

“A bowrd about bed”

Women’s Community of Laughter  
and the Woes of Marriage in Dunbar’s  
*The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*



Than all thai leuch apon loft with latis full mery  
And raucht the cop round about, full off riche wynis,  
And ralzeit lang or thai wald rest, with ryatus speche.

(ll. 147–49)<sup>1</sup>

[They all laughed loudly with the merriest behavior, and passed the cup round and round, full of rich wines, and for a long time they went on jesting with a riot of conversation.]



In William Dunbar’s *Tretis*, two married women and a widow gather together in the enclosure of a garden to complain about men and marriage, finding comfort in the exchange of shared woes. Whereas Boccaccio’s ladies restrain their laughter and blush because they are in mixed company, these women give free rein to their laughter because they are in a women-only group in a garden they believe to be sheltered from the eyes and ears of men. The poem is recounted not from their perspective, however, but from that of the male narrator who, having happened upon them while out for a moonlight stroll, eavesdrops on their merrymaking. Spying upon them from behind a

1. *The Poems of William Dunbar*. Translations have been taken from A. D. Hope, *A Midsummer Eve’s Dream: Variations on a Theme by William Dunbar*. The date of the poem is uncertain. There are two extant copies of the poem, a print dated around 1507, and a manuscript, the Maitland Folio, compiled between 1570 and 1586.

hedge, he recounts the scene, concluding his account in a way that invites his audience to judge the women:

3e auditoris most honorable, that eris has gevin  
 Onto this vncouth aventur quhilk airly me happinnit,  
 Of thir thre wanton wiffis that I haif writtin heir,  
 Quhilk wald 3e wail to 3our wif, gif 3e suld wed one?  
 (527–30)

[You most distinguished auditors, who have given ear  
 to this extraordinary adventure of the three wanton women  
 I here have written down and that happened to me early one  
 morning,  
 which of them would you choose as your wife, if you had to wed  
 one?]

The narrator's question to his "distinguished auditors" as to which of the women they would marry implies a male audience. Dunbar was a Scottish court poet, the recipient of a royal pension from James IV, and a priest pledged to celibacy and ordained in around 1504. The audience for his poem was most likely a mixed audience of men and women at the court. Some scholars have even proposed that Dunbar had in mind a predominantly female audience, particularly given that the queen of Scotland, the English Margaret Tudor, who married James IV, was his patron.<sup>2</sup> Many of Dunbar's poems are in fact dedicated to the queen, and quite a few contain explicit praises of women. This poem, however, announces no interest in women readers, and its portrayal of women's laughter is thus quite different from that in the *Decameron*. The women's raucous laughter over their husbands' various inadequacies serves to indicate their less-than-ladylike demeanor, thus making them the object of the poem's satire; in the process, it also points to the kinds of things that medieval men worried might make their wives laugh.

### *Women's Private Laughter and the Male Eavesdropper*

Like Boccaccio's ladies, Dunbar's women are distinguished in social status. They are richly arrayed in kerchiefs of fine cloth, have the shining gold

2. For example, Scott, *Dunbar*, 191.

tresses and lily-white complexion of romance heroines, and they meet together to chat in a pastoral setting. The two wives are noblewomen, being married to lords (36), and the widow claims to be of noble birth (312). After each woman has spoken of her woes in marriage, the narrator describes all three women's laughter in similar terms. After the second wife has spoken her piece, for example, the narrator informs us:

Loud lauchand, the laif allowit hir mekle.  
Thir gay wiffis maid gam amang the grene leiffis,  
Thai drank and did away dule vnder derne bewis,  
Thai swapit of the sueit wyne, thai swan quhit of hewis,  
Bot all the pertlyar, in plane, thai put out ther vocis.  
(240-44)

[The others, laughing loudly, praised her highly.  
Those merry wives made sport among the green leaves;  
they drank and they drowned their sorrows under the sheltering  
branches;  
they drank heartily of the sweet wine, those swan-white beauties;  
but all the livelier they voiced their grievances without restraint.]

The loud laughter, the merry mood, the drinking of wine, and the bucolic context echo the description after the first wife has spoken, cited at the beginning of this chapter and are repeated yet a third time after the widow speaks:

Lowd thai lewch all the laif and loffit hir mekle,  
And said thai suld exampill tak of her souerane teching  
And wirk efter hir wordis, that woman wes so prudent.  
Than culit thai their mouthis with comfortable drinkis,  
And carpit full cummerlik, with cop going round.  
(506-10)

[The others broke into gales of laughter, praised her highly,  
and said they would follow the example of her sovereign teaching  
and act as she had advised, so prudent a woman was she.  
Then they cooled their mouths with comforting draughts  
and gossiped cozily as the cup went round.]

In all three descriptions of the women, the narrator emphasizes the loudness of the laughter and the “riatous” speech, the copious drinking of the wine, and the specifically female context (“cummerlik”) of their private merrymaking.

It has been argued that this loud laughter is meant to represent “the worst feature of their depravity,” and that “it would shock the religious and idealistic in the audience.”<sup>3</sup> Evidence that their loud laughter may have been seen as a sign of their immorality is found in the *Documenta matris ad filiam*, a late-fifteenth-century Scottish conduct book in which a mother instructs her daughter, and that warns women to be “Nocht lowd of lauchtir na of langage crouß” [Neither loud of laughter, nor crass of language, l. 15].<sup>4</sup> The injunction to refrain from loud laughter is joined with the familiar warnings not to wander about town, nor to spend too much time with men lest their honor be besmirched.

The women’s heavy drinking would also have indicated to the audience their questionable moral character. According to *The Good Wife*, a conduct book written no later than 1350, women were told not to pass too much time in “passing the cup.”<sup>5</sup> This concern for women’s drinking occurs as well in the earlier writings of both Marbod of Rennes and Andreas Capellanus, who accused women of habitual drunkenness.<sup>6</sup> Dunbar’s own poem, “The Tua Cummaris,” imagines that when women get together, they like to drink, even if it is the beginning of Lent.<sup>7</sup> In his *Treatise on Laughter*, Joubert links wine and laughter, reasoning that since wine of good quality enriches the blood, and since good blood leads to laughter, a

3. Ibid., 186.

4. Another text, *The Thewis off Gudwomen*, similarly enjoins women to be “Nocht loud of lange na lauchtir crouß” (l. 15). Both texts are found in Girvan, ed., “*Ratis Raving*” and *Other Early Scots Poems on Morals*. An older edition is that by Lumby, “*Ratis Raving*” and *Other Moral and Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*. It is worth noting that men, too, are counseled in the *Foly of Fulys and the Thewis of Wysmen* not to laugh too loudly among men. In context, however, the passage is more about how to be congenial, making jokes all can understand, rather than only a few (Lumby, l. 103, p. 80). In the manuals for women, laughter is explicitly connected to speaking little, not wandering about, nor speaking with men.

5. *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, stanza 25.

6. Marbod of Rennes, *Liber decem capitulorum*, chap. 3, p. 15. Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, bk. 3, p. 207. A fabliau that satirizes female drunkenness is “Des .III. Dames de Paris,” in Montaiglon and Raynaud, *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux*, 3:145–55. The women become so drunk that they take off their clothes and dance outside of the tavern. They are discovered collapsed in the center of town and, assumed to be dead, are buried, only to revive, demanding more food and wine.

7. *Poems of William Dunbar*, no. 57, “Richt arely one Ask Wedinsday.”

person who drinks wine will laugh.<sup>8</sup> Although Joubert does not specifically discuss women in his section on wine, the medical understanding of the importance of bodily humors in laughter makes it not surprising that women’s drinking and laughter were commonly linked. Dunbar’s loudly laughing, heavily drinking women betoken feminine carnality and excess.<sup>9</sup>

The lascivious nature of the women’s jesting is furthermore related to the subject of their jokes. Whereas Boccaccio’s ladies laugh at everything from corrupt friars who get their due to women who are too stupid to realize that they are being mocked, Dunbar’s women laugh only about men and their sexual inadequacies, and their language is far more explicit than the euphemisms considered appropriate for the medieval lady. The word in the poem that succinctly illustrates the fusion between sexuality and laughter is *wanton*. The narrator first describes the widow as “wanton of laitis” [of wanton habits, 37]. At the end of the poem, the narrator asks his audience which of the three “wantoun wiffis” they would marry if they had the choice. The word *wanton* can simply mean playful or jesting, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as the second definition “lascivious, unchaste, lewd,” noting, however, that it has this meaning only when applied to women. Although the word in its pejorative sense could be applied to men or women in the Middle Ages, it eventually comes to be applied to women alone. The *Tretis*, which highlights the word, already suggests the fusion of lasciviousness and jesting when applied to women.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Dunbar imagines women’s laughter differently from Boccaccio, who although he insinuates that laughing about sex can compromise a woman’s modesty, insists that his ladies have remained virtuous and that their laughter is justified and appropriate.

One reason for this difference is that Dunbar’s women are married, and therefore have the sexual experiences that Boccaccio’s ladies presumably do not have. But more important is that the three women believe they are

8. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 105–7.

9. Other elements of the women’s description may also have suggested unwholesome features. Their hair is loose, not worn under a headdress as married women would do (Hope, *A Midsummer Eve’s Dream*, 10). Their shining green attire, the hawthorn under which they sit, and their meeting time of Midsummer Eve are suggestive of elves or fairies (11–23).

10. In the *Thewis of Gud Women*, the word *wantone* or *wantonneß* is associated both with wandering about town (110–12) and with *giglotryß*, which Lumby glosses as “giddiness,” but should also perhaps be understood as frivolity or foolish playing around. The text notes a few lines later that women should spurn such frivolity (“Nocht leif to wantoune giglotryß”). The *Documenta* similarly cautions against “vantoune giglotriß” (159).

alone, speaking openly to each other as women (“full cummerlik”). Their private community of women is reflected in their choice to exchange not fictional tales, but their own personal life stories, which are predominantly of a sexual nature. The first wife, for example, complains that her elderly husband is repulsive to her not only because of his scratchy beard, but because of his inadequate male member: “Quhen kissis me that carybald, than kyndillis all my sorow. / As birs of ane brym bair his berd is als stif, / Bot soft and soupill as the silk is his sary lwme” [When he kisses me, that cannibal, then all my misery flares up. / His beard is as stiff as the bristles of a fierce boar, / but his wretched tool is soft and supple like silk, 94–96]. While the wife has simply used the word for “tool” (*lwme*), the sexual connotation of the word is obvious. She later notes derisively his “rousty raid” (141), which could be translated as a rusty raid, ride, or rod, all three of which allude to the sexual act.<sup>11</sup>

The second wife makes similar charges against her husband’s tool. Her husband, although not elderly, has been a lecher for so long that his tool has lost its power: “He has bene lychour so lang quhill lost is his natur, / His lwme is vaxit larbar and lysis in to swoune” [He has been a lecher so long that he has lost his virility. / His tool has grown weak and lies in a swoon, 174–76]. Her criticism of her husband becomes even more blatantly sexual when she mocks his “3oldin 3erd” [exhausted rod or penis, 220]. The widow complains that she found her husband so loathsome that when he climbed on top of her she would imagine another man because she could never enjoy his “myrthles raid.” Most outrageous is the widow’s description of her current loose lifestyle now that her husband is dead. When she is in the company of barons and knights, all clamoring for her attention, some of the men, she says, pass her the wine cup or kiss and hug her, and another “a stif standand thing staiffis in mi neiff” [thrusts a stiff, standing thing into my fist, 486]. The women’s references to silky tools, flaccid rods, and mirthless rides distinguish the wanton laughter of the three wives from the blushing laughter of Boccaccio’s ladies.

The private laughter of Dunbar’s wives versus the more public laughter of Boccaccio’s ladies raises the question of whether there is any fundamental distinction between modest ladies and wanton women. Would Boccaccio’s ladies have engaged in equally raucous laughter had the three men not been

11. The *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* notes an explicitly sexual meaning for *raide*.

there to watch over them? The widow in fact boasts that when she is in public, she behaves as though offended when she hears bawdy talk: "At langage of lichory I leit as I war crabit" (445). Her feigned illness at hearing naughty words suggests a concern among medieval men that women put on an appearance of modesty in public when they are actually quite immodest by nature.<sup>12</sup> Treatises from Ovid through the sixteenth century list women's use of artifice as one of their most dangerous weapons. In the eleventh century, Marbod of Rennes warned men, "Beware the honied poisons, the sweet songs and the pull of the dark depths. Do not let the charm of contrived appearances seduce you."<sup>13</sup> Dunbar uses the women's laughter to foreground the ugly reality that lay underneath courtly artifice, which serves as a satirical warning to men of what can happen if they are not sufficiently vigilant of their wives' (and daughters') behavior.<sup>14</sup>

This satirical focus is supported by the poem's narrative structure. Although the narrator reports the women's speech in direct discourse (with occasional interventions to make transitions from one speaker to the next), he reminds his audience that the women's "pastance most mery" has been transmitted through his pen. The power he has to invade the women's space is clear in the comment of the second wife, who claims she will speak freely since "ther is no spy neir" (161). The narrator enjoys an advantage over the women, who are unaware of his presence, and by telling the story, he increases the number of eavesdroppers since he allows the audience to spy on the women along with him.<sup>15</sup> This ironic invasion of the women's privacy makes clear the collision between the positions held by the women: as speaking subjects and as objects of the male gaze.<sup>16</sup>

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12. See my discussion of this implication in chapter 2.

13. *Liber decem capitulorum*, chap. 3, p. 71. See also Howard Bloch's discussion of the formulation of woman as ornament or decoration (*Medieval Misogyny*, 39–46).

14. Kinsley, *The Poems of William Dunbar*, 259, notes the contrast between the courtly artifices of the women's outer appearance and the less than courtly reality that their private behavior reveals.

15. Joldersma, "The Eavesdropping Male," 217.

16. For a related example of how Dunbar uses the male gaze to subvert women's power, see Louise Fradenburg's fascinating discussion of Dunbar's poem, "Ane Blak Moir," which parodies the genre of the love lyric by incongruously praising a black woman, thereby implying that there is little difference between the idealized white ladies of his poetry and the black lady, traditionally viewed as exotic, but not beautiful. Fradenburg argues that Dunbar uses the male gaze made possible through the work of his pen in order to reverse his submissive position before his patron the queen to a position of power and control (*City, Marriage, Tournament*, 261).

The satirical effect of the narrative frame is furthermore strengthened by the irony of the narrator's use of seemingly complimentary words to describe actions that have just been shown to be anything but praiseworthy. For example, after the first wife has berated her husband, our narrator calls her "the semely" [that fair one, 146]. Given the woman's unbecomingly blunt descriptions of her husband's sexual inadequacies, the narrator surely means his readers to judge the woman as anything but "semely." Nor is it likely that the audience is truly expected to find the second wife "amyable" (239). Although the women laugh at how they have deceived men, the narrative structure ensures that they have not deceived the male audience, who is instead ironically invited to assess the women's desirability as marriage partners. How might women have reacted to their exclusion as readers or listeners of the poem?

### *Women's Counternarrative: Mockery as Emasculation*

To infer what the poem suggests about the pleasure of laughter for women in particular, we need to consider the poem not for what its structure instructs the audience to understand, but for what it implicitly tries to cover over. The widow and the two wives are indisputably targets of laughter because of their stereotypically lascivious speech, but they have criticisms of their own to make about men; in their jokes, they tell their version of the "truth" about men as they know it. Their wit (wit being linked etymologically to knowledge) is in fact the demonstration of their knowledge of men, a counternarrative that tells a different story than that which men tell about themselves.

Much of the women's joking is specifically targeted at male anatomy. Boccaccio's comic tales involving sex rarely single out the male member for attack, usually pairing male and female members, such as "mortar" and "pestle" or "Devil" and "Hell." The laughter of Dunbar's women is of a more "castrating" nature, for all of them use terms such as "sary lwme" or "lwme waxit larbar" to ridicule their husbands' impotence. Indeed, the notion that women complain about men who don't measure up, which endures in today's popular culture, is evident in a fifteenth-century joke about a woman who was asked what kind of penises women preferred: big, small, or medium-sized. When asked to explain her response—"Medium-sized ones are the best"—she quipped, "Because there aren't any



big ones.”<sup>17</sup> But more than size or shape, it is the inadequacy of the sexual performance that receives the brunt of the women’s invective, such as when the widow describes her strategy for enduring the (infrequent) repugnant lovemaking of her second husband:

Bot of ane bowrd in to bed I sall 3ow breif 3it:  
Quhen he ane hal 3ear wes hanyt, and him behuffit rage,  
And I wes laith to be loppin with sic a lob avoir,  
Also lang as he wes on loft I lukit on him neuer  
Na leit neuer enter in my thocht that he my thing persit.  
Bot ay in mynd ane othir man ymagynit that I haid,  
Or ellis had I neuer mery bene at that myrthles raid.

(385–91)

[But next I must tell you a joke about bed:  
when, after a whole year of restraint he suddenly felt the urge,  
I was loath to be leaped by such a clumsy cart-horse.  
All the time he was on top, I never once looked at him  
nor would I let myself think that he was piercing my thing,  
but always I would imagine [that it was] another man I had there,  
otherwise I should have had no pleasure from that cheerless  
assault (or ride).]

Her mockery of her husband’s deficient performance shows her to be sexually obsessed, typical of satirical portraits of women in medieval literature, but also surely points to medieval husbands’ fears of their sexual inadequacy, and the damage it could do to a wife’s respect for him. As Jean de Condé states in his fabliau in which a noblewoman mocks the manhood of her admirer,

Car il n’est femme terrienne  
Qui ja peüst .I. homme amer,  
Mès qu’ele l’oïst diffamer  
D’estre mauvès ouvrier en lit

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17. From an anonymous Italian compilation (ca. 1480) called the *Detti piacevoli* or *Bel libretto*, in Bowen, *One Hundred Renaissance Jokes*, 28. See also the fabliau “Sohait des Vez,” in which a woman dreams she is in a “prick market” in which even the lowest-quality pricks are better than her husband’s (Noomen and Van den Boogaard, *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, 6:261–72).

De fere l'amoureux delit,  
Et sus ce point fu ramposnez.

[For there is not a woman on earth who can love a man without slandering him for being a lousy worker in bed when it comes to making love, and for this he was mocked].<sup>18</sup>

Dunbar's text, like the fabliau, voices concern not just with male inadequacy, but with women's mockery of it and the shame it could bring men. Indeed, the shameful aspect of the widow's joke is suggested by her calling it a *bowrd*, which was usually "applied to jests with a cruel edge, or to crude practical jokes."<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the widow's joking targets not only her husband's poor performance in bed, but his unawareness of his clumsiness. As Dunbar's narrator invites his audience to peek into the secrets of these seemingly courtly women, the widow invites her fellow women (and readers) to learn of her private assessments that deflate her husband's self-unaware sexual performance as that of a clumsy cart horse. The second wife deflates her husband more explicitly, noting that he struts about like an arrogant dandy, whereas in reality he is impotent as a result of his lechery:

He has bene lychour so lang quhill lost is his natur,  
His lwme is vaxit larbar, and lysis in to swoune:  
Wes never sugeorne wer set na on that snaill tyrit,  
For efter sevin oulkis rest it will nought rap anys.

.....

And ȝit he is als brankand with bonet on syde,  
And blenkand to the brichtest that in the burght duellis.  
(174–81)

[His tool has grown weak and lies in a swoon;  
nor is it any use to give that tired snail a period of repose. . . .

18. "Le Sentier batu," ll. 127–32, in Montaiglon and Raynaud, *Recueil général*, 3:247–51. Chaucer's Merchant's Tale may also be an inspiration for this scene, for May is similarly shown as not liking husband's sexual advances or "playing": "But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte, Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte, In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene; She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene" (IV.1851–54).

19. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 19. Bawcutt specifically notes that the women's raucous joking at the expense of their husbands "exposes not only women's desires but men's fears—concerning sexual satisfaction, material possessions, and, above all, power" (328). See also Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 261.

And yet he swaggers about with his bonnet at a rakish tilt  
and making eyes at the prettiest girls that live in town.]

The wife's "and ʒit" unmasks her husband's performance as a sham, as a few lines later, she points to his unjustified boasting: "He ralis and makes repet with ryatus wordis, / Ay rvsing him of his radis and rageing in chalmer" (193–94). The lines criticize the boasting ("ralis," "ryatus wordis," "rusing") more than the sexual performance itself. Such mockery of men's sexual performances as well as their pretensions parallels rituals documented by anthropological studies. One particularly intriguing example is the tradition of the *tafritals* in contemporary Yemeni society. Carla Makhoulf describes how in these regular afternoon gatherings, groups of up to fifty women congregate in a room to smoke, dance, tell stories, and especially to ridicule men through jokes or even satirical plays.<sup>20</sup>

The emasculation of men by ridiculing their performances is most clear in the speech of the widow, who made her husband do "woman's work," as she confides to her gossips:

I maid that wif carll to werk all womenis werkis,  
And laid all manly materis and mensk in this eird.  
Than said I to my cummaris in counsall about,  
"Se how I cabeld ʒone cout with a kene brydill."  
(351–54)

[I put that ninny to work only at women's tasks  
and made him give up all masculine business and all earthly signs  
of manhood.  
Then I would say to my gossips round about when we were  
chatting:  
"Look how I haltered that colt with a tight bridle."]

By forcing her husband to abandon his performance of all that "masculine business," she suggests an equivalence between male sexual potency and the social roles allotted to men. A man who performs poorly in bed becomes, in fact, a woman, doing her work. Like the farce wife of chapter 5, who demonstrates her mastery over her husbands by making him do the

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20. Makhoulf, *Changing Veils*, 46.

housework, the widow's boast about "bridling" her husband equates sexual performance, rather than male anatomy, with the masculine role.<sup>21</sup>

The tenuous link between male anatomy and masculine authority is suggested in the poem's use of the word *pen*, which can mean either penis or pen. The word first appears when the first wife remarks, scathingly, "And thocht his pen purly me payis in bed, / His purse pays richely in recompense efter" [And though his prick pays me poorly in bed, / his purse pays richly in compensation afterwards, 135–36]. The wife's punning use of the word "recompense" clearly shows her preference for the more satisfying cash payment over the meager compensation provided by her husband's tool. Later the word is also used to refer to the writer's tool, the "pen" the narrator has used to write down the account of the women's conversation. While on the surface the narrator's reminder that "with my pen did report ther pastance most mery" (526) appears to put a lid on the women's unruly conversation and reassert control, the resonance with the "pen" that all three women have just lambasted in the preceding verses was surely a self-conscious move on Dunbar's part to symbolically, for humorous effect, emasculate his narrator. This playful move, of course, is a way of asserting the primacy of discursive power over sexual potency, for the author "puts himself on top" by laughing at his own narrator.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the dual meaning of the pun, given the context of the women's covert resistance to the authority of their husbands (especially as seen with the widow) suggests a concern that to disparage men's masculinity is also to undermine their authority. One is reminded of Hélène Cixous's ridiculing of men's "little pocket signifier" [petit signifiant de poche], an allusion to psychoanalytical theories of the phallus as the privileged vehicle for subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> Whereas the Wife of Bath laments that men have written history and have therefore controlled the representation of women, the implication of the wife's ridicule of her husband's "pen" is that this male privilege is based on a pretty shaky claim.

21. It should be added that the fact that the widow notes that her contempt for her husband increases the more he allows himself to be bridled also relates to the fundamentally conservative message of the domestic farce: it is better for men and women alike if men perform their natural role as head of the house.

22. Although I would not go so far as Spearing does in calling Dunbar "a fascinated celibate spy" who writes out of sexual frustration (*Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 265), the "pen" pun certainly suggests an awareness of some kind of relationship between sexual and authorial power.

23. Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 890; "Rire de la Méduse," 51.

Deflating men’s (writing) tool and the various discursive traditions it has produced, the women in fact produce a counternarrative of their own. The widow, as the most experienced of the group, asks the others to reveal the “truth” of their own experiences as married women:

“Bewrie,” said the wedo, “ze woddit wemen zing,  
Quhat mirth ze fand in maryage sen ze war menis wyffis.  
Reveill gif ze rewit that rakles conditioun,  
Or gif that ever ze luffit leyd vpon lyf mair  
Nor thame that ze zour fayth hes festinit for euer,  
Or gif ze think, had ze chois, that ze wald cheis better.”

(41–46)

[Disclose, said the Widow, you young married women,  
what enjoyment you have found in marriage since you became  
men’s wives;  
reveal whether you have ever repented that reckless contract,  
or if ever you loved a living man more  
than those to whom you have irrevocably fastened your allegiance;  
or, if you had the choice, whether you think you would make a  
better one?]

Her command to the women to reveal the truth of their experience, along with the riddlelike form of her question, suggest a parody of the medieval *demande d’amour*, a courtly pastime in which young men and women asked each other such questions as whether one gains more joy from seeing ones beloved or from thinking about him.<sup>24</sup> The three women debunk the elevated status of love in the pastime, underlining only the disappointments love and men have brought them.

Their bitter revelations could be heard as a cutting response to the tradition of male-authored treatises against marriage in which men complain about women. In the enormously popular Latin *De Coniuge non ducenda* of the first half of the thirteenth century, the anonymous author tallies the sufferings awaiting the married man and quips, “In brief, to sum up marriage well, / It’s either purgatory or hell. / In hell there’s neither rest

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24. Bawcutt notes the literary evidence of this tradition in Scotland (*Dunbar the Makar*, 327–29). See also chapter 2 on this pastime.

nor peace— / A husband's pains have no release."<sup>25</sup> Whereas male authors complain about the woes of marriage because of female deceitfulness, bossiness, lechery, and more, the women come up with a list of their own complaints against their husbands. The satirical tone in the antimarriage treatises is matched by the sarcasm of the widow's tone as she asks the women to talk about the "blist ban," like the Wife of Bath's sarcastic rhetorical questions that question the legitimacy of clerical discourse.

In addition to leading the women in forming their own story about men, the widow becomes a kind of mock teacher, claiming like the Wife of Bath that she has knowledge from which women can learn: "Wnto my lesson 3e lyth and leir at me wit" (257). She teaches them how to manipulate their husbands more effectively in a kind of mock sermon in which she uses her life as a kind of exemplum:

Now tydis me for to talk, my taill it is nixt.  
 God my spreit now inspir and my speche quykkin,  
 And send me sentence to say substantious and noble,  
 Sa that my preching may pers 3our perverst hertis,  
 And mak yow mekar to men in maneris and conditiounis.  
 (246–50)

[It is now my turn to talk, my story comes next:  
 May God inspire my spirit, enliven my speech  
 and send me noble and worthwhile ideas to express  
 so that my preaching may pierce your obstinate hearts  
 and make you meeker to men in your behavior and in your  
 demands.]

Although the wife claims she will make the women meek and obedient wives, she in fact teaches them how to deceive men, to pretend to be sweet as angels, but sting like adders (265–66). In other words, she urges them to play the role of docile wives ("counterfeit gud maneris," 259) so that they can pursue their own desires. The widow's lesson and the responses of her "pupils" counter and subvert the good-wife treatises, conduct books

25. Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed*, 129. The genre of the antimatrimonial treatise stretches back to the church fathers (particularly Jerome) and resurges in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, continuing well into the sixteenth century with Rabelais and the *Quinze joyes de mariage*, translated into Scots and popular with Scottish readers (Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 340). See the other antimatrimonial treatises in Blamires.

that provide a model of wives as decorous and submissive.<sup>26</sup> Such “teaching” among women is of course double-edged. On the one hand, it serves to confirm the satire against women by showing them to be duplicitous; the very title of the poem pokes fun at what passes for a “tretis” among women, exposing women’s knowledge (*wit*) as laughable and a source of potential trouble for men.

On the other hand, the parody of the women’s teaching also suggests the fun that they have at playing with authoritative (male) discourse. Their subversion consists not only of returning tit for tat against the anti-marriage tradition or pretending to be meek; they also play with the modes of authoritative speech. The widow frames her speech to the other women in the form of a mock sermon, appropriating and implicitly deflating the authority of preachers to preach sermons on women’s faults.<sup>27</sup> As a confessor’s role is to make sinners repent their sins by telling the truth, the widow, with a wink, asks the wives to “reveill” (43) and “confese” (153) the truth of their experiences. She also says she will use her “preching” to pierce the “perverst hertis” of her companions, whose “sin” is their ignorance at how to trick their husbands (249). This appropriation of official Christian offices is further suggested in the widow’s playful statement that she has recounted the (saint’s) legend of her life (“This is the legeand of my lif, thought Latyne it be nane,” 504). Like the Wife of Bath and the wife in the Shipman’s Tale, the widow parodies the official discourse of the male world whose language is Latin, and transforms her own sufferings and “martyrdom” into matter for a mock saint’s life—a saint’s life that is in the vernacular, the language to which women more often had access.<sup>28</sup> The

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26. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 336–37. See Rasmussen’s similar interpretation of the German “Stepmother and Daughter” poem, which in some manuscripts also has an eavesdropping narrator who tries to co-opt the mother’s teaching by moralizing to his readers on the dangers of women. A significant difference between these German poems and Dunbar’s, however, is that Dunbar’s women are noblewomen, not the lower-class women, perhaps even prostitutes of the German corpus (*Mothers and Daughters in Medieval German Literature*, 189–221).

27. Scholars have noted the poem’s affinity with the *sermon joyeux*. For a full discussion of the various genres underlying the poem’s humor (*demande d’amour*, debate poetry, *chanson de mal mariée*) see Percy, “The Genre of William Dunbar’s *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*,” 58–74.

28. The Wife of Bath says she will show the tribulations of marriage in which she is an expert, and she will do this using “ensamples mo than ten” (179), preaching through *exempla* the truth of her sermon. Another possible source for the widow’s sermon is the Shipman’s Tale, where the wife says, “Than wolde I telle a legende of my lyf / What I have suffered sith I was a wyf” (VII.145–46).

women laugh after this and appear to participate in her parody of official teaching, for they say that they “suld exampill tak of her souerane teching” [would follow the example of her sovereign teaching, 507].

On one level, the wife’s mock sermon can be read as a serious comment on how older women can corrupt younger ones.<sup>29</sup> But the context of the women’s laughter makes the wives’ use of the words “soverane teching” sound equally as ironic as the widow’s use of “legeand.” When we interpret the references to preaching and saint’s lives as a case of the women consciously parodying those traditions, what we hear is not so much blasphemous preaching as playful ridicule of dominant discursive modes. The playfulness of women adopting the preaching mode is evident in the enormously popular fifteenth-century *Évangiles des quenouilles* (Gospels of distaffs), in which six married women described as “doctoresses” share their knowledge with each other during the course of six evenings of spinning and have it recorded by a male scribe. The women share home remedies, various folk beliefs, and sayings about men and marriage. While it is clear that the narrator’s claim that he has agreed to describe their proceedings to the honor and glory of women is ironic, since he describes folk beliefs and things “sans aucune raison ou bonne consequence” [without meaning or purpose], it is important to note that what the women say is perhaps less interesting than the fact that they parody official teaching for their *own amusement*. For example, in the first “chapter” of the gospel recounted the first day, the female narrator, Ysengrine, says that husbands who fritter away their wives’ dowries will have to answer to God. She or one of the other women adds a gloss (*glose*) to her chapter, stating that any husband who disobeys this chapter will end up in the “purgatoire des mauvais maris,” where they will be placed in a vat of burning sulphur, unless they do penance.<sup>30</sup> This comment suggests the kind of imaginary retribution

29. See, for example, Reiss, *William Dunbar*, 123–24.

30. *Les Évangiles des quenouilles*, ll. 219–27. The French versions first circulated in Flanders and Picardy, but translations also circulated in other European countries. See, for example, the discussion of the Dutch tradition in Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society*, 25–26. The variety of manuscripts, from luxurious illuminated manuscripts of the fifteenth century to the small printed copies of the sixteenth, suggests the wide audience of the *Évangiles*. One of its illustrious women owners was Marie de Luxembourg. It was also widely cited, both in didactic works and comic literature, particularly farces. This wide diffusion, and its varied use, suggests how the text played on several registers. As Jeay notes, it was both positive and negative in regard to women, both comic and serious, fundamentally ambiguous (13).



the women conjure up for husbands, who normally find no punishment for such “transgressions.” Their gloss is in comic contradiction to official teachings on husband’s control over their wives’ property, and the women, rather than commenting seriously on it, instead laugh.

What we see is not a brewing rebellion to overthrow bad husbands but women taking pleasure together at the subversion of male power they are able to effect in their minds, through their laughter. That their mock “preaching” is aimed at producing laughter more than corrupting other women is especially suggested in the last chapter of the day, when Ysengrine shares a remedy for women with problems with their breasts: they should have their husband make three circles around their breasts with his “instrument naturel,” for this will heal their affliction. The women laugh loudly at this “joyeuse conclusion” and promise to circulate her gospels to those who would not have a chance to read about them in the book (429–42). *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen*, like the *Évangiles*, shows women having fun with their own playful narrative, their laughter allowing them to come together in the company of other women and subvert conventional male-authored discourse in a way that they cannot do in the world of men.

### *Laughter as Relief for the Woes of (Mis)Marriage*

More than a head-on challenge to masculine power, the women’s laughter shows them privately carving out a space for themselves in which they can exert some control over social conditions that are largely beyond their control, namely their inability to choose their own marriage partners. It has often been noted that the poem shows the women to be lascivious. It is true that the first wife argues that even birds do not stay with one mate, but rather take a new partner each year (56–67). The widow, for her part, exults in those occasions when she simultaneously entertains a whole roomful of lusty knights and barons and other bachelors (476–504). But the poem also has the women voice their disappointment at not having been able to choose their partners. Whereas the male narrator asks his male audience sarcastically which of the women they would choose as a wife, the widow asks the wives whether “had 3e chois, that 3e wald cheis better?” [if you had the choice, would you make a better one? 46]. In saying “*If you had* the choice,” the widow underlines the fact that they do *not* have the

choice. In noble or wealthy bourgeois families, husbands were chosen by the family in order to cement political alliances with other families or keep land or wealth within the hands of already existing alliances, which meant that the young girl's personal inclinations were disregarded in favor of family interests. The second wife describes her husband as a "whore-master" whom she has caught committing adultery many a time. His sexual excesses had weakened him even before he "chesit" her (178), and now she complains that she spends many a sleepless night, tossing and turning, and cursing her wicked kinsmen who chose poorly for her, casting her away on such a poor specimen of manhood when there were many finer knights in the land to choose from (213–16). She laments that, now married, she cannot undo her marriage and "cheise agane" (208). The first wife does not mention kinsmen explicitly, but she twice mentions her lack of choice (54 and 75), and it is likely that she also was not permitted to choose her husband, who is clearly much older than she, since she frequently uses the word *ald* (old) and describes him as

ane wallidrag, ane worme, ane auld wobat carle,  
 A waistit wolroun na worth bot wourdis to clatter,  
 Ane bumbart, ane dronbee, ane bag full of flewme,  
 Ane scabbit skarth, ane scorpioun, ane scutarde behind.

(89–92)

[ a slack sloven, a worm, an old crawly caterpillar,  
 a worn-out boar good for nothing but clap-trap;  
 a bumbler, a drone bee, a bag full of phlegm;  
 a scabby scrag, a scorpion, a poop-bum.]

The descriptions of the husband would seem to suggest that she has been given to an older man, a mismatch not uncommon in the Middle Ages, as historical records indicate.<sup>31</sup> This practice makes its way into the literary corpus, the fabliaux authors, for example, openly taking the side of women

31. See David Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 103–11, who documents cases of wives who are sometimes as much as a generation younger than their husbands. Herlihy uses decision theory to explain this difference. Because customs of dowry were favorable to men, they could wait for the "best offer" from the bride's family, whereas the bride, having less favorable terms in the dowry, needed to go with the first offer or risk not being married at all. For a discussion of the lack of choice of marriage partners in Scotland, see Marshall, *Virgins and Viragos*, 22–27.

who have been married either to those too old for them, or too low in social station.<sup>32</sup> Chaucer's Merchant's Tale, which illustrates the comic mismatch resulting from the marriage of old January and young May, was in fact probably one of Dunbar's sources.<sup>33</sup>

It is only the widow who now has free choice, for now that her mourning for her deceased husband is over, she can now enjoy and in turn please a whole crowd of men around her: "Thar is no liffand leid so law of degre / That sall me luf unluffit, I am so loik hertit" [There is no man living of such low degree / that he shall love me and not be loved in return, so tender-hearted am I, 497-98]. The widow conjures up a sort of "free market" where the woman can choose and be chosen, love and be loved.<sup>34</sup> The widow's "tender-heartedness" is of course both a parody on the courtly motif of the lady's pity and an implicit condemnation of the widow's rampant sexuality. But what is also emphasized in the widow's advice to her younger companions is the financial and legal management that women should learn in the face of their lack of control over the marriage itself. She notes, for example, how she cajoled her first husband, an older man who is ill-tempered and full of phlegm (272), into signing over his property to and legitimizing her illegitimate son, who he believed to be his own. The widow then boasts that she was a "wis woman" who achieved more with the force of her "wylis" than with the strength of her hands. Such financial acumen was probably what led her to marry her second husband, a merchant. Her strategies make him give the bulk of his wealth to her own sons at the expense of the children of his first marriage. The widow then notes the delicious irony that "wise men" often claim that women are bad at business (408-9). The widow may well have been denied the choice of her first husband, but once married, it appears that she has deployed her womanly

32. For fabliaux narrators' condemnation of older husbands' marrying younger women see Chaucer's Miller's Tale (I.3221-32) and Merchant's Tale (IV.1248-66). For criticism of peasant or bourgeois men marrying courtly women, see "Berengier au long cul," 2:14-17, "Aioul," 3:5-23, and "Vilain Mire," 2:1-40, all in Noomen and Van den Boogaard, *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*. H. Diane Russell, *Eva/Ave*, 190, also notes the popular use of the "unequal lovers" motif in prints and paintings in the later Middle Ages. See also the fifth joy of the *Quinze joyes de mariage*, which talks about the dangers of a woman's marrying beneath her.

33. Spearing (*Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 253) and McCarthy ("Syne maryit I a Marchand," 149) assert that Dunbar's poem is more indebted to the Merchant's Tale than to the Wife of Bath (253).

34. Burns (*Bodytalk*, 61-62) notes the similar predicament of fabliaux wives who may also be heard to demand choice rather than simply unlimited sex.

stratagems to look out for her interests. Her laughter thus signifies her cunning manipulation of the legal system.<sup>35</sup> It should also be noted that in the Middle Ages widows of sufficient means had more freedom to dispose of their property, even control their own businesses, than married women, who had to have the consent of their husbands for commercial and legal transactions.<sup>36</sup> The widow's delight in her newfound freedom about which she boasts to the two married women was thus understood to encompass social and economic as well as sexual matters.

Such financial and legal control, lectures the widow, can be achieved through patience and wiles. Yet psychological control, she suggests, is equally important, and this is made possible by laughter, which is what enabled her to endure keeping up the pretense of marital bliss with her first husband:

I hatit him like a hund, thought I it hid preue:  
 With kissing and with clapping I gert the carill fon,  
 Weil couth I claw his cruke bak and kemm his kewt noddill,  
 And with a bukky in my cheik bo on him behind,  
 And with a bek gang about and bler his ald e,  
 And with a kyind contynance kys his crynd chekis,  
 In to my mynd makand mokis at that mad fader.  
 Trovand me with trew lufe to treit him so fair.  
 This cougth I do without dule and na dises tak,  
 Bot ay be mery in my mynd and myrthfull of cher.

(273–80)

[I hated him like a dog, though I hid that from him  
 and with kissing and petting I made a fool of the man.]

35. For a discussion of the widow's shrewd business maneuvers in the context of Scottish marriage and inheritance laws, see Bentsen and Sanderlin, "The Profits of Marriage in Late Medieval Scotland." The authors note the contrast between the wives' use mostly of sexual invective and the Widow's use of legal terminology such as "evidents of heritage," "summonses," "chief chemys," and "billis" and "bauchlis" and argue that the increasing written recording of such transactions into protocol books and registers was a significant influence on the poem, one that would have resonated with many in the audience. On the laughter of a woman outwitting the legal system, see Burns's discussion of Iseult's mocking of legal procedure in Bérout's *Roman de Tristan* (*Bodytalk*, 236).

36. On widows generally, see Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 95–97. On Scottish widows, see Marshall, *Virgins and Viragos*, 22–27. See also Bawcutt's discussion of the freedom of widows as a context for reading Dunbar's poem (*Dunbar the Makar*, 345).

Well did I know how to ease his bent back and comb his cropped  
noddle,  
while I puffed out my cheeks and pulled faces behind him,  
and with a bow came round and pulled the wool over his old  
eyes,  
and with a kindly expression kissed his shrivelled cheeks.  
In my mind I made mock of that mad father  
who trusted me to treat him so fair from true affection.  
I could manage this without trouble and no discomfort  
but was always able to be cheerful in spirit and full of gaiety.]

The widow embraces outwardly the attitude of wifely concern and servitude dictated to women in conduct manuals. Her description of how she would make faces and mock him behind his back, however, suggests that this kind of playing with her wifely role allows her to "make merry in her mind." As in the "bowrd" she tells about imagining another man in her husband's place in the marriage bed, the widow uses her mockery as a strategy of control that gives her a different kind of pleasure than that of the marriage bed. The pleasure she takes in her own "bowrd about bed" indeed seems the more keen for her husband's sublime unawareness that he has been ridiculed. A similar example of a woman's private mockery of her husband is found in the French fabliau "De la Saineresse," in which a wife decides to punish her braggart of a husband who claims that no woman can deceive him. She proves him wrong in typical fabliau style, cuckolding him in his own house with a lover dressed as a female physician (blood-letter) who has come to cure her of a "pain in the loins." What is interesting is that the revenge does not stop at the cuckolding, for when the lover leaves, she tells her husband in great detail about her "treatment," with its repeated "probing" and its marvelous "ointment," delivered in a long tube. The husband is not only bested in being cuckolded, but the narrator furthermore points out that he did not get the joke: "Cil ne s'est pas aperceü / De la borde qu'ele conta."<sup>37</sup> Proving him wrong becomes pleasure for her in the very fact that he does not know the joke has been played on him.

As in the fabliau, the widow's laughter comes from enjoying her own

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37. *Cuckolds, Clerics, and Countrymen*, trans. John Duval and introduction and notes by Raymond Eichmann, 105–24.

cleverness, making a joke that her husbands do not get. What the widow wants to teach the other women concerns the psychological advantages of their own laughter, the space it offers them as a refuge from the woes of marriage, a space that can be enjoyed in the company of other women. This brings us back to my opening point that the laughter of the women is the laughter of a private women-only group, which is continually underlined throughout the text as they address each other as “wiffis” [wives, 398] or “sueit sisteris deir” [dear sweet sisters, 145]. Their community stands in opposition to the male community formed between the eaves-dropping narrator and his male audience. When the second wife expresses her willingness to speak because “ther is no spy neir” (161), the irony is at her expense, but it also makes clear the violation of the woman’s community by the man who is spying on them. In fact, given the medieval garden’s function as a place of privacy, it is likely that readers would have assumed that the women have met in the garden precisely in order to prevent intrusion by men.<sup>38</sup>

The private and intimate female community in which the three women do their joking reflects the contemporary findings of anthropologists who have studied gender differences in joke-telling across cultures. Whereas women generally do not tell jokes or laugh loudly in front of men, when they are among other women, their laughter is uninhibited, as the *tafritals* discussed above suggest.<sup>39</sup> Like the women described in this ritual, Dunbar’s women bond together both in their unrestrained behavior and in their communal joking at the expense of men. In both cases, laughter marks the ritualized space of the women-only gathering that provides relief from the various pressures that circumscribe the women’s behavior in public.

The cathartic function of such women-only laughter is directly invoked by the second wife, who begins her speech by saying it will help purge her pent-up frustrations:

I sall a ragment reveil fra rute of my hert,  
 A roust that is sa rankild quhill risis my stomok.  
 Now sall the byle all out brist that beild has so lang.  
 For it to beir on my breist wes berdin our hevny.

38. Stokstad and Stannard, *Gardens of the Middle Ages*, 216.

39. Apte, *Humor and Laughter*, 75–81.

I sall the venome devoid with a vent large,  
And me assuage of the swalme that suellit wes gret.

(162–67)

[I shall reveal a discourse that comes from the bottom of my  
heart,  
a disturbance that rankles so that my gorge rises.  
Now shall all the bile burst forth that has been swelling up for so  
long;  
for it was too heavy a burden to bear in my breast.  
I shall give wide vent to the poison  
and ease myself of a swelling which has so much increased.]

The wife’s claim that her speech will enable her to purge the bile poisoning her connects to medieval views on the influence of the body’s four humors on a person’s psychological disposition. A medical condition brought about by an imbalance of the humors could be remedied by a therapy that expelled the excess humor. A therapy often prescribed by medieval medical treatises was laughter.<sup>40</sup> As Boccaccio explains that he wants to amuse his dear ladies by chasing away their melancholy, and as the ladies in the *brigata* hope to forget the horrors of the plague in telling comic tales, Dunbar’s women laugh in order to assuage the sufferings they have endured from the woes of marriage. The imaginative, fantasy aspect of their narrative is evident in the terms “game” (241) and “pastance most mery” (526). Dunbar’s use of the word “game” echoes Chaucer’s in the *Canterbury Tales*, and his affirmation of its ability to purge “both colere and malencolye” (VII.2946). The festive opening of the *Canterbury Tales* is also echoed in Dunbar’s poem, set during “Midsummer Ewin, mirriest of nightis.”<sup>41</sup>

The women-only laughter also relates to medieval concerns about the dangers of women’s gossip. The term “gossip,” or *cummar*, was used to describe a woman with whom another woman habitually shared her secrets, illustrated in the example of Dunbar’s “Twa Cummaris.” The fact

40. See Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 126–28. Verberckmoes (*Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society*, 60ff.) also discusses Joubert and other medical treatises in this light. For a different interpretation, see Bitterling, 346, on the possible allusion to confession as a kind of purgative medicine.

41. Midsummer Eve was celebrated in June, on the day before the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. Throughout Europe, feasting, dancing, and bonfires marked the celebration of the feast, but were often condemned by medieval preachers (Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 75).

that the term has generally been used to denigrate women's conversations with each other suggests men's uneasiness about the content and purpose of women-only talk. The kind of gang ridicule performed by groups like Dunbar's women is commonly represented in medieval culture, both in literary texts such as the fifteenth-century *Fifteen Joys of Marriage*, which chronicle the fifteen types of suffering (sarcastically labeled "joys") they cause their husbands and in visual images that suggest the dangers of women's talk.<sup>42</sup> What is so interesting about such representations is that they suggest that women's derisive laughter and gossip, although perhaps done in private, was well known to men and a considerable source of anxiety.

### *When Men Imagine Women Laughing*

The therapy offered by the women's laughter has not been enjoyed by all of Dunbar's readers. One critic labels the women "coarse, lecherous, and cruel" and argues that the "three drinking, jesting, gossips cynically pretend, as part of their festive joke, allegiance to courtly love,"<sup>43</sup> while another critic calls the widow "hypocritical" in her teaching to the two wives.<sup>44</sup> The notion that the women are cynical or hypocritical has led such scholars to view the humor of the poem as, well, not very funny: "[Dunbar's] humour is a hurt, slightly mad humour—wild at times, at times gruesome, dark, and unpleasant or sweetly pathetic. . . . We suffer with him, and he does little to relieve his own pain or ours, but, on the contrary, rubs it in."<sup>45</sup> As Bawcutt notes, there is a distinct disparity between the hilarious laughter of the three women and the singularly unamused reaction of male critics: "It resounds with laughter, yet many

42. Examples of women laughing at men in the *Quinze joyes de mariage* can be found in Joys 3 and 5. Another notable text featuring gossip is Gautier Le Leu's fabliau, *La Veuve*, in which a widow complains about her late husband's poor performance in bed. Gossip is of course also satirized in the portrait of the Wife of Bath (ll. 529–45). Diane Wolfthal, "Women's Community and Male Spies," notes that prints from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century showing groups of women were critical of their communal speech, but also discusses how some images were suggestive of the bonds formed between women. Wolfthal notes in particular the suggestion of female privacy given by the garden setting of one example, explicitly connecting it to Dunbar's poem (139).

43. Kinsley, *Poems of William Dunbar*, 259–60.

44. Reiss, *William Dunbar*, 123–24.

45. Scott, *Dunbar*, 205–6.



critics (chiefly men) are unamused and subject it to solemn and often hostile analysis."<sup>46</sup>

Were medieval male readers as unamused as these twentieth-century men? It seems unlikely that a prominent male poet at the Scottish court would compose a poem that would offer little amusement to the men in his audience. The disapproval expressed by the male scholars seems to reveal their discomfort with what the poem reveals about women's view of male inadequacies, and this discomfort may well have been shared by medieval men. How many wives were, like the widow, weeping on the outside but laughing in their minds? However, just as the poem portrays women seeking relief from the woes of marriage in their own laughter, male audiences were also invited to relieve their anxieties about their masculinity in laughing at the women. The eavesdropping frame of the narrative distances the threat posed by the women's conspiratorial laughter, making it subject to the male gaze allowed to penetrate the gap in the hedges. In the closing lines of the poem, men are invited to laugh at the women, for it is their power to choose the women, and not vice versa, that is reaffirmed.<sup>47</sup>

It is worth noting that the comments of the male scholars above were made in the 1960s and 1970s, before either feminism or reader-oriented criticism had made their way into scholarship on medieval literature. Readers today are more ready to acknowledge the multiple readings a text invites and the often ambivalent stance of the author. It should also be noted that women readers of Dunbar's poem were probably aware of the poem's misogynous implications since the arguments Christine de Pizan made against misogynous literature were most likely known to Dunbar and the Scottish court through Thomas Hoccleve's rendering of the *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*; women may in fact have already been engaging openly in discussions these texts raised.<sup>48</sup> The narrator's final question to his male audience may have been his way of anticipating and stifling resistance by

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46. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 325.

47. The poem might also have capitalized on the hostility between medieval men of different groups. Younger men could delight in jokes that ridiculed the older men who were in fact their greatest rivals in the competitive marriage market, but are effectively shown to be none the happier for being married. Brundage, for example, notes that "young bachelors in Dijon faced strong competition for brides from older men, many well established in the civic hierarchy and able to bring pressure to bear on families to give them the girls they desired" (*Law, Sex, and Christian Society*, 495).

48. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 296.

women readers. Or perhaps, as in the court pastime of the *demande d'amour*, the question led to further debate between the men and women. Since Dunbar's text was likely to have been read aloud at court, his audience may well have participated in the humor of the text by adding "ribald interjections" or "whispered speculation" about the marital relations of others present in the room during the reading.<sup>49</sup>

Both Boccaccio and Dunbar imagine noblewomen laughing and making jokes, but whereas the *Tretis* portrays a closed community of three women who tell dirty jokes about men, the ladies of the *Decameron* laugh at Dioneo's tales of sex, but blush, reminding him that he shouldn't tell such stories in the presence of ladies. Boccaccio's many addresses to his lady readers contrast with Dunbar's implicit construction of a male audience, and thus the depiction of the laughter depends in great part on the group dynamics between narrator and audience. Boccaccio paints a world of genteel play for mutual delight, where a woman's laugh, although potentially a weapon against unwanted advances, may also be accompanied by a subtly inviting wink. Dunbar imagines a world where women laugh at men rather than with them, their wanton laughter a sign of the feminine carnality hidden beneath their decorous disguise. Both texts represent male fantasies of what women's laughter means.

In an article on comic heroines in fiction, Judith Wilt has observed male writers' tendency to represent women's laughter in two ways that she describes as the "laughter of maidens," the deflating, yet bright and innocent laugh that men find beguiling, or the "cackle of matriarchs," the witchlike laughter of the woman who is "knowing, sly, packed full of ripe experience."<sup>50</sup> These two types loosely describe Boccaccio's witty and brightly laughing (although not so innocent) maidens and Dunbar's experienced matriarchs who laugh raucously as they detail their sexual histories. Wilt argues that both types of heroines, despite the power of their laughter, ultimately cannot escape the control of patriarchy, and comments that women today "may surely hesitate" before either kind of humor, "wistfully wishing they could count more securely on a man's sense of humor" (195).

49. McCarthy, "Synne maryt I a Marchand," 148. Deanna Evans sees the narrator's final question as a reminder to the audience to contemplate the greater message of the poem, returning us from laughter to serious questions. Although it seems plausible that the poem warns against the "seven deadly sins in carnivalesque disguise," the analysis does not fully take into account the playful ambivalence generated by the competing frames of the narratives or consider that "we" as readers might differ in the questions we ponder.

50. Wilt, "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs," 176.

Feminists today should certainly hesitate to share fully in the laughter either of Boccaccio's maidens or of Dunbar's matriarchs, since their laughter marks the limitations faced by women in medieval society, limitations made most clear in the narrative frame in both works where male author asserts his power over female reader.

Yet women's laughter also marks the points at which such power over women was felt to be threatened. A woman's laugh of contempt for the norms of modesty that would protect her reputation and that of her family was to be feared, but so too was a woman's mute response in the face of an illicit suitor's beguiling words. Putting the responsibility of maintaining her chastity on the shoulders of a woman also could entail acknowledging that she would need her wits about her to accomplish the task. Power to choose marriage partners or to dispose of the property of the married couple was granted mostly to men, who had legal authority over their wives, but the laughter of fictional heroines often suggests that the covert ways in which women might attempt to circumvent this authority was something over which men apparently felt they had less control. The laughter of maidens and matriarchs alike marks a space in which women, less able to record their voices alongside those of the men of their age, speak "off the record." Dunbar's poem, in particular, is interesting in that it both provides us with a clear example of a medieval antifeminism that laughs at women's presumed carnality and deceit and allows us a glimpse into a feminine space of laughter, or counterculture, that offered women a kind of shelter apart from the dominant culture of antifeminism.