conjure up the image of familial propriety that mention of a father would do. In this, elegy is similar to New Comedy, where a young courtesan is frequently under the protection of a mother or foster-mother. The pattern is general enough that when, in an erotic context, there is mention of a girl’s mother but no father or male guardian (kurios, tutor), one can perhaps assume that she is not of a respectable family.

May we conclude, then, that Aristophanes has softened the image of a free citizen girl openly expressing her desire for sex by assimilating her to a courtesan or whore, of the sort that Praxagora plans to banish from her new regime, insofar as she seems to have a mother but no father? We might imagine, I suppose, that the father was out working his fields, leaving the mother in charge of the girl. But then, where is the mother off too? The play has made it clear from the beginning that married women have great difficulty in leaving their homes unaccompanied: that is why, when they first meet to discuss their plot, the women have to invent excuses for their absence from the home, like attending a neighbor giving birth. So it seems likely that there was no husband, and the mother could be recognized, even from so brief a reference, as the stock comic figure of the old hetaera who is as dissolute as her so-called daughter.

But if this is the case, why does the girl care whether her mother is out of the house when her boyfriend arrives? For that matter, why is the girl in Marcus Argentarius’s epigram so shy about sex, if she is a budding hetaera, and what is the harm in her mother finding out about it? We can hazard an answer, again in line with the topos of the young hetaera. This may well be Alcippe’s first sexual experience: she is called a parthenos, after all. According to a stereotype we find in Plautus and in
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Ovid (Plautus *Cistellaria*, Ovid *Amores* 1.8), the so-called mother does not want her daughter to bestow her favors freely on a man out of love; the mother will have had a better sense of commerce than that—particularly in the case of a girl who is still a virgin. The mother in Marcus’s epigram, we may imagine, sees her daughter’s behavior as bad business, and the girl knows it. But, being who she is, Alcippe’s mother makes the best of it, and demands a share of the windfall—the *hermaion* here, then, takes on yet another significance, and both mother and daughter will have a piece of the profit (we may note too that Hermes was worshipped as the god of trade—here more like “rough trade”). Similarly, the enamored young girl in Aristophanes’s *Eclesiazusae* may wish to carry on her affair away from the mercenary eye of her mother.17

But if the mention of a mother, but no father, hints at the status of the girl as a hetaera or potential hetaera, the fact remains that there is no explicit indication that she is anything but an Athenian citizen, and the same applies to the old woman.18 When the boy enters, he declares that it is intolerable that a free man must first make love with an old woman (941), so he is surely not a slave. The girl and boy proceed to sing a passionate duet (952–975),19 but they are interrupted by the old lady who demands her rights, citing the recent decree concerning the entitlement of elderly women, specifically, to first option (1013–1020). In the nick of time, the girl rescues the boy, claiming that the woman is more like his mother than a wife, and with these new laws the land will be full of Oedipuses (1038–1042), but just then a still older and uglier woman enters and claims her privilege, and as she drags him off a third arrives, still worse, and in the end they force the lad to service both of them.

If the women are not professional prostitutes (to whom the new law certainly does not apply), what shall we make of their lewd behavior? Of course, the episode exemplifies what happens when all social distinctions collapse under the radical communism inaugurated by the women, and so it could be read as showing just how bad things will be under the new dispensation. Give women power, and this is what men will have to put up with—a good reason for preserving the status quo. Men will of course get to have sex at will, but by exploiting the conventional revulsion, at least so far as our literary sources indicate, against the sex with old women, who are represented as both voracious and repulsive,20 Aristophanes turns the benefit into a punishment. Yet the older men in the audience will surely not have forgotten that they, like Blepyrus, the leading male in the comedy, will have priority with the young girl, so the situation is not all that bad, and the
play ends with a scene of merry feasting in which Blepyrus, declared the most fortunate of all men (1131), is invited to dine in the company of the lasses (meirakes, 1138) on stage. To enjoy it, however, the male spectators have to imagine, it would seem, their own wives and even daughters freely offering themselves to, and indeed competing for, sex with all comers, and laugh at the spectacle. Like Marcus, who was, however, undoubtedly writing for an elite Greek-speaking readership in Rome, Aristophanes skates very near the edge as he plays with the ambiguity between citizen women and prostitutes—and his audience was expected to appreciate his wit.

Before concluding, we may consider briefly one play in which transgressive desire, that is, adulterous sex, is soundly chastised—only in this case it is the sexual appetite of the husband. Plautus’s Casina is a farcical comedy in which a wife learns that her husband intends to sleep with a slave girl whom she has raised from childhood, under the pretext of marrying her off to the overseer of his country farm. To forestall his plan, the wife, Cleostrata, has a slave faithful to her dress up as the bride, and when the overseer and then her husband enter the house to consummate the wedding, both are driven out with blows and thoroughly humiliated before Cleostrata, her neighbor Myrrhine, and her loyal slave Pardalisca. This is a story of women triumphing over an errant husband, who tries to use his authority as paterfamilias to violate his responsibilities to his household. And once again, we may ask: why was this funny to the men in the audience?

Plautus wrote for a Roman public, and there are indications that, whatever his Greek source, he may have had a hand in composing the hilarious finale of the Casina. In this play, in which a faithful wife curbs the wayward passion of her husband, we can see a kind of reverse pattern to that of Aristophanes’s Ecclesiazusae: instead of promoting universal license, wives here are given the role of reaffirming the sexual exclusiveness of the nuclear family, for women and men alike. If the male spectators felt implicitly chastised for their own randiness, they may, at the same time, have felt reassured that their wives were custodians of marital fidelity. The humor here resides in surrender of patriarchal authority in the service of preserving the sanctity and indeed hierarchical structure of the home.

Aristophanes’s humor has different roots, as he seems to ratify the libidinous desires of both sexes, allowing his audience, and especially the older men among them, to laugh at how the world would look if they gave way to their repressed impulses and were guaranteed success
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in the game. But since this comes at the price of women’s sexual liberation as well as men’s, one might have thought that the idea would rouse at least some anxiety or distaste among them. In so patriarchal a society as we suppose ancient Greece to have been, men could nevertheless be amused by the picture of women on the loose, out for sex where they could find it. But here one might be moved to pose an objection: was not adultery in fact a common source of humor in classical antiquity, if not in the higher or public genres of officially sponsored tragedy and comedy, then at all events in the lighter forms of epigram and especially the mime, that is, the short and often racy skits that came into fashion in the Hellenistic and Roman periods? Modern scholars have even identified a subclass of the latter dubbed “the adultery mime,” in which wives take on lovers and cuckold their husbands in the style of the famous tale of the tub, first recounted by Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses* and later imitated, or at all events recreated, by Boccaccio and Chaucer. No doubt an entire subliterary tradition of jokes lay behind these burlesques. This is true enough, but I believe that there is a distinction to be drawn between these latter forms and the humor of Homer, Semonides, and Aristophanes, and it resides in the locus of identification: as labels of convenience, I propose to call the mime version the “bachelor type,” and the other, with which I have been concerned here, the “husband type.” The bachelor type is widespread and familiar: the husband is almost always a bit of a fool and very commonly is characterized as belonging to a lower class than that of the adulterer and (by implication) the audience, and so is fair game for ridicule. Occasionally the husband turns the tables on the intruder, which serves to reaffirm family values, after a fashion, but most of the fun lies in his discomfiture. We laugh at the poor schnook, not with him and at ourselves. The examples of humor that I have been discussing, however, strike me as fundamentally different, and more rare. The credulous husband is a figure of fun, but he is not contemptible; rather, he is like the male listener or reader, who is invited to see himself, and laugh at himself, in that role. The ancient Greeks were prepared, at least at times, to view themselves this way.

**Notes**

sexuality than has often been acknowledged” (p. 17), and argues that Greek males were not necessarily intimidated by the notion of independent and even dominant women: “The powerful Amazons exuded the sexual appeal strong women could offer Greek men” (p. 27).

2. All translations are my own, and aim only at literal fidelity to the Greek; the emphasis on the word “men” reflects the enjambment of andres in the Greek.

3. For the meaning of kállos, see Konstan 2014.


5. I am grateful to Calum Maciver for alerting me to this passage in Quintus.


7. For an excellent discussion of how comparing women to animals is exploited to evoke laughter, especially in comedy, see Foka 2011. For an overview of methodology regarding women in Greece and Rome see Foka 2014.

8. See Easterling 1985, 154: “The poem was undoubtedly meant to be funny..., and it must be seen as an early example of a favourite theme in western literature, the attack on women written by men for men in a male-dominated society.” Cf. Walcot 1984, 47: “The seventh poem of Semonides of Amorgos shows that the good wife was also like the bee in her indifferance to sex.”

9. Cf. Scheur 1984, abstract: “Although the background of the poem is the reliable, generally felt Greek misogyny, men are the butt of the poem. The women may be full of vice, but the men are not intelligent enough to understand them.”

10. Olson 1988, n. 10, suggests that the youth is to be identified with the man who, earlier in the play, was unwilling to share his goods, in violation of the new dispensation; the idea is endorsed by Capra 2010, 256.

11. For the ambience of prostitution, see Halliwell 2002, 130–132.

12. For hetairos here as almost the counterpart of hetaira, see Ussher 1973, 202 ad vv. 912–914.

13. There is however one allusion, reminiscent of New Comedy, to squandering a father’s money on women (2.23.17–18).

14. Or mother-figure: e.g., Plautus Cistellaria 2, 38, 46, 83, etc., and Miles Gloriosus 100–112, 975–976; Terence Self-Tormentor 269–270 and Phormio 96–98; cf. Menander Periciromene, where Glycera, the concubine of the soldier Polemo, has been raised by a foster-mother; also Alciphron 2.24.1, and contrast Alciphron 1.6.1, of a well-bred girl who notes emphatically that she is the daughter of a respectable father and mother.

15. On mothers who raise their daughters to serve as hetairai, see Strong 2012.

16. Eccl. 528–531; cf. the same device in Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe, 3.15.4.

17. For the way in which the representation of such women shaded over into that of a procurress or lena, cf. Tibullus’s reference to a lena of Nemesis (2.6.45–54), or Ovid’s description of the old bawd in Amores 1.8, who offers advice on bilking a lover. An older woman might also be imagined as a faithful servant or mother surrogate. This may be the case with Delia’s mother, if the aurea anus or “golden
old lady” of 1.6.58 is also the woman in 1.3.83–90; cf. Terence’s description of the faithful Antiphila at Self-Tormentor 274–295.

18. When the old woman asserts that the girl will not rob her of her pleasures, she employs the same verb (\textit{hupharpaζαν}, 921) that Praxagora had used of slave girls who threaten to steal the sexual pleasures of free women (722), but this is not enough to suggest that the girl is a slave. Cf. Slater 2002: “We must recall that this young girl is a citizen…. As such, she has been carefully guarded all her life – until today, under Praxagora’s new dispensation.”

19. Cf. Olson (1988a) for the paraclausithyron or lover’s song at the beloved’s door as the model for the boy’s aria.


21. For discussion and further bibliography, see Konstan 2014, 31–61


23. For versions of this genre in other cultural traditions, see in this volume the chapters by Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir (chapter eleven), Didem Havlioğlu (chapter six), Kristine Steenbergh (chapter five), and Anu Korhonen (chapter seven).

Bibliography


Medieval comic narrative comes in many forms, but the apogee is arguably found in the fabliaux, the comic tales of trickery that appeared in many European languages and that flowered most famously in the rhymed French versions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Other medieval humorous genres include comic plays and lyrics, mock epics, beast fables, nonsense texts, parodies, schoolboy doggerel, riddles, and jokes both respectable and bawdy, and various other forms. Although these forms and genres are disparate, in fact the vast majority of medieval humorous texts participate in a shared world, each expressing life in the comic mode, depicting a fictive realm of appetite and abundance. This comic mode in effect establishes a mini- or pocket Utopia, a world of enjoyment that can be entered into from anywhere and by anyone, merely by indulging in the story. This essay will speak to explicate that comic realm, that portable Utopia, and in particular will engage with questions of gender as it relates to this comic realm, asking the question: is the portable Utopia a paradise for women as well as for men?

To argue that medieval comic texts establish a single comic realm is not to reduce all comic texts to a single outlook. Nevertheless, just as humor operates according to certain universe principles, such as incongruity, lowering, and mockery, so certain features and elements are found in comic texts as a matter of practice. The recurring presence of these make up what is in essence a comic world. I will enumerate these shared characteristics, with examples taken from the fabliaux
and other medieval comic genres, before proceeding to interrogate the world they establish.

The characteristics of the comic world include the following.

1. The Comic World Is a World without Tragedy

Bad things happen in the comic world, but only in a way that makes them good things. The worst of bad things, death, is restricted to people who annoy the main character; and even these deaths occur only in laughable ways that assure that they cannot be regarded as disturbing. Instead, death is trivial, comic, and gratifying. For instance, in the French fabliau *Le Sacristain*, a monk—the sacristan—has been pester for sexual favors. The wife and her husband, who have been recently impoverished by bad fortune, devise a way to use the monk’s lecherous obstinacy to trick him out of money, but the plan goes wrong and instead of merely cudgeling the sacristan, the husband accidentally kills him. The death of the monk proves to be a continuing inconvenience for the couple—the body keeps turning up again where it is not wanted, not unlike the sacristan in life. The continuing misadventures of the hapless couple trying to get rid of the dead body form the majority of the tale. In the end the couple succeed in divesting themselves of the corpse, and this forms the happy ending.

No one mourns the sacristan, and in the tale he is a one-dimensional, ludicrous embodiment of rapacious greed, so that his death is a comeuppance for his hounding and lechery. The comic world makes death satisfying.

2. In the Comic World There Is No Threat of Divine Condemnation

Death may be transformed into a benign force in the comic realm, but the world still recognizably corresponds to reality. Monks are still supposed to attend the divine office and obey vows of chastity; married men and women are still supposed to refrain from adultery: the comic world retains the strictures of the external world. The difference lies in the fact that those who break the rules are under no threat of eternal punishment—the torments of the afterlife are not a concern. Most medieval comic tales contain no important references to matters of the afterlife or divine punishment at all; they are simply not a concern.
Others, however, explicitly picture hell and the afterlife, and make it clear that they are not matters of grave concern. In *Le Pet au vilain*, for instance, a peasant is clearly set to be taken to hell, as the devil is waiting to take his soul when he dies. But the devil calculates that in the case of such a lowly person as a peasant, the soul must exit from his anus rather than from his mouth, as would be the case with loftier people’s souls. Consequently he waits at the peasant’s bottom with a sack, and when the peasant emits a fart the devil gathers the fart in a sack, under the impression that it is the peasant’s soul, and then lets the fart loose in hell. There the denizens find it so offensive that peasants are deemed exempt from hell ever after. The torment of hell is still in evidence, but becomes wholly detached from questions of moral behavior. God does not intervene in the misunderstanding. People can escape the torments of hell merely by a trick or a mistake on the part of the devil, who is presented as just as dim-witted and blundering as any other administrator. For the peasants in the audience of *Le Pet au vilain*, the relief is even sweeter: in the comic world they are specifically exempted from any worry about hell whatsoever.

### 3. The Comic World Is Stable

Just as there is no death, there is no destabilization and no change. The comic world is a world of equilibrium. In *Les Perdris*, for example, a frisky young wife undermines the rule of her husband by devouring the partridges he has planned to keep for himself and a priest, by carrying on an illicit liaison with the priest, and by hoodwinking both men. The wife may triumph in eating the partridges and concealing her cuckoldry, but despite all this the outward power balance remains in effect. She will never be discovered or cast out of the house, nor will her husband ever knowingly cede power. Individual monks may pay for their sins, as in *Le Sacristain*, but monks as a class will remain greedy and lecherous. No action is revolutionary, and the conditions for comedy remain in effect.

The conditions for paradise are thus established: a place of bodily abundance and delight in which the powerful and the annoying get their comeuppance, and the lowly prevail through the means available to them—cunning and trickery—means that happen to be very entertaining to observe. No divine sanctions are levied and the world is stable and eternal, yet still recognizably the real world and not an ineffable and inconceivable elysium. It is a corporeal and accessible paradise.
4. In the Comic World, the Greatest Sin
Is to be Stupid and Annoying

No one returns with terrible warnings of what they are enduring in the afterlife as a consequence for breaking the rules. Instead, punishment is purely earthly, and it does not come from breaking the rules; it comes from being annoying and stupid. Or we may say that the comic world acknowledges the formal rules—such as “thou shalt not commit adultery”—and the more important informal rules, such as “thou shalt not get caught committing adultery.” Tests of character are purely pragmatic, and what matters in the world is not who is the most moral or virtuous but who is the cleverest. People are exposed for what they are. In *Le Sacristain*, for instance, the greedy, lecherous sacristan is exposed as all body—his corpse gets around as well as the living man ever did—and he is exchangeable for a sack of excrement (in the monastic latrine and in the dungheap), a slab of meat (interchangeable with the stolen bacon, ending up in the monastery kitchen), and finally a lump of excrement again, in the ditch of waste. So the lecher is exposed for what he is—bodily, trivial, and annoying. The same can be said of the squeamish clerk Absolon in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, who refuses to take “No” for an answer and who fails to see that the coltish young wife Alison has her eyes on someone else entirely. He finally pays for his sins by getting a misdirected kiss and a fart in the face. A similar fate awaits a host of persistent, obtuse, and irksome characters.

5. In the Comic World, Deception and Trickery
Are the Keys to Success

The comic world, like the serious world, is a struggle for supremacy. In the comic world, triumph is never the result of virtue or of moral superiority; instead, it is a consequence of cleverness and successful trickery. It is the least powerful and most lowly who most need to resort to trickery; the underdog has the greatest need of trickery; trickery is the key to success; and so the underdog is the most successful.

6. The Engine of the Comic World Is Not Justice
but Cause and Effect

Things do not happen because they are right and just but because someone has ineluctably put them into action. Thus in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*,

Martha Bayless
the old husband John is a hapless, devoted soul who does not deserve a wayward wife, but by marrying a young woman he has, with inexorable force, brought the consequences—cuckoldry—upon himself.

He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,
That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude.
Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,
For youthe and elde is often at debaat.
But sith that he was fallen in the snare,
He moste endure, as oother folk, his care.⁵

[He knew no Cato—unseasoned at the game—
Who said to marry someone much the same.
Men should marry someone of their station
For youth and age are oft at disputation.
But since this man had fallen in the snare,
He must endure, like other folk, his care.]

The same is true of the French *Jouglet*, which describes a hapless young man named Robinet: “molt estois fol,” “he was very foolish,” and of “fols sens,” “foolish mind.”⁶ His foolishness means that Jouglet, the *jongleur* directed by his mother to instruct Robinet about the particulars of the wedding night, in preparation for his upcoming marriage, induces him to eat too many pears and then to tell him that it is taboo to defecate on one’s wedding night. Where his first experience in bed with his new wife would traditionally be consumed with sex, in Robinet’s case it is consumed with incontinent defecation, a fate suffered solely because Robinet is slow witted rather than because of any moral failing. In the end, though, Robinet contaminates Jouglet’s own room and possessions with dung, proving, as the text says, “Tel cuide conchier autrui / Qui assez miez conchie lui,” “He who seeks to befoul others will be befouled himself.”⁷ Stupidity brings about certain consequences, but equally so does the attempt to spread chaos. Jouglet is not an oppressed underdog but merely a mischief-maker, and mischief is an inevitable consequence of mischief-making.

7. In the Comic World, the Things of the Body Deliver the Greatest Happiness

This precept is true on two levels: bodily things deliver the greatest happiness both to the characters within the tale and to its audience.
Those who relish them most tend to be the most successful in the tale. In *Les Perdris*, it is the woman who savors the partridges and the bodies of the men: her appetite is voracious and gleeful. In the Irish-English poem about a monks’ paradise, *The Land of Cockaygne*, the monks show no sign of delighting in the love of God; instead, it is sex, food, and drink that supply the utopian pleasures, as geese fly across the sky ready-cooked. The point is made even more forcefully in *Les quatre sohais saint Martin*. In the story, a peasant who has always been devoted to Saint Martin is granted four wishes by the saint. He makes the reckless decision to entrust the first of the wishes to his wife. She takes revenge on his inadequacies by wishing for him to be covered in male members because, she says, she has been so disappointed in his one:

“Sire,” dist el, “je vous di bien
C’un seul vit ne me valoit rien:
Sanpres ert mol comme pelice;
Mès or sui je de vis mout riche!”

[She said, I’ll tell you my decree:
the one prick has no charms for me,
for it’s always soft as fur
but now in pricks I’m rich, dear sir!]

Stung into revenge, he similarly wishes for her to be covered in female genitalia. At that point they stop and look at each other, horrified. The peasant finally wishes all the genitalia gone, but the couple discover to their distress that this means that their own original genitalia have also been wished away. With only a single wish left, they effectively have the choice between using it to recover their sex lives or to gain anything else in the world. They choose to wish back their own genitalia—the importance of their sex lives is something on which they are finally agreed. The pleasures of the lower body initiate the sequence, and the importance of those pleasures closes it.

Even in texts of lowly scatology such as *La Crote*, the bodily supplies the pleasure. In this text, a husband and wife play a guessing game by the dim light of the fire. In the end, the wife reaches down behind herself to supply something difficult for the husband to guess. The husband fails to guess the object and finally, on his last guess, and desperate to win the game, he tastes a bit of it:

“Par le cuer bien,” fet il, “c’est merde;
Je m’en puis bien apercevoir.”
“Par mon chief, vos avez dit voir,
Fet la dame tout à estrous!
Jamès ne gaigerai a vous.
Deable vos ont fet devin;
J’ai perdue denrée de vin.”

[“By holy God,” said he, “it’s shit;
I’ve now got the gist of it.”
“By my head, you’ve told it true:
A woman knows it through and through.
Now I’ll never bet with you:
The Devil’s helped you to divine;
Now I owe you all the wine.”]

Thus even bodily waste serves as a source of jubilation, and the most successful in the tale is the person who is in the best position to take pleasure in the humor it affords.

8. In the Comic World, the Underdog Wins

By and large the underdog in the real world is also the underdog in the fabliau world. Fabliau characters are not individuals, but represent categories: the libidinous priest, the frisky young wife, the cuckolded husband, the bamboozled knight, the earthy peasant, the wayward monk. On the scale of rank and power, the young wife and the peasant have the lowliest positions, and so have the greatest need to avail themselves of trickery to obtain their desires. In a tale with the devil and lowly classes of humans, such as *Le Pet au vilain*, the lowly human wins. In a tale with members of the Church and secular folk, such as *Le Sacristain*, the secular folk win. In the comic version of the monastic world, where monks struggle under oppressive vows of chastity and women are desirable but unobtainable, the oppressed monks win. In *The Land of Cokaygne* alluring nuns swim naked, the monks choose whichever they want, and on top of that they’re allowed to enjoy 12 wives a year. But in a story with a secular setting, populated by multiple classes and genders, women win. In *Les Perdris*, the lowly wife who is supposed to have only one man and no partridges ends up with two men and two partridges.

The comic world, then, is a world of the fulfillment of appetite, of pleasure without punishment, and of sensual delight. But are women equal citizens of this paradise? Like other categories
of characters—peasants, merchants, clergy, old husbands, young swains—women evince stereotyped characteristics and play a particular role in medieval comic narrative. In these comic texts, women are the ones most able to express and enjoy their appetites, especially for sex and food; they are bodily and earthly; and they are, by and large, supremely adept at trickery. In a world where deception is the key to success, they are the most successful of all. They are the underdogs. However greedy the men are, it is the woman who is successfully greedy.

This success does not come without censure, though: many narratives present themselves as warnings about the deviousness and shamelessness of women. Les Perdris concludes with the moral:

Par example cis fabliaus dist
Fame est fête por decevoir;
Mençonge fet devenir voir
Et voir fet devenir mençonge.\(^\text{12}\)

[The point that this story shows:
A woman’s made but to delude:
A lie they make into the truth
And truth they make into a lie.]

La Sorisete des Estopes (“The Mouse in the Basket”), the story of a bride who cuckolds her gullible young husband with a shrewd story, comes to a similar conclusion:

Enseignier voil por ceste fable
Que fame set plus que deiable,
Et certeinment lo sachiez.
Les iauz enbedeus me sachiez
Se n’é à esciant dit voir.
Qant ele viaut ome decevoir,
Plus l’en deçoit & plus l’afole
Tot solemant par sa parole
Que om ne feroit par angin.
De ma fable faz tel defin
Que chacun se gart de la soe
Qu’ele ne li face la coe.\(^\text{13}\)

[This story shows that, on the level, a woman knows more than the devil,
on that there’s little doubt, you know it.
Pluck out the eyes now of the poet
if this doesn’t show what’s true!
When she wants to hoodwink you
her tricks are crazy, quite absurd:
she is able with one word
to manage more than any man.
My fable tells you then to plan
to guard yourself from female foes
or they’ll lead you by the nose!]

So although these women are successful in getting what they want,
in the narrator’s moral assessment they are culpable. As the narrator frames it, their success makes them reprehensible. So does this stereotyping and denunciation of women mean that the comic world is essentially misogynous, a place where, once again, women are condemned for their struggle against the forces that constrain them?

To understand the position of the narrative it is helpful to distinguish its stance from its effect. The stance of the narrator is often articulated in an explicit pronouncement. In Les Perdris the narrator’s stance is explicitly misogynistic: “A woman’s made but to delude.” A world in which the voice of authority formulates this opinion is obviously far from a Utopia for women.

Yet this appended moral is part of a larger and more vexed tradition of authority in such tales. Late medieval and early modern jestbooks are rife with morals that seem almost randomly appended to tales and that appear to miss the point of the story altogether. Some of these are fabliaux under another name. From the sixteenth-century jestbook A Hundred Merry Tales, for example, comes the story of a woman who arranges to have a fling with her husband’s apprentice.14 She tells the husband how disloyal the apprentice is in wishing to seduce her, and sends him out into the garden dressed in her clothes to entrap the apprentice. While the husband is waiting in the garden, she and the apprentice find sport in the bedroom. Afterwards the apprentice goes into the garden and pretends to recognize the disguised husband as the wife, and reacts to the idea that he might have a fling with the wife by beating the disguised husband. The husband is thence convinced that both his wife and his apprentice are true to him. The moral appended to the story is the predictable statement of misogyny: “By thys tale ye may se that yt ys not wysdome for a man to be rulyd alway after his wyuys councell.”15
So random are the morals, however, that some even miss a chance to make an obvious point about misogyny, as in “Of hym that said that a womans tongue was lightest of digestion”:

A certayn artificer in London there was, whyche was sore seke and coulde not well dygest his meat. To whom a physickeyon cam to give hym councell, and sayd that he must vse to ete metis that be light of digestyon and small byrdys, as sparowes, swalowes, and speyally that byrd which is called a wagtayle, whose flesshe is meruelouse lyght of dygestyon, because that byrd is euer mouying and styryng. The sekeman, herynge the phesicion say so, answered hym and seyd: sir, yf that be the cause that those byrdes be lyght of dygestyon, than I know a mete moch lyghter of dygestyon than other sparow swallow or wagtaile, and that is my wyues tong, for it is neuer in rest but euer meuying and sterryng.

By this tale ye may lerne a good generall rule of physyke.\textsuperscript{16} This surprising moral may illustrate the haphazard qualities of the impulse to moralize. A similar example comes in a tale of three wedded men appearing before the gate of heaven. The first is rewarded a crown of glory because “he had had much troble” through being married. The second man says that he has been married twice and therefore receives two crowns of glory. The final man says he has been married three times, and St. Peter chides him:

\ldots thou hast ben ones in troble and thereof delyueryd, and than wyllingly woldyst be troblyed again, and yet agayne therof delyueryd; and for all that coulde not beware the thyrde tyme, but enterest wyllingly in troble agayn: therfore go thy wyaye to Hell: for thou shalt neuer come in heuen: for thou art not worthy.\textsuperscript{17}

The moral is given as “Thys tale is a warnyng to them that haue bene twyse in paryll to beware how they come therin the thyrd tyme.”\textsuperscript{18}

The fabliaux themselves rarely include morals, but the jest books, which contain short versions of the same types of tales, may demonstrate what happens when morals are applied to this genre. There are vanishingly few examples, in fact, in which the morals actually do express the central theme conveyed by the story.

In the case of the fabliaux cited, the pronouncement of the narrator, a glib summary such as “A woman’s made but to delude,” identifies this as the “real nature” exposed in women, as other characters’
real nature is exposed in the comic world. As priests are lecherous and peasants crude, so women are deceitful. But the claim that women are especially contemptible is in contention with the audience’s experience of the narrative. It is clear from the story that no one in the narrative world is selfless or especially virtuous. In *Les Perdris*, all the characters behave according to their appetites. All three—the priest, the husband, and the wife—want the same things: sex and partridges. All are willing to shoulder others aside to get them. All are in danger of being denied their desires by the assertiveness of the other characters. The woman is clearly in the lowliest position—it is she who has to do the work of roasting the partridges, yet she is the least likely to profit from that work. Yet in a world where maneuvering and cleverness are the keys to success, she is the most successful of them all, winning not only one but both partridges, and not only one but both sexual partners.

Moreover, this is not the limit of what the woman wins: she has won the point of view. We, the audience, experience her appetite for the partridges, and her sensual satisfaction as she eats them:

La langue li prist à fremir
Sus la pertris qu’ele ot lessie.
Jà ert toute vive enragie
S’encor n’en a .I. petitet;
Le col en tret tout souavet,
Si le menja par grant douçor;
Ses dois en lèche tout entor:
“Lasse, fet ele, que ferai?
Se tout menjue, que dirai?
Et coment le porrai lessier?
J’en ai mout très grant desirrier.
Or aviegne qu’avenir puet,
Quar toute mengier le m’estuet”19

[Her tongue began to tremble then
Over the partridge she hadn’t had:
She thought she might be driven mad
Not to have a little bite.
The neck she snatched with great delight,
Savoured it till it was done;
Then licked her fingers, every one.
“Alas,” she said, “What did I do?
What to say if I eat this too?
And how shall I from this retire?
Now I’m filled with such desire!
Let the future bring what may,
I’m going to eat it all today!”

By this positioning alone, the wife’s wants and desires are more likely to inspire audience identification and sympathy. Each member of the audience experiences her situation: as a woman who is supposed to be subservient both to her husband and to the priest, who is supposed to remain faithful to a husband who threatens her with a beating, and as the character whose appetites are least likely to find an official outlet. The wife’s role as the underdog is the secret stance of every listener, even a male listener: a person who feels he has not gotten his fair share has worked harder than he should have had to, who is constantly struggling against opposing forces, and who just wants to relax and enjoy a little gratification now and again. In general, people do not seek to rule the world; they just want to enjoy a partridge or two. But most people, whatever their station in life, can identify with the feeling that their life has more work than enjoyment in it—that they are cooking more partridges than they are eating.

Narratively, moreover, the suspense comes from seeing whether she can get away with her deceptions—the story achieves narrative closure only when she proves able to deceive the others. So the narrator may evince displeasure with her character, but he himself has fashioned the narrative so that her triumph is eminently satisfying for the audience. If she loses, we lose. Her enjoyment of the partridges is our enjoyment of the narrative. We become one with the wife.

But the position of women in comic narrative is even more central than this. As we have seen, the comic mode is founded on elements such as appetite, satisfaction, pragmatism, cleverness, and bodiliness. All of these are identified with women. Although everyone in the comic world obeys the dictates of their appetites, and everyone strives to enjoy the pleasures of the body, it is women who have the pragmatism and the cleverness to satisfy these bodily appetites. It is thus women who have the happy endings—women are the supreme embodiment of this mode. Unsuccessful striving is the tragic mode. Successful appetite is the comic mode. Thus to introduce a woman into a narrative is to invite the comic.

Is it deleterious to women, then, to identify them with the comic world, which is, after all, nonserious and limited?
On the contrary, I would argue that the nonserious is serious. As the realm of play, the comic world was not countenanced by official culture, but abundant evidence shows that it was widely enjoyed by the creators of official culture. It is not limited in audience but in appropriateness; it is unofficial in that it was considered to be at odds with the eternal world, the world of God and the afterlife. It is as if the comic world starts at the ground and goes up to the waist; the serious, pious world starts at the waist and goes up to heaven. The pious world is essentially the world of the afterlife of the virtuous, lived out on earth as the pious are supposed to live. The pious world is concerned with the long view, the exalted, the immaterial. Its opposite is the comic world, which is concerned with the short view, the bodily, the pragmatic. The difference between the two worlds is exemplified by the first two tales in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the long and exalted Knight’s Tale, and the shorter and comic Miller’s Tale.\(^21\) The Knight’s Tale is set in the golden past, in ancient Greece, over many years, on a broad canvas of geographies, nobilities, tragedy, and fortune. Love from afar drives the plot; sex is not in evidence. The Knight’s Tale is explicitly “quited” or reciprocated by the Miller’s Tale. Where the Knight’s Tale is set in the past, the Miller’s Tale is set in the present day. Where the Knight’s Tale takes place over the course of years, the Miller’s Tale takes place over the course of days. Where the Knight’s Tale concerns two unmarried men who fall in love from afar with a woman they have never met, the Miller’s Tale concerns two men—one of them a cleric—who want to seduce a woman who is already married. Where the Knight’s Tale is set in ancient Greece, the Miller’s Tale is set in contemporary Oxford. Where the Knight’s Tale culminates in a grand combat in an arena, the Miller’s Tale involves a scuffle in a farmyard. Where the Knight’s Tale involves lengthy questions about philosophy and the gods, in the Miller’s Tale religion is ludicrously misunderstood or only an expedient to seduction or trickery. In the Miller’s Tale, sex, deception, and play are the main interest of every active character. In the Knight’s Tale, no one is having fun. Official culture would argue that we should be living in the exalted Knight’s Tale. But comic culture would reply that indeed we actually are living in the bawdy Miller’s Tale.

So, like women, the comic world bears a complex relationship to the contemporary world of “official” power, disparaged and prized in equal measure. It is a world of expediency, pragmatism, appetite, trickery, and enjoyment. All of these are associated with women; women are the engine of this world. Above all, this comic world functions as
a virtual world where women have power, appetites, and enjoyment—and men sympathize with them. Men are brought face to face with the truth that women represent humankind. That is the genuine radicality of comic narrative.

Notes

1. *Le Sacristain* appears in three recensions; the different versions are edited in Noomen and van de Boogaard 1983–1998, VII, 140–189. The first and third recensions (edited as *Le Sacristain I* and *III*) survive in one manuscript each, while the second recension (*Le Sacristain II*) appears in five manuscripts; it is this recension I will be referring to. This version is also edited with facing original in Harrison 1974, 85–137. A Middle English version is edited as *Dane Hew, Munk of Leicester* in Furrow 1985, 57–76; on other versions, see Espinosa 1936.


15. Hazlitt 1864, 14 (no. ii).
17. Hazlitt 1864, 40 (no. xix).
20. On the narrative technique of Les Perdris, see Brandsma 2011.

**Bibliography**


One of the most common visual images satirizing women in the late medieval period was a woman standing atop her husband, beating him with her distaff. More than any other material object, the distaff, the primary tool of women’s work with cloth, symbolized the danger entailed when women wielded power over men. Comic dramas like the popular Farce du Cuvier demonstrated that a man who did women’s work had lost his masculinity; to restore order, he must reassert control, whether by will or brute force. The invocation to husbands to beware the horrors of being forced to do housework by domineering wives runs throughout a variety of antimarriage treatises and narratives that present marriage as a kind of trial in which husbands are martyrs subjected to tortures such as being beaten by distaffs, submerged in wet laundry or soiled diapers, or stabbed by the sharp barbed tongues of their wives. Even today, a man wearing an apron and baking cookies can elicit a chuckle, depending on the context, and stereotypical jokes about nagging housewives persist. Yet laughter, as we know, can function as of a zone of exploration, of unease and questioning, even when the dominant values are well marked and understood. Thus, the distaff-wielding woman of comic literature invites us to ask what values concerning women’s work were in play during the medieval period.

When we think of women’s work today, we tend to distinguish between uncompensated labor in the home, which we call “housework,”
and labor for which one earns wages. This is of course a distinction that did not apply in the same way in the medieval period. Women and men alike produced goods in the home: spinning and weaving cloth, brewing beer, baking bread, crafting products. These might be sold from within the home or sold at the market. Rural women’s tasks encompassed the outdoors, with such tasks as gardening and farming, in addition to the indoor tasks we more readily label “housework.” A look at etymology suggests the changing understanding of the relationship between the home and work. In Britain, the term “huswifery” arrived in the thirteenth century, and existed alongside its companion term, “husbandry,” both referring to household maintenance. The word “housework” itself only appeared in the nineteenth century.5 Because the division between home and workplace was not as strong in the medieval period, some historians have viewed this period as a time when women’s work was more highly regarded. As the European economy shifted away from the family production unit to market production, it is argued, women’s participation in these economies was reduced. Because women’s work has traditionally functioned within the family unit, as the role of the family in production weakened, so too did the role of the wife, who increasingly found her economic options limited.6 But as Judith Bennett has cautioned, although the distinction between home and work was not as sharp in the medieval period, whatever work women did was low profit and low status.7

There clearly was value accorded to women’s work, however. Beginning in the thirteenth century, marriage tracts describing the married household as a condition ordained by God began to proliferate. Using both Aristotle’s works, particularly the Economics, and biblical models, ecclesiastical intellectuals such as Robert of Sorbonne and Gilbert of Tournai described a woman’s work as complementing the economic contributions of her husband; while he labored to produce income for the home, she was to conserve and administer what he produced.8 Christine de Pizan specifically praised women’s economic contribution to the household as often bringing in more profit than the value of the land itself.9 Dying husbands would often bequeath to their wives property and money in recognition of the services they had performed during their marriage.10 In the thirteenth century, Marbod of Rennes commented:

Woman alone contributes many things...which daily life in the community demands; for who but woman may take on the responsibility of a nurse? Is any man able to nourish life without a
woman? Who will draw out wool or thread? Who will turn the spindle? Who will return completed the day’s work of spinning or who will patiently weave? Yet these things are done for our benefit; they are so useful that if they were to be lacking, the quality of life would diminish. Moreover, woman accomplishes more efficiently with special female care very many things which looking after a household requires, and she puts up with much that our male pride disdains. She treats the sick more gently, is more painstakingly attentive at the bedside, provides food and drink more devotedly. She has greater liking for, and is more quick to respond to, commands. She can be shaped into the pattern of goodness like soft wax. 

Marbod begins with lavish praise of the housewife, but it becomes clear that she is valued both for deigning to do the trivial work her husband would refuse and for her obedience to him. In comic literature, unruly women not only shirk their responsibilities, but threaten to upset the normal order of man as the head of woman. One might say that the literary labor performed by the comic heroine is to undermine the ideal of wifely obedience and to turn the household on its head, generating laughter with her unruliness.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* provides a good starting point to consider attitudes toward women’s labor in late medieval culture. Often labeled an example of “estates satire,” the work targets the typical traits associated with various professions, from the profit-hungry Merchant to the manipulative silver-tongued Friar to the studious and dour Clerk. The work is not the place to look for exemplary portraits of labor, whether performed by women or by men. Among the pilgrims, there are only two women who are described in the General Prologue and who tell tales on the pilgrimage route to Canterbury: the Prioress and the Wife of Bath. As a representative of the first estate, the Prioress should exemplify the Christian values of the religious community to which she belongs. Chaucer shows her to be superficial rather than pious, more focused on fine manners than on spiritual affairs, more oriented toward bigotry than toward charity. As her prologue is quite short, we learn little about the actual work she performs.

The Wife of Bath, however, regales us with a prologue that is nearly twice as long as her tale, and although it does not provide an account of what we would consider “work,” it captures the stereotypical attitudes about how women spend their time. The first glimpse of the Wife in the General Prologue links her to the typical weaving work of women
Yet the Wife makes no actual mention of cloth work, and it quickly becomes clear that the Wife labors over a different kind of spinning: spinning webs to catch husbands and spinning lies to deceive them. The Wife herself brags “Deceite, wepyng, spynnng God hath yive / to wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve” (401–2). Unlike other pilgrims in the tales, who represent certain trades, the Wife represents the entire “fourth estate,” womankind itself. The weaving is less an indication of her work or social class than it is a placeholder for Woman. The Wife begins her prologue by justifying her multiple marriages, and one might say that what she describes is a kind of “sex work.” In the case of her first three husbands, who were both wealthy and old, she used or withheld her sexual favors to extract material goods. Bragging about how she has manipulated her husbands, she declares:

But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hond,
And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,
But it were for my profit and myn ese?
I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey,
That many nyght they songen ‘Weilawey! (211–216)

The Wife’s relations with her husbands are presented neither as procreation nor as wifely obedience, the only legitimate reasons for sexual unions according to Christian teaching, but rather profit and pleasure. The Wife herself laughs to think about the labor performed in bed by her older husbands: “As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke / How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!” (ll. 201–2). The word “swynke” explicitly describes sex as a form of labor, which connects her to a comic tradition where the word “work” has explicitly sexual connotations. In a late-fifteenth-century French farce, for example, a woman complains that her old husband is not able to do his work, so the woman and her friends consult a smith who, by virtue of his profession, can turn worn-out husbands into shiny new ones. In other plays, various male artisans arrive on the scene allegedly in order to help the housewives with their “work” and use the various “tools” of their trade to get it done. Pot cleaners, chimney sweeps, doctors, and other tradesmen provide their services to housewives and make cuckolds of the husbands.

The work the Wife performs with her fourth and fifth husbands is of a different nature. Unlike the stereotypically older and easily dominated
three husbands, these last two husbands are less interested in the Wife’s sexual wares and thus pose a greater challenge. Her fourth husband, claims the Wife, had a mistress. She labored to take vengeance, not by committing adultery herself, but by pretending to do so, thus making him jealous. She used her female stratagems to exert control, gossiping about him to her female friends, causing him to blush with shame. The Wife’s gossiping links her to one of the most dominant critiques of women in comic literature. The “Caquet des Femmes” [Gossiping of Women], a woodcut from about 1560, depicts activities that brought women out of the house into the market, but its title focuses on the opportunity for frivolous gossip or bickering that contact with other women could allow. While it is likely that women valued these opportunities to exchange household tips or share their experiences as housewives, from the perspective of the medieval husband, they represented the potential for his wife to evade his authority and perhaps leak household secrets to the community at large, as we see with the Wife’s fourth husband. Christine de Pizan urged artisans’ wives that they “should be willing to stay home, not running here and there every day, gossiping in the neighborhood to find out what everybody else is doing, nor frequenting her cronies. All this makes for poor housekeeping.” Some comic texts in fact portray women’s errands as excuses to commit adultery, such as the Farce du Pasté, where a woman who claims to be seeking a tart for supper sneaks off to see her lover. In the farce Martin de Cambrai, not trusting his wife, Martin takes away his wife’s keys, both depriving her of the housewife’s traditional control over the household goods and confining her inside the home.

While the Wife devotes only a few scant lines to the fourth husband, of her fifth husband, the clerk Jankyn, she has more to say. Unlike the upper hand she held in her marriage with the first three “good” husbands, in this marriage her sexuality is no longer a marketable commodity. Not only is he younger than she is, but he in fact takes control of the supply and demand process, withholding his affection from her, and causing her to love him more than her other husbands (522–524). We learn that the scholarly husband furthermore browbeats her with his antifeminist books that he endlessly reads, and it seems that the Wife is finally put in her proper place. But even when Jankyn deals her a blow that renders her deaf in one ear, the Wife capitalizes on the situation, playing up her victimhood, and implying he has killed her for her land. Having thus been made to feel guilty, Jankyn gives the marital reins back to her: “He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond, / To han the governance of hous and lond, / And of his tonge, and of his
hond also” (813–15). Using strategy and wit, the Wife takes control of the stage to ensure that her last two husbands are nonetheless subject to her staging and direction. Like other wives in the comic tradition, her use of pretense and manipulation substitutes for household labor.19

That this manipulation is viewed by the Wife as a kind of work is suggested by her description of her extensive “practice” with husbands as a kind of schooling or apprenticeship:

Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,
And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes
Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;
Of fyve husbondes scoleiying am I. 44c–44f.

A “werkman” performing her “practyk” and “werkes” in the course of her marriages, the Wife embodies medieval views of women as a source of entrapment of which men should be wary. The Wife declares her practice to be a kind of wisdom that puts her on equal footing not only with her clerk husband, Jankyn, but by implication with all clerks, including the Clerk riding with them to Canterbury, who later tells a tale meant to put the Wife in her place, mocking the “crabbed eloquence” (1203) of the Wife and all “archewyves” (1195). The ridicule directed at the Wife is shared by the Pardoner who interrupts her lengthy prologue, calling her a “noble prechour” and declaring that he has determined never to marry (165).

This derisive attitude toward the Wife’s self-declared “wit” or wisdom is common in medieval comic narratives. The Distaff Gospels, discussed above, is a prime example as is William Dunbar’s “Tretis of Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo,” which mockingly presents as a “treatise” women’s bawdy joking and boasting about domestic domination.20 In the later Middle Ages, several farce dramas portray women disdaining housework in order to claim themselves men’s intellectual equals. In one play, several women receive papal bulls proclaiming them mistresses of the house and refuse to do housework anymore since they have their degrees.21 In another play, wives decide to learn Latin because it will not only give them skills to outargue their husbands, but also enable them to get out of the house and into town.22 Such pretentions to be men’s intellectual equals are clearly mocked, and the message is sent that women should not question the “natural” division of labor that relegates women to the domestic realm.

It is important to note, however, that as much as the Wife’s work and her self-proclaimed wisdom are the object of Chaucer’s satire, she is
not entirely a comic butt of laughter. The General Prologue describes her as good company, a woman who knows how to have a good time (l. 474). Even the male Pilgrims who are horrified (or play the role of being horrified) by her lesson on mastering husbands are invited “back stage” to see how she does it. Unlike the unknowing victims of her machinations, they are privy to her strategies and thus, in some sense, invited to occupy her position. Part way into her prologue, she even invites her listeners not to take her seriously, for her “entente nys but for to pleye” (189–192). Yet these playful words invite us to take a second look at her defense of women and to consider what we might dismiss and what we might take seriously. They also mark her as in control of the narratives about women at play in the culture around her; rather than see her as a woman who unknowingly undermines her argument, we look to see what exactly she means by playing, and what Chaucer’s design is in assigning these words to her.

First, the Wife’s words alert us to the fact that she is performing a role. I have argued elsewhere that the Wife is not so much unruly as she is performing unruliness. More importantly, in having her perform this role, Chaucer himself is playing with the antifeminist tradition; in his manipulation of a whole authoritative tradition by placing it, with great ambiguity, in the mouth of a woman, he demonstrates his own mastery and dominance of the tradition. While readers surely never develop sympathy for the Wife’s defense of her unorthodox forms of labor, they potentially do hear a counternarrative whereby women’s agency is shown to be always circumscribed by antifeminist discourse. When the Wife declares that it is men who have written history and that according to them all women are corrupt (262; 688–710), it is the authoritative tradition itself, words themselves, that are brought into focus.

Whereas the dominant medieval narrative scorns women’s work and portrays women as always ready to shirk their responsibilities, both fictional and real wives bring attention to the value of their work and complain of the injustice in the fact that it is not recognized. An English poem of the fifteenth century declares that a woman is “a worthy thing,” putting all her might into caring for her husband, yet experiencing only stress and suffering for her efforts. That medieval women experienced housework as a kind of servitude is furthermore suggested by texts like the Middle English devotional treatise, “Holy Maidhead,” that encouraged women to enter convent life rather than be subjected to the hard life of maintaining a household.
It is thus not surprising that in some literary texts, women’s perspectives are represented through the fantasy of being able to escape housework. The wives in the *Farce du Cuvier* or other dramas are ridiculed for their attempts, but their complaints may have resonated with female audiences. Consider, for example, the farce in which a housewife triumphs by claiming to have found edicts stipulating that men must take over all of their wives’ chores including scouring pots, making the bed, sweeping, washing, going to the mill and oven, and, of course, spinning.27 For men in the audience, the passage is comic because they will never be threatened by laws that exist only within the realm of fiction. At the end of the farce, the husband announces that his wife has become “maistresse” because of his own “simplesse” or foolishness. Yet for women, might this text not spin an alternative story, showing the value of women’s work that should be recognized?

It is unlikely that medieval women thought that men should help out more around the house. Rather, complaints of fictional housewives focus on how husbands undervalue their wives’ work relative to their own. In historical records of late medieval France, we see that women would seek to establish their good character not only by demonstrating their dedication to their housework but also by highlighting their husbands’ unreasonable demands and failure to appreciate their work. More interestingly, when women recounted stories of how they killed in order to protect their virtue and ward off sexual aggression, they would usually open by recounting how they were engaged in some household task.28 In a kind of reversal of the “sex work” motif I described above, women would try to establish their good name and virtue by painting an image of themselves as industrious housewives. In the fifteenth-century “Wrights’ Chaste Wife,” a clever wife outwits the attempts of three men who attempt to woo her in her husband’s absence and punishes them by making them do her work.29 In a similar story in Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptameron*, the master of the house makes sexual advances to the servant who thwarts his attempts, forcing him to wear her clothes and take up her work of sifting grain. The lady of the house, upon witnessing this spectacle, laughs and asks mockingly, “How much per month are you asking for your work, wench?”30 As elsewhere, the man’s performing woman’s work is viewed as humiliation; the context, however, emphasizes the woman’s perspective, for her honest work is disregarded by the man who violates her place in the domestic sphere. Some texts suggest, moreover, that the work disdained as mere women’s work is not so trivial. For example, in the fifteenth-century “Ballad of the Tyrannical Husband,” a husband claims
that his work in the fields is more difficult than that of the wife, and to
make this clear, he argues that they should switch places. Although the
conclusion to the tale is missing, the implication is that, after having
taken on the work of his wife, the husband concedes that her work is
not so easy after all.31

The defense of women’s work goes hand in hand with the recur-
rent motif of men’s inadequate labor. Both fictional and real wives
of the Middle Ages charge that men do little work themselves, since
they are often engaged in drinking, gambling, or sheer laziness. In the
Wakefield Corpus Christi cycle, Noah’s wife berates her husband for
his absence, remarking that she does all the work while he does noth-
ing but amuse himself.32 In one farce, when a husband complains that
his wife has not served dinner, his wife retorts that he hasn’t done his
job so that there is not one crumb of bread, nor anything to make soup
with.33 Even the housewives of the farce discussed above complain not
simply that their husbands are too old to provide sexual labor, but also
lament the extra work required to care for these elderly and infirm
spouses. The first wife has to button up the shirt of her old husband
who opens the play with his coughing, and the second wife laments
that her old man constantly coughs, spits, wheezes, and snores.34 In
another farce, as the wife goes off to have her lazy husband’s boots
fixed, she exhorts him to at least do something useful like mending his
leggings. He procrastinates so long that by the time he attempts this
task, night has fallen, making his efforts futile (and likely comic to the
medieval audiences watching his fumbling attempts).35

Housewives also complain that their husbands squander whatever
the wife has been able to economize. In La Veuve, a widow contem-
plates whether she should remarry, worrying that her husband will
dissipate all of her belongings and eat her out of house and home.36 In
the Distaff Gospels, the women agree that “the man who wrongfully
wastes the possessions that come to him from his wife, without her
permission and against her wishes, will answer for this before God,
as if he had committed a theft.”37 To be clear, such texts do not invite
our sympathy. Framed as parodies of religious treatises, they represent
the content of the women’s complaints as incongruous with the form
of the narrative and implicitly frivolous in nature. In the Fifteen Joys
of Marriage, for example, childbirth, arguably the most gendered labor
one can imagine, is likened to nothing more than a hen laying an egg,
and the extreme pains of labor are viewed as inferior to the worry that
weighs down a man confronted with deep thoughts relating to his
affairs.38 The husband’s comparison of the wife to a plump hen who
Lisa Perfetti

does nothing but sit in the nest and clack or “caqueter” (the same word is often used to describe women’s talk) and the husband to an industrious cock who wears himself out feeding her bespeaks a far from admiring attitude toward the wife’s skills or talents.

Yet husbands squandering household resources were not a strictly literary motif, for medieval conduct manuals often urged women to be diligent housekeepers so as to keep their husbands at home and out of trouble.39 The Goodman of Paris, in his instruction manual for his young wife, even refers to women’s housekeeping as a power women can use to “bewitch” men, who are drawn in by all the pleasures she offers, such as taking care of his stockings, breeches, shirts, and so forth. Consequently, he will stay at home faithfully serving his wife rather than running out to seek other women. In this sense, then, the motif of women’s “sex work” is reversed so that her hard work “seduces” men into forsaking their own sexual improprieties.40 Even more compelling historical evidence of women’s complaints of profligate husbands can be found in the case of Jeanne Regnart, who complained that the troubles in her marriage started when her husband began drinking and dissipating the goods of the household, particularly those she had brought to the marriage. Recounting her story, she testifies that the fight that led to her murdering her husband started when he came home drunk from the tavern and she rebuked him for his ridiculous business transactions. Her criticism led to her being beaten, whereupon she fought back in self-defense.41

That women would use their husband’s squandering of household resources to defend themselves in a court of law might lead us to wonder whether women in the audience of farces or readers of fictional texts may have responded to the fictional representation of these complaints with some sympathy. Although some texts where men are forced to do the housework seem intended to reassert men’s dominance, others show doing women’s work to be the result of men’s own failure to fulfill their obligations. Indeed, in one farce, a young man is reluctant to think about the responsibilities he must contribute to the household in return for the benefits he derives from his wife’s care.42 Whereas the farce begins with the familiar comic motif of men’s fear of unruly wives, it ends as a sober pro-marriage performance (likely performed upon the occasion of a wedding) intended to remind husbands to take their duties seriously. This ending shows that the gendering of labor is not always about a power struggle; women often are seeking equal recognition of their work and a commitment from men to uphold their
end of the bargain. It is perhaps significant that one of the most popular medieval comic texts to focus on gendered labor, *La farce du Cuvier*, has an analog story in which the offending spouse is a husband who, in a drunken stupor, falls into a stream and must recant his unreasonable demands since pulling him out of the stream is not on his wife’s list of duties. Reading the two texts together, we see the comic reversal of one spouse over the other as a message about mutual obligations. Comic texts show the material needs facing medieval households and the vices of both husband and wife that make such mutual cooperation a difficult task. Men fret about having to provide for their wives, and wives lament that their husbands throw it all away on drinking and gambling.

The evidence from literary texts as well as from conduct books and legal documents suggests that women’s work was accorded inferior status, a status that was at times questioned, a question that made its way into medieval popular culture. But there may be another reason for the rising preoccupation with domestic relations in the literature of the later Middle Ages. As historians such as Judith Bennett have shown, women’s increasing participation in urban trades like ale-brewing and silk weaving in the period led to a backlash whereby men tried to restrict their participation in these trades or their membership in guilds. It might thus be possible to read comic texts as an example of how this backlash over women’s work became displaced onto the battle over who would control the domestic household. Farces that appear to focus on who gets to control the keys to the house displace concerns over women’s participation in economic life onto the battle over housework, suggesting that the threat posed by women was really only domestic after all. Whereas women were active in some of the lucrative urban trades, the farces kept her firmly behind the walls of the household. Although in late medieval drama a few female characters have trades (e.g., tripe seller, milk seller, fish seller, or tavern owner), most are housewives, in contrast to the majority of male characters who have trades.

The Wife of Bath is a weaver and a widow, both potentially sources of economic autonomy, yet her prologue invites us to laugh at her stereotypically feminine vices of sexual wandering, manipulation of her spouses, and sharp tongue. And while above I have noted that keeping women at home reflects a concern over female sexuality, the argument could be made that it also reflects anxiety about women’s economic autonomy. One scholar has in fact argued that the good wife treatises
of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England were designed in part to keep bourgeois women at home and not in the streets selling cloth as “hucksters.” The discourse on femininity is therefore really a displacement of a deeper concern over women who would dare aspire to an autonomous existence provided by their independent labor rather than the dependent economic condition represented by traditional marriage. Read in this context then, the image of the distaff-wielding woman may well be seen to elicit a snide snicker from an audience that knows that men are not to do women’s work, but it serves as an equally potent reminder that women’s work was, indeed, something to be taken seriously.

Notes

1. The distaff-wielding wife, as well as the woman who grabs the breeches, becomes a popular image beginning in the fifteenth century although an image appears earlier in the Luttrell Psalter (1320–1340). See Grössinger 1997, 112–127.
2. Perhaps the most conservative “comic” text in this regard is the fifteenth-century French farce, *Le Pont aux Anes* [The Ass Bridge], in which the husband complains that he has to draw water from the well, put the pot on the fire, make the bed, and cook the beans. The solution to this problem is offered to the beleaguered husband by a woodcutter who explains that he has to beat his stubborn ass to get him to cross the bridge and show who’s boss. This play may be found in Tissier 1986, 6: 61–79.
3. See, for example, the *III nouveaulx martirs*, in Cohen 1949, XL, 309–315, especially ll. 193–198 and 229–234. In this text, more of a morality play than a farce, Marriage is crowned a martyr, and a feast day is established whereby men will now have to suffer blows from the distaff from their wives.
4. For a similar analysis of the representation of women’s work in comic literature, see chapter 5 of my *Women and Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature*.
6. See Howell 1986, 198–222. Howell argues that it is specifically the increasing requirement of political participation in the new market economy that restricted women.
7. Discussing the tradition of ale brewing, Bennett 1996, 147, notes, “The history of brewsters shows, first, that even the best women’s work in the Middle Ages was humble work (belying any notion of a golden age) and, second, that the enduring characteristics of low status, low-skilled, and low profit describe women’s work in 1300, as well as in 1600 (belying the notion of a transformation in women’s work status.”


12. In her prologue to the legend of Saint Cecilia, The Second Nun expounds on the sin of idleness, and thus implicitly preaches the value of labor. But we get no portrait of her (some have speculated the tale was actually meant to be a second tale assigned to the Prioress). All references to Chaucer come from *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, 1987.

13. This farce is known as *Les femmes qui font refondre leurs maris* [The women who have their husbands recast]. Tissier 1986, vol 6, ll. 63–64.

14. French fabliaux and farces abound in such examples. One fabliau is the “Saineresse,” where a “doctor” provides a miraculous unguent to an allegedly ailing housewife. The fabliau may be found in vol. 4 of Noomen and Van den Boogard. Just two farce examples are in Cohen’s collection: *Le Ramonneur de cheminées* [The Chimney Sweep], (XXX) and *Les femmes qui font renbourer leurs bas* [Women who Get their Saddles Stuffed] (XXXVI).

15. See, for example, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie 1982, 253–255, who in his study of village life in southern France notes that women’s encounters with each other as they went to the mill or to the fountain gave them the opportunity to exchange important information on household or town matters. See also Davidson 1982, 149, who explains the tradition of having a common day for washing clothes (usually in a public town space) as a response to women’s desire for solidarity and companionship.


18. *La Farce de Martin de Cambray*, Cohen 1949, XLI, 154–156. See also *Les Femmes qui font refondre leurs maris*, discussed above, in which the elderly husband, now transformed into a virile and strong man, demands the keys from his wife, l. 504. On the binary opposing the good woman in the house with the bad woman in the street, which informs a wide range of medieval genres, see Salih 2003, 124–140.

19. Many texts show women feigning illness in order to get out of doing housework. In *Les Quinze Joyes de mariage* (edited by Rychner 1967), there are at least two such examples (36 and 53). In one farce (Cohen 1949, XXIII, 179–185) a farmer’s wife claims that she is too weak to work in the fields because her legs and feet hurt. In another (Cohen 1949, XXVIII, 218–226), a woman consults her neighbor, a doctor, who advises her to pretend to be sick to escape doing her housework and, naturally, offers her his own kind of remedy.


23. As Martha Bayless points out in chapter 2, the comic heroine’s point of view is often privileged, and that in itself, complicates the notion of such texts being misogynistic.
24. For an extended discussion of the Wife’s intent to play, see the first chapter of my *Women and Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature*.


26. Another example is the play *Mary of Nemmegen*, in which a dutiful young woman who works hard in her uncle’s household is tempted by the devil, who promises not only wealth and sensual pleasures, but also independence and freedom from household chores. As Claire Sponsler 1997, 98, notes, the devil’s offer looks distinctly appealing given the domestic drudgery endured in her uncle’s household.

27. Cohen 1949, XX, 159–164. Translation is mine. In another farce, *La Veuve* (Philipot 1939, 163–186), a man woos a woman by promising to do the wash, rock the baby, light the fire, and even empty the chamberpot.


29. See the discussion of this tale in Hanawalt 1998, 98.


33. *Le Pont aux Anes*, Tissier 1986, vol. 6, 79, ll. 4–6. It should be noted, however, that the wife later admits that there are peas in the house: her husband has merely to put them in the pot and cook them himself.

34. Tissier 1986, vol. 6, 137, ll. 92–95.

35. Cohen 1949, IX, ll. 204, 422–428.

36. Philipot 1939, 163–186, ll. 120–123.


38. *Les Quinze joyes de mariage* (ed.) Rychner, 58. In the third joy, pregnancy is viewed as a woman’s elaborate ploy to get out of doing housework, and the husband ineptly tries to cook something for his wife (18–22).


40. Brereton and Ferrier 1981, 100–103.

41. Davis 1987, 94. See also the case of Jeanne Mayet, who had her son-in-law killed because he had been beating her daughter and drinking away the family’s earnings (83). Christine de Pizan also notes the problem of men who spend all their money at the tavern rather than at home, thus advising wives to keep their husbands attracted to them so that they will stay at home (210).

42. Cohen 1949, XXXI.

43. The story comes from the 1522 collection by Johannes Pauli, discussed in Schnell 1988.

44. See Kowaleski and Bennett 1989, 23, who note that when men in London took over the silkwork craft from women in the sixteenth century, one of their first moves was to form a guild and prohibit hiring women as apprentices.

45. Riddy 1996, 66–86. On the threat of single women working in medieval German cities and their evasion of male supervision, see Rasmussen 1997, 201–208. See
also Westphal-Wihl 1989, 162–189, who discusses The Ladies Tournament, written in about 1300. In this text, women join together to stage their own tournament, and the men, threatened by this invasion of their sphere, and worried they will ultimately be forced to do housework, joke that the only “hard lances” the maidens will enjoy are in the marriage bed. Westphal-Wihl notes, such “anxiety comes remarkably close to the realization that the division of labor by sex is not a biological specialization but a social convention dividing men and women into two reversible categories that merely assures that the smallest viable economic unit will contain one housekeeper and one jouster” (185).

Bibliography


CHAPTER FOUR

Gender Subversion and the Early Christian East: Reconstructing the Byzantine Comic Mime

Anna Foka

Introduction

Scholars of theater have mostly treated Byzantine performance arts schematically, as if they were a literary bridge between antiquity and renaissance for the Roman East. Indeed, within the realm of performance arts, the same artistic forms found in Roman entertainment and spectacle also appear in later Greek antiquity: the landscape of popular culture in Byzantium is largely composed of chariot racing in the Hippodrome with comic mimes and serious pantomimes providing theatrical intermissions. In spite of this front-stage presence, however, these performances are treated by scholars of theater only fragmentarily, mostly focusing on criticism by the Church: with very few exceptions, scholars are mostly interested in their decline rather than their existence. This narrow conceptualization of the role of Byzantine theater undermines the social and cultural importance of performance in that specific historical milieu. In spite of the overall rich hypotheses, and while there is substantial evidence for the rapid decline of performances, more concrete facts about them remain enigmatic and obscure.

There are two key reasons for this blurry image: First, the paucity of literary evidence as mimes had no script; instead, they were based on broad outlines and improvisation. Second, following the emergence and popularization of Christian morals, theater gradually became a
derogated form of entertainment in Byzantium; preserved evidence is typically scattered across Christian authors who mainly criticize and condemn it, a criticism driven by Christian morality and its consequent emerging aesthetics. Indeed, while performances in the Roman West survive as Medieval Moral Mystery Plays, by the Middle Byzantine period (843–1204 CE) there are no remaining organized forms of theater in the East.

Against this backdrop, this chapter examines the nexus of gender, sexuality, and humor within early Byzantine comic performances. As opposed to earlier drama, microhistoric evidence reveals that in Byzantium both men and women could act. Microhistoric information about mimes is, however, scarce; just like the Roman mimes, performers in Byzantium were slaves or freedmen/women.\(^5\) First-century evidence on the broad plots of the Roman mime as well as the (largely Christian) literary reception of popular performers (Theodora, Pelagia) have led to the interpretation of the genre as constituted by lascivious scenes and obscene sexuality, including slapstick humor and grotesque imitations of sexual acts on stage.\(^6\) Other evidence about the genre reveals inherent contradictions: While the Greek sophist and rhetorician’s Choricius’s *Apologia Mimorum*, written possibly around 491–518 CE, seems to defend the disciplinary effect of humor in Byzantine society, the stark Christian polemic of the genre reflects its frequent association with prostitution and gender ambiguity. Using this evidence, I argue that in Byzantium, theatrical and social roles constitute each other. In this way, an investigation of obscure comic performance—albeit built on incomplete and fragmentary evidence—can elucidate how gender roles were supposed to be enacted within the Byzantine society. The subsequent criticism and censorship of the genre could plausibly stem from regulatory social conventions.

In the dramatic sphere, social behavior requires a performance: a theatrical reenactment and re-xperiencing that can relate, in some way, to socially established forms. Accordingly, performance can be used to enforce as well as subvert the social norm; it is in a sense the mundane and ritualized form of its legitimation.\(^7\) Similar to theater, gender is also recognized as a public action and a performative act;\(^8\) it is instituted through the stylization of the body and can therefore be understood as “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding, gendered self.”\(^9\) Similarly, as actors—whether theatrical or not—are always already on stage within the terms of performance, the gendered body can be viewed to act its part in a cultural and historically corporeal
space that enable and constrain social action. This formulation moves
the conception of gender off the ground from a substantial model of
identity detached from its surroundings to one that also requires a con-
ception of a constituted social temporality. With this in mind, studying
mimes can elucidate aspects of both theatrical and social performances
of gender in a particular space and time. I expand on this below.

In Byzantine performance, humor appears to be instrumental in the
way it can communicate socially established gender norms. As the sym-
bolic originates from individual acts that compose the norm, a subver-
sion of the norm is possible by citing the law differently in order to
reiterate and co-opt its power.10 In the case of comic performance,
this can be achieved through the deployment of satirical and parodis-
tic practices. In this sense, comic mimes can reveal new possibilities
for imagining gender in its particular historical context, that of Early
Byzantium. I argue that mimes, using humor as a tool, often repre-
sented alternative sexualities that are not categorized as “heterosex-
ual,” “normative,” “meant for procreative purposes” or “marital.” The
Christian polemics of these practices prove that they were challenging
and destabilizing to the gradually more popular Christian morality,
that in modern terms could be described as an ontological–epistemic
schema that framed particular (binary, androcentric, and hierarchi-
cal) configurations of the relationship between sex, gender, and desire
as normative.11 In Bakhtinian terms, this symbolic order is discussed
and questioned via the lens of humor: mimes confirmed society’s ills
through exposure. Against this backdrop, humor can also be seen as
a tool that brings out the critical interrogation of characterizations of
historical socio-sexual behavior(s), and the dominant role of desire in
Byzantine comic performance. In this way, the analysis provided herein
follows the premise that performances of mimes are a fundamental part
of the Byzantine social landscape; the construction of gender identity is
driven by the performative subversion of the symbolic order.12

(Un)making Gender: Femininity and
Sexuality in Performance

When Christianity became the official religion of Byzantium in 325
CE, both emperor and church proclaimed that they paid more respect
to human rights than the rulers of Old Rome had done.13 Eventually,
the emperors perceived public entertainment in a slightly different way
to the Romans.14 Byzantine spectacle was focused on chariot racing
rather than gladiatorial ludi; these gladiatorial events were in fact abolished by Constantine I (325–337 CE) who also completed the Great Hippodrome. This was the largest building in Constantinople, capable of seating about 30,000–35,000 spectators. The Hippodrome of Constantinople has been considered the equivalent of the Agora of classical Athens: a place for social interaction, public gatherings, and expression of political views. Beyond providing the space of performance, areas around the Hippodrome were also a melting pot for marginalized segments of the Byzantine society: traders, prostitutes, and panders. In other words, the Hippodrome was emblematic of the cultural landscape of Byzantium, involving politics and a potpourri of different social classes—from the Emperor to bear keepers. At the Hippodrome, there was a platform below the Imperial Box of the Kathisma. Here stood the emperor’s herald, so that he could be seen and heard by the whole Hippodrome. Several other activities also took place on the platform: various types of performances (mimes and pantomimic dancing) and wrestling were performed thereon during the intervals of the games.

Within the context of the Hippodrome—and its associated ties to society—these performances were key elements of public entertainment in Byzantium. The genre itself, although popular, proved gradually to be not entirely favored: there are multiple indications of hostility from church. A variety of texts indeed underline the incompatibility between these performances and Christian morality. Legal decisions support the narrative: after Emperor Justinian’s official ban of mimes (529–534 CE—Justinian Code) the genre slowly declines. In the case of mimes, one can observe an underlying moral struggle: although there is not much information regarding the genre itself, it seems that it generated public discussions of socially acceptable gender behavior, as we will see below.

The multicultural and multilingual character of Byzantium gave shape to the mime’s dramatic form: rather than verbal humor, performances drew on broad outline, improvisation, and slapstick. Whereas pantomime was serious drama—perhaps the outcome of a longer tradition that was connected with tragedy—mimes have been largely considered to be the derivative of older, institutionalized theatrical productions of comedy. Mimes have been previously thought to belong in specific categories according to their broad outlines (Mythological: a mockery of pagan myths, Christological: a mockery of Christianity and its practices, and Biological: concerning everyday life)—however, these divisions are a later construct, based mostly on Christian evidence.
how can then one define the mime? John Lydos, a sixth-century-CE author, explains that of all kinds of comedy known to the Romans, the only one to survive was the mime which involves nothing artistic \((technikon)\), and simply moves the crowd to mindless \((alos)\) laughter.\(^{24}\) For the twelfth-century-CE Byzantine author Zonaras, ethnic caricature was one focus.\(^{25}\) The Latin grammarian Diomedes (around fourth century CE) explains that “mime is the imitation of someone’s words and gestures that shows no respect, or the lewd imitation of shameful deeds and words” that points to the social function of the genre, “an imitation of life containing both licit and illicit things”;\(^{26}\) this is clearly an indication of their subversive aesthetics and topsy-turvy nature.

Performers of mimes were often described with the title \textit{biologos} (speaker of everyday life: see Biological above) and therefore we know performances of mimes often centered on sexuality and slapstick within the context of adultery, a representation of the illicit.\(^{27}\) Adultery was far from the only subject for mime; however, it seems to have been a core narrative from the first century BCE (at the very least). Adultery is a core narrative in Naevius’s and Plautus’s plays, to the Roman poet Juvenal (first century CE) to Choricius, five centuries later, with variations.\(^{28}\) The story unfolded around a very specific incident: a clever young wife and her lover are surprised by her slow-witted husband.\(^{29}\) According to Choricius, the finale showed the triumph of the legitimate husband and the restoration of order with courts, laughter, and singing.\(^{30}\) How much was presented on stage and how far the actors performed the illicit sex of the adultery mime is unfortunately unknown to us. Early church father and archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom (347–407 CE) mentions the presence of a bed \((klinē)\) but this could be a feature of any other mime.\(^{31}\)

Overall, little literary evidence of the Byzantine mime has survived apart from much earlier, first-century papyri, which only give a rough impression of what it looked like.\(^{32}\) Roman papyri offer two examples of broad outlines. Fragmentary papyrus \textit{P. Oxy.} 413 contains the partial script of the variation of the theme that a mistress desires a slave and schemes to poison her husband.\(^{33}\) The same papyrus also has a story that is reminiscent of the Iphigeneia in Tauris and that has elements that allude to the Greek novels. Here, a Greek heroine named Charition finds herself stranded in an exotic location with a chorus of intelligible Indians.\(^{34}\)

Most broad outlines seemed to have one unique characteristic: there are women in the plot and they are, in fact, on focus. The figure of the mistress in \textit{P. Oxy.} 413, for example, embodies familiar female
stereotypes (jealousy, violence, lust, unfaithfulness, etc.) and could be interpreted as an immediate representation of destructive female lust. The enacted immediacy of the mime, performed by a woman, unmasked, had a disturbing power over audiences, as suggested by the intensity of the polemics below. Female actresses, performing roles beyond the socially ascribed and accepted femininity, were at the same time destabilizing and subverting the norm.

In this context it is fair to say that mimes’ disenfranchising is due, in part, to how Byzantine society treated women, especially female actresses/mimes. The role of women was complex and contradictory: The contemporary ideology, specifically influenced by the teaching of the church, regarded women as the source of all evil; however, thanks to Virgin Mary, and her redeeming action, women were at the same time perceived by the church as spiritually equal to men. These two prevailing, contradictory portrayals significantly influenced contemporary ideas regarding the role of women in Byzantium who were accepted as either sanctified virgins or mothers and pious wives. When compared with modern views, Byzantine society was both misogynistic and patriarchal. Throughout Byzantine history the man indeed seems to be the norm, whereas women—in par with slaves and children—are considered weak and deranged, unfit to give public testimony. Contemporary males also portray Byzantine women as having uncontrollable sexuality; accordingly, their habitat should be the home where they could dwell secluded from public life, with a minimum of civic engagement. Prevailing dogma suggested an overall rejection of sexuality. The perceived dangers for male chastity reinvented a variety of female role models that became gradually sanctified by the church during the Early Christian period. These prescribed gender roles had as their common ground primarily the rejection of sexuality. Female mimes fitted into the very same category.

Theodora and Pelagia: Two Contrasting Portrayals

In terms of macrohistoric, literary evidence, there are two prominent examples of female performers. The most notable case is Empress Theodora (500–548 CE). Theodora is attested as a performer that grew up in a theatrical milieu: her father was the bear keeper of the Green faction, whereas her mother—whose name is unknown—was an actress and a dancer. After her father’s death, Theodora’s family came under the protection of the Blue faction. This ultimately led Theodora
to be associated with the Blues and “show business” in sixth-century Constantinople. Both the Syrian-speaking historian John of Ephesus (508–577 CE) and her contemporary Greek historiographer Procopius discuss Theodora’s early age employment, alongside her sister Comito, as a prostitute in Constantinople. This theory is, however, contested as sexual services off-stage were a potential form of employment for people involved in public entertainment and the two occupations seem to be interrelated. Either way, it is possible that Theodora earned money combining theatrical and sexual skills.

In Procopius’s *Secret History*, Theodora is primarily discussed as a negative example, specifically in relation to her theatrical skills that clearly involved sexual acts on stage: For example, she is attested dancing almost naked, wrapped with a ribbon. On another occasion she allowed geese to peck grain from her lower torso. In Procopius’s account, Theodora made a name for herself with this scandalous portrayal that was perhaps inspired by the myth of Leda and the Swan. The *Secret History* is, however, an ambiguous source as the historiographer is widely considered to be biased negatively toward her: He openly criticizes her political stance, secret alliance with Antonina, as well as her deployment of humor in performance, whether theatrical or social. Despite such criticism, however, there are also frequent mentions of her skills in provoking laughter from the audiences (as a mime) as well as her sharp self-mockery—the latter viewed as a unique and ambiguous personality trait of Theodora by Procopius, although he does not use the word *mīmas* (female mime) to describe her.

Procopius’s negative narrative of Theodora is comparable to narratives of the fifth-century-CE actress who came to be known as Saint Pelagia from Antioch after she swapped her life on stage for exemplary asceticism. Saint Pelagia is the subject of two sermons by Chrysostom and an anonymous text called *The life of Pelagia*. In the latter source, she is portrayed as a celebrated dancer and courtesan who, influenced by the holy Bishop Nonnus, converted suddenly to Christianity. Having displayed her guilt about her lifestyle to the bishop through tears of genuine penitence she was baptized, and wearing the garb of a male penitent she retired to a cave on the Mount of Olives, where she died after three years of penance. In this work, Pelagia is often referred to as a successful, wealthy performer of mimes: she is, for example, described as “dripping with jewels and accompanied by her own slaves as she rides through Antioch.”

In both narratives about these famous mimes (Pelagia, Theodora) one observes clear criticism of the deviant sexuality that is closely
associated with their occupation. Exceptions exist, of course: an example is the epitaph of the female mime Bassila, an inscription on her tombstone set up by a fellow mime in Aquileia in the first half of the third century. This is in fact considered a “brief but laudatory account” on the mime, in stark contrast to the depictions of Theodora and Pelagia.\textsuperscript{47} Fourth- and fifth-century polemic includes both elite attitudes and contradictions, yet the picture is still impartial. However, when it comes to historical concepts of what is social norm and exception, there are further implications. What is normal and conventional in culturally and chronologically remote societies, and specifically the Byzantine era, is a complicated issue and can only be estimated in our own terms. The reason for this is the lack of evidence: the vast majority of the information we have about women in Byzantium is filtered through male viewpoints, let that be material (archives, inscriptions, paintings, mosaics) or literary. Women tend to be spoken for instead of speaking for themselves, and therefore their appearance in historical records needs to be considered in that light.\textsuperscript{48} Theodora never publicly denied or abrogated her background as a performer after her marriage to Justinian. Her radical reforms, during her reign for the protection and rights of prostitutes and women in general, if one trusts Procopius’ disenfranchising, could be seen as a successful female strategy of transforming her life as a mime into practical politics by supporting marginalized and subordinated groups of women in general (see chapter six on the strategy of the female poet Mihri).

\section*{Christian Polemic and Legislation}

During the fourth century, mimes gradually decline in popularity; there is, overall, a major shift in their general perception; they often serve as a metaphor for gender ambiguity and sexual perversion. After the fourth century CE, the characterizations “actor” and “actress,” for example, become synonymous with deviant: irrespective of gender, these terms came to involve strict sexual connotations, regularly being associated with the word prostitute. This linguistic association derives from Christian authors who seek to redress the social practice of performance altogether. In the first and second centuries, pantomime is already attacked by the early Christian author Tertullian from Carthage, for example, whose comments are directed toward pagan depictions of gods within pantomime.\textsuperscript{49} A few centuries later, John Chrysostom (late fourth to the early fifth century) sees the lure of theater as a major
threat to the moral welfare of the flock.\textsuperscript{50} John Chrysostom attacks theater directly and openly.\textsuperscript{51} He expresses his concerns to the male viewer about the danger of female mimes on stage, arguing that singing and acting unnatural love (\textit{atopous erotas}) has a harmful effect on the audiences’ imagination.\textsuperscript{52}

For critics such as John Chrysostom, mimes are socially dangerous because of the very devices they deploy for humor: the immediacy of the female actress, who is a central character to the plot and portrays lust, as well as further connotations of sexuality and slapstick. During performances of mimes, a male audience member is, for example, believed to capture an image of the female performer in his mind that could potentially threaten his marriage.\textsuperscript{53} Slowly, there is the literary emergence of an assumed identification of female actors with prostitutes: according to the Gospel redefinition of adultery (Mathew 5.28) already indulging in impure desire could be considered equal to a consummated act of adultery.\textsuperscript{54} The dignity of the performer is, however, discussed in the same passage, stating that there was no essential difference in nature (\textit{phusis}) between a respectable woman and a mime. Performers are therefore discussed as deviant because of their social function and necessarily because of their gender.

Fourth-century-CE law supported negative positions toward mimes with legislation for actors who converted to Christianity. Daughters of “stage” people (\textit{scaenicae}) who lived virtuous lives were protected from being forced to follow their mother’s footsteps.\textsuperscript{55} The tension over such decisions and the clash between Christian ideals and the constant need for entertainment varies from “strict measures that lead to false conversions.”\textsuperscript{56} There is a particularly vicious edict of 381 CE: any former actress who failed to lead an exemplary life upon leaving the stage for religious reasons was threatened with being forced back onto the stage until she was “a ridiculous old woman made ugly by age.”\textsuperscript{57} Despite moral disapproval, however, one can see that there was nevertheless a constant need for actors to provide entertainment.\textsuperscript{58} In 520 CE, Emperor Justin even modifies the laws regarding the social status of mimes so that his nephew and successor Justinian can marry Theodora.\textsuperscript{59} Overall, the hostility toward performance (including mimes) can be seen in both legislation and public opinions expressed by authors of the time. For example, the Pagan Hellene teacher of rhetoric Libanius (314–392 or 393 CE) in his \textit{Reply to Aristides} 38 refutes the Christian author’s claim that all dancers (\textit{orchestai}) were courtesans.\textsuperscript{60} Humor then, in this specific performative context, is certainly not recognized as an edifying social phenomenon. Indeed, the mime was
typically criticized because of the nature of its performance: obscenity combined with stereotypical scenes of knockabout and adultery, which might have included less clothing on stage.61

**Humor as a Disciplinary Tool for the Making of Gender**

A different opinion on the social function of the mimes is found in the writings of Choricius in fifth-century Gaza. Choricius is often characterized as an enigmatic figure by modern scholarship.62 His work, *Apologia Mimorum*, is also considered largely disreputable since mimes were not highly regarded by his contemporaries; even Libanius seems to have defended the more acceptable pantomime that did not involve humor or any mechanisms that generated laughter. Choricius’s defense of the mime is based on the fact that he considers such shows to be trivial matters, a harmless pastime. Interestingly, he also defends them via a discussion of their educational value: while mimes are broadly based on adultery, and sexual acts and slapstick are performed on stage, the commiters of these moral faults are always punished at the end. Modern scholarship has regarded Choricius’s rhetoric as problematic; historically, his arguments were even considered invalid, based on the fact that he could have been a pagan, supporting older forms of entertainment for ideological and religious reasons.63 Either way, Choricius’s *Apologia Mimorum* is a statement that cannot be neglected as he delves into the importance of comic expression as a function that can have an effect upon individuals and their social behavior.

Contrary to legislation and other authors, Choricius defended mimes on the premise that humor deriving from societal shaming through punishment has a disciplinary effect upon its audiences. This opinion is on par with modern theories suggesting that humor is indeed a social act that is mandated by and mediated through the society that creates it.64 Humor is, then, an act of communicating contemporary social realities that affects the perception of society through the audience or reader.65 Choricius is in effect discussing how the audience processes humor through performance. His defense, in fact, brings up the possibility of comic incongruity and its consequence: ridicule through punishment ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu. Particularly in the light of Choricius’s *Apologia Mimorum*, a more careful examination of the mimes can therefore provide a mode of thinking about, enacting, and performing gender and its socially ascribed roles within Byzantine
social contexts. In the early Byzantine era, the focus is on gendered concepts of humor, and specifically its relation to ideals of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. As has been argued, notions of the body and the social function of humor can be viewed as interwoven, irrespective of gender. Although there is a significant lack of evidence for mimes, one can nonetheless identify the historical and cultural dimensions and limitations of humor through studies of public criticism, legislation, and censorship. Via the staging, outlines, and references to the mimes, one can comprehend the performative and visual dimensions of humor as well as its limitations as set by early Christian morality.

Such analysis can also elucidate how humor could be used as a disciplining tool through the enforcement and deconstruction of gender norms. This is evident, for example, through the eventual emergence of iconoclastic ideas, which resulted in the ban of theatrical performances. There is a linguistic shift in words such as comedy (komoidia) and comic (komikos) which remain common in the novel.66 In early Christian texts “comedy” comes to signify the work as well as the production of any satire or ridicule or a joyful event. Komodieo (to perform a comedy) gradually shifts meaning from “performing a comedy” to having fun, cursing, telling lies, reprimanding, disapproving, condemning, describing, or ridiculing. The word mimos itself as well as skenikoi, thymelikoi (stage people), mousikoi (musicians), and orchestai (dancers) come to mean effeminate, unmanly, perverse, obscene, heretical, and superficial kinds of people.67 Christian authors perhaps did not fully appreciate the disciplinary effect of humor, at least not as much as Choricius.

**Conclusion**

Due to the variable and often anachronistic receptions and misconceptions of the social history of the past, gender scholars typically interpret (sometimes correctly) premodern concepts of gender and humor as rigid, binary, misogynistic, and patriarchic. In this vein, gender theorists have often argued that laughing at women in the past was a way to disparage them and to alienate them from civic processes.68

Through recent studies that take a micro- rather than macrohistorical view of the primary sources; however, these assumptions increasingly come under stress; through microhistorical investigations, historical research has been able to delve deeper into premodern performances of gender as well as its historical constraints and their implications as a
consequence of hierarchical patterns of stratification. In this way, this investigation indeed showed how contemporary approaches to gendered humor can potentially reinforce or subvert stereotypical historical expectations.

Although there is a dearth of evidence regarding the mimes, several conclusions can certainly be drawn from this investigation. To start with, mimes—both as performers and as a cultural institution—embody a certain kind of social morality, or rather lack thereof; they perform slapstick, adultery, and lust as humorous devices that generate laughter. Sexual acts on stage such as sexual jealousy, effeminate behavior, and adultery were a way of sustaining the norm through the disciplinary effect of humor upon audiences. For Choricius, mimes indeed play an important social function as they criticize socially unacceptable actions through humor and, therefore, can have a disciplinary effect on audiences. For Choricius, these concepts do not reveal the truth about human nature, but are rather producing “narratives.” In general, however, Christian authors neglected comedy and laughter as a major opportunity of subversion. Instead, they saw them as a threat to the morals of their contemporary society, a society primarily and stereotypically considered patriarchic, with an emphasis on heteronormativity and procreation within the premises of marriage.

It seems as if early Christian authors saw a “sexual economy” that positions men and women according to a bifurcated and hierarchical configuration of the relationship between sex, gender, marriage, and desire; they established the “gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (to use the contemporary label).” The phenomena of the mimes configured intelligible subjects, produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. In turn, the mimes’ parodic repetition and subversion of the “original” failed to convince Christian critics that the original within a comic context can be a parody of the very idea of originality.

In this sense, I argue that the critical potential of mimes as parodies and as a mode of cultural critique more generally lies, at least in part, in its capacity to reveal some of the ways in which reified and naturalized conceptions of social identity might be understood as performatively constituted. Mimes reveal the ways in which certain cultural configurations and formations have seized a hegemonic hold on gender performativity in Byzantine times come into relief; although for contemporary scholars, they are further conceived as a natural part of the cultural landscape. In the case of mimes, gender identities are primarily
performative: constituted by creation of differing interpretations of the body and its physicality with an emphasis on parodizing social actions rather than biological gender itself. Because of the obscenity and the “social incorrectness” of the mimes, however, the topoi in mimes are typically gender derogatory.

By studying the mimes’ decline within the emergence of Christian morals and their eventual ban, historians can thus mark the beginning of an era in the Eastern Empire, where and when concepts of the body are scrutinized within specific gendered labels (male, female, sexually ambiguous); an era where gender ambiguity and sexuality in comic performance starts to carry the social stigma of potentially dangerous, morally harmful, and socially deviant. The humble Byzantine mimes indeed then represented a “free” and polymorphous sexuality not yet categorized and labeled.

Notes


4. Stephanis 1988 collection of prosopographies of performers offers actual numbers: during the late Hellenistic era there is a record of about 3,000 “artists of Dionysus” in Byzantium; these include not only mimes, but also pantomimes, dancers, performers, and instrumentalists. Stephanis’s work provides a framework for the decline. During the sixth century CE, numbers drop to 23 during the sixth centuries. Beginning of fourth century we have evidence actors that become martyrs and a lot of legal Christian comments and legislation about them. Slowly and within the iconoclastic tradition of Christianity, “artists of Dionysus” die out.

5. Information on the types, status, and function of mimes during the Roman empire can be found in several literary sources. Plutarch talks about two types of mimes (Symptotic Questions 7.8 and Moralia 712 E). The hypothesis and the paignion. They involved bomolochia (offensive language) and buffoonery. There was certainly erotic potential of these performances that must have facilitated the popularity of the genre. According to the author(s) of the Historia Augusta, Heliogabalus had the sex scenes literary performed in front of him (Hist Aug. Heliogab. 25.4. See:
In terms of performers’ social reception and status one can observe Donatus’s remark on female actresses (Donatus on Terence, *Andria* 716, *in commentum Terenti* translation by P. Wessner I, Leipzig 1902, 212) “et vide non minimas partes in hac comoedia mysidi attribui, hoc est personae feminae, sive haec personatis viris agitur, ut apud veleres, sive mer mulieren ut nunc videmus.” Clearly from the passage cited, one can observe that there was a generic sense of gender and status confusion regarding performers (see Müller 1909, 40, and Leppin 1992, 43). Another source discussing primarily the status of performers is a testament by Cicero, *Pro Plancio* 12.30. The passage narrates the story of a patrician called Plancius concerning the rape of a mimula. Plancius alleged behavior toward the mimula was indeed considered traditional treatment meted out to *scenici* in small, provincial towns of the late Roman Empire. The implication was that male actors were also vulnerable to sexual violence. Presence of women on stage was often considered a source of criticism (PG 57.72; see Brown 1989, 316).


8. Body and gender is indeed a historical construct; see de Beauvoir in *Second Sex* 1974, 38; Butler 1988, 526. For a critical discussion of Butler’s Theory on Laughter, see Helbig 2004, 347–354; the chapter shows that Butler’s turn against epistemological theories that conceive of adequacy between concepts and states of affairs as criterion of truth has much to do with theories of the comic dwelling on incongruity, by making clear that incongruity can also be understood as inadequacy on an epistemological level. Butler’s remarks on the subversive possibilities of laughter are linked to the epistemological foundations of her conception.


10. Along the lines of Butler 1993, 14.

11. Similarly, Butler 2000 speaks of the heterosexual matrix—a concept that is not applicable in antiquity since such rigid definitions of sexuality appear much later in history.


14. Partisanship and factions took the place of harsh gladiatorial *ludi* and exotic animal fights were replaced by local fauna. See relevant discussion concerning the decline in use of exotic animals in performance in Roueché 2008, 679.


17. Procopius, *Anecdota* Chs.7.23.1, 7.3–7.4; Cameron 1973, 237, 238 n. 1, 248–249 and 258; 1976, 44, 56, 72, 80, 84–85, 99–100, 123 n.1.

23. See Reich 1903 as well as Puchner 2002, 316.
24. John Lydos, De Magistratibus, 1.40. (=Bonaria, Fasti, no. 444)
25. Zonaras on Canon 51.
26. Diomedes, Ars Grammatica 3; see also Webb 2008, 250–251, note 44.
27. See Theocharidis 1940, 83–87, and Reynolds 1946.
30. Choricrus, Apologia Minorum 33, 50.
31. John Chrysostom, De Davide et Saule 3, PG 54.696–697: in the play that leads to the martyrdom of St. Genesius, the main character lies on a bed as if ill.
32. Wiemken 1972.
34. For suggestions and a broad explanation of both plots, see Wiemken 1972, 48–109 and Winter 1933, 236. Wiemken’s reconstruction of the mimes in P. Oxy shows that there might have been two female and four male performers. The archimimae like Fabia Arete and Bassilla (see explanation on status by Webb 2002, 289) might have been playing the roles of Charition and the scheming wife.
35. These images are also found in aetiological tales about Rome, that is, Sabine Women, Lucretia, Veturia (Coriolanus’s mother), Verginia (Pudicitia), Quinta Claudia, to name but some. They are not new or directly related to the Virgin Mary, although they are refashioned in her image.
43. Procopius Secret History 9.
44. See Cameron 1985; Fisher 1978; and Webb 2002, 283.
45. 9.13.
46. Life of Pelagia 78. There is an attempt to limit the use of luxurious clothing by mimae in the late fourth century See Cod. Theod. 15.7.11 (393). Csapo and Slater 1995, 329 and Sallmann 1990, 268.

47. CIG xiv. 2324 now museo inv no. 260; see also Kaibel 1878, 609; see Webb 2002, 301–302 for text and translation. Bassilla was a couple (on stage and life) with Heraclides (inscription by Webb 2002, 290). Also in 301, Webb pits Theodora against Bassilla to discuss two diametrically different perceptions of female mimes as well as the different concepts found in macro- and microhistoric accounts.


49. See Tertullian, De Spectaculis; Jürgens 1972; Weismann 1972.


51. Wiemken 1972, Theocharides 1940, and Reich 1903.

52. Chrysostom, PG 62.428.

53. PG 56.266–267.

54. Also a Roman concern found in Plautus (e.g., Plaut. Amph.).


57. Cod Theod. 15.7.8; see Lepelley 1989. Webb 2002, 299 suggests that they threw a burden of individual moral responsibility onto performers replacing or adding to the old collective social stigma of infamia.

58. See Cod. Theod. 15.6.2 (399) and discussion by Lim 1997.

59. Cod. Iust. 5.4.23 where the choice of acting is a result of women choosing this life because of their innate weakness. Legislation change: Procopius, Secret History 9.51. See Daube 1967.

60. Orchestai: the masculine plural refers to performers in general.

61. Although this is a debatable concept (see Webb 2008).


63. Pox. 2707; see Cameron 1976, 213 and Roueché 1993, 58. For a summary and a final verdict of this, see Webb 2002, 300.

64. See Zijderveld 1982; Mulkay 1988; Berger 1997; Critchley 2002, 10.


66. See Walden 1894, 41 for the word comedy in the novel.

67. For a specific study of terminology in relation to humor, see Bibilakis 1996, 147–173.

68. Cixous believed that our sexuality is directly tied to how we communicate in society. In her article “Le Rire de la Meduse” 1975, Cixous, like Simone de Beauvoir, traced the battle between the sexes back into premodernity, specifically classical Greek literature, performance, and oral tradition as a way of phallocentric societies to control women. By projecting the Greek myths of Medusa and Abyss, Cixous argued that laughing at women in the past was a way to cast them away and to alienate them from civic processes.

69. On the relationship between truth and narrative, see Haraway 1989.


Bibliography


The theaters in early modern London have long been considered a male bastion: not only were the playwrights who wrote for the commercial stage exclusively male, the playing companies were also all-male, with female roles performed by boys or men. An antitheatrical polemicist even warned women to keep away from the theaters as spectators, since entering a public playhouse would ruin their reputations. All the evidence, and indeed the fact that this writer felt the need to urge women to avoid the theaters, suggests that female spectators made up a considerable part of the audience in London’s commercial playhouses. This was especially the case in the seventeenth-century theater of Blackfriars, an indoor theater located in a former monastery. Several plays performed in this theater cater especially to a female audience, addressing women in their prologues and epilogues. What can a perspective on gender and humor tell us about these women’s playgoing experience? This chapter focuses on a comedy that satirizes the role of newsbooks and gossip in the early modern English public sphere, and which features four female spectators as characters within the play, who return in between the Acts to comment on the action. I will explore how the affective experience of the comedy by these four women relates to their position in the public sphere of the theater in early modern London, as well as how the role of these
four spectators within Ben Jonson’s *The Staple of News* (1626) may have been experienced by women in the Blackfriars audience.

**Beguiling Mirth**

In 1579, when the relatively new phenomenon of the commercial playhouses in London was becoming ever more popular, Stephen Gosson published an attack on poets, playwrights, and theaters. He warned of the dangers of plays, which have the capacity to subject the audience’s reason to their passions. Attached to his booklet is a separate epistle addressed to the gentlewomen citizens of London in which Gosson alerts his female readers to the dangers of playgoing. Gosson’s main concern is with the public nature of the theater, since women who attend plays expose themselves to the judging look of men. The brief epistle stresses that all women are in danger of losing their virtue if they watch a play. Indeed, there was nothing a woman could do to protect her virtuous reputation, whether she bears a sober expression, comes with friends, or makes sure she is known for her modest behavior at home: none of these things can protect her from harm in the playhouse. Gosson recommends that women stay at home.

The feminist critic Jean Howard has read Gosson’s advice to the gentlewomen of London against the grain, and suggested that the real reason for his concerns is not female virtue, but the threat posed to the patriarchal system by women’s spectatorship in the theater. She proffers that the playhouse not only allowed the female spectator to escape from the patriarchal space of the household, but also entitled her to watch and judge the performance as a paying customer. The theater made her an active participant in society. “Is it possible,” Howard asks, “that in the theater women were licensed to look – and in a larger sense to judge what they saw and to exercise autonomy—in ways that problematized women’s status as object within patriarchy?”

If Howard focuses on the activity of judgment as purely rational in her argument about women’s agency as paying spectators, Gosson’s letter to the gentlewomen of London is also concerned with the operations of affect. Briefly imagining their reasons for wanting to see a play, Gosson envisages a housewife who is “pensive” and “grieved” at home, and looks for a remedy in the experience of playgoing. Gosson tells her:

> Beware of those places, which in sorrowe cheere you, and beguile you in mirth....Being pensive at home, if you go to Theaters
to drive away fancies, it is as good Physike, as for the ache of your head to knock out your brains;...When you are greeved, passe the time with your neighboures in sober conference, or if you canne reade, let Bookes bee your comforte....Do not imitate those foolish patientes, which having sought all means of recovery & are never the neere, run unto witchcraft. If your greef be such, that you may not disclose it, & your sorrowe so great, that you loth to utter it, looke for no salve at Playes or Theaters, lest that laboring to shun Silla, you light on Charibdis;...The best councel that I can give you, is to keepe home, & shun all occasion of ill speech.2

The passage is fascinating material to study the relation between gen-
der, humor, and the position of women in early modern society. From a piously rigid perspective on gender roles, Gosson adheres to the patriarchal ideal of woman’s confinement in the home. He assumes that women attend plays because they feel melancholic in their domestic surroundings and hope that a play induces mirth to counter their gloomy mood or even grief and sorrow. The term “mirth” in the early modern period had a wide range of meanings, referring both to a thing affording pleasure or amusement, and the pleasurable feeling itself, a lightness of mood manifested in laughter.3 It was a term associated especially with the genre of comedy: in prologues to comedies, the word “mirth” appears even more often than the word “laugh.”4 Many defenses of the theater in the period indeed argued that the theater has the potency to change the mood of its spectators.5 Interestingly, Gosson here seems to suggest that this was a common and broadly accepted reason for women to see a play. Not only did the attendance of a play allow a woman the right to judge the performance she attended, then, it was also a transformative emotional experience, a sensation that could ease her sorrows.

The Affective Experience of Female Spectators

The affective response of women in the audience to the performance of plays is a relatively unexplored terrain in the case of the early modern theater. Katherine Craik and Tanya Pollard in their introduction to a collection that provides an important impulse to the study of the affective effects of early modern theater have recently argued that “despite the prominence of scenes of reading and watching in early modern
texts, and authors’ insistent attention to the consequences of such encounters, critics have had surprisingly little to say about the period’s investment in imagining literature’s impact on feeling.”6 Those critics that have looked at women’s affective experience tend to focus on the tragic genre and emotions such as grief and compassion. Pollard shows that classical and early modern medical thought considered women who had been pregnant especially susceptible to emotional impact.7 Her analysis focuses on the tragic genre and considers the emotional effect of maternal bereavement and passionate lament. The affective experience of female spectators is connected to the tragic genre also in Harry Levin’s study of prologues and epilogues that offer general indications of women’s emotional reactions. He found that female spectators were known especially for their capacity to weep at moving scenes or pathetic plots. Similarly, Clifford Leech has similarly argued that the drama in the Caroline private theaters became more sentimental due to the increased presence of women in the audience.8

Pamela Allen Brown in a groundbreaking study looked at women’s responses to comedy by placing drama in the context of the culture of women’s jests as well as the social place of women in the neighborhood. She uses these contexts as evidence for women’s possible involvement with the plays they saw performed in the theaters. Alison Findlay in A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama writes that the lack of female-written responses to performances makes it difficult to know how women interpreted the plays they saw. She uses women’s writing “to create a doorway through which a historicist feminist perspective on the drama can be constructed.”9

In this chapter, I will use the figure of the onstage spectator as an inroad into the experience of female audience members. Blackfriars theater was known for its use of metatheatrical elements such as onstage spectators who were part of the play script. As Tiffany Stern writes, “Blackfriars plays often have internal events—masques, songs, dances—that call for a ‘staged’ audience of actors.”10 Such onstage audiences cannot, of course, be taken as realistic representations of early modern audience members. Indeed, on-stage audiences within English Renaissance plays have a tendency to display a misguided response to the play.11 Andrew Gurr therefore criticizes the method of looking for evidence for the reaction of the audience in the plays themselves as “the circular argument that finds audience response written into the plays, and makes easy assumptions from what it finds there.”12 Also, individual responses to plays of course varied, and even if a large number of written accounts of female visits to the theater had survived, it would be impossible to
reconstruct “the” theatrical experience of women in the early modern period. Nevertheless, the four female characters who watch *The Staple of News* on the stage provide us some access to ideas about female spectatorship, even if these ideas were penned by a male author, performed by male actors, and viewed through a satirical lens. The scenes in which the four women voice their thoughts on the performance do provide indirect access to early modern conventions of spectatorship as well as to ideas about the affective experience of a play. Moreover, the fact that these female spectators take central stage to be laughed at in the theater in itself indicates that female spectatorship and a woman’s right to judge the quality of a comedy was a matter of conflict in the period. As Keith Thomas wrote: “Laughter has a social dimension. Jokes are a pointer to joking situations, areas of structural ambiguity in society itself; and their subject-matter can be a revealing guide to past tensions and anxieties.”

**Ridiculous Gossips**

Just as an actor is about to speak the prologue of Ben Jonson’s *The Staple of News*, he is interrupted by four women who follow him onto the stage of Blackfriars theater. The stage direction reads: “After him, Gossip Mirth, Gossip Tattle, Gossip Expectation, and Gossip Censure, four gentlewomen ladylike attired.” One of the women boldly addresses the actor, asking him for some stools so that they can take their places on the stage. It was customary for men to pay an extra sixpence to hire a stool and watch the play on the stage. Gurr describes such audience members, however, as “the most exhibitionistic of gallants”: the stage was certainly not an area of the theater from which women would watch the play. Gossip Tattle apparently realizes this, as she needs to be encouraged to enter the playing area. Gossip Mirth coaxes her: “Come, gossip, be not ashamed.” The actor who was about to speak the prologue also suggests that it was not customary for women to be seated in the playing area. “Where?” he asks them, “O’the stage, ladies?” Gossip Mirth boldly announces that they come “to see and to be seen,” exercising the right to watch and judge that Howard views as an inherent threat to patriarchal power structures.

The gossips’ function in the play is closely connected to this right to judge in the public sphere of the theater. Unlike the Globe, Blackfriars had breaks during the play, because the candles that lit the stage needed to be trimmed regularly. It was usual to provide musical entertainment
during the four act breaks, but the audience also conversed among themselves. According to Jonson, playgoers in Blackfriars had a tendency to discuss “how many coaches in Hyde Park did show / Last spring” rather than direct their attention to a judgment of the merits of the play. In order to guide these conversations toward the play rather than toward gossip and chatter, Jonson replaced the musical interludes with intermeans in which the four gossips provide their views of the play.

How would a seventeenth-century audience have reacted to this incursion into the male space of the stage? An intertextual echo of an earlier Blackfriars play may have led the sophisticated playgoer (m/f) to assume that Jonson’s play mocked the women whose entrance onto the stage they had just witnessed. For in John Day’s comedy The Isle of Gulls (1606), performed by boy actors in Blackfriars, three men similarly interrupted the prologue, asking him for stools to sit on the stage. Like the gossips in The Staple of News these men discuss their expectations of the play, focusing on the effect the performed scenes will have on them: “Give me a sceane of venery,” says one of them, “that will make a mans spirrits stand on theyr typtoes, an die his bloode in a deepe scarlet.” Another gentleman longs for a play that satirizes citizens’ wives, and asks the prologue whether “Laywers fees, and Cittizens wives [are] laid open in [the play]: I love to heare vice anotomizd, & abuse let blood in the maister vaine.” The connection between this earlier play and the opening of The Staple of News may have led audience members to expect Jonson’s play to “lay open” these gentlewomen—to satirize their behavior in the theater.

In literary criticism of the play, the gossips have indeed been considered as satirical portrayals of female spectators. This interpretation was in large part guided by a comment from the playwright himself. In his address “To the Readers,” Jonson characterizes the four women as “ridiculous gossips that tattle between the Acts.” The adjective “ridiculous” derives from the Latin “ridiculus,” which literally means “capable of arousing laughter, funny, comic.” Jonson tends to use the word in its literal Latinate sense of exciting laughter. Critics, however, have tended to view the gossips as the object of derisive laughter, interpreting the word in its more negative sense of arousing or deserving mockery or derision, a sense that was current in early modern English as well. Devra Rowland Kifer, for example, called the women “un sophistcated theater-goers,” since “their expectations exceed their judgments, they admire poor, old-fashioned but still popular plays, they have no understanding of dramatic conventions, and their standards
of morality are more appropriate to a Saturnalia than to an ordered society.”23 Similarly, Helen Ostovich disqualified the gossips as a “chorus of ignorant she-critics.”24 In these interpretations, the satirical representation of these women resulted in their exclusion from the public sphere of the commercial theater. If a contemporary audience similarly viewed the gossips as the objects of derisive laughter, then female playgoers in the audience would presumably not have felt invited to share their own views of the play during the interludes, discussing the play openly in the way the gossips do. Humor would here have served, as Anna Foka writes in the introduction to this section, “as a way to cast [women] away and alienate them from civic processes.”25 The representation of these unruly women, then, may have functioned as caricatures intended to silence and discipline unruly women in the audience.26

Recently, however, the four female spectators have been considered in a milder light. Critics have begun to close-read their appearances in between the acts, and found that the women are not as ignorant or ridiculous as previously assumed.27 Julie Sanders, for example, has described them as “astute theatregoers” in terms of their knowledge of the theater repertoire, and as more politically topical than they are usually considered.28 Nova Myhill suggests that even if the gossips are marginalized as a satire of an undesirable kind of spectator, they also serve to focus the attention on the importance of the audience’s experience in the playhouse, and offer a range of examples of viewing habits focused on the play and its performance. They represent the follies of the male gallants who take their seats on the stage, rather than the women in the hall. Moreover, Myhill argues, although the gossips have often been considered as a homogeneous group, they are individual characters. Whereas Tattle appreciates an older dramatic tradition, Mirth shows herself thoroughly familiar with current theatrical convention as well.29 The gossips, then, provide comic relief in the intervals between the Acts of the play, but they also focus audience attention on the interpretation of the play itself, and guide the audience toward a discussion of their experience and the play’s merits in the intervals.

In the context of this recent revaluation of the role of the four gossips, a reexamination of the role of humor in their appearances in the play is warranted. This is especially the case since Jonson’s play was performed in the indoor theater well known for the conspicuous presence of women in the audience.30 One contemporary source mentions “frequent throngs of gentlewomen which prest thither” to see plays performed at Blackfriars theater.31 Gurr speaks of a “real take-over by women” and describes how the boxes closest to the stage were the
place where ladies and gentlewomen would take their places, either accompanied by their husbands, or even by their pages. Michael Neill suggests that with the advent of Henrietta Maria, who has a passion for theater, respectable women became an important part of the audience. Their taste influenced the kind of plays that were performed there. Playwrights in their prologues and epilogues addressed female members of the audience, sometimes using female characters to do so. He considers it “symbolically appropriate” to these developments that Jonson staged four gossips who enter the bastion of male privilege that is the stage. If women were seen as a section of the audience whose interests and affective experience should be catered to, and the ability to raise laughter in an audience could ensure a play’s success, it is important to consider the relation between humor and female spectators. Indeed, Pamela Allen Brown argues that this information should change our interpretation of the plays performed in theaters such as Blackfriars. “Listening for women’s laughter forges an interpretive grid for resituating drama in relation to their desires and experiences.” If we view the concept of mirth as well as the figure of the gossip from the perspective of the female spectator, we can catch glimpses of possibilities for resisting the view of women in the playhouse as victims of patriarchal judgment. Instead, this perspective allows us to see female mirth as empowering.

**It’s Merry When Gossips Meet**

Those critics who describe the four gossips as unsophisticated theatergoers are steered by the expectations of the actor who speaks the prologue. He tells Gossip Censure that she has probably only come to judge the costumes of the actors, to see “who wears the new suit today, whose clothes are best penned.” Censure makes short shrift with this assumption, however, assuring the Prologue that she has also come to judge the actor’s acting skills and style, to see who is drunk on the stage, and who overacts prodigiously. Her retort to the actor puts him in his place, clarifying that it is not the actor who judges the spectator, but the gossips who will decide whether the play was well performed or not. The gossips declare that they come to “sit upon” the play in judgment, as Mirth puts it, “and arraign both them and their poets.” They enjoy the practice of playgoing not because of an intense emotional experience, but because they experience pleasure in the interpretation and critical judgment of the play. Whereas their critics have tended
to follow Jonson and the Prologue in their characterization as women who tattle between the acts, the gossips can also be seen as active participants in the public sphere of the theater.

A similar shift in perspective is possible when considering the use of the term “gossip.” The word evokes associations of idle chatter between women. Howard, for example, associates gossips with the domestic terrain where Gosson would like to confine the gentlewomen of London: “Gosson would send the gentlewoman citizen out of the theater and back to her house, husband, father, books, and gossips.” Indeed, the term “gossip” could refer to a female friend invited to be present at birth, a godmother, and to a woman who enjoys idle talk, a newsmonger or a tattler. This range of meanings seems to refer to areas of life considered insignificant from the perspective of masculine public life. Recent criticism has shown that this female domain, impenetrable to men, was often considered as threatening to the patriarchal order by male authors. Childbirth took place in the company of women, with a midwife and gossips present at birth. Similarly, christening “was a primarily female affair.” And finally, gossiping created “female spaces and times that men often found deeply troubling…unsupervised female sociability posed a threat to the order and values of patriarchal society.” Mirth’s use of the word “arraign” reminds the audience of another important role of the gossip in early modern England, that of community judge: “Always on hand for disputes and interventions, [the gossip] serves as a relayer of news and knowledge within the community….She operates as an informal social arbiter.” The news heard, judged, and spread by women was not idle tattle, but played an important role in the community. We will see that Jonson’s gossips perform a similar role in their judgment of the play they are watching.

It is especially gossip Mirth who shows herself an experienced playgoer. The play portrays her as a typical Caroline spectator in the private theaters, a “closed group of cognoscenti who came to the playhouse not merely to be entertained but to appreciate and judge the offerings of the poet’s fancy.” This group is usually conceived of as a masculine world of critical connoisseurship in which educated members of Caroline society attend the theater on a daily basis, to display their wit and sense of judgment. Michael Neill, who acknowledges the importance of female spectators after the arrival of Henrietta Maria, nevertheless pictures this group as male, writing that “the profession of critical connoisseurship lay open to any gentleman who could buy admission to the private playhouses.” Not only do the gossips encroach upon the masculine territory of the stage, Gossip Mirth is also styled as a member of this
group of male *cognoscenti*. She corrects gossip Tattle when she complains that the play lacks a Vice armed with a wooden dagger, explaining to her that “That was the old way, gossip, when Iniquity came in like Hocus Pocus in a juggler’s jerkin, with false skirts, like the Knave of Clubs. But now they are attired like men and women o’the time, the Vices male and female!” Like the erudite spectators in the private theaters, she is aware that the dramatic styles of the previous age have now become unfashionable, and are even considered barbarous. The gossips frequent the theater often, and compare what they see to earlier dramatic repertoire. Mirth also enjoys the backstage experience: she has been in the tiring house to see the actors dressed before the beginning of the play. Moreover, she is familiar with the playwrights, for she recognized Jonson “rolling himself up and down like a tun” worried about the performance and reception of his play.

Gossip Tattle’s tastes have been associated with traditional popular drama more than the satirical comedies written by Jonson. Tattle is a widow, and her predilection for the more old-fashioned type of plays suggests that she is perhaps somewhat elderly. She hopes that *The Staple of News* will contain one of the staple characters of comedy, the clown. “I would fain see the fool, gossip,” she tells her companion. The role of the fool in early modern drama was contested. Jonson as well as Sir Philip Sidney in their writings about drama disapprove of the kind of laughter stirred by the fool. Their reasons for this condemnation resemble Gosson’s in his letter to the gentlewomen, at least in the sense that the mirth evoked by the fool is portrayed by these two authors as an involuntary bodily experience. Sir Philip Sidney compares laughter to “scornfull tickling,” and uses the word “gaping” to describe the attitude of the audience watching a fool. These descriptions similarly foreground the passivity of the audience: they only need to watch, and their laughter will be excited almost against their will. In his *Discoveries*, Jonson condemns laughter incited by the fool, writing: “the moving of laughter is a fault in comedy . . . as a wry face without pain moves laughter, . . . or a rude clown dressed in a lady’s habit and using her actions.”

The kind of overwhelming laughter incited by the fool was particularly disapproved of in women. Indira Ghose cites Juan Luis Vives’s advice to women on this matter: “speaking of laughter, which is the surest index of a light and frivolous mind, let her take care that she does not laugh too freely so that her whole body seems so convulsed with boisterous laughter that she cannot regain her breath . . . Such are the convulsions of the ignorant, the peasants, children, and women, when
they lose their self-control as they are overcome by laughter of this kind.”55 One of the fools who could incite such involuntary laughter was Richard Tarlton, a clown who performed both solo and as an actor in Elizabethan plays. Several contemporary quotations describe his bewitching effect on the audience, reporting for example how his first jest in a performance “brought the whole company into such vehement laughter, that not able again to make them keep silence, for that present time they were fain to break up.”56 At the time of Jonson’s play, this type of improvisational clowning had gone out of fashion.57

Even if Tattle is often dismissively portrayed as an uninformed lover of old-fashioned kinds of drama, however, the fool she longs to see is not the type of “rude clown” described by Sidney. Rather than the experience of uncontrollable laughter, Tattle seeks wit and satire. This becomes clear when she explains why the fool is her favorite character: “He is the very justice o’peace of the play, and can commit whom he will, and what he will—error, absurdity, as the toy takes him—and no man say black is his eye [you can find no fault with him], but laugh at him.”58 The fool can point out the errors and absurdities of contemporary society without any danger to his person or reputation, since everyone is bound to laugh at him. Tattle’s longing to see the fool is not motivated by a desire to be charmed into uncontainable laughter, but to see the fool perform this role of justice. Tattle’s definition of the role of the fool here comes close to Jonson’s description of the ideal kind of comical satire in Every Man Out of His Humour: “a thing throughout pleasant, and ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners.”59

The type of mirth that the gossips enjoy, then, is not the old-fashioned kind of tomfoolery associated with the Elizabethan fool, but a satirical type of laughter targeted at error and absurdity. Their predilection for and understanding of workings of satire appears also from gossip Censure’s remark that in styling Lady Pecunia as “Infanta of the Mines” and giving her the three names Aurelia Clara Pecunia, the players allude to Isabella Clara Eugenia, daughter of Philip II of Spain. “Ay,” says gossip Censure, “therein they abuse an honourable princess, it is thought.”60 Not only does censure show herself abreast of developments in international politics, she is also aware of the reception of The Staple of News in the public sphere of early modern London. She is a consumer of plays and newsbooks, and apparently engages in conversations about the interpretation of the plays’ personal satire as well.61 These involvements in the public sphere are overlooked by those critics who focus on Tattle’s knowledge of “who kissed the butcher’s wife
with the cow’s breath” and other London gossip.\textsuperscript{62} Indeed, even Tattle is concerned that Jonson abused the reputation of another princess—she provides a spirited defense of the reputation of Pocahontas, warning Jonson that “I do censure him and will censure him: to say she came forth of a tavern was said like a paltry poet.”\textsuperscript{63} Gossip Mirth objects to her friends’ finding personal allusions in the play’s satire, stressing that they are “but one gossip’s opinion” and inviting others to react in a different way. These contrasting opinions on the play and its meaning must have invited actual audience members to focus their conversation in the break on similar questions.

Jonson’s remark about the “ridiculous gossips” also needs to be read in context. Jonson writes that his allegorical representation of princess Pecunia has been misinterpreted, “as if the souls of most of the spectators had lived in the eyes and ears of these ridiculous gossips that tattle between the Acts.”\textsuperscript{64} Apart from the double meaning of the word “ridiculous” discussed above, Jonson’s remark plainly ignores Mirth’s objections to Tattle’s remarks, grouping the gossips uniformly as tattling women who look for resemblances between satirical portrayals and actual living persons. Jonson’s words also suggest that he as the author takes no responsibility for the opinions expressed by the gossips—as if they are their own agents rather than scripted roles. This is a suggestion the play introduces from the very moment Mirth describes how she has seen Jonson sweating backstage, to the women’s final decision to let a protest go out against the poet, “in two large sheets of paper—” in which the women censure the play and the poet. In his letter to the reader, the figure of the playwright continues in this mode when he in turn censures the gossips. His remark should therefore not be taken as the final word on the role of the gossips, or indeed on the way to interpret the allegorical figures in the play, but as part of a comic dialogue between the figure of the playwright and his representation of the audience.\textsuperscript{65}

The gossips’ discussion on the interpretation of princess Pecunia as well as the comment in the address to the readers draw attention to the act of interpretation in the theater. Stuart Sherman views the gossips as representative of the difference between the uncritical consumption of news and the critical judgment invited by the playhouse:

By sitting and talking on the stage, they remind the audience emphatically that they are in a theatre; by commenting on the play both astutely and comically—in some ways that invite assent and in others that excite laughter—they doubly reinforce [critical distance] in the audience.\textsuperscript{66}
If we look beyond the satirical stereotype of the gossips who enjoy only popular, old-fashioned types of drama, what do these four onstage spectators reveal about women's experience of comedy in the Caroline private theaters? They form a small female community who enjoy mirth, gossip, and news and do not shy from expressing their opinions and judgments in the public sphere of the theater. Indeed, the play draws parallels between their roles as gossips in London neighborhoods and their role as judges on the stage. Although their representation is not void of satire altogether, their enjoyment of the discussions in the intermeans shows them as the kinds of female spectators that Brown describes when she looks at the culture of female jest: “In the theater, [women] became part of a crowd that more closely resembled a vocal and self-aware jury than the silent and submissive audiences of today. Schooled in local processes of control, including the culture of jest and ridicule, women were likely to read the conflicts onstage through the lens of neighborhood, where they were called on to intervene and to tolerate intervention, to judge and be judged.”

Like Shakespeare’s Merry Wives of Windsor, the gossips in Jonson’s play form a close-knit female community with its own sense of humor. Within this community, patriarchal prejudice is overturned by female jests. The four gossips not only flout warnings that their sitting on the stage in the theater would make them susceptible to male lust, they are also consciously aware that they are doing so, satirizing the Puritans who would keep them from going. In their discussion of Jonson’s earlier play The Devil Is an Ass (1616), gossip Mirth remembers how she saw the play together with Tattle, despite the attempts of one Mistress Trouble-Truth to dissuade them. Trouble-Truth told them that “[Jonson] was a profane poet and all his plays had devils in them... And that he would learn us all to make our husbands cuckolds at plays.” This did not convince Tattle and Mirth, who went to the theater despite these warnings. Indeed, gossip Mirth recalls “that a young married wife i’the company said she could find in her heart to steal thither [to the theater] and see a little o’the vanity through her mask, and come practise at home.” Playgoing in this female community is represented as an opportunity to broaden the horizon of wives confined to the house. The gossips appropriate the stereotype of the female spectator who is seduced by lust, and instead present the audience with the image of a woman who actively seeks pleasure in the theater.

In the theater, the gossips’ boldness, their mirth and enjoyment of both the play and their discussion of its merits during the intermeans may have inspired women in the audience to share their thoughts about
the play in a similar manner. Gossip Mirth introduces herself as the “spirit of Shrovetide,” the festival traditionally associated with theatrical festivities as well as with role reversals. According to Kifer, the women can only behave in this way because Jonson allows them this holiday license. “On an ordinary day,” she wrote, “their behavior would be intolerable. On this occasion, though, despite their lack of knowledge, morality, and taste, they are free to arraign both poet and play.” Once more referring to the gossip’s lack of sophistication, she assumes that the effect of the role reversal is only temporary and does not change women’s position in contemporary society. However, this Bakthinian idea that festive role reversals serve only to reify the status quo has been challenged in recent criticism, which argues that the anarchic humor released by such role reversals is never fully contained by festivity. As Albrecht Classen puts it: “Those who laugh either join an community or invite others to create one because laughter excludes and includes, it attacks and belittles, but it also evokes sympathy and understanding.” Audience members could either laugh at the gossips in the intermeans, or laugh with them.

Notes

2. Gosson 1579, sigs. F3r–F4r.
5. Craik and Pollard 2013 write that “medicinal affect played an important role in legitimizing a genre widely held in suspicion for its potentially inflammatory nature” (11–12).
7. Pollard 2013, 89.
10. Sterne 2006, 47.
14. Anthony Parr writes that the women, like the citizen’s wife in The Knight of the Burning Pestle, “are presumably planted in the audience and ascend the stage from the front” (Jonson 1999, 64n2). This would make sense in terms of the theatrical effect, since the audience would assume that the women were one of theirs, but it does not accord with the stage direction, in which the women enter...
“after” the prologue, presumably following him onto the stage from one of the entrances. Also, gossip Mirth later says that she has been in the tiring-house (Jonson, Induction, 62), which makes it more logical for her to enter from that side of the stage rather than from among the audience. See also Myhill 2011, 49.

18. For the idea that the gossips are intended to guide audience interpretation, see Myhill 2011. For the gossips and their role in the intermeans, see Parr (Jonson 1999, 152n1). Myhill wonders whether the gossips were audible to the audience (2011, 51).

22. OED, ridiculous sv 1a.
25. Foka and Liliequist, introduction to Section 1, this book.
26. This is what Pamela Allen Brown initially suggests when she reads the gossips in the context of jest books (Brown 2003, 65).
27. See also Myhill 2011, 53n27.
30. On women in the commercial playhouses, see Gurr 2004, 59–64 and appendices I and II.
40. Capp writes that “The term ‘gossip’ originally denoted a godparent of either sex, but came to apply almost exclusively to women, and to denote any close female friend” (2003, 51).
41. OED, gossip, n, sv 2b and 3.
42. Capp 2003, 50–51.
43. Capp 2003, 50.
50. If so, Mirth is teasing her when she calls her “the youngest voice” (Jonson 1999, IV.INT.45).
52. In general, laughter as an audience response in the theater was also represented in contemporary texts in terms of the loudness of the communal sound of laughter, the physical intensity of the experience, and the uncontrollability of the phenomenon (Steggle 2007, 68).
54. Jonson 1953, 92. The terms “clown” and “fool” were used interchangeably in early modern English.
59. Jonson quoted in Kernan 1959, 158.
61. Personal satire, also called “application” or “railing,” was not uncommon in Blackfriars theater. See Shapiro 2002, 323–324.
64. Jonson 1999, To the Readers, 4–6.
65. See also Rickart 2012, 307. Another aspect to take into consideration is that since Jonson’s remark is made in an address to the readers in an edition published decades after the first performance of the play, the theater audience would not have been influenced by this characterization of the gossips.
70. Kifer 1972, 338.

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The seductive stories of the *1001 Nights* have entered the imagination of Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Antoine Galland first translated them into French. Galland started collecting manuscripts of the *Nights* in Aleppo, and continued his search in various places including the Ottoman capital Istanbul, where they had twice been translated into Ottoman Turkish in the seventeenth century.

The European counterparts of such tales, represented, for example, by Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, had appeared in print about two centuries prior to Galland’s *Nights*. Although both were based on a long tradition of orally transmitted stories, Rabelais was generally considered worthless later in Modern times, while the fascinating and foreign *Nights* could endure within the imagination of Europe. A good example of the impact of the *Nights* in the European imagination survives in the writings of travelers such as Théophile Gautier, who reports his surprise in his *Constantinople* about an “obscene” performance on the streets of Istanbul in which women and children were falling about laughter. Although we do not know exactly, it is likely that this was a *Karagöz* shadow theater that would have taken place during the month of Ramadan, as entertainment after a day’s fasting. Interestingly, texts by travelers such as Gautier serve as the valuable sources reporting the eroticism of *Karagöz* plays in the premodern Ottoman times as
they were censured by the “modern” Ottoman regulations from the nineteenth century onwards.

The stories told in 1001 Nights, Karagöz and alike, were all based on folk tales in various languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, or Urdu, and some of them may be considered sexually explicit and grotesque by Modern standards. It is interesting that, as well as the fascination they held for Europeans, these erotic and humorous stories were pervasive for centuries across the Ottoman lands. In other words, the widespread popularity of these stories points toward the existence of an enduring tradition and mode of communication which found currency in a variety of literary and entertainment circles in the early modern Islamicate geography.

While the stories’ eroticism is what initially attracts attention today, its partner in charge, the humor has been often overlooked. It should be underscored that, among the many functions of such tales, a primary one is to entertain the audience, and another, with the help of humor, is to highlight the contours of social constructions. To this end, they make use of grotesque language that is not simply pornographic but also functional, and for this very reason has survived for centuries in various cultures. Although the Modern literary scholarship tends to categorize them as “folk tales”—by implication dismissing them as worthless⁵—the early modern literati did not hesitate to number them among the classics. Furthermore, this kind of literary mode, which I shall tentatively name erotically humorous discourse, was not only used extensively in folk literature but also evolved into a literary craft in classical Ottoman poetry.

For instance, a substantial corpus of erotically humorous texts not only survives intact in a number of manuscript copies but can also be traced through biographical dictionaries, those canonical works of Ottoman literature. It is only rather recently that such texts have been critically appraised, and only by a small number of literary scholars, such as Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, who have evaluated them with respect to a certain time period, in the context of love poems, and in comparison to the European Renaissance.⁶ I intend to make a contribution to the discussion from a different angle, by trying to look at the matter from the perspective of the speaker and his/her purpose for utilizing the erotically humorous discourse. Given that such works were not dismissed but were in fact considered part of literary practice, the issue is not so much how speakers could use such discourse, but rather to uncover the meaning and function of it within the literary practice.
In Ottoman classical literature, humor in conjunction with eroticism is an aesthetic tool that causes Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter, and it has a dual function as both enforcing and subverting social norms such as gender construction. My intention is to determine when and how it is used for either function and to explore how it is able to bring about a temporary awareness of the gender roles. My presumption is that it is possible for virtuoso speakers/poets to use humor for their particular purposes. A comparative analysis of the functions of humor in classical texts, and specifically how it is used among male and female speakers/poets, will reveal this double operation. As an example for such analysis I will discuss the case of Mihri Hatun (d. 1512) and the erotically humorous discourse used by fellow male poets to represent her in their writings to highlight her “womanness” and enforce gender roles; and I shall compare this with her use of the same discourse to present herself as a legitimate “poet” in response to her colleagues and thereby to subvert gender construction.

As a background to my analysis, I will first survey the perception of humor within Islam and Ottomans’s approach to it, searching for a definition of humor within the writings of Islamic scholars and Ottoman literati. In this context, I will further discuss the possibilities of humor when it intersects with sexuality and grotesque language.

**Humor in Islam**

There is little to be gained from trying to define a specifically Islamic form of humor, or to demarcate this from other kinds of humor. If there is indeed any difference, then it should reveal itself in the manifold expressions of humor in major Islamic texts. In his important study of humor in early Islam, Rosenthal lists incidents of laughter from the lives of the Prophet and his companions, as registered in the major sources of Islamic literature—the Qur’an and hadith (stories and sayings attributed to Prophet Mohammed). For instance, crying and laughter are presented as two opposing causes, both given by God: “He alone who causes [you] to laugh and to weep” (53:43). The implication is that laughter is a reward whereas crying is inflicted.

Although laughter is considered a humane act, mockery and sarcasm are strictly forbidden, as is made clear in the following verse: “No men shall deride [other] men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves; and no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than
themselves. And neither shall you defame one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets” (49:11).

Beyond the Qur’an, the Prophet and his deeds are taken as a model for Muslims, and certain anecdotes are worthy of mention here. According to a well-known hadith Mohammed said, “Refresh your hearts periodically, for if they get dull, they become blind.” Some scholars, such as al-Nuwayri (d. 1333) and al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 1109), have drawn upon various hadith to suggest that the Prophet had a cheerful disposition who liked joking with his wife Aisha and his grandchildren. Two of his successors, Ali and Omar, are traditionally juxtaposed, the first being cheerful and the latter serious. In short, there are abundant stories told about the Prophet and his close circle to suggest that humor and cheerfulness were not considered inappropriate.

Although there is no clear evidence either to encourage or to ban laughter in early Islam, later scholars of Islam took different positions. While some completely opposed humor, others, such as al-Ghazali, approached it with caution. It is clear that for al-Ghazali, mockery is an evil deed that can be disastrous, since insulting someone is considered torture which is strictly prohibited (haraam). People who insult others are not allowed to enter heaven, excepting when the subject of the joke in fact agrees with it. In other words, as long as it is done in moderation and with great caution about mockery, there is nothing illicit about humor.

It is for this reason that, as early as the ninth century, Arabic philologists collected nawâdir (anecdotes or witticisms). Sometimes the same jokes can be found in different languages and in various literary works, albeit in a variety of narrative transformations. A good example is the transformation of a story first told by Attar (d. 1221) in his Mantiq al-Tayr (Conference of the Birds), into a joke by Rumi (d. 1273) in his magnum opus Mathnawi. This is the story of the grammarian and the sailor. The joke is didactic, and is an example of Rumi incorporating humor into his work in order to communicate his teachings. In a clear example of literary transformation Bernard Chanfrault reports a modern Juha joke from Morocco which adopts the same joke to current political agenda. In like manner, it is not surprising to find the same story in a classic poem by the Ottoman poet Gülşehri in the fourteenth century.

That the same joke can appear in various genres, languages, and time periods, points not only to the shared aesthetic repertoire of the audience(s) in the Islamic world, but also to the versatility of humor as a literary craft. The audience’s process of perception, as Valerie
Gonzalez explains, is simultaneously an ontological, religious, and ethical practice. In other words, the meaning as an aesthetic goal, which artists try to communicate, can be perceived by the audience through a sensory experience. It is during this phenomenological experience that the audience appreciates an artwork. Although we do not have much textual evidence regarding how humor was theorized among scholars of early Islam, the Ottomans not only placed humor among the most valued literary crafts, but also defined and categorized it based on its functions.

The Ottoman Approach

Ottoman artistic culture is coded with Islamicate ideals and it is rich with works of humor. Before I discuss the literary texts, which is the focus of this article, brief mention should be made of the performance and visual arts such as the shadow puppet show (Karagöz), which must have influenced the development of humor as a literary aesthetics in Ottoman literature.

While some research suggest that Karagöz originates from an ancient Turkic tradition, borrowed from China, India, and Mongols and influenced by the Byzantine and Greek theater, some conjecture claims that the Ottomans adopted the puppet show in the sixteenth century when Selim I invaded Egypt. Expressed in many Ottoman languages such as the Turkish Karagöz, Greek Karagiozis, or Arabic Karakuz, the puppet shows were pervasive in many Ottoman languages. The two main characters, Karagöz—naive, ignorant, and simple-minded—and Hacivat—learned, superficial, supercilious—invariably come into conflict, accompanied by a diverse crew of characters such as the Jew, the Albanian, the courtesan, the demon, and so forth. They quarrel about mundane things in their daily lives while implicitly criticizing core societal values. Up until the nineteenth century, when the first theaters were opened, the puppeteer (hayâlî) would put on the show on the streets or in coffee houses, improvising based on a few framework stories. As Canan Balan suggests, Karagöz shows were the mimicry of the world of ideas where both upper and lower classes took part. In other words, it generated a space for transgression for both social constructs such as the gender.

Such transgression can be traced in one of the most popular Karagöz plays, Ters Evlenme [Reverse Marriage] which is not simply a cross-dressing parody but also a critique of upper-class priggery. In this
particular play, Hacivat wants to have a little fun and so makes Karagöz believe that he is actually a woman. Despite warnings from the audience, Karagöz is then compelled to marry the neighborhood’s macho alcoholic. After a long series of humorous erotic incidents, he finally recognizes his error and punishes Hacivat by giving him a good battering. The audience, already aware of this classic ruse, shouts continual warnings as the play progresses, but Karagöz does not hear them. Karagöz’s performance as a woman is parody of femaleness, lacking grace or eloquence; and far from feeling sorry for his trials, the audience finds all of this uproariously amusing.

The puppet show was not only the major entertainment of the ordinary people, but also formed part of the processions and festivals organized by the palace for royal weddings or circumcision ceremonies. Chronicles (surname) of these festivals state that various forms of entertainment including puppet shows were part of the entertainments enjoyed by the sultan, his family, and the palace staff. The verbal accounts of these festivals, such as Mustafâ Ali’s (d. 1600) narrative poem Câmiü’l-buhur der mecâlis-i sur [The Collection of Seas in the Festival Courts], recount musicians, dancers, magicians, acrobats, wrestlers, as well as puppet shows as present in the 1582 festivals. Mustafâ Ali’s poem is considered classic literature, and for this reason it is an evidence of the incorporation of so-called folk or oral literature in high culture.

The street festivals commissioned by the palace and their verbal and visual representations in classical forms point to the acceptance of humor in high culture. Biographical dictionaries (tezkires) are the main sources of classical literature, in which writers defined and categorized certain poets as being humorous or making use of humor. They also differentiated satire (hiciv, hezl, ta’riz, şathiyyat) from humor (nûkte, latife, şaka, suhriyye) based on these literary crafts’ functions in a literary work. Well-known satirists such as Nef’i (d. 1635) or Ziya Paşa (d. 1880) and their works, for instance, were not considered humorous. Until the nineteenth century, when satire flourished and reached its peak, these categories could coexist in a literary work. In her influential study of humor, E. G. Ambros works through the terminology of humor used by the Ottomans to define various genres and she too makes a distinction between satire and humor. Rather than looking at satire, I here remain focused on humor and its erotic extension, briefly explaining how it functioned as a legitimate aesthetic tool in classical Ottoman poetry, and how it could transform the literary discourse from within in humorously erotic literary works.
According to the biographers, humor in classical Ottoman poetry can be divided into two major categories: first as a graceful and/or cheerful personal style adopted by a particular poet; and second, and more profoundly, as a valuable aesthetic tool or a literary craft under the category of witticism (nükte). Some poets such as Lütfi (d. 1495) or Gazâlî (d. 1532) are defined as talented poets inspired with witticism (nükte-baz, nükte-dân, nükte-şinâs, nükte-pîrâ). Although the biographers did not explain the characteristics of humor and how it should be deployed, they highlighted a number of good examples and specifically pointed to witticism as a desirable skill that apparently very few poets possessed. Mine Mengi suggests that the Ottomans use “creative meanings” (ma’na), “conceit” (mazmun), and “witticism” interchangeably, and point to a close relationship among them. These three literary devices share a common intention: constructing layers of meanings through the sense of ambiguity, such that only the well-versed audience member can grasp the deeper sense. In other words, a good poem should have alternative meanings and different audiences would access different layers dependent on his/her literary capacity. This process can be defined with an Ottoman concept, condensation (teksif), which refers to constructing meanings with the least possible number of words. In order to achieve this, poets had to refer to other texts or already constructed meanings. In this frame, Ottoman poetry is fundamentally intertextual, as each word and phrase points to another context.

Apart from occasional use of humor as a personal style, there was a specific branch of literature that made use of humor and eroticism to challenge the norms in literature. Among these, the earliest examples are the anthologies of jokes (letaifname) that became very popular from the beginning of the sixteenth century. These anthologies have a legitimate place in classical literature, as they recorded jokes retold in a variety of contexts—such as in entertainment and literary salons. On the basis of his extensive research on Ottoman humor, Tunca Kortantamer suggests that Ottoman literary scholars did not engage in theoretical discussions about how humor could be accomplished. Likewise, Lamiizade Abdullah Çelebi (d. 1531), the author of one of the most famous anthologies of jokes, discusses different approaches to humor within the context of Islam and Ottoman literature in his preface. After a brief overview of the Qur’an and Islamic exegesis, Lamiizade concurs with the major Islamic scholars that while insulting jokes, sarcasm, and mockery are dangerous, humor can encourage intellectual development.
not, though, enter into a discussion about the aesthetic values of his jokes or his use of eroticism.

The epitome of this category, entitled *Daş'ii-l-gumum ve raş'ii-l-humum* [Repeller of Sorrows and Removers of Care], was composed in the sixteenth century by the poet Gazali—a religious scholar, judge (*kadi*), and poet known as Deli Birader (Lunatic Brother). His work was commissioned by one of the companions of the crown prince Korkut, Piyale Bey, who apparently enjoyed erotic stories. It is composed in the form of poetry based on a compilation of folk stories from the Turkish, Arabic, and Persian literary traditions. Gazali’s work thus demonstrates that eroticism and humor is an old tradition in this region. His attitude toward humor and sexuality is similar to that of Lamiizade, and suggests in his introduction that his stories are primarily intended to be educational. In a similar manner, he begins his work by recounting the benefits of sexual intercourse and the virtues of marriage.

In the similar vein, a specific genre called *bahname* (book of sexual intercourse) are semimedical and erotic literary works that were composed to define sexual organs, positions of copulations, prescriptions of aphrodisiacs, and sexually explicit jokes. The major representative of this genre is the translation of *Rucu's-Şeyh ila Sabah fi'l Kuvveti ala'l-Bah* [The Old Man who Becomes Young Again with the Help of Sexual Desire] from Arabic to Turkish with extensive additions by Ahmed b.Suleyman who was known to be Kemalpasazade (d. 1534), commissioned by Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520).

Both Lamiizade and Gazali’s works, as well as the *bahnames* manifest characteristic similarities in terms of their use of a specific literary discourse that combines eroticism with humor. This literary category has not yet been examined as a distinct literary form in its own right, either by Ottoman or by contemporary scholars. However, the way in which the poets approach their subject matter, and how they explain or even excuse themselves for producing such works, show peculiar similarities. Although, by using the erotically humorous discourse, they challenge the social norms, they do not cause a fundamental change to literary structure. However, the challenge posed by the humorously erotic text was in fact directed at something less visible but more fundamental—and my contention here is that its proper target was the poetic norms. Along with the grotesque language, the poets not only defined the limits of the citizenship for belonging to a literary circle, they also attempted to ridicule poetic language, which had been extremely stylized. In other words, this erotically humorous mode of speaking implied a certain level of intimacy among the members of the literary club which automatically
dismissed some poets, such as women who might hesitate to use it. It is worth remembering that poetic circles and the literary norms were male dominated at this time and by using this discourse, the male poets enforced the limits of its audience to male poets only. It is textually evident that early modern Ottoman literature is a male-dominated profession—as in the first four biographical dictionaries there are only three women poets as opposed to approximately 400 male poets. Although traditionally, a respectable female speaker is not expected to use such discourse as her gender is supposed to avoid immorality, in the following case of Mihri Hatun shows that the very same tool—the erotically humorous discourse—which helps the male poets to enforce the gender roles of the literary world can serve a woman poet in the opposite way to help subvert these gender roles.

**Humor as a Magic in a Woman’s Work**

Shehrazade, the mother of storytelling—or in Edgar Allen Poe’s words the “politic damsel”—cures the ailing King Shahryar and saves her body and that of other women by telling a story every night. Her stories keep her alive and/or cure the king. Meanwhile, the desire the king feels for her body is equal to that which he feels for her words. As Fadwa Malti-Douglas suggests, she is well aware of this situation, and her power emanates from the control of his desire. However, her success creates both admiration and suspicion in later texts about women. The classical motif of the “cunning women” is pervasive in classical Islamic texts. According to Malti-Douglas, the Arabo-Islamic discourse on women has its roots in the image of Shehrazade, and still influences the perceptions of today’s Arab women writers. Malti-Douglas reminds us that Shehrazade is the archetypal woman narrator, who plays tricks on—or in other words seduces—her audience with her words, and that is the reason of her success. One of the “tricks” she plays is telling fantastic stories to amuse the king, and in this way she changes his perspective. Among many literary crafts she makes use of, for example, humor plays a significant role in the king’s transformation. The king is amused by the stories she tells and thereby begins to feel kinship with ordinary people who go through similar unfortunate ordeals in their life by doing humane mistakes. The king laughs not only at them but also at himself, and in the process he is “magically” cured.

There are many women storytellers—or in our case poets—who played similar “tricks” in order to sustain their existence in the literary
world; and it is significant that these are in fact legitimate literary tricks, which many other good storytellers or poets have used in order to make their literary mark. What makes a literary craft look like a “trick” in a woman’s narrative is that she uses it for her advantage. The survival of a woman poet in the male-dominated literary world is metaphorically comparable to Shehrazade’s own survival. Her power originates from her understanding of the audience’s perspective on her gender and how she controls this perspective. She does not resist being a “woman”; on the contrary, she claims it but also subverts its meaning by highlighting the superficiality of the way it is constructed. One of the ways in which she does that is to utilize traditional tools such as humor to her advantage. Mihri, as an early modern Ottoman woman, survived as a poet because she understood that her only option was to speak in a way that her audience would understand her. She was first a woman, so she did not take male pseudonyms, while still finding certain points of flexibility in which she could carve out a space for her existence as a poet.

Mihri Hatun is the first Ottoman woman poet, whose poetry collection survived in four manuscript copies today. She was born into a privileged family who were influential in the province of Amasya and engaged in literary practice. Our information about her educational background is limited, although there are strong references to her friendship to Sultan Bayezid II while he was the governor of Amasya. After coming to the throne, Bayezid rewarded her poetry several times with monetary awards. Apart from the acknowledgment from the palace, her contemporaries as well as subsequent literary historians confirm her acceptance and celebration as a poet. As I have discussed elsewhere, her influence as a major inspiration in the history of Ottoman Turkish women’s writing is substantial.33

The following erotically humorous anecdote is told about Mihri Hatun in the biographical dictionary of a prominent Ottoman literary scholar, Aşık Çelebi (d. 1571), who is extensively referred today in the studies of Ottoman literature.

Unlike most other early modern women poets, Mihri never married and, based on the discussions of this issue in the dictionaries, this was apparently considered strange as she was a woman from the privileged class and said to be decent, beautiful, and educated. The anecdote runs as follows:

When Paşa Çelebi, the professor of Eyüp, asked Mihri’s hand for marriage, Zati said the following couplets:

We heard that the Paşa has asked for Mihri’s hand
Should she sacrifice herself for him?
She has fasted for many years, poor thing.
Should she now make a feast with a donkey’s cock?  

Aşık’s reference to Zati’s (1471–1546) humorous and sexually explicit poem is no accident, but rather a deliberate choice. This is for two main reasons: first, it is a good poem by an acclaimed poet within literary circles; second, it fits well with the witty and entertaining style in which Aşık prefers to talk about Mihri.

It is necessary to explore the meanings of Zati’s poem in order to highlight its importance for our discussion. In two couplets he communicates the strange and complicated matter of Paşâ Çelebi’s proposal. First, he sets up the supposed meaning of the lack of sexual intercourse for a woman who has remained unmarried all her life. It is worth recalling Gazali’s note that—regardless of the facts of daily practice—in the Ottoman Empire, as an Islamic state, sexual intercourse was only sanctioned within the confines of marriage. Zati communicates the situation through an analogy between religious duties within Islam, and how those duties can be interrupted with feasts such as Ramadan and the feast of the Sacrifice. He uses words or phrases to remind the reader of this analogy such as fasting (oruç tutmak), breaking the fast (oruç bozmak), or to sacrifice (ram eylemek). However, when he compares Paşâ to a donkey, the imagery of religious duties and festivities are complicated by the joke. He further indicates the strangeness of the incident by constructing a stark juxtaposition between the earthly and the heavenly, or the sensual and the spiritual, by inserting the grotesque image of the donkey’s penis. The animal nature of earthly life as opposed to spirituality is so coarse that it provokes our senses to grasp the double meaning of the poem: the first and obvious meaning is that, for some reason, Paşâ and Mihri would make an odd couple; the second and contradictory meaning is that suppressing natural instincts might lead to abundant sensuality. By implication and through its ambiguity, the layers of meaning suggest the use of witticism (nükte), which highlights the value of the poem.

Zati’s poem fits well with the stylistics of Aşık’s entry for Mihri, which also uses erotically humorous discourse. A closer look at the relationship between Aşık, Zati, and Mihri will show some of the reasons for this use of intimate language. They all belonged to the same literary court (majlis), where they could produce art while enjoying an intimate professional life. It is of utmost importance to take this closeness into account when we consider the language of poetry. In Bakhtinian terms,
Zati’s “carnivelesque” language points to an intimacy between the subject and object and functions in two ways: it breaks social boundaries, and provokes renewal or change. The literary salons were a common ground for poets who came from different groups of the society. Their humorous and sometimes sexually explicit language picks up on their differences and allows them to laugh at themselves. In this way, they not only highlight but also tolerate their differences through laughter, which compels a positive change in their perspective on each other. In Mihri’s case, her most striking difference was her gender—she being one of the very few women poets in the male club of early modern Ottoman literature. Interestingly, she accepts the challenge and finds a ground for herself to exist in this literary world.

Mihri’s erotically humorous discourse first allows her to mock her colleagues back when they make advances, while also helping her to reinforce her status as a poet by mastering a valued literary craft. In other words, her poetry transforms the tradition from within, as it compels a temporary change, if not creating a rupture that may also afford a glimpse of awareness. To show this, I will look closer to a comparative case, a poetic dialog between Mihri and Makami, two contemporaries, who were colleagues and friends in the same literary court.

According to Aşık, Makami and Mihri attended Prince Ahmed’s court in Amasya. He notes that Makami was a Muslim community leader (imam) at Prince Ahmed’s palace and that he taught the Qur’an to the children of İbrahim Paşa and Iskender Çelebi. The following part of a poem is quoted by the biographical dictionaries to show him courting Mihri:

Oh Mihri, is it surprising that I hide your love in my chest
See what is the confidence of the sultan of the heart
This is my oath that I give my life for your kiss
Present your lips and see how Makami does not lie.

Apparently, Makami’s affections were not reciprocated; and Mihri in fact mocked him, judging from the following lines:

My beauty is neither like the sun nor like a new moon
Neither are my eyebrows like bows nor my locks like marksmen
The orator spoke falsely when he called us beautiful
But then so many of the poets are the biggest liars
It is no surprise if he asks us for a kiss in jest
Anyone whose beard grows becomes the people’s laughing stock

Makami, from now on our only kisses will be
Years of angina and the torment of diarrhea

She grovels at every threshold and goes begging for kisses
In this matter, Mihri is more a mendicant than you. 38

This poem, which is clearly a response to the poem by Makami quoted above, is a good example of her use of grotesque language. She rebuts Makami’s overtures, because his poem treats her as a body, and not as a legitimate poet. In other words, this is insulting for Mihri: because Makami suggests a physical interaction. He could have treated her as an elevated beloved within the confines of spiritual love, in the way poets did with a patron or a sultan. However, he openly asks for a kiss, a physical claim that reminds us of his earthly intention.

In this frame, Makami’s attempt to assign Mihri the role of a silent and sexualized beloved is offensive, and she responds within the legitimate confines of poetry by using a valued literary craft: witticism. She treats him as a laughing stock who is begging for a kiss, and tells him that he would not be able to stomach her kiss—that it would cause him diarrhea. The grotesque language and imagery has a similar effect on Zati’s poem, referred to above, with its juxtaposition of the earthly and the heavenly. Both poems generate sudden surprise, laughter, and a moment of realization. The main difference is that while both Zati’s and Makami’s poems enforce gender norms, Mihri’s poem challenges them. Zati implicitly highlights her womanness by abruptly emphasizing a supposed interaction she would have with Paşa Çelebi’s maleness. Mihri, on the other hand, makes fun of a male poet’s position in the world of poetry and asserts herself as the better poet. To do that, she purposefully brings up Makami’s filthy—and very human—defecation to highlight his attempt at earthly love which places him, not her, in a lower status. Meanwhile Mihri, as a poet, seeks spiritual love that has higher value in the world of poetry. Last but not least, she proves her point by performing better poetry.

In Mihri’s poetry, the use of erotically humorous discourse operates to challenge the gender roles of poets. The reason she uses grotesque language has much to do with her desire to be accepted as a poet. She does not take on the traditional role of a graceful, nice, and
timid woman; on the contrary, she represents herself as a courageous poet who masters the rules of poetry. She resists this classification of a “woman” using the very literary craft which the tradition possesses. For this reason she remains accepted within poetic circles, since she remains within those circles, while also deconstructs certain expectations from within.

Mihri’s attempt to challenge gender roles in poetry through the use of humor shows the subversive agent of this literary craft. Purposefully, she does not sound upset or cynical as regards Makami’s overtures; on the contrary, when she phrases her rebuttal as a joke, it does not sound self-conscious but entertaining. Her poetry is a good example of a woman’s voice in Islamic literature, recalling the descendants of Shehrazad who can play the traditional tricks to their own advantage. Their voices challenge the stereotypical conception of “woman” as a category.

Conclusion

The broad and overarching function of humor as an Islamic aesthetic is to create a space for criticizing social norms and practices. Although there is no way of defining the major characteristics of “Islamic” humor, it is possible to consider that mockery and sarcasm have been frowned upon for their potential to hurt their subjects. Apart from being an educational tool, it was used extensively in artistic and literary expressions such as jokes, puppet shows, and folk stories. Based on the limited research done so far, however, a clear distinction between good and bad humor cannot be clearly drawn.

Due to the grotesque language which they frequently employed, humorous texts have traditionally been categorized under folk literature in the Modern scholarship, with the implication that classical or canonical texts use a serious tone and employ elevated language. My intention in focusing on the use of humor in classical Ottoman literature is to challenge this categorization and point out that the borders imposed by Modernity are artificial. By going back to early Islamic ideals, I searched for the role of humor and the way it was understood in those times and places.

In theory, the Ottoman poets also adopted the early Islamic approach to humor. However, they also extended its so-called didactic function to create a virtual and temporary space which worked not only to highlight norms but also to challenge them and, eventually, to raise awareness of them. Along the way we have seen some examples that could be considered as mockery and sarcasm by an outsider—but their character
changes when we recall that they occurred within a close circle of friends. The use of sexually explicit language reflects the intimate relationships, particularly between men, which are tolerated within the literary courts only because it had a vital function: crystallizing the borders of the literary spaces. A woman poet in a predominantly male club is picked out because of her gender. Her marginal position, however, is also full of potential for her to challenge the club from within, and she may do that with the help of traditional literary tools such as humor. It is important to remember that when she uses humor, and even grotesque language, it is not disturbing the poetics of Ottoman language; on the contrary, she proves herself to be a legitimate member of the poetic club, because a facility with humor is considered one of the desirable literary skills.

Positioning humor within the poetics of Ottoman literature allows us to see how it was perceived within the tradition. Even though Ottoman literati did not explain what good humor is, their choice of poets and their poetry in biographical dictionaries indicate what their tastes were. Humor and its use of sexuality, which I tentatively called erotically humorous discourse, is a literary tool which is able to appropriate the Islamic aesthetic ideal of unraveling the hidden meanings. This tool has been used by many classical poets in various milieu, in a manner ranging from the mildly explicit to the outright pornographic. The extent of explicitness shows the taste and style of the poet and the audience; but does not detract from its literary value.

Last but not least, we must note that a versatile literary tool such as humor can function in various ways depending on who uses it. The aspect of sexuality in humor poses the question of the importance of the speaker’s gender identity and how meaning changes when humor is used in different contexts. The way it affects meaning is fundamentally different in Mihri’s poems as compared to Zati’s and Makami’s. While Zati and Makami express the traditional expectations from a “woman,” Mihri reverses those expectations by using the same discourse, and that way enforcing a change in the way a woman is traditionally perceived. All of this confirms the validity and legitimacy of the use of humor and grotesque language in classical Ottoman literature.

Notes

1. For an excellent discussion of the manuscript traveling, see Haddawy 1990, ixxxxi.
8. Ibid., 5.
10. For a list of such catalogs, see Rosenthal 2011, 6–12.
15. And 1997, 244.
16. And 2004, 42.
17. For further discussion of the puppet theater and its influence on cinema, see Balan 2008, 171–185.
18. For an analysis of the sexual script of the Karagöz puppet show, see Ze’evi 2006, 125–149.
19. For studies of humor in the nineteenth-century Ottoman culture, see Fenoglio and Gerogeon 1995.
20. See Ambros 2009, 64–86 as she further suggests that there are certain literary tools to achieve the sense of humor.
23. For a discussion of intertextuality in Ottoman literature, see Holbrook 1994, 32–51.
24. Kortantamer 2007, 137.
28. See Ze’evi 2006, 3–4, quoting Abdulwahab Bouhdiba, as he comments that Gazali’s views on sexual intercourse within marriage are essentially common sense within Islamic philosophy.
34. Mihri Hatun 2007, 17, translation mine.
35. For the full text in translation and an analysis, see Andrews and Kalpaklı 2005, 201–208. However my reading/translation of Zati’s poem in this article is quite different from Andrews and Kalpaklı’s.
37. Ibid., 827, translation mine.
Bibliography


PART II

Humor, Laughter, and the Rhetoric of Manhood
Introduction

Jonas Liliequist

The theme of the section is the way in which laughter and humor have been used to construct, legitimize, question, and transform the meaning of manliness and masculinity in various cultural and political contexts. Manliness and masculinity are used synonymously by most of the authors, though masculinity is at times associated with Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity. Manhood also occurs and is used as a more inclusive and historically/culturally neutral catch-all term. The ambition has not been to contribute to ongoing theoretical and methodological discussions, but to highlight the powerful rhetorical nature of historical and cultural notions of manhood in a broad explorative perspective across time and cultures. Nor has the ambition been to apply a comparative perspective in any systematic and methodological sense. Still, there are some interesting parallels, continuities, and differences noted in this introduction, which is intended to also serve as a tentative conclusion and a suggestion for further research.

Sexual Rivalry and Male Anxiety

While historical notions of manliness and social honor are usually intertwined, a man who loses his honor is put to shame, while he who is made to appear unmanly is typically ridiculed and laughed at. Laughter and mockery provide allusions to unmanliness with strong rhetorical potential, and this is also the topic of the first contribution to this section. Cuckoldry and the “taming of shrews” were among the most frequent themes in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English jest
books analyzed by Anu Korhonen. According to the gendered premises of these jokes, patriarchal authority was under constant attack by adulterous or insubordinate wives. But while the cheated husband was always made the comic butt of cuckoldry jokes, tables were turned in the violent chastisement of shrews. In her analysis, Korhonen explores how misogynistic barbs aimed at women and the ridicule to which unmanly men were subjected created an arena for a predominantly male readership, where the limits and possibilities of patriarchal power and authority were continuously displayed and renegotiated.

Korhonen also draws attention to the question of cultural diversity and historical change. The theme of cuckoldry still seems to have been something of a public obsession in Renaissance England, though the exact reason is unclear. Reference to increased post-Reformation emphasis on patriarchal household authority does not suffice. Anglican and Puritan advice books on marriage were indeed preoccupied with the question of how to uphold male authority, and so was similar literature in other Lutheran countries like Sweden. However, in contrast to England, the cuckoldry and shrew-taming themes seem not to have exercised the public imagination in early modern Swedish culture. This might simply be a question of literary genres—English jest books had no counterpart in seventeenth-century Sweden, which in turn may have been due to the tiny and tightly controlled commercial market for popular prints. However, the equivalent Swedish term for cuckold rarely cropped up in the repertoire of insults that made it to the courts in cases of verbal abuse and defamation, and no instances of ritual shaming of cuckolds like the continental “charivari” or English “rough music” are known to have taken place, which indicates more substantial differences in the popular rhetoric of gender and ridicule.

In England and on the European continent, comic tales about cuckoldry were a well-established literary genre as early as the Middle Ages. Even though it may not be possible to discern a definitive difference in content between pre-Reformation Catholic and Protestant marriage advice guides, the theological status of marriage as “second best” and the obligation of celibacy for priests constituted a fundamental divergence, with obvious consequences for both cast and plot in medieval cuckoldry jokes. Thus, the adulterous protagonist in tales from the French Fabliaux and the German Mären analyzed by Olle Ferm is typically a “horny” priest. By comparing two tales separated by nearly two centuries in time with the same cast but a different outcome, Ferm can speculate on how the stories might have been received by various audiences and the possibility of a general shift in attitudes. In both tales,
Introduction

it is the foolishness and gullibility of the peasant and/or his wife (in the second tale the fooling of the priest as well) that make the comic point, rather than allusions to the cuckolded husband’s impotence and sexual inadequacy. Ferm concludes that while none of the protagonists (except for the husband in the second tale) comply with the norms of their gendered position, “they all have in common that they like sex.” Of course, the latter was highly inappropriate for a priest, but in what sense was it also part of the comedy?

From a lay perspective, the priest would most likely have been laughed at and ridiculed for his hypocrisy, while not being perceived as unmanly. On the contrary, his succumbing to sexual lust may have been seen as exposing the absurdity of the denial of a natural urge that was considered as a necessary constituent of manhood. According to Jennifer Thibodeaux there are indications that parishioners hesitated to report a priest’s long-term quasi-marital relationship, maybe in lieu of the risk that a priest without a permanent partner of his own might prey upon the married women in his parish, as in the cuckoldry plots of the Fabliaux.4

From the perspective of the educated and higher clergy, recent research on clerical masculinity indicates that the priest may not only have been derided as vulgar and no better than his peasant parishioners, but as effeminate, to boot. The basic components of this particular clerical masculinity have been characterized by Mathew Kuefler, Maureen C. Miller, and others as spiritual strength and self-discipline paired with the appropriation of certain female virtues and, at the same time, a strict avoidance of any association with actual women as polluting and debilitating.5 According to the logic of this ideal, the priest’s sexual prowess was in reality a sign of weakness on par with the natural lustfulness of women, and his ignorance or failure to recognize this mistake made him ludicrous.

Gazing back from medieval to ancient culture, male fear and anxiety is the theme of Alexandre Mitchell’s study of how wives and other respectable women were portrayed and mocked in Athenian vase paintings from the sixth and fifth centuries BC. Four themes have been selected for closer analysis—sex-crazed women; drunken wives; the sleeping guardian or lazy housekeeper; and gossips. Each of these themes reveals men’s darkest fears of female insubordination and the fragile nature of male control, couched however in the guise of light-hearted, humoristic images on vases designed for both public and domestic use.

There seems to be an obvious connection between the fear of adultery and jokes about cuckoldry. Classical Greek did however not
contain any corresponding term for cuckold and the easy availability of courtesans, prostitutes, and slaves for extra- and premarital sexual satisfaction, as well as the institutionalized courting of boys, constitutes fundamental social differences. Marriage in this society has been characterized as being more about a man’s possession of his wife and the production of legitimate heirs than a sentimental relationship based on mutual affection.6 In the case of adultery, what husbands feared was the risk of raising illegitimate children and possible loss of property, not the loss of sexual honor. As defender of the oikos, a husband and kyrios was compelled to take action against the intrusion of another man, but in contrast to the logic of early modern and medieval cuckoldry jokes, it seems to have been the adulterer rather than the cheated husband who put his masculinity on the line. In Aristophanes’s comedy The Clouds, the character “Worse Argument” claims that a man caught in the act of adultery has nothing to worry about, as long as he defends himself with the appropriate argument. His opponent “Better Argument” objects: “But say he listens to you and then gets violated with a radish and depilated with hot ash? What line of argument will he have on hand to avoid becoming wide-arsed?”7 He is referring to the humiliating punishment of an adulterer by shoving a radish up the rectum to symbolically deprive him of his manliness. Becoming “wide-arsed” implied allowing oneself to be sexually penetrated and was commonly associated with the effeminate and lustful kinaiodos (male seducer of men) and male prostitutes.8

More generally, the seducer and womanizer is characterized as effeminate and is typically described as young and beardless with boyish looks appealing to both women and men. According to David Konstan, women’s desire for men seems to have been modeled on male desire for boys, making wife and husband potential rivals for the same youngster—a ménage à trois might very well be more culturally significant for ancient Greek sexuality than the straightforward rivalry between two men that was the staple of cuckoldry jokes.9

**Discipline and Change**

Turning from the exclusive clique of male citizens in Classical Athens to the exclusive class of literati in Imperial China, the focus shifts from the venting of male fear and anxiety to the disciplining effect of humor. In his study of three humorous texts compiled under the reign of different dynasties, Mario Liong shows how humor was used to distinguish
men of the literary class and maintain their hegemonic position over the commoners. To be respected as a father and show due respect as a son were key elements in this elite masculinity based on Confucian principles. Education was another key factor, reflected in the sophisticated and subtle formulations and play with words and meanings in the anecdotes that required both historical knowledge and basic training in Confucian classics to get the point. Commoners are depicted as incapable of showing proper deference to paternal authority, even when cognizant of Confucian teaching. The sophisticated reader is invited to laugh at the commoner who commits such cultural faux pas.

Besides this distinct class aspect, the plots of these anecdotes have a strong homosocial overtone, as men ridicule other men. This is symptomatic according to recent research claiming that premodern Chinese masculinities were not constructed primarily in opposition to femininity, but as power positions in a male homosocial context. Within this context, feminine tropes and characteristics were employed by the literati as a way of asserting a superior masculinity based on literary qualities (wen). Its masculinity was thus not defined against but rather through the feminine, making the whole issue of unmanliness and effeminacy a most complex matter.

Returning to the Middle Ages via Iceland, we find the corresponding issue of the relevance of designating the Icelandic gender system as dichotomous. In an article that has attracted much attention over the years, Carol Clover suggested that the social binary in Medieval Iceland was not between males and females per se, but between the ability to take action and show strength on the one side and weakness and dependency on the other. Men and women were thus judged according to the same standard of values, in which the qualities of hvatr (vigor, briskness) were associated with the ideal man, and blauðr (softness, weakness) with the typical woman. But there was no inevitability that destined every man to be hvatr and every woman to be blauðr. Hvatr was something that needed to be constantly reasserted by men and could be demonstrated by women as well. In this game, men did however have much more to lose than women, as reflected in the Old Norse tradition of níð, gross insults stigmatizing a man for having been sexually penetrated by another man. In contrast to Classical Athens and its public homoerotic discourse, this should be interpreted as a symbolic allusion to weakness and cowardice rather than effeminate lasciviousness—of being unable to defend oneself or being perceived as blauðr.

While Clover may stretch her argument a bit too far, the notion of manhood as more a matter of strength and prowess is further substantiated
by the theme of the “illicit love visit” in Icelandic sagas. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, it is said that Bjorn has been paying love visits to Thurid, the wife of Thorodd. His neighbors blame Thorodd for suffering such shame. Thorodd takes action and arranges an ambush but Bjorn slays some of his ambushers and escapes. When Asbrand, the father of Bjorn, asks how the fight turned out, Bjorn states defiantly that Thorodd will succeed better in “sporting” with his fair-haired wife, or (though anxious with a bow) robbing taxes from the Earl’s traders. Thus, Thorodd is not depicted as a lesser man in a sexual sense (in accordance with the logic of early modern English cuckoldry jokes), but as a weakling and coward who lacks the strength and nerve to fend off the encroachments of Bjorn.

Courage and laughter in the face of death was another aspect of this heroic code of masculinity, which has been studied by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. By confronting death with scorn and laughter, the protagonists are commemorated as fearless paragons. But Friðriksdóttir also shows how smiling, irony, and mocking praise are employed to criticize, ridicule, and even challenge an excess of the very same heroic ideal. Women laugh as much as men but are never laughed at themselves. This changed in romantic sagas written at a time when the Icelandic elite became increasingly dependent on the Norwegian king and feuding gave way to competition for influence and prestige at the Norwegian royal court. Focus shifted to curbing independent, strong-headed women, represented by mythical “maiden kings” who behaved like males according to the heroic gender scale and standard of values. In her analysis, Friðriksdóttir demonstrates how laughter became a rhetorical weapon for discipline and change in what can literally be described as a battle between the sexes. An obvious parallel with the “comic violence” in the taming of shrews analyzed by Anu Korhonen.

Change and the rhetorical use of humor and laughter is also the topic of the final contribution by Jonas Liliequist. The context shifts from the literary to the political scene, illuminating the manner in which satirical texts and rhetorical figures of unmanliness were produced and used to various ends in the politics of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sweden. Embarking from disputes over rank and civil service in the latter half of the seventeenth century, Liliequist shows how traditional themes of unmanliness were given a new twist with the introduction of the “spark” or “petit-maître.” Vanity and affectation rather than cowardice and weakness were the main attributes of this ludicrous figure. As a rhetorical weapon, the spark could be used for both challenging traditional ideals and, through contrasting effect, making new ideals appear more masculine. Hitherto the ultimate proof of manliness and
honor, the spark was used to discredit dueling as a legitimate manner of settling quarrels over trifling matters and wounded vanity. Here is an obvious parallel to the questioning of heroic ideals analyzed by Friðriksdóttir. Furthermore, the spark served as a counterimage of virtue. Virtue constituted the key concept in disputes over rank and civil service, superseding the horizontal concept of honor associated with dueling. Among the newly ennobled groups and emerging middle class, virtue was associated with merit, thrift, and industry, which were also becoming the dominant societal ideals of the eighteenth century. Such attributes were however hard to gender as manly, compared with traditional values like courage and physical strength. In his article, Liliequist demonstrates how the spark was constructed as a mischievous but ludicrous counterimage, associated with typical feminine vices and guile under the guise of manly aspiration.

The spark’s lack of virility stands in contrast to earlier comic stereotypes of lechery and too much sex as signs of weakness and cowardice. Though portrayed neither as a cuckold nor as a lecherous kinaidos, the unmanliness in the caricature of the Swedish King Gustav III could best be described as a lack of virility. Virility like manliness is however a culturally constructed concept with different connotations even when boiled down to a question of impotence. While laughed at in Greek comedies and medieval and early modern European comic genres as well as being ridiculed among the literati in Imperial China for whom producing male heirs was of central importance, impotence was hardly a laughing matter for clericals who adhered to the ideal of the “manly eunuch.” In ancient Greek and Roman culture a virile demeanor could also be deceptive, covering an insatiable and effeminizing lechery. Consider the story of the Greek physiognomist Cleanthes whose skill was tested when he was presented with a tough-looking hirsute man with horny hands and shaggy mantle, who demanded a diagnosis. After careful observation he had to declare himself stumped. But turning around to leave, the shaggy fellow suddenly sneezed—at which Cleanthes cried out triumphantly, “He’s a cinaedus!” With this sneeze readers are invited to enjoy the reading of the following contributions and reflect over the rhetorical power of unmanliness in the making and unmaking of masculinity.

Notes


Jestbooks, printed collections of jokes, were produced in cheap small formats by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printing presses both on the European continent, and, more importantly for my essay, in England. As courtesy books suggested, the social skill of jesting was necessary even on the highest levels of society, and jestbooks provided material for those who were not quick-witted enough to fabricate jokes of their own. Translated from other European languages, poached from earlier publications or written down when heard from friends, jest collections represent a rich archive of themes, characters, plots, and punchlines that seem to have made early modern people laugh—and gender was clearly one of the most frequently discussed cultural categories in English humor.

Gender and laughter intersect in the jestbooks in various explicit and implicit ways, but in this essay, I will look at jokes about sexuality and violence to see how they were used to negotiate relationships of power, particularly within marriage. This is all the more opportune, as the most common theme for sexual jokes in English jestbooks was cuckoldry. Of all the breaches of sexual morality, women’s adultery seems to have been perceived as the most comic, but the comic butt in these jokes was the cuckolded husband, only rarely the cheating wife. In addition, I will analyze comic violence and the ways in which the image of the shrew was used in delineating ideal marital power structures and ideal gendered identities for both men and women.
What I hope to show is that, rather than just denigrating women, the jests were actively debating English masculinity and one of its mainstays, the problem of patriarchal authority. Gender history, particularly in its earlier guise of women’s history, has often noted the misogynist tendencies of early modern humor, but demeaning depictions of women should not only be read as evidence of how women were perceived by men or society of the time more generally. The many deficiencies that jokes saw in female nature and behavior also carried a message aimed at the mostly male readership of the jestbooks: in the rhetoric of humor, patriarchal power, the ideal authority embodied by the father and husband, was under constant attack by women. The responsibility for retaining that authority, however, resided with men. By consistently attacking women, jestbooks created a homosocial arena where the limits and possibilities of authority could be displayed and discussed. I would suggest, then, that the negative representations of women in early modern humor were meant to work as a tool for imagining and renegotiating masculinity rather than as mere negative images of femininity.

Humor and laughter can function socially and culturally in opposite ways: they can reside on the side of hegemonic power and sanction unwanted behavior, or they can express rebellious tendencies and make fun of authority and power. Both strategies are evident in the humor of English jestbooks: deviant behavior by both genders was presented as comic, but jokes also painted scenarios of subversion and inversion. The jokes themselves were rarely subversive or openly advocated such a position, but were rather inherently conservative, hankering for a well-ordered male-dominated world. Nevertheless, by portraying subversion, ostensibly to make it look ridiculous and suppress it, they also made a subversive identification possible and even entertaining. What renders these jokes culturally specific is not so much the themes they discuss—their topics are by no means only found in England or Europe, or in the early modern period—but the underlying message they convey. Their most emphatic demands were not directed at women, but at men, who were also the most avid collectors, buyers, readers, and, apparently, tellers of jokes.

**Cuckoldry: Challenging Masculine Authority**

Ranging from sexual punning through sexual harassment to scenes of intercourse, sex jokes are ubiquitous in English jestbooks. We would
expect sexual jibes from male characters of jests, but women, too, speak with sexual undertones: one of the most frequent phrases that we can hear women of any class or age utter in jestbooks of the time is “kiss my tail.” Sexual innuendo could be funny regardless of whether joking partners were married or not, and sex between unmarried persons was habitually portrayed as funny, but sex jokes became especially socially relevant when they questioned the status of marriage. It was the figure of the cuckold who embodied these tensions more than any other. But why was the cuckold such a familiar figure in early modern humor?

Marriage, a key social institution, was also of central importance in most people’s personal lives. What is perhaps not so self-evident is that the functioning, problems, and ideals of marriage were far from unambiguous to early modern people themselves. It is this acute need for cultural negotiation and the diversity of individual experience that jests and jestbooks reflect—even when they deal with these problems in highly formulaic ways.

Judging by the jestbooks, the fundamental problem about early modern marriage seems to have been the distribution of power and responsibility. The patriarchal ideal was clear: the husband and father was the head of the household, and the wife—mother his closest subordinate, while also the ruler of children and servants. Familial ideology was based on hierarchy, following the larger social and political ideals of male-dominated hierarchies of church and state. In practice, however, the hierarchical family was felt to be at constant risk by the actions of both women and men.

If humor is a mechanism for venting social anxieties, then this perceived threat to patriarchy would go a long way toward explaining why marriage was an unending source of humor for English jokers. What they were most often concerned about was the question of marital fidelity, particularly women’s adulterous relations and the problems faced by cheated husbands, or cuckolds. That cuckoldry was considered predominantly comic derives from the predicament of male power, as comedy of gender so often does. In a jest, one husband asked why it was that cuckolded men had to carry the horns even when the guilty party was clearly the wife. He was answered: because the husband is the wife’s head, and where would one carry horns if not on the head?

The question was not, then, exclusively about women’s morality but about male honor. Jests frequently present a perspective that particularly worried men: if the wife cheats, the husband will be made a laughing stock. The wife’s reputation and good name were crucial to the husband’s social prestige. If she lost her honor, he could no longer
walk the streets without being mocked and ridiculed. The relationship between husband and wife was of course important in these jokes, but crucial to their cultural resonance is the way in which they represent negotiations of relationships and hierarchies between different kinds of men. Questions of masculine honor, virtue, conduct, and authority are of prime importance in these distinctions.

The worst fate was assigned to husbands who silently condoned their wife’s deceit and even enjoyed the fruits it sometimes brought—the gifts, wealth or friendship of a wife’s richer and superior lover, for example. Anthony Copley, whose jestbook *Wits, Fits, and Fancies* (1614) contains several pages of cuckoldry jokes, gives us an example:

A Cuckold innocent being informed that such a one was a bed with his wife, answered: Knowing him as I doe to be a right honest man, I dare aduenture my wife a bed with him.

It is the stupidity of the husband that was found funny here, not the wife’s adultery: the innocence of the cuckold makes reference to his being a fool, rather than to his being unaware of his wife’s affairs. Early modern jokers often raised laughter by displaying foolishness of different kinds, but in the case of cuckolds, idiocy combined with further dangers, such as failing to see familial hierarchy and patriarchal authority as mainstays of masculinity.

Almost as laughable was the man who was too stupid to see he was driving his wife into the arms of another or who gave his wife opportunities that were hard to miss. One such husband was a young recently married hat-maker Tom who lived near his shop. One night he was drinking in a tavern with a young man of his acquaintance, who lived further away and would have had to pass several night watches on his way home. The friendly milliner offered his friend a bed for the night. In the morning, the milliner woke up, crept out of bed, dressed silently, and left for his shop. But when he arrived there,

never did any one that had been stung with the *Tarantula* laugh more extravagantly, he could hardly open his shop for laughing, the tears ran plentifully over his Eyes, he sometimes clapt his Thighs, and wheezed to himself, somtimes spread his hands and laughed out, ha, ha, ha, ha ha, aloud.

His neighbors, wanting to know the reason for such excessive behavior, asked him what made him so merry. Still laughing—“Why he! (saies
he) he! he! why!”—he explained that he had left his drinking companion in bed with his wife, “together fast asleep, like a couple of harmless fools,” and could not keep from laughing at the thought of “how simply they will look upon one another when they wake. Ha! ha! ha! ha! he!” The silly milliner then “fell to laughing again like mad,” and his neighbors laughed with him, declaring it all to be a pleasant jest indeed.11

Guarding one’s wife and her easily violated virtue was the duty of all husbands. Anyone who failed to grasp this sacrificed shared standards of masculinity, endangering not only their own honor but also the security and sense of gender balance of other men. The hat-maker’s excessive hilarity testifies to his simplicity—only fools and idiots would laugh so immeasurably12—and gives us evidence about who really was the butt of this joke. The husband’s hapless benevolence also fits the picture: cuckolds were too naïve to suspect their friends and too obliging to safeguard their own good name. But men’s foolishness was not the only reason for making cuckoldry appear funny.

In many jokes, adulterous couples were found in flagrante or only narrowly escaped detection.13 These tales play with both surprise and suspense, and must have appealed to their readership through their dramatic, theatrical qualities. To a large extent, these jokes rely on the recognition of well-known patterns and basic setups rather than startling turns or innovative storylines. For example, women’s ability to escape the watchful eyes of their husbands, hide their lovers when threatened with exposure, or explain away their misdemeanors by inventive subterfuge were endlessly explored and varied.14 Despite their brevity, the jokes also allow us glimpses into the material world of the home, making use of rooms, doors, stairs, beds, and chests, often to enter, escape, and hide. Clothes and textiles, too, play a part, often in ways that may be reminiscent of theatrical practices as much as everyday use. In a rather opportunistic way, the jestbook home can always provide cover and privacy for those seeking unlawful assignations. Despite the sketchy and rather conventional allusions to material surroundings, these stories can also raise questions about how we should understand the practical and metaphorical workings of early modern homes.

Many studies have stressed the openness of homes of the time and their lack of private spaces. Early modern people did not spend much time alone and inside, nor did they value or yearn for privacy and solitude, no matter the time of day. Even beds were usually slept in by several people.15 These arrangements are indeed reflected in the jestbooks’ social and material world, but in the context of humor, it is very important for husbands and wives to have a private marital bed to symbolize
the exclusivity of their relationship, and it is the couple themselves who control access to it. Even though most jokes take place in the open air, adultery jokes typically played with early modern understandings of intimacy, and thus took part in constructing gendered spaces for working and living. On closer inspection we find that sexual jests typically depicted women involved in various activities outside the home, but jokes about adultery emphatically linked intimately homely spaces with wifely work and the sheltered sphere of marital sexuality. The sexualization of women did not require the material context of the bed and the bedroom, but it was especially useful for cuckoldry jokes because of the possibilities that it allowed for hiding and revealing sexual activities and relationships on the one hand, and for questioning the gendered use and control of space on the other.

The jestbooks presented marriage as an arena for manipulative playfulness, where both scheming and conniving partners in turn were allowed the upper hand, but in jokes about adultery, it is the female protagonist who finally won. It is striking how consistently the wives of these jokes are presented as clever and resourceful. I do not mean to suggest that this native female cunning should change our views about how early modern humor evaluated women’s intelligence; rather, I would stress the frequency with which female ingenuity was used to point toward male inadequacy and weakness. Cuckoldry was understood to cause such deep humiliation that its male victims could hardly escape with their honor intact. Women’s cleverness in deceiving their husbands, and getting away with it, did not serve genuine reflection on the nature of women; its target was to display the problems of manhood that cuckoldry was related to.

Where jests celebrated the cunning of adulterous wives in order to point the finger at the weakness of cuckolded husbands, English court records testify to a rather different attitude toward women in actual criminal cases. Here accusations of adultery and cuckoldry mainly emerge in the context of defamation: branding a wife a whore and her husband a cuckold worked as a shaming tactic, setting in question the honor and reputation of both parties. However, where real-life women seem to lack the stamp of cleverness displayed in jests, the position of the cuckold remains relatively similar. Despite the comic potential of cuckoldry—or rather because of it—wives’ adulterous behavior and the challenge it posed to husbands seemed very real social and psychological threats in early modern England. The large number of cuckoldry jokes reflects the acuteness of the problem and people’s need to deal with it through the relatively safe medium of humor. Jests worked both
to alleviate the tensions caused by adultery and to keep the question continually in the public eye.

In early modern English culture, the key measure of one’s worth was a good reputation. Sexual norms were among the most central indicators of honor. Previous research has stressed the importance of sexual morality for women’s honor, but male sexuality, too, has emerged as a contributing factor in conceptions of honor. It is important to note, however, that men’s good name was not as dependent on their own sexual behavior as on the carnal habits of their wives. Cuckoldry was the worst challenge to male sexual honor. Men could cheat on their wives, visit brothels, and keep mistresses without necessarily losing their good name, but if their wives did the same, the husband’s moral standing was irreparably compromised. Sexuality here seems to blend into the more openly discussed facets of ideal masculinity, physical strength, and valor. In fact, for men, the social danger was not having too much sex, but too little. Even though jokes do not say it out loud, the common assumption that women’s adulterous relationships often resulted from their not getting what they wanted at home seems to lurk behind many jokes: cuckoldry suggested sexual impotence, a sign of lacking physical prowess also in a more general sense. Adultery cases were alarming examples of the possibility of female independence in a situation where male supremacy was already endangered. The comic disdain of cheated husbands that jests registered and supported further enhanced men’s social fears of cuckoldry and loss of authority. Cuckold humor was, then, an arena for displaying and testing homosocial power. It is precisely in this sense that humor had a pedagogic function: the combination of ridicule and shame was a tool for social control. Even though jests presented exaggerated and endlessly repetitive situations, they can still make visible the demand for decency and conformity that early modern culture held as constituents of masculinity and of patriarchal authority.

There were at least three kinds of laughter at work then, as Elizabeth Foyster has itemized, when people giggled at cuckolds. First, they could feel sympathy toward the deceived husband, perhaps because they felt a shared threat of disaster, and mixed their fellow-feeling with laughter. Second, their laughter could be understood as contemptuous derision when it aimed at social control and rectifying a problem. When the laughers were happily married, for example, they could feel superior to the unhappy cuckold and express both their disapproval and their demand for discipline by laughing. Third, cuckold humor could teach to recognize potential dangers and provide patterns for how observers
could react to their neighbors’ marital problems. Laughing at cuckoldry and their adulterous wives functioned as education of proper marital conduct and correct gender hierarchy.  

But as Bruce Boehrer has pointed out, cuckoldry raised such intense interest and was so central in early modern English humor that we would do well to ask whether it is enough to explain it by just referring to the patriarchal gender system and to social hierarchy. If the fixation with cuckoldry only resulted from problems and anxieties of patriarchal power, why do we not find a similar obsession in other similarly patriarchal cultures, such as classical Greece or feudal Japan? And why are cuckoldry discourses so complex, incongruous, and riddled with internal contradictions, such as the unbalanced distribution of gendered shame? Boehrer’s answer links the early modern English gender system to postmodern Western gender theory: the humiliated husband turned into a target for ridicule because he so conveniently showed how masculinity in general is contested and negotiable, indeed a cultural fiction. Masculinity, just as femininity, needs to be constantly performed. Both by presenting scenarios where masculinity could be lost or gained, and by providing patterns for responding to these practices and representations, humor contributed to this constant renegotiation.

Shrew-Taming: Humor and Violence against Women

One of the possible solutions to the problem of unruly women, early modern jokes suggest, was the use of physical force: a large number of jokes in English jestbooks record amusement at violence against women. The most usual scenario starts with a long-suffering husband getting tired of his willful and independent wife, who is depicted as being in need of “taming,” or being taught good manners through physical correction. The husbands in these jokes demand respect which their wives have been unwilling to show them, while physical violence is felt to be a justified measure to force unruly wives to submission. Obviously, this kind of comedy can only work if its readers and listeners subscribe to the idea that wives can and must be subordinated by their husbands, and that husbands are responsible for whatever means the process of taming requires. In order to laugh at these jokes, then, a patriarchal mindset has to be deployed, and the laughter, in turn, will work toward reinforcing the ideological standpoint demanded in the first place.
This is also why we should be interested in comic violence of the early modern period. It would be difficult to prove that comic depictions of wife-beating caused or actively encouraged violence. These jests also cannot be read straightforwardly as accurate reflections of English society or even its attitudes toward violence against women. Humor works in more complicated ways. Yet the jests undoubtedly offered men a fantasy of power that contributed to their constructions of masculinity and helped them to come to terms with the workings of patriarchy. The relationship between this fantasy and social reality was construed on the ideological level: the jokes proposed that even though wife-beating was not necessarily advisable, controlling women in other ways was obligatory. In English sermons and household books, husbands were instructed to overpower their wives not with physical violence but with intellectual, sexual, and economic power—what was incontestable was that authority should never be surrendered to women. If cuckoldry jokes used cheated husbands to point out the necessity of male authority, shrew-taming jokes tested the ways in which that authority should be maintained.

Interestingly, English visual images of the time, including comic woodcuts, very sparingly portray violence against women. Images of husband-beating wives, however, are not difficult to find. Visual culture may have eschewed graphic portrayals of violence against women for many reasons, but in the case of humor, it is not too difficult to understand why: on the basis of a visual image only, a man beating a woman would not have appeared comic. Without further visual clues, it would have seemed serious or even tragic. An image of a woman beating a man, however, would have been interpreted more readily as comic, because it would have suggested the idea of the world turned upside down and seemed like an illustration of the struggle for the breaches—which men in the end were supposed to win. If they did not, they deserved to remain comic butts anyway.

Husband-beating wives also appear frequently in jestbooks and other early modern comic texts, but often only as justification for the more serious male violence to follow. In the comic context, violent wives were supposed to be immediately interpreted as shrews: their violence prepared the way for their own taming. Shrews were a special female type, a recognizable comic image of the bad wife who was only sometimes physically violent, but always loud, angry, nagging, scornful, and disrespectful, a wife who tried to rule over her husband despite the dictates of patriarchal hierarchical order. Thus, the emergence of the word shrew at the opening of the joke already conditioned its hearer
to feel for the husband and temper his or her sympathies for the unruly wife. The point of the joke was often just to imagine ever more fantastical techniques for how women could be tamed.²⁷ In this context, violence appeared as comic and physical torture acquired entertainment value.

Let us have a look at how this could work. In *The Complaisant Companion*, a typical scenario presents itself: a newlywed couple negotiates their roles in marriage, and the young wife’s aspirations of power are curbed by her male relatives:

*A Young man married a cross piece of flesh, who not contented though her husband was very kind, made continuall complaints to the Father, to the great griefe of both Familyes; the husband being no longer able to indure this Scurvy humour, banged her soundly: hereupon she complained to her father, [who] understanding well the perversness of her humour, took her to task, and laced her sides soundly; saying, go and commend me to your husband, and tell him I am now even with him, for I have cudgeled his Wife, as he hath beaten my Daughter.*²⁸

The punchline clearly plays with our expectations and the father’s answer delights with its incongruity, but the beatings themselves seem absolutely routine. In many domestic violence jokes, shrewish wives seem to have extensive experience of husbandly aggression even though they persist in their attempts to control and correct their husbands.²⁹ The idea that wives knew they deserved punishment for rising against their husbands was a key assumption without which the jests would not work, but it is also evident that many jestbook wives sought to remedy very practical problems by verbal abuse and name-calling. Even early modern readers must have sometimes thought that husbands deserved to be called knaves and rogues in the circumstances that comic stories presented, but although this may have made the wives’ behavior understandable, it could never be wholly excused. In the patriarchal mindset, a wife’s mastery in the family could not be a solution, it was always a problem. The only sensible answer, then, was that husbands must be able to govern reasonably and persuade their wives that male authority was justified. But what was the correct means to go about persuading wives? This is the point of uncertainty that called for different humorous treatments, including the brutal violence of the shrew-taming jokes.

These scenes were not exclusive to jokes and jestbooks—they can be found in all kinds of comic literature, and sometimes in more serious
Laughter, Sex, and Violence

contexts as well. Excessive violence against wives was frowned upon in early modern culture, but justified correction was even advised by clergymen and magistrates. This is what shrew-taming refers to; in the comic context, physical violence was seen as an effective way to correct unruly wives, and ostensibly humorous treatments of the topic could go relatively far if they showed that physical correction was needed and deserved. That is why many comic beatings start with a marital brawl, a contest of wills, and a fight over mastery, and it is essential that they make plain the wife’s disobedience and bad behavior, indeed make her a worthy opponent, before the correction starts: whether the wife nagged at her husband about excessive drinking in the local tavern or engaged in adulterous relations with neighbors, she had to be found at fault in order to be a comic victim. What follows could be drastic: in Scoggin’s Jests, the eponymous hero’s wife “crowed against him that all the street should ring off” until Scoggin “thought it was time to breake his wife of such matters.” He tied up his scratching and kicking wife and sent for a surgeon to let her “hot and proud blood.” When the surgeon arrived, he saw the wife was mad and needed treatment, which he agreed to perform. Held by Scoggin and a servant, the wife was let blood “both in the arme and in the foot, and vnder the tongue”—that is, from the body parts that she had used to hit, kick, and verbally abuse her husband. This half-medical treatment was said to indeed cure the wife, and, as the moral added to the story testifies, the whole episode proved that it is “an vnhappy house where the woman is master.”

Wife-beating had comic potential, then, but so did husband-beating. In both variations, the comedy relied on the understanding that men had to retain mastery in their household and families, and on the standard image of wives as constantly threatening that mastery with their own demands and actions. At the same time, however, these images suggested the possibility that wives could indeed gain mastery if husbands were weak or had not fully adopted the contemporary ideals of masculinity and gendered social hierarchy. Not all jokes about marital contests of power ended with a triumphant husband subordinating his wife. Sometimes clever shrews also tamed their unreasonable husbands or even achieved positions of relative equality. Even if the overt message of violent jests seems to stress the necessity of male mastery, comic images of “women on top” did not always succeed in proving that this was the only solution. Just by suggesting that wives did indeed rebel against their husbands and sometimes for good reason, jests could also provide women opportunities to read them against the
grain, however curtailed these attempts may have been by the violence that followed.34

What are we to conclude about jests and gender, then? First of all, jestbooks were a predominantly male genre, collected, published, and read mostly by men. The subject matter of the jokes as well as the implicit tellers and audiences embedded in the narratives reflect and reveal this tendency, even though in social situations women certainly heard and told jokes as well. As we can see from Nicholas Le Strange’s manuscript jestbook, which records who he heard jokes from, misogynist or patriarchal undertones could also emerge in jests told by women.35 While jests did not aim to represent the actual state of affairs in gender relations in early modern culture, they do expose the tensions and negotiations that mattered in everyday life. As Tim Reinke-Williams has suggested, much gendered jesting may actually represent the misogynist tendencies of young men only just entering their adulthood rather than married men’s real concerns, but there is no denying that these views existed all over early modern comic literature.36 Rather than just as depictions of women, however, gendering jests should be read as attempts to formulate a patriarchal rulebook for masculine authority. They were not meant primarily to describe women (although they certainly did that as well); rather, they discussed the potential tensions, ruptures, challenges, and demands that the exercise of patriarchal power forced men to face. The jests could represent the pedagogic function of humor in that they conditioned their readers, tellers, and listeners to see women and men in a certain light and they presented, in a light-hearted but ever-present way, the systemic inequalities of power that were supposed to sustain patriarchal culture. Yet if we concentrate only on how jokes represent women, we lose sight of the fact that they were not complimentary about men either. Men portrayed as weak, foolish, or otherwise falling short of ideal masculinity were systematically ridiculed in early modern humor.

In this way, humor performed gender on two levels. First, jestbooks were not read for private amusement only; they were meant to be told and performed in company. In male gatherings, these performances could strengthen masculine fantasies of power. In situations where both genders were present, however, joking drew attention to the patriarchal predicament and tacitly naturalized perceptions of gender. Second, then, jests were repeated articulations of power relations, recipes for understanding and sustaining gender relations and for organizing one’s mental images of social hierarchy. As such, they were meant to uphold the status quo, not challenge it. Told and retold, adopted and adapted,
emerging in new contexts with slightly modified details but essentially same structures, they performed gender effectively precisely because they pretended not to take it seriously at all.

**Notes**

2. Tim Reinke-Williams has counted how representative gender jokes are within the context of the jestbooks. In his extensive sample, jests of one sex mocking the other accounted for less than a third of the content of the jestbooks, but clearly constituted a widely debated issue. Fewer than 10 per cent of jests in Reinke-Williams’s sample represented women mocking men, and fewer than 1 per cent women mocking other women. Reinke-Williams 2009, 334, 339.
5. Burton 1679, 79.
9. Copley 1614, 98; see also the ballad ‘Who would not be a cuckold’, Old English Ballads 1920, 196–197; Tarlton’s Jests [1611] 1814, 211–212.
13. See Twyne 1583, sig. O3v–P2v–P2v; Tales, and Quicke Answeres 1532, sig. E3r–E4r; Dekker 1607, 2; Copley 1614, 98; Heywood 1637, 150–151; Taylor 1638, 37–38.
14. See A C Mery Talys 1526, fol. 1r–1v; The Deceite of Women 1560, sig. A4r–B1r; Churchyard 1575, fol. 90r–92r; Twyne 1583, sig. P1r–P2v; Burton 1679, 54–56.
20. Sedgwick 1985, 21–27. Pamela Allen Brown, however, has suggested a complementary interpretation by noting the important role of women in mockery and ritual shaming of cuckolds, Brown 2003, 84–85, 89.
27. Fletcher 1995, 118–119.
30. For shrew-taming, see also Wife Lapped in Morel’s Skin, probably by Joannes Bramis (ca. 1580); The Pinder of Wakefield 1632, sig. B1v–B2v; Goodcole 1635, sig. C4r. The most famous version is of course Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew, where Kate’s taming involves not overt violence but deprivation of food, sleep, clothes, physical contact and freedom of movement. See Newman 1991, 41; Fletcher 1995, 108; Detmer 1997, 273–274; Dolan 1999, 208; Paster 2004, 88, 133.
34. Davis 1975, 131, 145; Wiltenburg 1992, 207.

Bibliography


Foolish indeed are those who think themselves able to formulate a theory about what makes a person laugh, Julius Caesar confided in Cicero. Caesar had read all that the Greek philosophers had to say on the subject. All is argued so simplistically, he declared, that it just gave him a good laugh. So it is best to just avoid such theorizing.¹

A little over 1,900 years later, mankind had made some progress. The American humorist W. C. Fields asserted that he knew what makes people laugh, but not why:

“The funniest thing about comedy is that you never know why people laugh. I know what makes them laugh, but trying to get your hands on the why of it is like trying to pick an eel out of a tub of water. (Levine 1969, 1–2)

The authors of medieval fabliaux also do not seem to doubt that their stories can make people laugh; even members of the upper crust allow themselves to be amused—at least those of the masculine gender:

_Ce sont risées, pour esbatre
Les roys, les princes et les contes._²

(There is laughter to amuse kings, princes, and counts.)
But according to medieval poetics, the authors wish not only to entertain, but also to educate:

\begin{verbatim}
Vos qui fableaus volez oir,
Peine metez à retenir;
Volentiers les devez-aprendre,
Les plusors por essample prendre,
Et les plusors por les risées
Qui de meintes gens sont amees.³
\end{verbatim}

(You who would listen to fabliaux, strive to remember them. Preferably you should learn them by heart. Most of them should be regarded as lessons, and most of them appreciated for the laughter, which is loved by many.)

Let us therefore examine just what they regarded as both entertaining and educational. First to be presented will be a fabliau from the thirteenth century; and next a parallel, a German Märe from about 1400.⁴ The theme is common to them both: priests’ lust and its social outcome. To formulate in another way, it is a play on gendered positions.

### The Priest Who Spied

The fabliau “The Priest Who Spied” (*Le prestre qui abevete*) is reported to have been written by a certain Garin, who is otherwise unknown.⁵ It deals with a parish priest, a peasant, and his beautiful wife. The peasant loves his wife, but she desires the priest, who in turn desires the peasant’s wife. One day the priest decides to visit the peasant’s house. Upon arrival he finds the door closed, but through a crack he can see into the house, and spies the peasant and his wife sitting down at the table to eat. The priest calls out to them and asks:

\begin{verbatim}
Que faites vous là, bone gent?⁶
\end{verbatim}

(What are you doing, my good folk?).

The peasant replies that they are eating, but the priest thinks otherwise:

\begin{verbatim}
Il m’est avis que vous foutés!⁷
\end{verbatim}

(Eating? Are you? You lie! I think you’re fucking.)
The peasant denies this, but the priest sticks to his contention. He says he can see clearly that they are fucking. Does the peasant think that the priest is blind? Why not trade places, so that the peasant can see for himself whether the priest is lying or telling the truth? The peasant, unfortunately, agrees to trade places. And the priest steps in and locks the door. The forced entrance becomes a foreboding of the transgression that comes next. He draws the woman to him and begins that:

Que femme aimme sor toute cose.
Le vit li a ou con bouté.  
(/ . . / which /a/ woman loves above all; he has slipped his cock into her cunt.)

The peasant has a good view of everything that goes on. But the priest is unembarrassed. He knows how to describe what is happening:

Ne veés vous? Je sui assis
Pour mengier chi à ceste table.  
(Don’t you see? I’m sitting down to eat, right here at the table.)

The peasant thinks that it all seems like a made-up story, a “fable” (faible). If the guest were not a priest, he would never have taken him at his word. Nothing further happens. It is merely remarked that the peasant has been fooled, and a moral is delivered in the form of a proverb: Maint fol paist Duis. (God feeds many fools.) The moral is not only cynical but also subversive, as it celebrates clerical abuse and overturns the patriarchal order of marriage, over which the husband should be the master. This reversal is not a unique case. The fabliau La crote (“The shit”) has two protagonists, a man and his wife. The wife is not only bored but also annoyed at her husband’s rude manners and decides to get revenge: she fools him into eating her shit. The reader is not surprised when told that the wife “thinks her husband is a fool” (le tient por sot).

In the previous fabliau the daring priest is successful and thus becomes the hero of the story. Nobody should pity the peasant, because he is a fool; and the wife is a servant of her own lust, acting complacently to satisfy her desires. It is not indicated why the wife so willingly accepts the priest, but priests had (in the fabliau in general) a reputation of being very potent.
The key scene is the first. It is here that the priest gains the advantage. He does so by denying the obvious—that the couple is sitting at the table and eating—by instead claiming that they are engaged in sexual intercourse. In short, they are unchaste, though the priest uses other words. The priest’s assertion and his coarse language are so surprising that the peasant becomes confused. But the claim gains a compelling force, because it comes from a priest. In virtue of his spiritual and social authority the priest can define the situation—he exercises power—even when the result is absurd.

In the second scene the peasant realizes that the priest is a rogue, and that he himself has been deceived in the most scandalous manner. Yet the peasant accepts what the priest now claims: that the priest and the peasant’s wife are sitting and eating, although they are in fact engaged in intercourse. Of course, he has his reasons for doing so. He does not want to go around the village being called a cuckold.

The Love Tithe

A parish priest had a right to a tithe from his parishioners. That right becomes a means of blackmail in “The Love Tithe” (Der Zehnte von der Minne), a Mære, recorded by Heinrich Kaufringer, a cleric based in Landsberg am Lech in southern Germany around 1400. The cast of characters is the same as in the fabliau: a parish priest, a peasant, and the peasant’s wife. And the problem is the same: the priest has taken a liking to the peasant’s wife.

At a Shrove Tuesday celebration, a priest points out to a peasant woman that he is entitled to a tenth of all production. Since she had never given a tenth of her work of lovemaking, she can only count on God’s grace if a change is made. The priest promises to be generous in measurement; she needs to only provide a tenth of the past half-year’s sexual labor. The woman, who is eager to avoid the punishments of hell, replies:

*Was ew ze recht werden sol,*  
*Des will ich ew günnen wol.*

(What is owed to you, I certainly want to give to you.)

The next morning, when the peasant has gone away to work in one of his fields, the priest appears. Using the threat of God’s displeasure, he demands his rights immediately:
Raicht mir her den zehenden mein,
Oder ir habt gotz huld verlorn.\(^{16}\)

(Give me my tithe, or you will have forfeited the grace of God.)

So the priest garners his tithe. As he is leaving, the peasant catches sight of him, and immediately suspects something fishy is going on. He rushes home and interrogates his wife, who soon realizes that she has been thoroughly fooled. The couple decides to take revenge, and they invite the priest to a grand feast.

Preparations are made, including the purchase of two wine barrels. One is filled with excellent wine. In the other one, the woman urinates until it is full. On the appointed day the priest arrives and is elegantly wined and dined. Once everything is eaten and the fine wine finished, the peasant brings forth the second wine barrel. He invites the priest to help himself. The priest, rather intoxicated, takes a hearty swig. But as soon as he swallows he has to vomit, and exclaims:

\begin{quote}
Das ist ain trank bös.
Lungen, leber und das krös
Ist mir alles zerrüttet ser.
Ich üervind es nimer mer.\(^{17}\)
\end{quote}

(That was an evil drink! My lungs, liver, and intestines are destroyed. I'll never recover!)

The peasant is quick to reply. The wine, he says, is from a vine from which the priest recently took his tithe. Regarding the vineyard, he can state:

\begin{quote}
Der wingart ist auch gar volkomen,
Den haun ich erpawen schon.
Davon ist mir ofi ze lon.
Lieb und guot vil geschehen;
Er ist aigen und ist nit lehen.
Niemand hat darin ze schaffen,
Weder laien noch die pfaffen,
 Dann ich allain / ... / .\(^{18}\)
\end{quote}

(The vineyard is completely perfect. I have nurtured it well. In return, it has provided me much that is good and dear. It belongs to me alone and is not for sharing. No one else, whether layman or priest, has any business in there; only I alone.)
The peasant adds that no tithe has ever been demanded from the vineyard in his lifetime. Should anyone try to claim it, he may expect to pay a high price, so high that even death would seem a mercy to pray for. The priest is terrified. A deceived husband is nothing to play with. But the priest is allowed to slink away, somewhat worse for wear, after he has asked for forgiveness and promised never again to visit the peasant’s vineyard. The priest and peasant part as friends.

Some Remarks

A moral in the form of a warning is common to the two stories, one that was immediately recognizable to the audience of the time: Watch out for priests; they are full of lust and will take any opportunity to satisfy their urges. The theme was recognizable not least because it was so common in medieval jokes and satire. Indeed, it is so common that even a fool, un sot (an actor in a sottie), understands what the clerisy is like: Que chastité et gens d’Eglise. Ne se connoissent nullement. (That chastity and clerics know each other not at all.)

But more may be derived from the two stories. There are two principles in operation, one active and one passive. Men are responsible for the active. They initiate the events and also drive the plot forward, using clerical authority and deception to have their way. Primarily this applies to the priests, but in the German story the peasant also is very active, while the French peasant is more or less passive, adjusting himself to the priest. The women adapt to this pattern, but in differing ways. The woman in the French story plays along in order to gain an outlet for her own lust, while the woman in the German story feels forced to let the priest have his way; clerical authority prevails.

A social hierarchy is also discernible: men are—or should be—superior to women, and priests are superior to their parishioners. Priests are thus doubly superior to women, and they act in accordance with this double authority. Both of the two peasants and the women are opposites in characteristics: the peasant in the first story, like the woman in the second, is gullible, while the peasant of the second tale is smart, like the woman in the first. Character features are therefore not a direct function of social status or the norms of gender. Moreover, they have one thing in common (except perhaps for the peasant in the fabliau): they all like sex, provided that the peasant in the German story is not
bragging about his marital achievements. The ideal of chastity—for priests a norm—is not upheld at all.

Even though the stories treat the very same subject, the results are quite different. In the first the priest, as well as the peasant’s wife, commits a crime against mores which is allowed to go unpunished. In the second the crime against mores is not allowed to stand: the perpetrator, the wicked priest, is punished. But that is not all; a reconciliation occurs as well, which implies that the social order has been preserved. Yet in the first tale, a tension remains. The offense against mores is not punished; in fact it is celebrated, when the gullible peasant is pilloried as “a fool.”

The question remains whether the two different conclusions mirror a more general shift in attitudes. In the wake of the frequent plagues and the social unrest and upheavals of the fourteenth century, a more moralizing tone might have crept in. Good morals, patriarchal order, and social stability are emphasized in the German text. Lecherous behavior is punished and marriage as a social institution, with a clever husband at its head, gets its due. Moreover, social compliance marks the end of the story. The edification, not the immorality, is emphasized. Rectitude plays well in times of anxiety. The problem though, whether this is a general trend or just a coincidence, cannot be settled on the basis of just two instances. It would require further investigation.20

Laughter

The morals of the stories have been dealt with, but people do not always find morals entertaining, even less so funny. On the other hand, a good laugh may put them in a mood favorable to hearing a moralizing conclusion.

Laughter is often a response to the perception of incongruities, which occur in the two tales as a consequence of a subversive play on gender models. In the fabliau, none of the protagonists comply with the norms of their gendered position; in the Märe only the husband does, while his wife fails, coaxed by the parish priest (Table 8.1). But the issue of laughter is complex. Modern research has shown that several factors affect the outcome of a joke. Let me confine myself to an oral context, which was the most common in the Middle Ages, and briefly indicate some key aspects.22
1. The relationship between the narrator and the auditor. Does the narrator address an in-group in which the people know each other; or an out-group, in which values, social background, and status vary and are perhaps quite different from the narrator’s? Does the narrator make a sympathetic or unsympathetic impression?

2. The subject. Is the joke about trivial or sensitive matters? Is it perceived as benevolent or malicious?

3. Context. Material permitted in some venues might be taboo in others.

4. Atmosphere. Does the auditor feel safe, at home, in the mood for a joke, or the opposite?

We do not know the specific circumstances under which the texts were produced and performed. It makes it difficult to take these aspects into account. A few scenarios may be indicated, though.

Let us first imagine an aristocratic and bourgeois audience for the fabliau. This is the audience indicated by modern research. Likely both aristocrats and townspeople would have had a good laugh at the expense of stupid peasants, lecherous priests, and unreliable or gullible peasant women. In such an audience, no one needs to take offense, as the protagonists are peasants and parish priests. If the author were a cleric—and they usually were—and presented it to other educated clerics, they all could laugh at the expense of uneducated parish priests and stupid peasants. There are parallels from the same period. In the *Le Roman de Renart*, a comic tale about a society of animals mirroring a high medieval feudal society, the rural priest is represented by a donkey, considered to be not only the stupidest of animals but also the

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**Table 8.1** Behavior and gender norm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Validating</th>
<th>Contrav</th>
<th>Motive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fabliau</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Märe</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>x</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sources: NRCF 8:98, Sappler 1972.

contrav = contravening; premed = premeditated; unpremed = unpremeditated.
lustiest. Celibacy is for such a priest out of the question. The tale likely came from one of the northern French cathedrals where the level of education of clerics was considerably higher than among parish priests of the countryside.\textsuperscript{24}

In the German Märe the author is a cleric who was hardly an ordained priest. Faced with a mixed crowd of peasants and petty bourgeois, the likely congregation he served, surely a joke where a peasant wins the day against an immoral priest would have been well received. That a peasant woman allowed herself to be fooled was perhaps of less consequence, since the established order of gender is upheld.

Despite the differences, in both cases the laughter is directed at others’ imperfections. The humor is condescending. Thomas Hobbes was clear about the function of such jokes:

\begin{quote}
I may therefor conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others / . . . / .\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Patronizing jokes provide a kind of reward to those who laugh. Belief in one’s own excellence is strengthened, and the conviction about the failings of others is confirmed, at least temporarily. Hobbes does not explain why this is so. There may be any number of reasons for denigrating others while exalting one’s self; it is admittedly difficult to assign motives. One factor, exemplified in the examples, may still be stressed. Medieval folk lived in a hierarchical society marked by different privileges that produced social inequality. Those of higher ranks, for example, the clerisy, lived off of the labor of others. That experience influenced people’s social consciousness, and can explain the jokes that we have examined here and why they were very common.\textsuperscript{26}

Those with privileges justified themselves with malicious jokes about the stupid and underprivileged, and considered themselves justified in doing so, or about clerics who did not meet an acceptable standard of education or mores; while those without privileges compensated by making malicious jokes about the privileged, not least priests, abbots, and bishops, who did not live as they should.

Notes

2. MeR III, 144; cf NRCF 10, 121: 256–257
4. *Fabliaux* and *Märern* are comic tales in verse of didactic, erotic, moral, and social content and closely related to the Latin *ridicula* and the Italian *facecie* and the German *Schwank*. Ménard 1983 and Köpf 1987 provide short valuable introductions; for a comparative perspective on the genres, see Strasser 1989.
5. Different aspects of the genre are discussed by Rossi 1992 in his *Introduction* (9–70) and by Bloch in his comments on Rossis edition (531–545), where you will also find relevant secondary literature as in Burrows 2005.
11. MeR III, 48; cf NRCF VI, 57:1–62 (51). You may agree with the conclusion of Nykrog (1957, 159): “le plus degoutant de tous les fabliaux.”
12. Clerical transgressions were (in the real world) not uncommon. The situation in Normandie in the thirteenth century is discussed by Thibodeaux 2006, 380–399. On the potent priest in the fabliau, see Burrows 2005, 99–120.
13. There are two by the name of Heinrich Kaufringer recorded in Landsberg (am Lech) in the decades around 1400: a rector (Pfleger) of a church and his son. It is not known which of them wrote the texts attributed to Heinrich. Kaufring was a small town, not far from Landsberg. Classen 2007 is an English anthology of erotic tales from medieval Germany with an updated bibliography.
20. A general investigation is considered a desideratum by Burrows 2005, 41, who also draws attention to the fact that many priests of the French fabliau are punished for their frequent transgressions. On the other hand, many priests in the German *Mären* do behave as they should. See Beine 1999, 182–195.
21. The connection of incongruities, humor, and laughter is discussed in Ferm 2009, 77–93.
23. The question is complex; see Burrows 2005, 215.
24. Figueroa 1982, 196–199. In the *Roman de Renart* you even find the cynical atmosphere you find in *Le prestre qui abevete* and in the fabliau *La crote*. 
25. Hobbes 1840, 46. The theory has its origins in Antiquity. In *De arte poetica* (1449a, 35) Aristotle asserts that what draws forth laughter are errors, mistakes (*amartema*), or deformity (*aischos*). In *Ethica Nicomachea* (IV, viii) there is a more nuanced view of the phenomenon.


**Bibliography**


The paper’s general context is visual humor in ancient Greece but its main focus is on the way in which women from different backgrounds were portrayed and mocked by (mainly) male Athenian vase-painters between the sixth and fourth centuries BC. The driving idea is that men tried to the best of their abilities to control women, and their fears are revealed in comic depictions. The artists were really artisans: they usually did not have patrons as they mass-produced their often well-designed utilitarian objects for the marketplace. Their production followed the rule of fashion and because these objects were ubiquitous in Athens, and showed every aspect of daily life and mythology, they offer us a popular vision of what troubled, fascinated, or amused most Athenians. In many respects, the main problem in studying women in classical Athens is that they have often been seen as an undifferentiated mass. The paintings on Greek vases open a different path to studying women in Athens. Their goal was to please their viewers in order to sell their pots. Whether the vases were produced by men or women is not as important as the identity of the final consumer or even the purchaser. One’s productions do not always show what one believes in personally, but what one wants to sell. This is why on the one hand I am particularly interested in the revealing nature of humor, the fact that humor brings out what is hidden in conventional discourse and on
the other hand the vases both contradict and comfort interpretations originating in the ancient textual evidence.

After a few preliminary notions (1) on the purpose of studying visual humor and a discussion on conventional representations of women in Athens, the paper will then focus (2) on four comic female types involving wine, sex, laziness, and gossip. These striking images raise many issues, among which are masculinity and the loss of control, consumerism (buying patterns, gendered shopping, the intended and the final use of these vases), and finally the fear of counter-culture critique and female social networks.

1. Preliminary Notions

**Visual Humor**

A unanimous definition of the laughable does not exist among theorists on laughter, nor can they even find a tacit agreement on what arouses laughter. But for the sake of convenience and as we are only interested in what humor reveals rather than its nature, let us define *humor as the intellectual stimuli that provoke laughter because they have been intentionally prepared to this effect and perceived consciously to this effect.*

The study of visual humor in ancient Greece offers insightful views on ancient Greek society, its values and customs, just like the proverbial mirror of Old Comedy that offers a distorted yet truthful reflection of ancient Athenian social customs and beliefs. Is it possible to identify comic scenes in an ancient culture after such a long span of time? Our knowledge of Ancient Greek society is profound, thanks to tremendous amount of scholarship in philology, epigraphy, history, and archaeology over the last two centuries. Yet, to identify visual humor among hundreds of thousands of vases, one must reconstruct what was conventional from what was not, then establish which unusual images were intended to be humorous. The principles of parody, caricature, and situation comedy are the same today, cross-culturally, as they were in antiquity. What changes from one village to the next still today are the comical references and local taboos. Images intentionally produced to ridicule are a way of dealing with subjects that are difficult to broach in a “serious” way. It is as if humor enabled us to distance ourselves from the subject and thus squint at our innermost fears. Visual humor will give us a distorted vision of men’s fears that in turn will help us understand more about women, certain forms of masculinity, and other related issues.
Gender Studies and Classical Archaeology

Gender studies have pushed the boundaries of scholarship far and wide and archaeologies of sex and gender, studying past societies through their material culture by closely examining the social construct of gender identities and relations, emerged as a specific (mine) field of research in the 1980s. Indeed, “much of the way we learn how to be men and women in any society comes not through explicit discussion but through the inexplicit experience of living in a world of things.”\(^2\) It is an extremely complex interpretative process, especially when one’s main evidence is archaeological remains.\(^3\) Gender scholars first wondered where ancient women were located, focusing on their public and domestic roles. They then turned to the status of women and issues of patriarchy. Yet, we still do not agree on the exact location of the men’s or women’s quarters in Greek houses: the visual evidence points to women’s typical actions rather than loci.\(^4\) The current studies of women in antiquity have moved away from the history of women to the history of gender with complex intersections between gender, class, race, and ethnicity in classical cultures. In this chapter, we will focus on the interplay between male fears and how women could be controlled in ancient Athens.

Conventional Images of Women

On vases depicting scenes from daily life, we find three main types of women: “respectable” wives (and daughters),\(^5\) servants, and prostitutes. The wives are often shown indoors, wearing lengthy and heavy clothing, sometimes jewels. Their long hair is either worn loose or in a bun (sakkos). They might sit on indoor chairs, performing various domestic activities such as wool work, raising babies, cooking, and kneading dough. Outdoors they tend tombs, get married, shop, and sell goods at the market, and, as we shall discuss further, fetch water at the fountain house.

The debate regarding women’s status, whether they left their homes or not, and related issues has generated a huge amount of scholarship.\(^6\) The image of the submissive wife described by Xenophon in his *Oeconomicus* has permeated our categories of thought, but luckily we have many other sources to paint a different picture than an elitist Athenian’s fantasy of a submissive wife. By taking a middle view between Xenophon and, for instance, Aristophanes, one may recreate what the Athenian view of women might really have been. Indeed, Aristophanes won many dramatic competitions, and the decision of the jury, which was composed of democratically appointed men, probably reflected popular sentiment.
Many of the problems regarding the assessment of women and status are due to the fact that women are often portrayed as an “undifferentiated mass.” Wealthy wives could send servants on various errands, while women of more modest means or from poor households left their house to work without being slaves or prostitutes. Women were not strictly isolated from the outside world but had so much to do, maintaining their household that they had little spare time for anything else. In Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*, Kalonike says: “It’s difficult to get out of the house this early. We’ve got to do our husbands little favours, we’ve got to get the servants out of bed, we’ve got to put the children to bed, wash them and feed them.”

Still, the enduring constructed image of a discrete and demure Athenian wife described by Xenophon is also to be found on some vases. A small red-figure wine jug (chous) in New York (Figure 9.1)

![Figure 9.1](image-url)
show a drunk naked man wearing the typical reveler’s headband, knocking roughly with his staff at a front door (the roof is indicated by the tiles above the door). A woman moves forward from the other side with great hesitation, her right finger brought to her mouth in a gesture of fear. She holds an oil lamp which indicates that the scene is occurring at night. She might be thinking what Philokleon tells Bdelylkleon in Aristophanes’s Wasps: “No, it is a bad thing to drink; from wine come broken doors (thurokopesai), beatings, thrown stones; and then the money to be paid after a drunken bout.” She is fully dressed and her long hair is attached in a bun. Even though Theophrastes commented on lurid women stating that “They [women] answer the front door themselves,” this woman has all the attributes and demeanor of a frightened “respectable” wife woken up in the middle of the night by a drunk.

Servants on vases are often smaller, wear plainer clothes, and have shorter hair, as on a red-figure hydria in Paris (Figure 9.9), where three Thracian servants fetch water from the fountain place.

Prostitutes, just like “respectable women,” could be wealthy or poor. Pornai were anonymous streetwalkers or brothel prostitutes who catered to a large number of absolute strangers. The hetaira, however, was a mistress of one or two lovers who supported her financially. She offered her company for discussions, play, and sex. According to Kurke, the binary relationship between the porne and the hetaira is a discursive and ideological construct; both words should be considered as concepts used in different modes and contexts. The ordinary pornai are usually shown naked with cropped hair, used and abused sexually, sometimes even beaten: these women are utterly objectified. In contrast, hetairai were often dressed as “respectable wives” but with commercial erotic overtones (e.g., inclusion of money satchels in the scene to indicate payment). As in life, they were the expensive companions of revelers at drinking parties, often found half-naked, reclining on cushions, talking, and drinking wine. Some are even shown wearing the sakkos, while others wear reveler headbands: they are the visual cross between a “respectable wife” and a prostitute.

To sum up, as in textual evidence, the limits between different statuses in vase painting are slightly blurred; the painters used identifying details from each category to embellish or degrade another category of women. But, in most circumstances, clues are present to aid in the identification of hetairai, pornai, and “respectable” wives.
2. Four Examples of Male Anxiety

Women were the target of male jokes and criticism in literature since very early times (seventh century BC with Semonides of Amorgos and sixth century with Hesiod *Works*) but it is Athenian comedy that offers the most useful data: “we should not expect to find realistic portrayals of people, but rather stereotypes, embodying the fears and anxieties, the mild, underlying paranoia about what might happen.” Athenian comics wrote about women as adulterers, drinking on the sly, lazy, and spending their time gossiping. Under the guise of comedy, they revealed men’s darkest fears.

*Sex-Crazed Women: The Fear of Adultery*

In contrast to Xenophon, the Attic Orators, and even Pericles’s funerary oration, who all portrayed women as modest beings, Aristophanes and other comics described them as shameless lustful creatures. It is doubtful that husbands complained about having sexual wives, but they might have feared being inadequate or cuckolds. Their fear was not only rooted in the loss of honor and self-worth, but in issues of inheritance and property. If the “legitimate” wife were to have a child from another man, the immediate family inheritance line might be broken. Until women had children, they were inherently distrusted because they came from a different oikos and had no particular allegiance to the new husband and his oikos. But, once they had produced legitimate heirs, they were entrusted to care for the household and defend their husband’s property against the outside world.

Actually, with regard to property, a very fine balance between surveillance and trust bound husbands and wives. “Just as the owner of invisible property had to cultivate a relationship of trust with the holder of his property, so too an Athenian woman needed to maintain a good relationship with her kyrios. The law limiting a woman’s transactions did not prohibit her from engaging in transactions above this limit (i.e., it set no penalty if she did so); rather, it gave a legal basis to her kyrios to invalidate the transaction if he wanted to.” But if the wife had an affair, the adulterer, a foreigner to the oikos, could gain access to a man’s possessions. “How? Not through any possible baby, but directly through the wife.” This fear explains the sexual innuendoes found on some vases that clearly portray respectable wives.

On a number of vases women handle dildos, engage with giant phalli or fantastical beings called phallus-birds (whose neck and head
consist of an erect penis, sometimes with a scrotum at the base).⁴⁶ Some were probably intended to be *hetairai*, but many could be “respectable wives.”

On our first comic vase, a red-figure cup in Berlin (Figure 9.2),²⁷ two “respectable” wives, dressed in heavy garments and their hair in a sakkos, stand back to back while working at raised trays, probably kneading dough. Above them is a fantastical being, a phallus bird. It has no agency in the scene, in contrast to other scenes where it ejaculates or copulates with satyrs or women. The phallus bird has been interpreted as a funerary apotropaic symbol,²⁸ but why should the intended function or meaning of all cups found in tombs be funerary simply because tombs happened to be their final resting place? The clue to understanding the picture lies in the animal’s frozen, almost heraldic air. It most probably symbolizes the women’s sexual thoughts while they are at work, in a similar fashion to speech balloons in comic strips. It is a picture of escapism while carrying out dull domestic duties. It is comical
in that they are not looking at each other, work back to back, and still, “both think of sex.”

Another unusually comic scene is shown on a red-figure pelike in Syracuse (Figure 9.3). The humor arises from the extreme contrast and similitude between the two sides of the same vase. On one side, a young “respectable” wife wearing a sakkos has just undressed (her shoes and clothes are wrapped in a bundle on a stool) and is about to wash. A cleaning sponge and a strigil are hanging in the background.

On the other side of the pelike, a woman steps into a container as if to bathe. But the clay vase has turned into a wicker basket, the water having given way to dildos. They have eyes like phallus birds, which brings the dildos to life. The humor lies in the conjunction of the woman’s exaggerated sexual appetite (she prefers a phallic immersion rather than a bath) and the surprise effect, an important asset in humor, between the two sides of the vases, which graphically are almost identical, with a comic twist.

Finally, a red-figure pelike in London (Figure 9.4) shows a “respectable” wife outdoors in a farm yard, distributing seeds to erect phalli instead of chicken. It is a parody of a dull, repetitive farming activity, turned into an escapist erotic fantasy. Another fully clad woman on a red-figure pelike fragment in Athens (Figure 9.5) stoops down to pet affectionately a phallus bird that cranes its neck to look up at the woman. This gesture of female empowerment is surprising because of its stark contrast with the many images of rape. Rape scenes on vases are visualized reenactments, but these erotic fantasies of “respectable” wives are the

Figure 9.3  Visual pun. Side A: woman washing clothes. Side B: woman stepping into a basket full of dildos. Pelike, Attic RF, Syracuse, Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi, 20065; 510–470 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
Figure 9.4  Woman throwing grain to upright phalluses as if they were chicken. Pelike, Attic, R.F, British Museum, E819; 440–420 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.

Figure 9.5  Woman petting affectionately a phallus bird. Pelike, Attic, R.F fragm., Athens, Agora Museum, P27396; c.480 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
expression of male sexual fantasies and paranoia. The last drawing in this series by the erotic artist Martin van Maele (1863–1926) (Figure 9.6) dates back to 1905. It shows almost 2,400 years after our Greek vases a farm girl attacked by phallus geese. The meaning of this image is quite different: it emphasizes virginal temptation and fear; a male vision of a young woman’s fantasies of geese turned into phalluses.

**Drinking Women—Loss of Control**

The second male fear concerned women drinking wine on the sly. Husbands were not afraid of wasted or “siphoned wine” (“You are at hand when furtive wives unlock the storeroom door, or siphon off the wine”) but rather of its influence on women. In losing control, women could not be good mothers nor take proper care of the household, and thus we return to the inevitable fear of economical loss.

A red-figure skyphos in Malibu (Figure 9.7) shows a well-kept cellar (A). On the other side (B), a young slave girl, with cropped hair, follows her
mistress while carrying a full wineskin on her head, a bag on her shoulder, and a hydria in her hand. The overweight mistress hurriedly drinks wine out of a large skyphos, “her large lips glued to its lip to increase the flow of the liquid.” The woman’s long and heavy dress and hairstyle are that of a “respectable” wife. They must be bringing wine to a symposium. As female citizens could not attend such an event, she can only drink on the sly, on the short way between the cellar and the symposium.

The Sleeping Guardian or Lazy Housekeeper

The third masculine fear concerned lazy housekeepers. Indeed, even wealthy wives would have had their hands full managing the oikos, and the lack of activity of “lazy” wives could potentially lead to a complete breakdown of the household and its dependents, leading ultimately to serious economic loss. A key to visual as well as verbal humor lies in the use of comic archetypes. Comic artists knew as they do today that certain archetypes always produced the same comical effects by playing opposing concepts or images. The sleeping guardian is one such comic archetype. The guardian, whose sole purpose is to protect something of value, falls asleep on his watch. Add this archetype to another of the lazy woman found in literature since the time of Semonides, and the cocktail is twice as potent.

A Boeotian red-figure pelike in Munich (Figure 9.8) shows on one side a butcher chopping meat on a tripod with his typical broad blade knife. On the other side, a woman is reclining on a chair next to a tall pole or lamp stand. At its very top hang a few slices and chunks of meat. A cat perches on the foot of the stand. The two sides of this pelike must be observed as one complete narrative.
Vases often show greedy animals, usually cats and dogs. It is likely that our cat intends to climb up the long pole because it has sensed the presence of meat. These poles are frequently found in butchery scenes, as food had to be kept out of reach of greedy animals. The woman is asleep: she is leaning her head on her right hand and her eyes are shut. She was keeping an eye on her husband’s produce but fell asleep “on duty.” She is a comic archetype: the sleeping guardian. She also conforms to a Greek male stereotype of lazy women, loitering instead of doing their housework.

_Gossips at the Fountain Place_

The fourth male fear and comic stereotype is that of gossiping women. Men jeer at female interaction calling it gossip, because they fear what is potentially discussed (men’s foibles) and female social networks of friends and neighbors running in parallel to men’s. As discussed above, there has been a huge amount of scholarship on whether women left their homes or not. “One often-repeated generalization about men’s space and women’s space in the classical Greek polis is that women were confined as much as possible to the domestic interior, while men dominated outside spaces.” But we came to the conclusion that they did go outdoors. So, what did they do outdoors besides work? One repeated visual example of female interaction on vases is women fetching water from public fountains. This
was a female space *par excellence* in most cultures, where women from various households met to exchange news, pester about their husbands, and cover a million other topics of conversation. This reflects the gendered division of labor in traditional communities, in which domestic water collection is typically associated with women’s roles. Cohen points out that many women would not have had a well in their home nor slaves to fetch water for them or might have simply wanted to go themselves. The public fountain is still a focal point for women throughout the Mediterranean world (Spain, Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and North Africa), but also many other parts of the world, such as India, Nepal, Thailand, and Vietnam, and various sub-Saharan African countries. L. Nevett breaks the mold of the usual debates on female spaces, using topography to show how women left their homes, locating them in immediate or extended urban neighborhoods.

The first vase (Figure 9.9), alluded to above, displays three Thracian servants fetching water from a fountain that might or not be inside the city space. Even though the fountain resembles more a natural spring

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**Figure 9.9** Three Thracian servants fetch water from the fountain place. Hydria, Attic RF, Paris. Musée du Louvre, CA2587. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
from a rock with twigs sprouting above, one of the servants steps onto a man-built step and another servant is about to pick up a hydria from a square base or altar to the left. The three women show us how to gather water: (1) they place the hydria under the water flow, (2) they steady the filled and heavy vase on a flat surface before (3) placing it, upright, on their head.

The second vase, a black-figure hydria in Oxford (Figure 9.10),\textsuperscript{54} shows much more clearly the engaged discussions between at least six well-dressed women (embroidered peploi) at the fountain place. On the very far left, a woman stands on the krepis of the fountain place filling up her hydria. To the right, two women holding their filled hydriae upright on their heads are turned to the right, away from the fountain, whereas the other two women they are gesturing to in conversation are turned toward the fountain place waiting to fill up their hydriae (placed sideways on their heads). There are numerous representations of women at fountains in the black- and red-figure techniques. Some show clearly fountain houses, others simpler fountains, some women

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are named, for example, “Anthyla (Flora, or Florie) Rhodon (Rosy) is pretty.”55 None of these vases are comical. They simply show women conversing at fountain places.

But, one hydria shows a comic version of this daily life scene: on a red-figure hydria in Madrid (Figure 9.11),56 two women are standing at a fountain house, which consists of a Doric column erected on a one-stepped krepis with a lion’s head spout shown in profile. From their gestures and poses, they are conversing. The woman on the left is carrying a hydria upright on her head and her feet are turned to the left which indicates that she is leaving. The “taller” woman has left hers beneath the fountain’s spout. Both women wear a tiara, which indicates that they are most probably citizens. The woman on the right’s hydria is overflowing with water pouring out from the lion’s-head spout. The woman on the left turns toward the other woman. With these simple elements,57 the overflowing hydria, the gestures of discussion, the indications of departure of the woman on the left, and her lingering (head turned right), the painter has shown two gossips so engrossed in their conversation that one of them has forgotten her hydria, the very purpose of her presence at the fountain place. A similar

Figure 9.11  Male humor: two gossiping women at the fountain place. One has forgotten her overflowing hydria. Hydria, Attic RF, Madrid, Museo Arqueologico Nacional, 11117; 500–480 BC. Photograph © A. G. Mitchell.
scene of gossiping ladies (they all wear chitons and himatia and hair-gillets) is shown on a black-figure lekythos in Thebes (Figure 9.12), where the water streams half in the vase and half outside. This typical scene of situation comedy could almost be transposed to the theater. These two vases are the only ones I am aware of, among the numerous representations of ordinary women filling their hydriai at fountain houses or at fountains, in which women have let their hydria overfill or misplaced it.

Did not men gossip at the Agora or elsewhere in Athens? Kartzow, a specialist in gossip studies, writes: “The stereotype is that gossip belongs to women… Ancient as well as modern sources do not claim that men never gossip but a gossiper is usually a woman.” In the seventh century BC already, Semonides of Amorgos wrote: “Always yapping, even if she sees no human being. A man cannot stop her by threatening, nor by losing his temper and knocking out her teeth with the stone, nor with honeyed words, not even if she is sitting with

Figure 9.12  Male humor: two gossiping women at the fountain place. One has forgotten her overflowing hydria. Lekythos, Attic BF, Thebes, Archaeological Museum, 6151; 510–490 BC. Photograph © A. G. Mitchell
Foxhall and Neher also consider roof spaces used by women in antiquity as gossiping arenas. The authors equate these roof spaces to the use of balconies in Renaissance Venice. Indeed, in his study of balconies as gossiping spaces in Renaissance Venice, Cowan writes: “Balconies lie in a liminal position. They are neither entirely part of a house, nor are they part of the street,” and further (p. 728): “Balconies were good places from which to have a gossip at first- or second-floor level without leaving home. Close proximity across a street could lead either to relaxed relationships or bitter enmities.”

So what was so scary about women gossiping? “Gossip is insinuated critique of power while hiding behind anonymity...gossip makes public what was supposed to be private.” When women gossip, they create social ties outside of what one could describe as male dominance. The fountain, a female-circumscribed area at the center of male public territory, was the ultimate daily gossip location. Du Boulay confirms this with regard to most traditional societies today: “the fountain alone provides women with a means of meeting and chatting with people whom they would not otherwise encounter.” This was what men feared, not gossip but what lurked behind it, female empowerment through female friendships.

If Greek vases seem at first glance (Figures 9.11 and 9.12) to simply ridicule women’s friendships, the extra twist that is displayed in these images reveals a deep-seated fear of women’s friendships, something we know quite well from Aristophanes’s Lysistrata and its female social revolutionaries.

_A Fanciful Epilogue_

It is doubtful that these eight comic vases (over-sexed women—Figures 9.2–9.5; drunks—Figure 9.7; lazy housekeeper—Figure 9.8; gossips—Figures 9.11, 9.12) would be interpreted differently depending on who bought them and for what purpose. Yet, their psychological impact might have been different whether a woman or a man viewed or chose these vases. One could attempt to reconstruct different viewers’ scenarios and buying patterns, especially gendered ones. “The distinction here is between two different ways of thinking about visual images. The first takes images as reflections of accepted truths. From this perspective modern advertising images represent widely shared and accepted notions of the roles of men and women.
But we can instead or simultaneously think of images as a means for the circulation of propositions that might be contested. Not everyone accepts the kind of ideals projected in contemporary advertising” (Joyce 2008, 16). It is also doubtful that whoever bought these vases “misunderstood” their intended meaning, but one can imagine too that they may have bought a number of pots containing oil or wine and not really paid attention to their representations.

Three reminders: First, anyone could buy these inexpensive pots at the market. Second, based on representations of vases in use on vases themselves, certain shapes were produced for a specific function. If we look at our four comic types, Figure 9.2 is a decorated wine-drinking cup probably intended for banquets or home. Figure 9.7, a skyphos, was also a wine-drinking vessel. Figures 9.3–9.5, and 9.8 were pelikai, used for the storage of liquids (wine, water) and solids such as grain. Figure 9.11, a hydria, was a water jar identified by its three handles, two for carrying and one for pouring. The final shape in Figure 9.12 is a lekythos, a small oil container for personal use. We also know that certain shapes of vases or pottery objects were intended for women, such as certain perfume flasks, jewel boxes, or epinetra but none of our comic vases apply. Third, we know from the vases themselves that women bought and sold objects at the marketplace.

Female Viewers

The porne. She probably would not have laughed at the comic sexual fantasies of respectable women as her daily life amounted to soulless sex from morning to night in crowded brothels. She may or may not have laughed at the drinking on the sly scenes. The lazy woman or sleeping guardian would have raised a smile as it was so far from her daily life and a comic archetype. But the chatty women at the fountain place would not have been funny: would she not feel envy at the idea that these women had the freedom to meet, socialize, and chat at the fountain place?

The hetaira. She would probably have laughed (laughter of superiority) at these poor wives fantasizing about sex, because she was probably the reason their husbands were not so preoccupied in satisfying their legitimate needs. She would have felt superior and free even though she was of a far lower social status. Similarly for the “drinking on the sly” scene, a hetaira could drink her heart’s content. The
lazy worker is a consensual image that might have made her laugh at the archetype of the sleeping guardian. The final image of “respectable wives” gossiping would not have raised a smile but rather made her wonder whether she was the talk of the town, as she was quite probably hated by most Athenian wives. She would never have been part of a social network involving the “respectable wives” chatting at the fountain.

The servant. She probably would have laughed out loud at the idea of her uppity mistress being sexually frustrated; she may have thought something along the lines of “she’s no better than me.” The same attitude may have prevailed with the wine-drinking scene and the lousy housekeeper as servants carried out most of the domestic work. The final image might really have made her laugh as it would have reminded her of her daily bouts of gossip with her fellow servants at the fountain house. Surely one of the conversation topics must have concerned their mistresses.

The respectable maiden. The sexual fantasies would probably have been somewhat subversive or possibly raised a guilty smile, depending on how far she had been sheltered from the outside world. It is also unlikely she would have laughed at an image of a drunken mother-figure. The lazy house worker is a comic archetype but she might have thought “if men had half my mother’s workload, they’d probably take a nap too.” She would probably be amused and certainly not threatened by the gossiping wife images.

The respectable wife. She was the only self-reflexive case among our potential viewers. More than the others, her view would really depend on her good or lack of sense of humor. The fantasies could raise a smile of recognition, or she may have pestered about men’s fantasies, thinking “sex is the last thing on my mind when I’m making bread or feeding the chicken.” The drinking-on-the-sly image might have raised a guilty smile she might have found it demeaning. Or she might also have known a female neighbor drinking on the sly and this visual parallel might have amused her. The same notions are prevalent for the “lazy housewife.” The last image of gossiping women might have amused her, but just like the respectable maiden, she would not be threatened by her own female friendships.

The older “respectable woman.” As she would have been less likely to be molested by men, she would have been freer of her movements within the city space. The comic erotic fantasies might have raised a smile thinking back to her youth and the other three types of images might
or not have made her laugh depending on her own sense of humor, especially the consensual comic archetypes.

**Male Viewers (with the Exception of Married Athenian Men Who Are the Subject of This Article)**

*The male servant.* The respectable woman’s sexual fantasies might have made him laugh: he might have fantasized about his mistress, possibly thinking that she was not so “respectable” after all. The woman drinking on the sly would probably have made him laugh as well, as he might have thought “if they only knew how much I drink on the sly!” (the Paphlagonian servant in Aristophanes’s *Knights* would have probably concurred). The lazy housewife would have made him laugh as a comic archetype, but he would definitely laugh at the last image of the gossipping wives as he would probably feel as threatened by these images as other men, thinking here of female servants.

*The young unmarried man.* The respectable wives’ sexual fantasies might have made him laugh as much as titillate him, despite (or maybe because of) the danger of getting caught in the act by a jealous husband. The drinking-on-the-sly scene might have made him laugh, but he might have conflated the image of his own mother with the visual image and found it disrespectful. As an archetype, the sleeping guardian would have made him laugh, as he might have imagined himself sleeping on duty during his military service. The final image of gossipping ladies would have made him laugh as he would have been as paranoid about it as most Athenian married men.

**Metics**

Whether they were rich or poor, metics were of a lower status than citizens who were born so. Metic women were probably of even lower status. After Pericles’s citizenship law, things for metics went from bad to worse. Before then, metics might have tried to emulate citizens in the hope of become citizens one day. But there was no point doing so after 451 BC. The reactions of metics would probably be aligned on that of Athenian husbands and metic women on that of servants.

In view of the erudite works on spectatorship in ancient Greece, this is a rather coarse and unscientific epilogue, but it enables one to think
“out of the box” about numerous ancient voices muffled by the past and endless viewing possibilities. For one interpretation of each comic image based on the visual evidence, there were probably countless conflicting views of passersby based on their gender, age, status, and ethnic background.

Notes


1. See the woman painting a volute krater in a workshop. Red-figure Hydria fr., Vicenza, Banca Intesa, c.278 (B.A. 206564). **ARI²** 571.73, 1659, **Add** 128, **Add²** 261, **Para** 390. From Ruvo. Attributed to the Leningrad Painter. On the various interpretations of the scene, see Papadopoulos 2003, 198–199.


4. Spencer-Wood 2007, 284. The function of the various areas of the house changed according to the specific activities carried out in them at different times of the day (Lin Foxhall 2007).

5. Lawful married wives in contrast to concubines (indistinguishable from the former in the visual evidence).


8. On snooty upper-class women who look down on working men, see Mitchell 2009, 56–57, 69–70.


15. These servants are identifiable as Thracian from their tattooed arms. See Herodotus 5.6 and Zimmermann 1980.
16. Lévy (1976, 105) writes that highflying courtesans, such as the expensive Lais, must be distinguished from the anonymous pornai that populate banquets (Ar. Ach. 1091) and work at the City gates (Ar. Knights 1400, 1403), inside the Kerameikos (Schol Ar. Knights 772), or at Piraeus.
21. For a different view of Pericles’s funerary oration, see Tyrrell 1999.
22. See also the Philogelos (a second-century Book of jokes) which includes a number of misogynistic jokes with sexual undertones (e.g., 244A).
23. On issues of masculinity, see Rosen 2003.
29. Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi, 20065 (BA 202175), ARV² 238.5, Add² 201, Para 349. From Sicily, Gela; Myson; 510–470 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell. See also an attic red-figure amphora, Paris, Musée du Petit Palais, 307 (BA 202706), ARV² 279.2 Add 103, Add² 208. From Italy, Capua; Flying-Angel Painter; 500–490 BC.
30. See Freud (1905) on the “psychological” reasons for laughing. The viewer is held simultaneously by two opposite visual meanings and the unexpected meaning is suddenly chosen against the more common one.
34. Aristophanes, Assembly of Women 14–15. See also Lysistrata 195–197.
35. See Noel 1999.
38. Lys. 1.23.
41. See Faraone 2012 for recent work on butchers and sacrifice in ancient Greece. But all butchery images were not sacrifice related: see Ekroth 2007, 272.
42. On sleeping figures, see McNally 1985.
43. Blundell 1995, 137.
44. See also Davidson 2011, 598. On the rejection of the straightforward equation of women with the home on theoretical grounds, see, for example, Helly, Reverby 1992 and Brumfiel 2008. On women and agricultural labor, see Scheidel 1995, 1996. For wide-ranging economic female activities, see Brock 1994. For similar issues in contemporary society, see Veauvy 2004.
45. Davidson 2011, 597.
48. See Bourdieu 1974, 221–222.
50. See Saul 1999, 33 on the division of labor.
52. Odebode, Godwin 2012, 187, 190. See also Thompson 2011.
53. Nevett 2011. Llewellyn-Jones (2007) notes that even when men were present in significant numbers, women might have worn a veil, but this is not substantiated by the visual evidence.
55. On the women’s names, see Rotroff 2006, 7.
60. See the discussion in Mitchell 2009, fn.133 on the scenes involving Polyxene at the fountain.
61. Kartzow 2009, 44.
62. On gossip studies, see Merry 1984 and a recent overview by Foster 2004.
63. See also Hunter 1990 on gossiping in classical Athens.
64. Fragmenta 7, 12–20.
68. Kartzow 2009, 47.
70. See also Taylor’s study on social networks and female friendships (2011).
71. On the archaeology of consumption and buying patterns, see Mullins 2011 and Crook 2000. For the Athenian agora, see Thompson 1993.
72. On the issue of the final user, see Lewis 2002, 8–9, 11.
73. For example, Stansburg-O’Donnell 2006 and Hedreen 2007.
Bibliography


CHAPTER TEN
Hegemony and Humor: Class and Hegemonic Masculinities in Three Premodern Chinese Humorous Texts

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Scholars studying humor have been debating over whether humor is rebellious toward the social order or is reprimanding those who do not or cannot conform. Some researchers argue for the resisting potential of humor. For example, Joseph Boskin argues that because of its easy transmission the impact of rebellious humor is tremendous. He speculates that humor which challenged the social, racial, and political conditions in the United States exerted its effect during political repression, ethnic and gender conflicts, and collective worries over social and economic crises. In her study on a construction site in Britain, Jacqueline Watts finds that junior men and women used humor as resistance against the more powerful men. Humor between women served as a shelter for them in such a patriarchal environment. Furthermore, comedy that values women’s experience can act as strong criticisms toward stereotypes and objectification of women.

However, situations that people used humor to reinforce gender and class boundaries are well documented. Despite the positive force that humor produces, Watts indicates that men felt threatened by the increasing number of women in the industry and used humor to exclude them on a professional level—they laughed at women’s appearances, creating a hostile work environment for the women. Friðriksdóttir (chapter eleven) reveals that humor in Old Norse–Icelandic saga literature can reproduce
dominant ideologies and gender norms, such as the ideal image of manliness. Alecia Simmonds points out that working class was discursively constructed as disorderly in the eyes of the middle- and upper-class normative perspective in the nineteenth-century Australian colonial context and was thus often the target of ridicule. Ferm (chapter eight) documents that the privileged and the under-privileged in Medieval Europe made fun of each other to strengthen what they believed to be acceptable behaviors. Hans Speier suggests that even jokes mocking the powerful are not necessarily rebellious because they do not stop people from obeying the social order. Rather, these jokes just give those who dare not rebel a way to convince themselves that they still have conscience. Therefore, although the less powerful can mock the dominant with humor and laughter, the social order is not shaken simply by doing so.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the humorous texts from different periods of imperial China serve to distinguish the literary class from the working class and maintain their hegemonic position through affirming the hegemonic masculinities set out by the elite literati men. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally applauded configuration of masculine gender practice that sustains the supremacy of particular groups of men, the legitimacy of male dominance, and the subordination of women. Men who do not embody it also acknowledge its superiority and order themselves in the hierarchy as they still enjoy the patriarchal dividend that grants them privilege over women. Nevertheless, men with subordinated masculinities are oppressed in the forms of violence, discrimination, and/or other symbolic policing as their masculinities are associated with femininity.

I adopt contemporary critical theories to read the humorous texts to reveal the socially and culturally situated value about men and masculinities. I particularly focus on the intersection of gender and class in the anecdotes in creating the ideal and hegemonic masculinity in premodern China. As Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft put it, “[t]raditional Chinese literature, both high and low, reflects male fantasies, male fears, and a male view of society and culture.” Nevertheless, it does not represent men equally. Since the literati class dominated traditional Chinese literature and culture, it carries the hegemony of their taste and perception. Humorous texts are no exception.

**Chinese Hegemonic Masculinity**

Chinese masculinity is organized into two main qualities, *wen* and *wu*. *Wen* refers to the literary quality which is regarded superior to *wu*, the
martial quality, although the possession of both is most desirable.\textsuperscript{12} Wen is not associated with a particular social class. Rather it is a kind of personal quality: “Wen is generally understood to refer to those genteel, refined qualities that were associated with literary and artistic pursuits of the classical scholars, and can thereby be partly analyzed as a leisure-class masculine model.”\textsuperscript{13} In the Confucian sense of sexual attraction, cultural talent and gentleness are desirable in contrast to muscular or sexual form of masculinity in traditional Chinese high culture.\textsuperscript{14} Neo-Confucian scholars, in particular, dignified this scholar-gentleman masculinity and downgraded the \textit{wu} quality as aggressive, barbaric, and uncivilized.\textsuperscript{15}

This masculine hierarchy has its roots in the social organization of imperial China. Imperial China was a class society consisting of four ranks, in the order of the literati, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants. The literati include gentry or landowners who assumed official ranks in the imperial government and commoners who became scholar-officials through passing the imperial examinations. They dominated the political and cultural spheres. While the social convention and gender division of labor kept women at home with children and the elderly, men socialized with other men exclusively to build emotional bonds and to develop physical and intellectual talents.\textsuperscript{16} Educated elites organized themselves socially as “tent-friends” serving under a patron in a hierarchy, which exerted social control over the men involved in competition for fame and prestige.\textsuperscript{17}

**Humor, Joke, and Class in Confucianism**

Since Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (140–87 BC) adopted Confucianism as the only legitimate principle, it became a hegemony throughout the imperial period. The literati considered it the most important, if not the only, organizing principle of social life and felt responsible to spread it. Hence, the traditional literature, including jokes, written or chosen by the literati, reflect Confucian values.

Confucianism understands emotion as human nature but one has to control how it is expressed. A learned person should be solemn in public but can be gentle and relaxed at leisure.\textsuperscript{18} The essential principle is not to subvert the social order, especially the social hierarchy. Under this principle, jests were considered lower than serious literature since the Han dynasty.\textsuperscript{19} Even jokes can be divided into high and low. Those that amuse the commoners were seen as shallow and vulgar.\textsuperscript{20} High jokes, or humor, should avoid being explicit and should engage the listener or
reader thinking or it should link with certain established knowledge. 
Humor can include sexual content but the juicy details should be left 
unsaid because that would be hurtful and would threaten the estab-
lished morality. Neoclassical scholars have repeatedly emphasized 
the importance of humor to be used for moral education. Scholars, like 
Sima Qian (145–86 BC), Liu Xie (465–522 CE), Zhao Nanxing 
(1550–1627 CE), and Guo Zizhang (1542–1618 CE), suggested that 
humor should admonish rulers to the virtues or instruct people to be 
moral and good.

I will include three texts in the analysis, namely Xiaolin (The Forest of Laughter), Shishuo xinyu (A New Account of Tales of the World), and Xiaolin guangji (A Wide Record of Forest of Jokes). Xiaolin is a joke book 
targeted at the popular taste written by a famous calligrapher and scholar 
Handan Chun (132–225 CE). It is considered as the first collection of 
jokes in the history of Chinese literature (Baccini 2011) but unfortu-
nately most of the entries have been lost and only 29 of them exist to the 
present time. Shishuo xinyu was compiled by Liu Yiqing (403–444 CE), 
who was the prince of the southern Liu Song (420–479 CE) dynasty. It 
is a collection of anecdotes and quotations by historical figures from the 
third and fourth centuries. Rather than being a joke book, it has long 
been considered a book for the educated elite to polish their art of con-
versation because it contains clever, witty yet elegant remarks that amuse 
the reader. Xiaolin guangji comprises jokes from Ming and Qing dynas-
ties (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) by Youxi zhu ren (The Master 
of Game). Its characters are grass-root or working-class people violating 
ethics, norms, or common sense. It contains sex jokes, discriminatory 
remarks on disabled people, and jokes based on regional prejudice.

Although all of them were written or compiled by the literati, only 
Shishuo xinyu fits the Confucian criteria for humor among the three 
texts chosen. It is because the characters in the text show the wit in 
times of challenges and crises. Also, readers should have the knowledge 
of the historical figures and events to be able to laugh. It thus has been 
highly acclaimed among the literati readers.

Xiaolin guangji is considered of low status because it not only targets 
at commoners but it also contains a lot of sexual jokes that explicitly 
describes sex organs and deviant sexual activities. It implies the literati’s 
view that commoners are morally lower. No matter it is wen or wu, 
containment and control of desire is the guiding principle in literature 
and martial arts. Excessive sexuality is thought to be dangerous to the 
morality as well as the physical health in Confucian and Taoist notions 
respectively. Sexuality should be contained in order not to affect other
aspects of social life, particularly not to devastate the hierarchies of power.28 Hence, men are constructed as moral beings in Confucianism, not in terms of their bodily existence.29

Although Xiaolin does not have any sexual jokes, the fact that it targets at commoners and hence contains more elaborate description of historical figures makes it lower than Shishuo xinyu. Yet because it laughs at “foolish” people as they go astray from the Confucian norms, the literati gives it a higher status than Xiaolin guangji.

I argue that the three humorous texts chosen reflect the hegemonic Confucian masculinities as they were written or compiled by the literati, who were in support of Confucian social order. The inclusion of masculinities deviant from the Confucian norms did not carry any subversive goals; rather, it reiterates and reproduces the cultural hegemony of Confucian masculinities and the superiority of the literati. In the following sections, I will illustrate my argument with anecdotes from the three texts. I will also show what hegemonic masculinities the three texts bring up.

### Perpetuating the Family Line as Masculine Mission

In the Confucian tradition, a man has to refine himself by cultivating intellectual and moral qualities before he can carry out the external endeavors. According to Daxue (The Great Learning),30 a man’s ultimate mission is to demonstrate his virtue throughout the world.31 To achieve that, he has to equip himself with the great learning through the eight steps: investigating things, extending knowledge, being sincere, rectifying the heart, cultivating oneself, forming a family and keeping it in order, governing the nation, and bringing peace to the world.32 In order words, he should first achieve personal excellence that legitimates his authority in the family and the state.33 Among these personal missions, establishing a family through marriage is an important intermediary step between the private and the public domains. A man without a family means failure in his masculine mission. Some anecdote in Xiaolin ridicules these men:

> In Han times there was an old man who did not have sons. He was rich but stingy by nature and was [dressed in] shabby clothes and [ate] coarse food; he woke at dawn and rested at night; he took care of his property and amassed wealth insatiably, but he did not dare to use it.
Once someone begged from him, and he could not help himself but go inside, take ten coins and [then] from the room to the exit, every step constantly decreased [them]. When he arrived outside, the sum was already half of its original. He closed his eyes, as he gave them to the beggar. After a short while, he repeatedly exhorted: “I have ruined my family in order to support you. Be careful to not reveal to others, or they will imitate you and come to me as well!”

The old man died soon after. His field and house were not looked after, and his goods and belongings filled up the state treasury.³⁴

The anecdote creates a ridiculous aura by describing the way the old man gives a small sum of money to the beggar as if he is making a big donation. The ending, in which the state seizes the property he has earned through hard work and through being harsh to himself and others, creates further ridicule because his stinginess does not benefit him or his sons, or accomplish anything significant. With the emphasis that the old man has no sons, the story not only mocks stingy rich men, but more importantly presents the belief that the accumulation of property and wealth is meaningless if a man has no son to succeed it.

Xiaolin guangji also ridicules men without sons by framing them as shameful:

“Old Widower”
Someone asked an old widower in Suzhou, “Have you got a son?” He replied, “When you mention my son, I feel heartbroken. My wife’s grand-father tried to find a wife for my wife’s father. When they were about to get married, a jerk appeared and tricked them to ruin the whole thing. So my wife’s father had not been able to marry my wife’s mother who had not brought up my wife. Now my son’s whereabouts is still unknown.”

“Enter the Temple”
There was a man who had no wife. Whenever he masturbated, he saved his semen in a jar. After some time the jar was full. When he took it out to empty it, he cried to the jar, “My son! I put you in the jar [Jar sounds similarly to temple] just because you don’t have a mother!”

In both anecdotes, the sonless men feel so shameful that they have to portray their situations as “normal” in order to comfort themselves. In “Old Widower,” rather than giving a direct answer to explain why
he has not got a son, the old man tries to appear normal by creating a story which involves his nonexistent wife and son; whereas in “Enter the Temple,” the man fantasizes about having a dead son that he can put in the temple. Both anecdotes laugh at men who do not have sons by depicting them as fantasizing about being “normal” in order to cover up their shame. The ridicule is a reflection and reinforcement of the belief that paternity is an important masculine mission.

Fathers as the Cultural Parent and Educator

The phrase “to feed without teaching is the father’s fault” from San zi jing (or Three-character Classic) captures the significance of education in Chinese fatherhood. In the context where this saying emerged, education was considered an important means of producing an appropriate successor for the family lineage so as to guarantee its prosperity and success.

One typical example was Ceng Guo-fan, a well-known Confucian scholar, official, and military general in China during the late Qing dynasty. He wrote a lot of personal letters to his sons encouraging them to read, even when he was preoccupied by his official duties. Kwang-ching Liu suggests that Ceng wished to see his family attain political and educational success. Thus, by using his authority as the patriarch of the family and as one who had achieved a high political status, he encouraged his brothers and sons to prepare properly for the civil service examinations. Another father, Yan Zhitui, author of Yanshi jiaxun (Family Instructions for the Yan Clan), repeatedly told his sons the functional goal of learning: to become an official, and subsequently earn wealth and fame.

Under Confucianism, descendants are considered carriers of a family’s fame. The belief that a man succeeds his father’s qualities was reflected in the practice of evaluating a particular son through a comparison with his father. Some anecdotes of Shishuo xinyu depict this practice, which was particularly prominent among the literati:

“Grading Excellence, Anecdote 5”
Ssu-ma Chao [Sima Zhao] once asked Wu Kai [Wu Gai], “How would you compare Ch’en T’ai [Chen Tai] with his father, Ch’en Ch’ün [Chen Qun]?”

Kai replied, “In regard to being able to make teaching and influencing everyone in the realm his own responsibility with
uninhibited urbanity and broad cheerfulness, T’ai is not the equal of his father. But when it comes to establishing his merit and getting things done with enlightened discipline and utmost simplicity, he surpasses his father.”

Chen Qun served as an official under Cao Pi, who later overthrew the emperor of the Eastern Han dynasty and crowned himself the emperor of Wei. Chen Qun was one of the officials who supported Cao Pi to do so. Yet, after Cao Pi became emperor, Chen Qun looked sad. According to the Confucian order, it is immoral to overthrow, or help others to overthrow, the emperor out of self-interest or ambition. So when Cao Pi asked why he was sad, he referred to the Confucian order and explained that he had served in the Eastern Han dynasty and so felt sad for the previous dynasty’s failure. He even compared himself to Kong Fu, who was the ancestor of Confucius, and died for Emperor Song Shang Gong during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC). Chen Qun did so because he wanted to build his reputation on loyalty, a virtue highly valued in the Confucian order. However, his son, Chen Tai, did not bother with the Confucian order and was actively involved in helping and advising Sima Zhao, who overthrew the Wei dynasty and became the emperor of Jin. Because Chen Qun wanted to act as a role model to loyal Confucian officials, Wu Gai says that Chen Qun was happy to bear the responsibility of teaching and influencing others. Yet because Chen Tai did not bother with the Confucian morality and just focused on gaining status through serving Sima Zhao, Wu Gai said that he is simply dedicated to building his own merit. In the anecdote, Wu Gai cleverly hides the moral judgments, but frames his comments on Chen Qun and Chen Tai in terms of what they are good at because offering any moral or political judgments could have implied sarcasm toward Emperor Sima Zhao, who violated the Confucian order in realizing his ambition to overthrow the previous emperor. By framing his comment in such a way, Gai matches the established expectation that one evaluates how much a son succeeds his father’s qualities.

Anecdotes in Xiaolin guangji also indicate this succession of qualities from the father to the son, but they induce laughter by involving sons’ unfilial acts:

“Expecting the grandson to take revenge”

An unfilial son often beat his father. The father loves the grandson more and more, keeping him in his arms. Someone asked him,
“Your son is so bad but you still love your grandson, why?” The father replied, “I just want to bring him up to revenge for me.”

The grandfather in this anecdote considers the succession of the father’s qualities to be something so natural that his grandson will spontaneously repeat what his son does (i.e., beating his father), thus revenging him. The anecdote reinforces the notion of the father as educator, and one who passes on his own qualities to the son; the reader needs to understand this notion in order to find the anecdote funny. In addition, the anecdote reinforces the Confucian order by pinpointing the bad consequences of mistreating one’s father.

As shown in the anecdotes above, the belief that a father passes his qualities onto his son was a hegemonic notion shared by both the literati and commoners during the imperial period. However, these humorous texts also highlight class divides: the literati fathers are depicted as passing on socially desirable qualities to their sons, whereas the commoner fathers are shown to be morally deviant. These differences also apply to the sons, who are expected to observe the patrilineal family order according to the Confucian ideal.

Father as the Respected Figure in the Family

According to the Confucian ideal of the kinship system, fathers enjoy a lot of power and control over their sons and daughters. This extends to the family’s property as well, for which they are the chief trustees. Fathers acquire their authority from acting as the head of the family and its financial manager; that is, the person who is in charge of the family’s moral and economic affairs. Fathers gain their respect and power from the ideology of filial piety, which requires descendants to respect and listen to senior members of the family. Hence, as a text aimed at spreading Confucian values and the superiority of the literati, Shishuo xinyu contains anecdotes that describe educated sons respecting their fathers and the familial order:

“Crudities and Slips of the Tongue Anecdote 5”

Hsieh Chü [Xie Ju] used to climb to the top of the room to fumigate rats. Since his son, Hsieh Lang [Xie Lang], had no way of knowing that his father did this kind of thing, when he heard someone say that there was “some idiot” who used to do this, he made sport of him. At the time he himself repeated the story
more than once. His uncle, Hsieh An [Xie An], realizing that Lang didn’t know it was his own father, waited until he was finished speaking, and then said to Lang, “People of the world have used this to cast aspersions on my middle brother; they even say that I used to do it with him!”

Hsieh Lang was mortified and flushed with embarrassment. For a whole month he closed his study door and did not go abroad. Hsieh An’s hypothetical citing of his own fault to awaken Lang is what might be called virtuous instruction.46

Xie An (320–385 AD) was a prominent official in the Eastern Jin dynasty. He had a reputation of being a role model for Confucian scholars. In the above anecdote, Xie wants to teach his nephew to obey the Confucian order. Instead of scolding him, he places himself in the joke, so as to indirectly tell his nephew that he was laughing at his own father. Moreover, this anecdote addresses how the son, Xie Lang, feels guilty about laughing at his father, and thus spontaneously punishes and improves himself because his actions disrupt the familial hierarchy, even though it was unintentional. This anecdote not only conveys the Confucian order, but also strengthens the superiority of the literati through showing and admiring Xie An’s wit and kindness, as well as Xie Lang’s obedience and self-improvement.

A well-educated son not only shows respect to his father, but also defends and protects his father’s authority and reputation—and thus the familial hierarchy—when needed. Because the father is the educator and passes on his qualities to his descendants, sons defending their fathers are standing up for the honor of the family, which they, as male heirs, represent. Shishuo xinyu has an anecdote addressing such incidence:

“The Square and the Proper Anecdote 1”

Ch’en Shih [Chen Shi] had made an appointment with a friend to travel, setting the time at midday. When it was past midday, and the friend had not arrived, Ch’en left without him. After he had left, the friend finally arrived. Ch’en’s son Chi [Ji], who at the time was in his seventh year, was playing outside the gate. The guest asked Chi, “Is your father at home?”

He replied, “He waited for you a long time, and since you didn’t come, he’s already left.” The friend, becoming angry, said, “He’s no man, to make an appointment with someone to travel, and then leave without him!”
Chi said, “If you made an appointment with my father for mid-day, and at midday you hadn’t shown up, that was a lack of trustworthiness. And if in the presence of the son you revile the father, that is a lack of courtesy.”

The friend, feeling ashamed, got down from his carriage and beckoned the boy, but Chi went in the gate without looking back.\(^{47}\)

In this anecdote, Chen Ji, who is only seven years old, demonstrates his wit when defending his father’s virtues. Through speculating on how his father’s friend has violated Confucian rules, Chen Ji is portrayed as smart and well versed in Confucian virtues. Although shouting at an older person is rude, Chen Ji is considered filial because he is protecting his father’s honor.

Another anecdote in Shishuo xinyu follows this tendency to communicate Confucian morality through a witty child humorously defending his father:

“Taunting and Teasing Anecdote 40”

Chang Chen [Zhang Zhen] was the grandfather of Chang P’ing [Zhang Ping]. One time he said to P’ing’s father, “I’m no match for you.”

Before P’ing’s father had quite understood the reason for the remark, Chang Chen went on, “You have a fine son.”

P’ing, who was only a few years of age at the time, pressing his hands together, said, “Grandpa, is it fair to use a son to poke fun at his father?”\(^{48}\)

Zhang Zhen teases his own son by implying that Zhang Ping, who is the grandson, is finer than his father. Zhang Ping cites the Confucian familial order to stop his grandfather from saying these things, which is something Zhang Zhen cannot reject.

On the contrary, in Xiaolin guangji, a commoner son is not sophisticated enough to observe the Confucian order despite believing in it, and this violation induces laughter:

“Splitting the firewood”

A father and his son came to split a piece of firewood. The father accidentally hurt his son’s finger with the axe. The son shouted at his father, “Old man! Are you blind?” The grandson saw that his grandfather was being scolded and thus felt vengeful. He said, “You son of a bitch! How can one scold his father?”
While the grandson intends to protect the familial order by pointing out his father’s fault, he paradoxically humiliates his father with swear words and unknowingly disrupts the filial order. In pointing out his father’s faults, he inadvertently contradicts the principle he is attempting to uphold. This humorous anecdote leads the reader to share the author’s view that commoners are both vulgar and stupid.

Comparing the anecdotes with similar themes from *Shishuo xinyu* and *Xiaolin guangji*, we can see that commoners are depicted as incapable of observing paternal authority and familial hierarchy, even though they are aware of the Confucian teachings; whereas the educated elites are morally sophisticated in the Confucian sense. Anecdotes in *Shishuo xinyu* are humorous because of the characters’ literary wit. On the contrary, commoners are laughed at in *Xiaolin guangji* and *Xiaolin* based on Confucian moral grounds, as well as their lack of social and literary ability. The literati justify their hegemonic status by reproducing the belief that their moral qualities are more sophisticated.

### “Failed” Masculinities among Commoners

Apart from constructing the literati’s hegemonic status, the stories of men who fail to achieve standards of Confucian masculinity in both *Xiaolin* and *Xiaolin guangji* alert readers and audience to the negative consequence of not fulfilling the masculine mission. One example comes from *Xiaolin*, in which the father does not do his job as educator:

When A’s parents were still alive, after having studied away from home for three years, A came back. His maternal uncle asked him what he had acquired from his studies, and [asked him] to write something to express his feelings for having been far from his father for so long.

The man then answered: “In my feelings at the northern bank of the Wei River, I surpass the Duke Kang of Qin.”

Subsequently, the father scolded him: “What good was it for that you studied!” He answered: “When I was young, I lost the instruction from my father, this is the reason why I studied without profit”.

A’s answer to his maternal uncle is an allusion to the story of the Duke Kang of Qin, who composed a poem at the shore of the Weiyang River to express his affection toward his maternal uncle. The above anecdote
is humorous because the maternal uncle asks his nephew to use what he has learned to express his affection toward his father, and the nephew mistakenly expresses affection to his maternal uncle instead. However, when his ignorance of literature induces his father to scold him, he answers his father back by complaining about his father’s failure to educate him. His reaction is amusing because, in pointing out his father’s fault and embarrassing him in front of another person, it shows that the son also lacks knowledge of the Confucian familial order.

As mentioned above, the father should be the most respected person in the family according to the Confucian order. However, this anecdote conveys the message that because the father does not fulfill his role as an educator, he does not deserve his son’s respect, and therefore cannot have a filial and knowledgeable successor. An anecdote in Xiaolín guāngjì depicts the paternal authority of a father unable to set a good example being challenged directly by his son:

“The father one time more”

A son liked to go to the brothel. His father scolded him, “You are such a useless creature! I saw you in the brothel nine out of ten times I was there.” The son said, “Then, you’ve been there one time more than I have and now you are scolding me?”

This joke is amusing because the son turns the tables on his father using the same accusation that he has made. It implies that if the father does not act as a good role model, his son will follow in his footsteps and, furthermore, will not respect him. This serves as a counter-example to suggest that paternal authority is based on fulfilling the Confucian moral standard and the duty of education. A similar anecdote, in which the father and the son go to the brothel together, communicates the message that a father who does not teach his son well does not deserve respect, or even the title “father”:

“The son visiting the brothel and the father serving”

There was a man who liked to go to prostitutes and made his father starving. The father told him, “Rather than employing others to serve you, why not bring me in, so I can eat and you can save the money? But we cannot reveal our relationship.” The son listened to him. The father served perfectly well in the brothel. The prostitute asked the man, “How did you find such a good server? He is incredible.” The son said, “Well, it is difficult to explain. His daughter-in-law has an affair with me and is provided
by me. So he is so considerate.” The other day the prostitute told the father what the son had said. The father replied, “His mother also has an affair with me. So I treat him like a son. That’s why I am considerate.”

Rather than taking care of his father, the son in this anecdote spends his money on seeking sexual pleasure. Instead of condemning and educating his son, the father connives at the wrongdoing by pretending to be his servant in order to fill his stomach. They cannot openly admit their father–son relationship because the son is unfilial whereas the father does not fulfill his educator duty. They have to explain their relationship in some indirect ways, which is amusing. That both of them use an immoral relationship (i.e., affairs) to describe their normal relationship further adds to the amusement.

According to Confucian principles, men who seek romantic and sexual satisfaction are sources of ridicule because they are regarded as having no control over their sexual desire. As discussed above, containment and control of desire is essential in both wen and wu masculinities because it can bring stability to the kinship structure. So, the anecdotes that mock men’s obsession with women reiterate the Confucian requirement to contain one’s desire.

Similar to the above anecdote, another entry in Xiaolin guangji laughs at men who do not demonstrate filial piety by providing for their elderly fathers, in particular those who are not economically independent or who cannot take care of themselves. In this case, the target of ridicule is a son who is only concerned about how long he can rely on his father economically:

“Living on the father’s provision”

A man got a son when he was twenty. His son continued to live on his provision and could not be independent. One day, a fortune-teller came and said, “The father can live up to eighty. The son can live to sixty-two.” The son cried sadly, “How can I pass the last two years!”

The above anecdotes demonstrate how masculinities deviant from Confucian hegemony are often targets of ridicule. We should note that mocking deviance from Confucian ideals only appears in Xiaolin and Xiaolin guangji, not in Shishuo xinyu. The literati dominated the cultural sphere in imperial China, and they assumed their hegemonic position by imposing their own moral standards (i.e., Confucian ideals) on commoners. They stereotyped and judged commoners by the moral
standard they had set up; conversely, they depicted themselves as both morally and intelligently superior, as shown in *Shishuo xinyu*. While the literati were admired for their wit and morality in maintaining the Confucian order, commoners are portrayed as lacking Confucian knowledge and self-restraint. It is implied that this is why they are incapable of exhibiting “proper” character and why they disrupt the social order; in turn, the humor generated from these portrayals reinforces the established order.

**Conclusion**

In imperial China, men dominated not just the private sphere, but also public spheres (i.e., the cultural and the political arenas). The homosocial organization of the educated elites excluded women and thus created a patriarchal gender order. As the majority of the population were illiterate, the literati could dominate the cultural and political realms. The philosophy they embraced, Confucianism, became cultural hegemony. Traditional Chinese literature, including humorous texts, reflects the desire and vision of this social class. *Wen* masculinity, which depicts the qualities of the literati, was deemed more sophisticated and superior to *wu* and other forms of masculinity. Confucian values regarding social and familial order were taken as the hegemonic standard of morality, whereas intelligence was defined in terms of the knowledge of Confucian classics, as well as a person’s literary ability. Therefore, there existed not only a patriarchal social order of men over women, but also a hierarchy of men and masculinities based on morality and intelligence.

In this context, these three humorous texts promote the values of the literati. Whether humor makes fun of authority or embarrasses those who violate the social order depends on its specific context. The construction of the joke (i.e., whether humor or ridicule is targeted at the deviant, the situation, or constraint that induces such deviance, or the powerful) determines its nature and purpose. Humor or ridicule in the three chosen texts is not rebellious, but reproduces hegemonic ideals. As Lisa Merrill suggests, humor that challenges the social order mocks the situation rather than the struggling characters. *Xiaolin* and *Xiaolin guangji* laugh at the commoner characters because of their stupidity or misconduct, whereas *Shishuo xinyu* associates the literati with knowledge, ability, and morality, and of being capable of wittily handling each situation. None of these three texts challenge the Confucian social order.
Moreover, jokes in *Xiaolin* and *Xiaolin guangji* that involve social taboos are themselves “social valves,” which release the repressive pressure of morality and social norms. Back to the reality, the hegemony of social norms is still in effect. The inclusion of deviant behaviors, thoughts, and sayings is a method of appealing to commoners, so that the underpinning values and messages of Confucianism are more widely perpetuated. In addition, laughter and ridicule are only made possible with the cultural hegemony that defines Confucian values as the norm. The laughter induced by humorous anecdotes in these three texts only serves to strengthen the established social order, rather than providing an opportunity to relax its control.

**Notes**

5. Simmonds 2009.
7. Ibid.
17. Ibid. 142.
21. Ibid. 67.
22. Ibid.
23. The English translation of *Xiaolin* is from Giulia Baccini’s dissertation, *The Forest of Laughs (Xiaolin): Mapping the Offspring of Self-aware Literature in Ancient China*. Baccini combined the anecdotes of Zhang Wen and Shen Heng in Lu Xun’s edition and thus there are only 28 anecdotes in that edition. For *Shishuo xinyu*, I adopted Richard Mather’s *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* for the English translation. Mather used Wade-Giles Romanization and I included the *pinyin* in square brackets in the quotations. For *Xiaolin guangji*, I
used the edition published by Zhongguo xiju chubanshe in 1999 as reference. I translated the quotations to English.

30. Daxue, often attributed to Confucius and his disciples, is a chapter from Liji (The Book of Rites). It describes the education for governing the state and the “conditions of just rule” (Höchsmann 2004, 49).

33. Ibid. 50.
34. Baccini 2011, 170.
35. Three-character Classic is a classic Chinese text created in the Song dynasty by Wang Yinglin. The arrangement of three characters in a phrase facilitates easy learning and recitation by children. The contents of this text include Confucian morality and Chinese history.

38. Ibid.
40. Mather 1976, 250.
42. Ibid.
47. Ibid. 146.
48. Ibid. 417.
50. Ibid.
55. Huang and Li 2001.

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Huang, Kewu and Xinyi Li. 2001. “Ming qing xiaohua zhong de shenti yu qingyu: Yi xiaolin guangji wei zhongxin zhi fenxi” (Joking About Sex and the Body in Late Imperial China: An Analysis Based on the Jest Book *Xiaolin Guangji*). *Hanxue yanjiu* (Chinese Studies) 19.2: 343–374.


Gender is one of the most fraught topics in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and medieval authors made productive use of laughter and humor, inviting the audience to laugh with, or at, their characters, based on how good or unsuccessful they are at fulfilling ideal male or female roles. Sagas and eddic poetry are noted for brave heroes who die with a sarcastic remark on their lips, and formidable women who coldly laugh as they demand that someone be killed. These characters are likely to reflect a society preoccupied by honor and the heroic ethic. In sagas inspired by romance, where women’s independence is the central theme, laughter becomes a weapon in the battle of the sexes, and instead of men laughing at other men, they join ranks to laugh at women. This article examines how the employment of laughter and humor, not only its comical but also its ludicrous and incongruous aspects, plays a fundamental role in the construction and representation of gender in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, and reinforces or interrogates existing models of masculinity and femininity.

### Heroes and Laughter

Traditional Old Norse-Icelandic heroes are depicted as preferring a heroic death in battle to surrendering to their enemies, certain that their deeds will be commemorated in stories about their bravery. These
awe-inspiring characters do not let slain kinsmen or sworn-brothers go unavenged either—the greatest dishonor possible according to the heroic code—and never show signs of fear or self-doubt. A notable topos in this tradition is the hero who laughs in his dying moments, gruesomely conceived, for example, in texts narrating the ancient Germanic legend of the Völsungs, Gjúkungs, and Burgundians. In eddic poetry, as Atli’s men cut out his heart, Högni laughs in the face of his captors: it is a chilling, defiant laughter of triumph. When presented with Högni’s heart on a plate, his brother Gunnarr, also a prisoner of Atli, comments approvingly that this heart did not tremble like that of a coward. Such heroes display an uncompromising attitude to life: a man’s worth is not measured in worldly riches or power, but in the reputation he leaves behind.

The hegemonic masculine ideal of men flaunting their courage at the moment of their death is crystallized in the Sagas of Icelanders (Íslendingasögur). These are a corpus of long prose texts (written mostly in the thirteenth century and into the fourteenth), telling the stories of people who emigrated from Norway to Iceland in the settlement period of the Viking Age and the decades immediately after. The sagas’ plots typically center on loyalty, deceit, love, jealousy, ambition, revenge, and the tragedies to which the heroic code of ethics leads. Although bravery is admired, heroes are often depicted as exceptional and at odds with the peaceful society governed by law and moderation that the people around them try to build, leading to their inevitable downfall. These sagas encapsulate a medieval discourse about the idea of unconditional courage, and the cost of the self-perpetuating revenge process that a heroic culture demands, leading to violence and death.

The so-called “laconic understatement” has long been regarded as the essence of saga style, known for its terseness, apparent objectivity, and reluctance overtly to verbalize people’s emotional reactions to the events that befall them. This type of comment, uttered at a crucial moment, efficiently communicates its speaker’s mettle: upon being stabbed through with a spear, a character in The Saga of Grettir Ásmundarson observes in a detached manner, “these wide spears are in fashion now,” before falling down dead. These heroes offer no tender farewells to loved ones, or wrathful curses upon the slayer: instead, they embrace death with a chilling laugh or joke.

On the other side of the coin, humor also functions as a tool with which to belittle an antagonist. Njáls saga’s Kolskeggr, upon chopping off the leg of his opponent, comments: “there’s no need to look [at the stump] – it is just as you see, the leg is gone;” his opponent then falls down
dead. Kolskeggr is reminiscent of a modern-day action hero, cracking jokes as he blows someone to pieces with his gun: the remark derides the victim and underlines his lack of success at fighting. Simultaneously, it amplifies the speaker’s masculinity, founded upon battle prowess, and verbal, as well as physical, aggression. In the society depicted in the sagas, words are as effective as actions, as the laws surrounding accusations of ergi—a demeaning term denoting lack of manliness, cowardliness, and possibly homosexual behavior—show, and the smallest joke could provoke bloody revenge (for further discussion about unmanliness in this volume, see chapter twelve). Thus, one man’s masculinity is augmented at the cost of another’s, and verbal insults are no less powerful than physical violence in the performance of ideal Norse masculinity.

The laughing, self-assured hero has a female counterpart. Many women in sagas advocate peace, but those who have come to form the lasting image of Norse heroines are the “inciters”: vengeful women who spur their male kin on to physical violence. A striking manifestation of this figure is the formidable heroine who shockingly laughs or smiles upon hearing about a man’s death. The classic example is the heroine Brynhildr’s laugh upon hearing that Sigurðr, her former betrothed, has been killed, an act carried out by her husband Gunnarr and his brothers after her incitement speech, also accompanied by laughter. Women are sometimes depicted as compelling their husband or male relative, often depicted as reluctant, to do the deed, usually by evoking accusations of lack of masculinity. These women use the likely socially sanctioned speech act hvöt “whetting speech” to get the wheels of revenge in motion, despite the strong possibility that this will in turn lead to even more bloodshed on their own side. The inciting woman’s hollow laughter is not intended to signify that they find their predicament amusing; she is as just as invested as the men in their family’s honor and the laughter is performative, conveying that revenge has been achieved, or will be in due course.

Although these images of heroic (and unheroic) men, and whetting women, are distant in time and highly literary, they encapsulate at least part of contemporary attitudes, ethics, and modes of expression. These ideas and characters are also found in sagas such as Íslendinga saga by Sturla Þórðarson, which belongs to the contemporary sagas (samtíðarsögur); these are a subgroup of sagas generally considered closer to “reality” than the Sagas of Icelanders, as far as reality can be reconstructed from written sources. They incorporate a great deal of skaldic verses attributed to named poets: composing and performing verses was an effective way to opine publicly on events, since the stylistic features of poetry render it
more likely to be committed to memory and circulate between regions and groups. Some verses are in a humorous tone and can be harmless on the surface, but when unpacked show that masculinity is at stake in every social interaction and always under scrutiny.

Íslendinga saga gives an insight into another facet of the construction of hegemonic masculinity through the verses composed in response to the dramatic event when two young men, Þórðr and Snorri, on a mission to avenge their father, do violence unto women, children, and noncombatant men. The brothers consider a local magnate, Sturla Sighvatsson, partly responsible for their father’s death, since Sturla was politically aligned with his murderers, and they attack him in retaliation for what they consider his culpability in their father’s death. In the small hours of January 14, 1229, the two teenaged brothers and a gang of retainers storm into Sturla’s estate, thrashing their weapons into the beds of the sleeping members of the household. Þórðr and Snorri quickly discover that their intended victim, Sturla, and his men, are not at home, but only women and children, servants, and a priest. They kill two farmhands and an elderly servant woman named Þorbjörg Ysja, threaten the women verbally, and ransack the estate, stealing whatever valuables they can get their hands on. The raid is predominantly described in a matter-of-fact tone; the comment that “the sounds of women and wounded men were piteous to hear” is the only intrusion in the narrative’s otherwise plain style. The next chapter conventionally refers to public opinion in order to convey indirectly the author’s ethical evaluation of the raid: “it was said that never had any household been thus overturned,” leaving splendid quarters in a state of “disarray and ravage,” flowing with blood.

Supporters of the brothers’ political ally, Snorri Sturluson, one of the most powerful men in Iceland at the time, voiced their opinion that the attack itself had been justified, but nevertheless, even they conceded that mortally wounding an old servant woman was despicable, and the brothers were roundly condemned on that score. Some of their contemporaries’ opinions were put into skaldic verse, a genre of poetry traditionally used to praise success in battle. Many of these stanzas ironically employ imagery and diction conventional in skaldic poetry about a warrior’s heroism, but the lofty terms used to describe the ignoble slaying of Þorbjörg Ysja, in a verse by Ormr Jónsson, is surely intended as sarcastic mockery:

Great was the commotion, when men offered [Þorbjörg] Ysja loss of life. Warriors reddened the wound-ice [= sword] with blood before
Þorbjörg [Ysja] died. The feeder of the giantess’ horse [= warrior] avenged his father’s death with a sword. Dóðr was dangerous to the lives of men in the harsh sword-play [= battle].

The elder brother, Dóðr, is called “the feeder of wolves”: wolves, the giantess’ steed in Old Norse mythology, were among the beasts of battle, eating the corpses of those slain in combat. His sword is a “wound-ice,” its cold steel like an icicle, reddened from penetrating the woman’s body. The raid is referred to as the “harsh sword-play,” that is, battle, ironic considering the uneven position between the attackers and their vulnerable victims. The ironic use of heroic lexis in the poem and the mocking praise of Dóðr contrasts heavily with the unheroic killing of an old woman, suggesting the poet’s contempt for Dóðr’s cowardice. The rhetoric in this poem falls directly in line with the wider use of laughter and humor in Old Norse-Icelandic discourse; it would certainly have been recognized as such and enjoyed by its intended audience, those who participated in the power struggles and fighting of the time.

Although some efforts were made to settle the feud peacefully, the attack on Sauðafell was mercilessly avenged three years later. Sturla and his men ambush the brothers, who bravely defend themselves despite their disadvantage in numbers and years; Dóðr then willingly meets his death, kneeling before Sturla’s axe, while Snorri looks on calmly. The saga’s account of the brothers’ heroism in their final hour—regardless of their earlier acts—is reminiscent of the scenes of Högni laughing in the face of death, and perhaps even more striking considering its narrative realism: these brothers have no intention of being remembered as cowards with trembling hearts. Snorri loses his leg, but not his composure: he smiles in the face of his attackers before he, too, is decapitated, taking on characteristics of laughing Norse heroes. The masterful delineation of the brothers rests not only on the pathos produced by their violence and subsequent execution, but also on the employment of smiling, and irony, indispensable parts of Old Norse-Icelandic literary topoi.

Another verse that responded to the attack on Sauðafell, and would have been intended for the same audiences as the verses by Ormr Jónsson and others, mentioned previously, shows that humor can work in more ambiguous ways, throwing doubts on those who follow the heroic code, and, by extension, the society that celebrates it. The poet Guðmundr Oddsson composed an eyewitness account of the raid, humorously reflecting on his behavior at the scene, characterized not
by heroism, but by terror and lack of courage. Each of the two halves of the poem describes the attack in conventional skaldic language, relating among other things that “the warriors reddened their weapons in blood,” but in the last line of each half, Guðmundr admits to getting out of harm’s way.23 The usual boasting of heroic deeds is hinted at, but instead, each half-stanza ends with a punchline: the poet’s confession that he was “terrified so that [he] was overcome,” and, up in the building’s rafters, Guðmundr “thrust,” not a weapon into an adversary, but, less of a feat, his “head onto a solid plank.”24

Not only does the poem, with its self-deprecating humor, subvert genre conventions and thus audience expectations, but it functions externally as a moment of comic relief in the saga after the harrowing account of the raid. Following the violence committed onto the defenseless householders, so movingly described, the saga author gives the audience a chance to suspend their horror and laugh at the image of the poet clinging to a plank in the rafters. Mocking himself with ironic use of conventional skaldic idiom and ritual male boasting, the poet could be seen to criticize the mores of his time in an understated manner: the critique is couched in humorous language, and crucially, Guðmundr makes himself the butt of the joke, thus preventing any trouble in relation to accusations of unmanliness. He subtly rejects the aggression and violence that the heroic model of masculinity demands, and suggests that when faced with the reality of blood feud, resolute heroism—the ideal masculine role—was unrealistic, unattainable, and unattractive to many. As Mario Liong (chapter ten) notes, hegemonic forms of masculinity not only subordinate women, but also those men who possess other, “lesser” versions of masculinity; a social order that elevates heroic masculinity is at stake in all of the verses, but Guðmundr the poet arguably rejects it.

The antiviolence ideological position in The Saga of the Sworn Brothers is even stronger, not only showing the heroic model as unappealing, but occasionally ridiculing it. The saga’s two protagonists, the sworn-brothers Þorgeirr and Þormóðr, wish to emulate ancient heroes of Norse legend, but they grow up in an agrarian community where most people consider heroic masculine behavior a thing of the past.25 The discrepancy between the sworn-brothers’ ideas about how to behave and their neighbors’ predominantly peaceful farming way of life is vividly depicted in the saga’s many humorous episodes. Sometimes they appear as foolish oafs, or malleable and immature youths who can nevertheless be steered toward good deeds, but in other instances, they romp around the local area, terrorizing the locals with their hyper-masculine behavior, often wreaking havoc.26 Þorgeirr is the more
extreme of the two sworn-brothers, and his perception of manliness is so rigid, that, unlike the womanizing Þormóðr, he avoids female company altogether, since in his view, “it would be an affront to his might to stoop to women.”27 Even when in danger, Þorgeirr refuses to call for help, but this can take ludicrous forms. When he nearly falls to his death over a steep cliff, Þormóðr must rescue him, and once back on firm ground, he makes a deadpan joke in the heroic style, downplaying the peril he was in; somehow the visual image of Þorgeirr dangling off a cliff, clutching onto a branch of angelica, does not match up to the larger-than-life heroes of the legendary past.28 Þorgeirr is often portrayed as overbearing and unrighteous, using his physical abilities for bad deeds. When he travels to Denmark after various ill-justified skirmishes with and murders of farmers, farmhands, and teenagers in Iceland, he is—no doubt sarcastically—said to have received such great honor there that the Danes “venerated him almost like a king, as commemorated in Þormóðr’s verse,” hardly an unbiased source.29 It is only after the sworn-brothers (separately) travel to Norway and join King (and later Saint) Óláfr Haraldsson’s retinue that their model of masculine behavior becomes appropriate, and the scenes where Þorgeirr and Þormóðr perform feats where they are up against truly threatening opponents that the narrative tone changes from satirizing to admiring. In Fóstbæðra saga, heroic ideals, at least when adhered to blindly and in the wrong social context, are problematized through sarcastic characterizations of the protagonists, and instead, the saga sympathizes with women and the lower classes, who, as innocent bystanders, are the victims of excessive use of violence.30

Laughter, smiling, and witticisms can raise men—whether in legend or more mundane, even bleak, Icelandic circumstances—to heroic status: facing death in hopeless circumstances, characters such as the brothers Snorri and Þóróðr achieve a posthumous reputation as brave and resolute in death. While some social groups in medieval Iceland seem to have accepted and adhered to the heroic code unreservedly, other members of society cast light on its irresolvable contradictions and inadequacies. Some authors had an ambivalent attitude to the heroic code privileged by their contemporaries; Þorgeirr is depicted as making a travesty of that code, whereas Guðmundr’s verse questions it more subtly. These more sceptical attitudes speak to a lively discourse about hegemonic masculinity and male gender roles in the medieval period, and presumably reflect ideological struggles and changing attitudes to what it meant to be a man for these medieval saga authors, redactors, and audiences.
Romance and Laughter

As shown in the previous analysis, men are laughed at, mocked, and ridiculed in heroic discourse, but women are never the object of jokes. Old Norse-Icelandic heroic texts depict a strict separation of male and female spheres, and men and women have discrete roles, whether or not they are depicted as normal or problematized in some way in the narrative. Women have an indirect, secondary role and work through men to gain influence, while men do the official decision making and fighting, and are the objects of legal punishments and physical violence in blood feud. Thus, since women have very little power to begin with, nothing much would be at stake were a woman subjected to attacks through humor. After Iceland became a part of the Norwegian monarchy in 1262–1264, the groups that previously fought each other for political supremacy now became a ruling class that received its power from the king. The new aristocracy, or at least a dominant part of it, avidly consumed translated romance literature, fashionable at the Norwegian court; they commissioned indigenous sagas that emulated romances in structure, style, themes, and other respects, bringing new preoccupations such as romantic love, and new forms of humor, into the indigenous narrative tradition. Instead of laughter directed at men, the tables were turned: women’s behavior and sexuality became the target of humor (Ferm, chapter eight, discusses *fabliaux* directed at women’s unbridled sexuality).

An early example is *Mottuls saga*, a thirteenth-century translation and adaptation of the Old French poem *Le Lai du cort mantel*, recounting the tale of a magic mantle that reveals the truth about a lady’s fidelity to her husband when worn. This saga is, according to the prologue, intended for “entertainment and amusement.” A mysterious emissary arrives at King Arthur’s court carrying a beautiful mantle. All the ladies at court try it on, but it is always too long or too short, and each one in turn is mocked by the other courtiers for her trespasses in sexual matters, much to the embarrassment of their lovers. Finally, the last woman who tries the mantle finds that it fits perfectly, and the saga ends with this lady lauded for her faithfulness. The court resumes their feasting, but damaged reputations and revelations of adultery leave many with a bad taste in their mouths, and “verily many a good knight [was] vexed because of his beloved.”

Male sexuality is occasionally the subject of humor in Sagas of Icelanders, but usually in the context of anxieties about unmanliness and lack of virility. Men’s extramarital sex is usually not regarded as

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*Note: The text is a natural representation of the document content.*
immoral or commented on, nor is women’s independence in sexual matters a pervasive issue. Interestingly, for the adultery described in Móttuls saga to take place, the unchaste ladies presumably needed partners equally unfaithful to their own lovers, but the men are not stigmatized or criticized for their role in this illicit sexual activity, nor do they volunteer to accept any blame. This double standard is glossed over and the saga’s overt message is that women should keep to their place or else face public mockery. Saga translations of originally Francophone romances, and Icelandic sagas that imitate them, transmit a form of humor previously not detected in Old Norse-Icelandic literature: laughter and jokes are directed at women rather than men, and seem to be intended as a disciplinary tool to threaten women and dissuade them to subvert their passive gender role. The increasing importance of primogeniture, men’s sole access to their wives’ bodies—and the anxieties these issues entail—is reflected in the derogatory attitude toward women in romance.37

Women straying into the arms of lovers are not the only sources of anxiety visible in the humor of romances, but also the fear of their taking a male role. The maiden-king narrative focuses on a female protagonist, following a paradigm of a young, noble unmarried woman, usually depicted as haughty, cruel, and sometimes armed, taking attributes from Germanic shield-maidens and romance heroines alike. She rules her own kingdom, rejecting all her suitors and mistreating them physically, verbally, or both. However, after undergoing and succeeding in other trials, ultimately the male hero finds a way to outwit and conquer the maiden-king, sometimes subjecting her to violence, beatings, or rape, usually presented as deserved, and often framed in a humorous context. This type of narrative quickly became popular, and the maiden-king seems to have been one of the most popular literary tropes in late medieval Iceland.38

One of the more violent sagas in this tradition is Clári saga, featuring the independent Serena, and Clárus, an emperor’s son. Arriving at Serena’s splendid palace, Clárus is received with a lavish banquet, but when he broaches the subject of marriage, Serena grossly humiliates him in front of the whole court by surreptitiously causing him to spill a soft-boiled egg over his gold-embroidered finery. She then enthusiastically abuses him for his embarrassing clumsiness and lack of courtly compartment.

Look here…miserable rogue and disgusting beggar…how did you drag your flat foot for no reason out of your mother’s house,
as long as you do not know sufficient courtly behaviour that you are able to bring food to your mouth without causing disgrace to yourself in the presence of other good people. And now take yourself out immediately, wretched boor, from this chamber with all these rapscallions and ribalds, which you dragged in here, as quickly as you wish to avoid being disgraced.  

In this colorful speech, Serena declares her suitor an ill-mannered bore, expressing horror at Clárus’s shortcomings in courtly dining etiquette. Thus, she attacks his social status, and describing him as flat-footed suggests that he is physically inferior, which was also the sign of low status; all this implies that Clárus is not of high enough rank to marry her. In addition to the humiliating aspect of Serena’s monologue, with its animated and alliterative language, it is also humorous through its hyperbole and excess, so unlike the polite and decorous conversation in which a high-born woman could be expected to engage.

The suitor later punishes Serena for her arrogance by kidnapping her and making her serve an ogre, his teacher in disguise, for a whole year, a reverse-Cinderella situation. The vivid scenes where Serena has to sleep in a sheep pen, wear tatters, beg for food, and endure constant verbal abuse at the hands of the ogre, contrast dramatically with her previous position, and the scenes of the ogre snapping at Serena and calling her all manner of names, are, when read from a hegemonic position, humorous in their excess, so similar to the earlier banquet scene. The saga ends with Serena’s subjugation, where Clárus deals her such a heavy blow to the head that she nearly passes out, and the narrator comments that Serena’s eventual submissive “behaviour [is] a clear example, how it befits other good women to be faithful to their husbands or betrothed ones.” Due to the misogynistic, mocking tone in the descriptions of Serena’s trials, and the fact that the saga is certainly composed in a clerical milieu, it can be postulated that the intended audience would have revelled in the haughty maiden-king’s humiliation, and derived amusement from her being brought to such a low station. Like Møttuls saga, Clári saga sends a straightforward patriarchal message to the women in the audience not to get any ideas about autonomy.

Another saga influenced by romance, Hrólf’s saga Gautrekssonar, set in Viking Age Sweden and primarily focusing on the search for a noble bride (interspersed with formulaic accounts of the hero’s exploits), makes use of the maiden-king narrative in a more complex, ambiguous way. The same paradigm of counter-humiliations of the suitor and the bride
is followed, but the woman being wooed has, in this case, taken up a male name, clothes, and weapons. (S)he governs a kingdom, keeping a castle and a retinue, and his/her retainers accept a woman embodying a male role; the narrator seems to do so as well, for the maiden-king character is consistently referred to in the masculine, for example, *he* and *the king*. When the young protagonist Hrólfr arrives to propose, he enters the royal hall under the silent scrutiny of the retainers, and addresses the maiden-king formally as *herra* “lord.” Then follows a long speech where he proposes marriage in a florid speech:

> I have come to see you, sir, following the advice and consent of King Eirekr, your father... to form a union with you for wondrous enjoyment so that each of us can please the other according to the dictates of nature and without any sin or sorrow.43

The suitor’s verbose rhetoric is incongruous against the austere backdrop and typical terse saga style, but the use of male pronouns and titles in the middle of a proposal scene further heighten the humor. Hrólfr’s efforts to push the maiden-king into a female role are futile, and he is humiliatingly driven away with threats of violence and insults aimed at his social and economic status as the maiden-king wickedly implies that he is begging for food. According to the narrative paradigm, the suitor must fail once at wooing the maiden-king, and pass other trials, in order to reach an adult level of maturity. Hrólfr’s second attempt at winning the maiden-king’s hand in marriage begins equally badly. Upon arrival at the maiden-king’s castle, Hrölf and his men are again derided and mocked: “the Swedes went onto the stronghold, taunted them and laughed at them and challenged their courage.”44 However, this time the mockery does not have the intended effect. The maiden-king and army put up a formidable opposition in the battle that ensues, but the confrontation eventually results in defeat, at which point the suitor’s brother deals the maiden-king a shameful blow on the buttocks, an act that has a subtext of sexual dominance.

Although humor is often used to reinforce, and thus construct and reproduce hegemonic social conventions, it has the potential to play with and undermine the rules or accepted practices of society, drawing attention to the arbitrariness and unnaturalness of these constructions.45 In *Hrólf s saga Gautrekssonar’s* representation of the maiden-king, humor, produced by discrepancies between elaborate, romance-inflected language and a Viking military context, in conjunction with the gender role reversal and the woman’s performance of masculinity, is, on the
surface, used to remind the audience of privileged gender norms. But
the maiden-king who acts like a man problematizes assumptions about
gender in a more nuanced way and can arguably be read from two
points of view, hegemonic and subversive. Theories of performativity
and the constructedness (rather than naturalness) of gender, advanced
by Judith Butler and others, suggest ways of reading the figure: by
consciously enacting or imitating “gender,” a discrepancy between the
body of the “performer” and the gender identity being imitated appear,
unsettling notions about fixed and separate gender roles. Applying
the concept of performativity, in the case of the maiden-king, every-
one in the imagined world of the saga, including her own retinue,
knows that she used to be an ordinary, female princess. However, his/
her men seem to have accepted that their leader, as a biological woman,
can break out of the confines of the traditional female role and
“become” a man for all intents and purposes, to perform a masculine
role, regardless of what she once was.

The ease with which this particular maiden-king moves between
masculine and feminine roles is remarkable; she is equally successful
as queen after her inevitable marriage to Hrólfr after he comes back
to conquer her, producing heirs and giving him wise advice, and her
husband considers her superior to all other women, confirmed in a long
description of her excellence. But before long she finds herself back in
a martial role, rescuing her husband, who has been imprisoned by an
evil Irish king. Hrólfr exclaims, upon seeing his savior and wife, “It
takes a long time to tame a woman like you!” This moment of comic
relief following Hrólfr’s near death could be taken as a long-suffering
husband’s exasperated comment on unruly women. However, given
that the queen has saved the day, the audience might have found her
“unruliness,” that is, appropriation of masculine fighting roles, had its
benefits, and the saga read as a whole seems to express a reconciliation
with the idea of women performing a male role, as long as they do not
adopt masculine names and titles. The artificiality of discrete male and
female gender roles is clear and the maiden-king’s undeniable success in
male activities opens up an imaginary space in which gender as a fixed
category is undermined.

Humor, in this final example, seems on the surface to be kindred to
the attitude to women expressed in Clári saga, deflecting male anxieties
about women’s access to power, reinforcing a strict division of gender roles, and naturalizing the hegemonic social order. But it can also
be read as engaging with a more subversive message, the unsettling of
traditional power structures, undermined by female characters’ success, despite her biology, in military activity and ruling. Thus, it is perhaps not strange that Móttuls saga and other sagas in the same vein advance the idea that women should be meek and passive, whether in sexual or other matters.

**Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this article has shown that humor is a productive lens with which to analyze gender representations in medieval Icelandic sagas and poetry. Humorous episodes are more than just entertainment: they illuminate dominant or competing ideologies in which individuals and social groups are invested. Ideologies are partly founded upon gender norms and their maintenance, that is, who has access to power, and what ideal(ized) qualities or behavior underpin this access. Others may use humor in its many forms as a way of casting light on the problems, contradictions, and cost—of lives, reputations, people’s happiness—that the same ideology entails. Thus, some saga authors champion the heroic model of masculinity: the sarcastic hero who has no problem committing violence, and who considers laughing at one’s enemy to be the ultimate show of courage and manliness. Likewise, men who commit violence onto defenseless people are ridiculed by sarcastic praise. This worldview, privileged in texts such as Njáls saga, (parts of) Íslendinga saga, and eddic poetry, allows no departure from the ideal image of manliness, which is so exclusive that some authors present it as impossible, and, indeed, unattractive, to inhabit. Some medieval authors employ humor to problematize, criticize, or even satirize the masculine man and his actions, privileged by their contemporaries.

An analysis of texts from different genres and origins consumed in Iceland in the medieval period shows that gender roles were in motion during this time, and the points of pressure seem to move, at least partly, from masculinity to femininity. In Móttuls saga and Clári saga, women are shamed for their transgressive sexual activity by being laughed at, and are threatened with similar public humiliation and physical violence if they act independently. This development suggests that at the time of writing, gender roles were perceived as at risk of being unsettled: women’s autonomy and access to power was a newly arrived, but pervasive, source of anxiety, probably more so than ideal male qualities.
As the maiden-king—later warrior-queen—of *Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar* suggests, there might similarly have been ambiguous attitudes current at this time about the scope of female behavior, and the benefit of women's participation in the traditionally male sphere. What troubled or intrigued people about gender roles might have changed with time but humor never lost its place as an effective tool with which to engage with these issues.  

**Notes**

1. Scholarly discussion about gender in Old Norse-Icelandic literature has been lively in the last three decades. For two recent large-scale studies and extensive further references, see Clark 2012 and Friðriksdóttir 2013a.

2. See *Atlakviða* (st. 24) and *Atlamál* (st. 65). In Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandtem denkmäler (web); The Poetic Edda 1994, 214, 227.


4. See, for example, Andersson 1970; Ólason 1998, 146.

5. See, for example, Hallberg 1962, 114–123; Ólason 1998, 111–131; and more generally for an introduction to Icelandic sagas.


8. There is significant scholarship on *ergi*; see especially Sørensen 1983; Clark 2012, chs. 1, 2, and 4. Ármann Jakobsson (2008) suggests *ergi* is not just lack of manliness, but “queerness,” encompassing all kinds of deviant, evil, and antisocial behavior.


10. See further Friðriksdóttir 2013a, ch. 1; 2013b, 117–135, and references therein.

11. See, for example, *Laxdœla saga*’s Guðrún, *Njáls saga*’s many vengeful female characters, and especially Brynhildr Buðladóttir from heroic legend.

12. See *Sigrœðarkviða in skamma* (st. 30) and *Brot af Sigrœðarkviðu* (st. 10, 15), in Edda.


14. See, for example, Grove 2008, 116.

15. *Íslendinga saga*’s author, Sturla Bóðarson (1214–1284), was closely related to many of the people who feature in the saga.

16. The political background to and consequences of this attack are analyzed in Nordal 1998, 89–99; Grove, “Skaldic,” 85–131; and Tulinius 2014.

17. The saga alludes to a woman’s breasts being cut off in the raid; see *Íslendinga saga*, 328. Although not mentioned, we can deduce that it is Porphjörg Ysja, as she seems to be the only woman who was seriously injured.

18. “Þat var aumligt at heyra til kvenna ok sárra manna,” *Íslendinga saga*, 326.

19. “Þat var mælt, at þeira hýbýla væri mestr munr ... hversu órækilig ok fátæk váru,” *Íslendinga saga*, 329.


22. Íslendinga saga, 357.

23. The verse in English translation is as follows: “I became, where the Nirðir [gods] of battles [= warriors, the brothers] reddened corpsescathers [weapons] with blood—the din of the showers of Göndul [=valkyrie] battle] increased—so utterly terrified that I was overcome. I myself thrust—blood fell on the swung oars of the wound [weapons], seldom was I in more danger—my head on the firm plank. Íslendinga saga, p. 329, trans. Grove, “Skaldic,” p. 95. As Grove notes, the penultimate line, “lítt vask heldr í hættu,” could also be translated as “little was I in danger”; it seems deliberately ambiguous, as in line with the rest of the poem.


25. Fóstbrœðra saga, 128.

26. See further Friðriksdóttir 2013a, ch. 2.

27. “Sagði hann það vera svívirðing sín krafts að hokra að konum,” Fóstbrœðra saga, 128.

28. Fóstbrœðra saga, 190. This episode is preserved in the Flateyjarbók redaction of the saga.

29. “[F]ék þar svo mikla virðing að Danir tignuðu hann nær sem konung að því sem Þormóður hefur um ort,” Fóstbrœðra saga, 159.

30. See further Friðriksdóttir 2013a, ch. 2. Ólason 1998, 162 refers to the sworn-brothers’ delineation as comic “caricatures” of the traditional Norse hero.


34. See, for example, Mottuls saga, 49.


36. For example, in a scene from Njáls saga where a man is mocked for being unable to consummate his marriage, two boys put on a little play for the household’s amusement making fun of the man’s alleged impotence (which resulted in divorce); see Brennu-Njáls saga, 29.

37. See further Larrington 2009.

38. See Friðriksdóttir 2012.

40. On physical inferiority and social status, see Friðriksdóttir 2013a, 117–119. See further Kalinke 2007.
41. Clári saga, 74.
42. On the saga’s authorship, see Hughes 2008.
43. “Ek er svá kominn, herra, á yðvarn fund eptir ráði ok samþykki Eireks konungs, fóður þíns, at leita yðr sóma, en mér framgangs til þess at binda við yðr unaðsam-ligt eptirlæti, þat sem hvárr okkar má öðrum veita eptir boði náttúrunnar fyrir utan allt angr eða ónáðir,” Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, 70.
44. “Svíar gengu út á virkit, spottuðu þá ok hlógu at þeim ok frýðu þeim hugar,” Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, 70.
47. “Seint er þó at tryggja slíkar konurnar sem þú ert,” Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, 150.
48. This article was written with the financial support of RANNÍS—The Icelandic Research Fund. I would like to thank Carolyne Larrington, Viðar Pálsson, Marianne Kalinke, and Anders Winroth for their helpful comments.

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The aim of this essay is to draw attention to the concept of unmanliness as a productive category in the historical analysis of gender and laughter. So far, unmanliness has most often caught the historian’s analytical attention as a laughing matter with misogynist overtones in tales about cuckoldry and henpecked husbands. I wish to broaden the perspective to include how the comic effects of unmanliness have been used as rhetorical weapons in social and political conflicts, beginning with arguments about rank and civil service among the aristocracy in seventeenth-century Sweden. It will be argued that allusions to unmanliness not only played a key role in the early modern rhetoric of male prestige but also were strategic means of changing cultural values and ideals and the meanings of masculinity.

A Dispute about Rank

Seventeenth-century Swedish society offered considerable opportunities for social advancement and ennoblement. Numbering less than 500 adult males at the beginning of the century, the hereditary aristocracy was incapable of meeting the increasing demand from the expanding state apparatus and military sector for qualified functionaries and by the end of the century, newly ennobled families accounted for roughly
80 percent of the entire class. Traditional aristocratic ways of life associated with landholding and military service were challenged by new demands for formal education and competence in both military and civil affairs. “Virtue” became the key to the new ideal of the “literate nobleman” and there was general consensus among the aristocracy that a person’s rank and office should be related to virtue “as the true origin of Nobility.” Virtue could however be assigned different meanings. While the term meant merit and efficiency among the newly ennobled groups, the old aristocracy insisted on magnanimitas (greatness of spirit), derived from noble ancestry and an inherited sense of honor. Intense disputes flared up in the Swedish House of Nobility in the 1680s over the principles for establishing rank and office. One Col. Örneklo, who had achieved lesser nobility of the third class, argued that his wife should share his rank, so that she would be able to benefit from the honor bestowed on her spouse. “In all other states and republics it is law that the wife benefit from her husband’s honour, but here it is not so, for even if she were a member of one of the great families, so she remains despised, though her husband be of greater service than the others.” In claiming rank for a wife, he continued, “the service provided should decide.” According to the minutes of the meeting, these words brought down thunderous laughter and jeers, with Count Axel Sparre taking the floor to say, “Thanks to you, Örneklo, pussy finally has got itself a brave champion.” He also insisted that these words should be recorded in the minutes. What was the point of this laughter?

Örneklo’s mention of “the service provided” was spitefully interpreted as referring to his wife and not himself, with the implication that the only “service” a wife could provide was of sexual nature. To be a spokesman for such “service” was to indulge in effeminizing lechery, with the further possible insinuation that by representing his wife, Örneklo was pimping her out, offering her “services” in exchange for rank. The word “brave” is used ironically to increase comic effect.

Sexual Indulgence and Cowardice

A similar insinuation is found in late Medieval and early sixteenth-century anti-Danish propaganda. In Ericus Olai’s Chronica regni Gothorum, written in the turmoil of the last decades of the Nordic Union, the reign of the Danish queen Margaret over the Swedes (1389–1397) was depicted as
ruthless and tyrannical. According to the author, the Queen “had a coin struck upon which was set the mark of her pudendum, meant to serve them [the Swedes] as a coat of arms.”

Displaying genitalia on the coin of the realm not only was a grave insult but also expressed the disdain and contempt with which the Queen held her Swedish subjects, according to Olai. While Margaret brought the Danes glory and success, her rule in Sweden was marred by deceit and oppression. The mark of the pudendum was her way of showing how little she valued the Swedish people.

But the affront was even more insidious. Olai states that Margareta placed the mark of her pudendum on the coin “to serve as a coat of arms” for the Swedes, that is a symbol to be held in highest esteem. There are two possible insulting connotations following from this. The mark could be seen as a banner forced upon the Swedes as a humiliating remainder of their subordination to the rule of the Danish Queen. Far worse and more in line with the derision rained down upon Örneklo, it could be seen as implying that Swedes prized physical pleasure and licentiousness above honor. While Danes were fighting for honor on the battlefield, the Swedes were only “brave” in sexual matters. From a Swedish nationalist perspective, this was no laughing matter, but the incongruence between selfless commitment and sexual indulgence foreshadows the scorn heaped on Örneklo.

The theme remerges in a political context in the work of Johannes Magnus, a Swedish bishop and historian living in exile in Rome after the Lutheran Reformation enforced by King Gustavus Vasa in 1527. His *History of All Kings of Goths and Swedes* was written in the prevailing nationalistic tradition incorporating the ancient Goths as the heroic forefathers of the Swedes. But Magnus is also careful to mention the depraved Gothic ruler Gostagos, a clear reference to Gustavus Vasa, the bane of his existence, and ruler as despicable in his eyes as the former Danish Union regents:

For one who acted like an implacable tyrant and lion of valor toward his loyal subjects, he was seen to be more frightened than a hare in warring with enemies. Before his time the kings of the Goths fought in the forefront of battle, but he abandoned the legions and climbed up the nearest tree or rock to observe the outcome of the fight. He was often found among the boys and draymen sent back behind the hillocks because of their unfitness in arms, while the bravest struggled with the enemy. But in the battle for the chastity of wives, maidens, and noble women, he had no equal. Hardly a night passed over the course of a year when he restrained himself from whoring, raping, and base copulation.
Allusions to lechery and submission to female rule were however not
the only ways to ridicule an antagonist by making him seem unmanly.
Returning to the dispute over rank and office, Baron Ernest Creutz
held a speech in the House of the Nobility critical of the counts’ claims
of precedence. “We are now living in a most unhappy time, in which
virtue is no longer considered and one has to tolerate being put upon
by children and adolescents [of the count families], from which much
evil will follow, such as brawls and duels.”6 To be disrespected by a
boy or likened to one was not only insulting to a full-grown man but
also a most useful means of provoking laughter and ridicule. Second
Lieutenant Hans Jacob Crail was ridiculed in a libelous song composed
by his aristocratic peers, for “hiding behind his dear mother’s apron”
after having challenged Major Per Lillie to draw swords “for life and
death.”7 A similar theme is exploited in the above-mentioned play by
Messenius, in which Starkotter encounters Mama’s Boy, a spoiled aris-
tocratic brat who clung to his mother’s breast until his ninth year and
sat on her lap until he was 19. Every morning he still rushes “without
trousers” just as a bare-assed little boy to the maids in the kitchen. He
has never been near a battlefield nor even ridden to hunt with his peers.
Behind the oven or just around the corner of the family home is the
farthest he has ever been, and then only with a rope tied tightly round
his waist to make sure that he returns safely to mommy again. “Are
you a calf or a man?” Starkotter exclaims. The mere sight and voice
of Starkotter frightens him so that Mama’s Boy immediately wishes he
was safe beneath the folds of his dear mother’s apron.

The image of the bare-assed boy comes to mind in a spectacular
scene that played out in the presence of Queen Christina at a royal ball
held in 1645. Among the attendees was Agneta Horn, granddaughter of
the Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna. Also present was Eric Sparre, chosen
as Agneta’s fiancé by her family. Sparre belonged to the high aristoc-
racy but he didn’t appeal at all to Agneta. Agneta’s disinclination had
become known and when Sparre stepped out onto the dance floor, his
compeers had removed the scabbard from his sword without his recog-
nizing it. Agneta describes the reaction in her biography. “And every-
one smiled at him and said to me: My very dear friend, see how they
make fun of your fiancé!” When Sparre asks for a dance, she declines
and dances with someone else. Sparre’s humiliation is complete when
the Queen upbraids him. “You tolerate another man dancing with your
fiancée, when she will not dance with you?”8
First Sparre is made to appear unmanly—dancing with an uncovered and “bare” rapier dangling at his side was an obvious sign of male ineptitude and likely something far more bawdy and embarrassing, to judge from the smiles and chuckles it elicited from the assembly. Then he loses honor in the eyes of the Queen by not taking action against his rivals. Agneta left no doubt as to what was worst in her eyes. “I don’t want someone who lets himself be made the fool,” calling him a “Hasenberger” referring to a well-known jester in the service of Count Carl Gustav Wrangel. Needless to say, the wedding was off.

Agneta Horn’s broken engagement has much to say about the rhetorical power of laughter. According to her memoir, she had already made up her mind before the embarrassing incident that she wanted “a brave soldier, not one like that, like him.” A wish that came true three years later, when she married Lt. Col. Cruus, with whom she had become acquainted before the ball.

Of course, we can never know the innermost motives of Agneta, but we do know that Sparre and Cruus were men of very different ambitions. Sparre was at the time a royal chamberlain dedicated to a career in civil service, while Cruus, after returning home from a grand tour of Europe, had already embarked on a military career so successful it would eventually earn him of baronetcy, elevating him to the first class of the Nobility. Ambition versus heredity, manly sacrifice on the battlefield versus staying safe at home, bravery versus civil service, in a wider sociopolitical context the disparagement of Sparre illustrates the dilemma he shared with the emerging class of civil servants—how to make civil virtues appear more explicitly gendered as manly.

**Vanity and Rank**

Returning to the dispute over rank and office in the House of Nobility, Col. Örneklo was furthermore teased that he “dare not [go] home to his wife, ere he acquire rank for her.” An insinuation that Örneklo was not master in his own house, a classic theme of unmanliness associated with the henpecked husband. There is however a second allusion here—by letting himself be ruled by his wife’s ambition, Örneklo was submitting himself to her vanity, a typically female weakness. In one eighteenth-century antifemale satire, women are gathering to decide the “foremost and most important issue for the female sex that is, rank,” an issue that had already triggered countless quarrels and threw the whole female sex into confusion and disorder, according to the author.
Each referred to their advantages and demanded precedence; words like ancestry, beauty, intelligence, and wealth flew through the air. Some boasted about the merits of their husbands, others about the power exercised over them; some prized their immaculate virginity, others their many children.²² Striving for status is in this way associated with an almost limitless female vanity, a theme further developed in the play *Mistress Greedyrank* from 1741.²³

The play opens with Mistress letting the audience know how she has manipulated her husband *Jesper Milksop*, an untitled nobleman living on a country estate, to petition for a public office in the capital. When Jesper finally returns and reports that he has been appointed Superior-Director—not for free of course, it cost him a packet—Mistress becomes so exalted that she embraces the household servant by mistake. Servant and maids are now outfitted in proper finery and given the titles of bookkeeper and lady’s maid, respectively. A coachman is hired and new horses and a fashionable coach are bought, but Mistress is still not satisfied. She tells her husband to secure an even loftier title. Her grandest plan is however to marry her daughter Louisa into the high aristocracy. A Count from an old aristocratic family is presented, but to her mother’s great displeasure, Louisa declares that she has already promised her heart to a certain young nobleman of the landed gentry: Leopold, untitled but competent and very successful in agricultural management. The conceited old Count, whose creditors flock impatiently outside the door, assures the indignant Mistress that young ladies often pretend to be implacable, quite contrary to their true inclination. “If you just let me have my way; when she becomes my countess, she will change her mind.”

By now, Jesper has advanced to General-Director and the count is no longer on Mistress’s short list. Advancement and the aristocratic lifestyle have however forced Jesper to mortgage his estate. Exhausted by his new life and threatened with total ruin, Jesper begins to realize his mistake. In the nick of time, a rescuer knocks on the door. In comes Leopold disguised as “the Count and Knight of the Green Ribbon and General Treasurer of the Grand Mogul” who has returned to his Swedish homeland to find a bride. Blinded by his titles, Mistress can hardly believe her luck, but she soon has to face reality when the Knight of the Green Ribbon reveals his true identity and Jesper declares his bankruptcy. Leopold marries Louisa and promises to pay Jesper’s debts on the condition that he return to his estate and quit public service. The moral of the story is spelled out by Leopold’s declaration that the only title he cares for is that of “honest nobleman,” underlined by Louisa’s
statement that what counts is “personal merit and quality” not rank and character. This was the political agenda of the new nobility, to which the author of the play Reinhold Gustaf Modée belonged.

Sparks and Petit-Maîtres—Counter-Images of Virtue

In *Miss Greedyrank*, the satirical barb is aimed at female folly and vanity. Rather than being denounced for indulging in a dissolute lifestyle, Jesper Milksop is under the constant pressure of his overbearing wife to pursue higher rank. Generally considered a typically feminine vice, vanity was however becoming a principal theme of unmanliness in Sweden during the eighteenth century. In one of the many antifemale fashion satires, criticism of the vanity of women is counterbalanced with a description of the “petit-maître” or “spark,” purportedly the prime introducer of foreign fashions who vastly exceeded any woman in matters of vanity. Emerging full-fledged in the eighteenth century, the spark had already been broached as a comical figure of unmanliness in Messenius’s character Mama’s Boy. Dressed like someone “who had travelled to France a lot,” Mama’s Boy is complimented by his peer *Flattermuch* for looking “just like a doll.” Whereas the vanity of Mama’s Boy is typically associated with cowardice, in the eighteenth century, the rhetorical power of the figure of the spark and petit-maître, lay in its use as a counter-image—the very antithesis of the virtuous man (Figure 12.1).

The mischievous character of the spark is nicely demonstrated by the publicist Olof Dalin in one of his many satirical texts on the subject, in which he recalls an encounter he had “just the other day” with Monsieur François d’ala Mode: A man of the world, the most chipper of sparks, he cast himself dramatically onto the bench, lay his feet up on the table and requested *une tasse de café*. Next he delighted in reporting having fooled a rival and gained eternal honour in a clandestine fight for the sake of Mademoiselle Mouche after first having broken her heart. Reproached for his intrigues, foul language and promiscuity, he just smiled contentedly. His interlocutor chose a different tack.

Well, thought I, pluck another string. I commented on his hair and said that I had never seen anyone set it the way he had, I pretended that he had made a fatal *pas grave* during the last minute [...] and an inappropriate bow, I said his buttons were out of fashion &c. M. d’ala Mode was utterly disarmed; aggrieved and outraged, his
heart roiled with such rage that if his beloved duels... had indeed been legal, he would have generously proffered the invitation, to fill each other with lead on the morrow.¹⁵

As rhetorical figures, sparks and petit-maîtres came in different shapes and sizes, but vanity and conceit always remained their principal qualities. Monsieur François d’ala Mode represented the abrasive, arrogant and loud-mouthed category of sparks said to gather at the coffee houses, where they spent most of their time in feckless indolence, quarrelling and boasting about their brawling, whoring and sundry other excesses. A counter-image to the ideals of virtue is discussed in each and every detail. All this fuss was however nothing more than affectation and posturing. The spark’s true nature lay in his narcissistic obsession with his dress, hairstyle, speech and manners according to the latest fashion, an obsession he shared with the female characters of contemporary fashion parodies. In this light, arrogance and supposedly

![Image](image-url)
masculine bravado was reduced to pretention and mannerism, making the spark a laughing stock.

**The Swedish Spark à la Mode**

In contrast to women, the vanity of the spark was said not to come naturally but as an adopted, at times clumsy affectation. Even his inordinate passion for fashion and “French manners” was characterized as pretence. Accordingly, the image of the “repentant spark” that eventually repents to live a virtuous life was a recurrent and edifying theme of satire. In the play *The Swedish Spark* from 1737 by Carl Gyllenborg, Count Brisk has just arrived in Stockholm after an extended stay in France. Back and forth he struts in his lodgings, adjusting his clothes with a restless gaze, singing and whistling by turns as he awaits the arrival of his cousin, Baron Steadfast, who finally enters. “Ah parbleu! Mon Cousin!” Brisk exclaims as he runs to kiss and embrace him. “Steady, steady, my dear Count, we neither kiss nor hug as keenly in Sweden as they do in France, but we mean it all the more sincerely,” Steadfast reminds him. The scene is set between the two main characters of the play—the conceited and Frenchified spark and the virtuous and manly Swedish nobleman. Both are in their mid-twenties and belong to the old nobility, boasting a long and proud ancestry, and both have been on a Grand Tour to France, but while Steadfast returned home after a short while, Brisk remained behind.

As it transpires, the two cousins are destined to become rivals for the hand of the beautiful young widow Lotta Enterfield (as her name suggests, new on the aristocratic market), daughter of an admiral recently ennobled after a long and distinguished carrier. A third rival appears on the scene—Squire Torbjörn Dividend, an unpolished, provincial upstart whose title was acquired through financial manipulation and formal petition—smoking incessantly, spitting on the floor, blowing his nose and wiping it with his coattails. Based on outer appearance, comportment and speech, Brisk and Dividend are one another’s opposite. But compared to Baron Steadfast and Lotta Enterfield, both equally represent an utter lack of virtue. While Dividend’s proposal is never taken seriously, Brisk makes a strong impression and receives Lotta’s promise of marriage, only to reveal his true nature shortly thereafter at a coffee house, where he first confronts Dividend and then Lotta’s father, without realizing who they are.

Brisk enters the coffee house singing a French chanson when his eyes fall on Dividend, who sits smoking a pipe in old, shabby clothes, a beer
and a glass of schnapps before him after having poured his coffee on the floor as undrinkable. “Verte bleu,” Brisk exclaims, “is he [the proprietor] turning his coffee house into a beer hall, or does he want gens de qualité to come here to smell tobacco smoke and carry it home in their clothes? Phew!” Dividend rises from his bench, lays his pipe on the table and watches in astonishment as Brisk struts around him whistling before suddenly pushing him back down in his seat again: Asseyez-vous, mon ami. Shifting to plain Swedish, Brisk starts to criticize Dividend’s clothes and recommends a visit to Paris to learn how to live and dress. He puts himself forward as a living example. “Behold my manner, so free and easy! See how nattily I am attired, the cut of each piece of my clothing. In a word, squire, it is impossible to be gracious and civilized without having spent time in dear, sweet France!” When Dividend does not take in his words, Brisk calls him a “vulgar country bumpkin” and the scene ends with Dividend departing, fully convinced that Brisk must be drunk and out of his mind. At that very same moment, Admiral Enterfield arrives.

The Admiral orders a cup of coffee and the latest newspapers. The loud and obtrusive Brisk spews contempt on the low standard of Swedish coffee houses compared to the French—Vive Paris, vive la France! Enterfield objects in a tempered voice with some remarks about the manly, honourable reputation enjoyed by Sweden and the Swedes. Brisk however continues to provoke the Admiral in the most egregious manner, and when Steadfast arrives a moment later, he finds Brisk and Enterfield reaching for their rapiers. Moving between them, Steadfast addresses his cousin and Enterfield realizes that the spark harassing him is his daughter’s intended. Despite Steadfast’s sincere efforts to rescue his cousin’s reputation, Lotta breaks off the engagement, which in turn provides Steadfast the opportunity to declare his secret love for her. Lotta, who has slowly come to recognize Steadfast’s virtuous nature, soon replies in kind.

After getting the brush off, Brisk finally realizes his mistake and declares that from now on, he will shed his vain and foreign manners and go back to being a proper, trustworthy Swede. The Admiral rejoices. “At last, some genuine Swedish manliness!” Forgiven, Brisk proposes to Steadfast’s half-sister Sofia Cheerful, who accepts on the condition that he renounce his spark ways according to an agreement in twelve specified clauses, including everything from hairstyle and dress to gait, flouncing into armchairs, constantly checking himself in the mirror and mixing his speech with French words. Even Dividend finds a wife in Lotta’s maid Sara, who turns out to be the orphan of
an old ennobled officer who died shortly after returning from foreign captivity. Sara has already demonstrated her resoluteness in an earlier confrontation with Dividend, and as her husband he can look forward to undergoing a drastic refinement of his manners at her hands. The play ends in the political message that ancestry and wealth are meaningless without virtue and personal merit, the veritable motto of the new nobility.

Inconstancy versus Steadfastness

What makes Brisk appear so ridiculous is the incongruent combination of vanity and affectation, associated with feminine ways, and the brusqueness of his manly aspirations. His inconstancy and fickleness further underline his comic attributes, already hinted at by the epithet Brisk. Traditionally, brisk (Sw. hurtig) referred to inner qualities like boldness and manliness (“a brisk and doughty warrior”). By the eighteenth century the word began to mean being pleasant mannered and easy in conversation and comportment according to the latest fashionable ideals. Among sparks this ease had turned into pure, superficial affectation lacking any moral consistency.18 However, when Brisk stops strutting about spouting French phrases, his epithet soon regains its traditional meaning, or as the Admiral expresses it, “Now I recognize our worthy forefathers in your person; such was their walk and their talk. Yes, now you are rightly and truly Count Brisk.”

Brisk’s inconstancy derived from his submission to the latest French fashions. As fashion changed, the spark was said to follow like a bird that shed and grew feathers according to the season. This capriciousness is derided by satirists as infiltrating the spark’s very being. His walk, like his speech, is a mixed performance; one moment he struts, the next he pitter-patters on tippy-toe, leaping into the air as if dancing, before skipping like a stone over the surface of a pond. He enters a coffee house wearing his hat at a jaunty angle, whistling, looking around and pretending not to see anyone. He sits down nonchalantly on a chair with legs crossed and pretends to fall into deep thought. Suddenly he hurdles himself at someone he doesn’t know and starts praising “pretty little sweetheart Chloris,” salutes one acquaintance and tells a third about last night’s seduction. A moment later he is bored with it all and heads for the door. He spends much of his time in front of the mirror, fiddling with his hair and dress, turning around and praising his appearance with a snap of his fingers. The mirror is the only true friend to whom he remains constant.19
The ludicrous comportment of the spark was a rewarding target for satire and impersonation, not only in popular magazines and on stage but also at social gatherings. In a letter, publisher and librarian Carl Christoffer Gjörwell recounts how he and his friends diverted themselves by playing different roles, among them a spark recently returned from Paris performed to the amusement of all in the present company.20 Telling stories about sparks also seems to have been a popular pastime. Linneaus loved to mix jokes about the preposterous behaviour of sparks into his lectures.21 The irrationality of the spark, said to be as brainless as an “angling worm,” was a recurrent theme in pamphlets and periodicals. In a sham comical defence, this charge is refuted by a story about a spark that was shot in the head in a duel. Out ran a substance with the strong odour of macaroon and punch. Which not only proves that sparks have brains, but that their brains are of a very delicate quality!22 Another satirist retells a most realistic dream he had about an autopsy performed on a deceased spark’s skull. The pineal gland, purported to be the seat of the soul, smelled strongly of perfume and consisted of what looked like many small pieces of cut glass, a thousand microscopic mirrors, so if a soul had ever resided there, its main occupation must have been to watch and admire itself.23

In The Swedish Spark, Brisk is compared with his cousin Baron Steadfast. Steadfastness was becoming a key concept of civic virtue in eighteenth-century Sweden, associated with rationalism and social responsibility in contrast to the irrationality and egotism of the spark. Through the prism of gender and the contrasting effect of the ludicrous spark, steadfastness was reinforced as an explicit quality of manliness. This was taken a step further in matters of courtship and sexual performance.

The Conceited Suitor in Love with Himself

The vainglory of the spark culminated without doubts in his courtship rituals. A typical story tells how a spark enters church in the middle of the sermon. He looks around as if he was at the theatre and immediately catches sight of a beautiful young woman. Without hesitation he takes a seat in the same pew and in a loud voice begins to praise her beauty and declare his love for her. Startled by this gross impertinence, the woman asks him to keep quiet so she may hear the priest’s words. “It is true, my Lady,” he says, “that he preaches well; I’m bloody sure that he is a most competent man. But my sweetheart, you can listen to him another time, but not so with me. You’d best seize the opportunity!
Besides, my moral is of another kind, and I’ll be damned if anyone knows how to relate it more charmingly than I.” When the woman ignores him, the spark gives up and makes to leave, only to find that the pew door is stuck. Increasingly impatient and after loudly complaining a hundred times about the priest’s sluggish delivery, he finally manages to open the door and leaves the same way he entered, without showing an ounce of shame.\(^24\)

Sparks were also portrayed as gallant suitors, but then only to be bested in the end by a truly virtuous rival. When push came to shove, the advances of the spark were little more than a play for the gallery. In the comedy *The Envious*, young Mr Calf has been invited into the home of one Styrbjörn and his wife to propose to their daughter. Upon entering he immediately heads for the mirror, brushing rudely past his hosts. Only after titivating his hair and adjusting his clothes for several minutes does he notice the mistress of the house and her young housemaid (daughter Augusta is not present) and immediately forgets the purpose of his visit. Instead of asking her stepfather for Augusta’s hand in marriage, he takes the mistress aside after first tossing the maid some compliments, and begins a whispered conversation in familiar tones. Understandably upset at being ignored, the master of the house interrupts him. “What kind of secrets are you sharing? Let me remind you that I am the husband and she is the wife!” “Indeed so,” Mr Calf responds. “I never doubted her sex for a second... Ha, ha, comment Monsieur? [collapses into armchair]. Vous faites donc le jaloux.” After being shown the door, the spark is delighted by his imaginary triumph. The whispered conversation turns out to have been nothing more than stream of “spark trivialities.” In the end, it is the virtuous Baron Adolph who wins the fair Augusta.\(^25\) True manliness is only found in virtue. This is once again the message communicated through the contrasting effect of the spark’s vanity and conceitedness.

A similar moral lesson is unfolded in *The Swedish Spark*. During his second visit with Lotta, Count Brisk lays his eyes on Sofia Cheerful and immediately orders his servant to find out who she is. The servant turns to the audience and explains that whenever his master catches sight of a young woman of birth, he’ll stop at nothing to meet her, but curiously not much ever seems to come of it. “I don’t know what goes wrong. Either he doesn’t know the handicraft, or his tools are not good enough.” Lotta suggests a third alternative—Brisk is only truly in love with his own reflection in the mirror. The message that genuine masculinity lies in a virtuous and steadfast demeanour is neatly demonstrated in the last act of the play. It is not until then, after his conversion
and sincere apology that the “real,” manly Brisk manages to earn and keep Sofia’s love. Thus sparks were not only conceited and vain, they also lacked virility.26

**Sparks and the Feminization of Society**

Where did all these sparks and petit-maîtres come from? The tradition of the nobility to send their sons on so-called “Grand Tours” to Paris and Rome and other European cities of culture to complete their education is the most common explanation. As early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, critical voices were raised complaining about young noblemen who had adopted odd gestures and mixed their speech with foreign words and phrases in the most contrived and ridiculous ways.27 That these harmful influences were of French origin is made plain in the epithet petit-maître, which was used synonymously with spark. Authors of eighteenth-century pamphlets and satires warn that “nowadays,” sparks and petit-maîtres thrive within the borders of Sweden as well. In the epilogue to *The Swedish Spark*, a distinction is made between those who had been raised as sparks and become used to life as a spark, and those who had merely been influenced while abroad.28 While the former were beyond redemption, the latter could still be reclaimed. Brisk’s servant explains how his young master had immediately ended up in the dubious company of Parisian petit-maîtres whom he mistook for respectable, influential French noblemen. Safely back home, a confrontation with virtuous and manly Swedes was enough to bring him back to his senses.

Indigenous sparks were presented as a much more serious threat, identified as spoiled upbringing, the rule of women and an ongoing emasculation of the whole nation due to a more general increase in the taste for luxury and sensual pleasures. The once doughty Swedish man of arms had according to critics been replaced by a new breed of “spark soldiers” who were only in it for the fancy uniform.29 In 1734, a husband’s right to chastise his wife was abolished from the law and a new paragraph addressed the issue of wives who beat their husbands. Starting with a fictitious news report about a man who had been beaten up by his wife’s friends, these changes triggered a number of satirical pamphlets and broadsheets about the danger of women taking wholesale control over the rule of society.30 Sparks were used to illustrate this inverse, confused gender order as well. Apart from the obtrusive, noisy and impertinent sparks congregating in the coffee houses, there
were also sparks of a more delicate nature whose fondest desire was to please the female sex and pass the time in the company of women who treated them like beloved lapdogs.31 This perverse gender order was further illustrated in the rich lore of spark humour. A joke published in one of the major Swedish newspapers concerns the wedding of a spark in France. He approached the altar with mincing steps, “his hair coiffured, powdered, perfumed, chapeau bas, decorated and dolled up, all according to the latest fashion.” By his side he had “a frisky woman with shining complexion dressed in a riding coat.” After some contemplation the priest exclaimed, “My, my! Before I marry you and to avoid any mistakes, pray tell me sincerely, which one of you is the bride?”32

A Spark on the Throne

Sparks and petit-maîtres served as excellent rhetorical figures but they were still characters and not caricatures of living persons.33 This changed during the eighteenth century. The most spectacular example is the reference in a journal to “a twenty-year-old weakling” who though unable to spell Swedish correctly, “still bellowed for the power to rule,” “a power-mad bitch in the guise of a spark.” The reader is advised to “laugh quietly” lest he be discovered.34 This was meant to be read as a covert reference to Crown Prince Gustav who seized power three years later (his inability to spell Swedish referred to the prince’s preference for French).35 Once King, Gustav was ridiculed for his vanity and feminine ways. In a parody written in 1779, the “Count of Svithiod” (i.e., the King) appears with a coat of arms bearing the motto In armis et ludi (“in war and play”), displaying a hero in full armour knitting a lady’s girdle. When the count throws his javelin at the Image of Love, he misses—a reference to the well-known frostiness of his matrimonial relationship with the Queen.36 Rumour and innuendo about the King’s lack of sexual interest in women or even impotence was on the rise again after the birth of his first son in 1778. Handwritten libels insisted that Crown Equerry Munck was the true father of the Prince. Allusions were made to Henry IV of Castile (called “the Impotent”), said to have engaged one of his favourites to impregnate the Queen. This parallel was played out in a burlesque parody called Lanterna Magica in which the King according to the text “kneels before the Queen and begs her to accept . . . ” followed by the comment “and so at last the poor Queen could enjoy the good thing; this was an admirable secret plan, so secret that the whole nation knew about it.”37 The word left out was supposed
to be Munck, which was inserted into some copies. The theme culminated in a drawing attributed to Carl August Ehrensvärd (Figure 12.2), probably drawn after the assassination of the King in 1792.

A further but not less comical insinuation in *Lanterna Magica* is that it was all a terrible and stupid mistake—Gustav had simply confused his historical role model, the admirable French King Henry IV with Henry IV of Castile! 38

There are obvious parallels in the ridicule of the King and the portrayals of sparks being kept as lapdogs, but also significant differences. Like the sparks, Gustav was said to prefer female company. Not because he was sexually attracted to them, but because he shared their feminine interests and trivialities. This claim seems not entirely groundless, although it might rather have been a tactic on the King’s behalf, through which socializing with women could be exploited to his advantage.39

While not acting as seducers, lap-dog sparks were on the other hand never associated with sexual approaches to other men. This however was another prominent theme in the libels against Gustav, not in reference to submissive seduction but rather as harassing advances associated

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**Figure 12.2** ‘Caricature of Gustav III’s attempt to produce an heir’ C.A. Ehrensvärd (1790-ties), NMH A 151/1973, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.
with the image of the King as an oppressive tyrant. A combination of obtrusive and indulgent traits from the spark repertoire but with a new twist!

**Concluding Remarks**

With Ehrensvärd’s sketch, the circle from representations of female genitalia in the mocking of Colonel Örneklo and the story of Queen Margaret’s coin to impotence is complete. Examples show the close connection between laughter and gender and more specifically, the rhetorical potential of unmanliness as a political weapon for either questioning or legitimizing male power and prestige. Through contrastive effect, allusions to unmanliness could also infuse already established concepts like virtue and courage with new meanings, in order to either discredit or masculinize. In contrast to horizontal cultural and social categories like class, notions of manliness and unmanliness viewed all men alike by laying down the lowest common nominator of what was required to pass as a real man in a particular culture. Not even a king could in the end ignore or escape rumours about impotence and this made him even more ridiculous and laughable!

**Notes**

1. Ågren, 1976.
2. Gustafsson 1959.
4. Olai/Sylvius 1678, 328.
5. Quoted and translated from Johannesson 1982, 181.
6. SRARP XI 1672, 3/10, 93.
7. Svea Hovrätt Huvudarkivet EVI a2aa:129 Liber causarum 100:2, mål nr 10.
8. Horn 1629–1672, 53.
9. For the sexual and gendered meanings of rapiers and swords, see Wirikander 1982, 47: “a man without a sword is like a man without trousers.”
11. Ibid. 45.
15. Then Svenska Argus 1732, no. XXXVIII, 290–291.
17. For the association of the French with effeminacy in an English context, see Cohen 1999.
20. Gjörwell 1791, 90.
22. Qvick 1766, 5.
23. Sedolärande Mercurius 1731, no. 22, April 27.
24. Sedolärande Mercurius 1730, no.10, August 11.
26. For a discussion of virility and manliness, see Liliequist 2007.
29. Then Swänska Argus 1732, no. XXXI, 231.
30. Liliequist 2011.
32. Stockholmsposten 1779, no. 85, March 26.
33. For this distinction, see Rauser 2008, ch. 2.
34. Philolaus Parrhesiastes 1768, 22.
37. Ibid. 117.
admire for Henrik IV as “le roi modèle.”
39. For a discussion about Gustav’s strategic uses of women and femininity, see
Liliequist 2012, 106–199.

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Svenska Vitterhetssamfundet.


SRAP Sveriges Ridderskaps och Adels Riksdags-Protokoll. Stockholm: Riksdagens tryckeriexp 1891 (XI), 1894 (XIII). printed by Riksdagens tryckeriexp Volume XI (1891) and Volume XIII (1894)

Stockholmsposten. 1779. Stockholm.


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