

“With them she had her playful game”

The Performance of Gender and Genre
in Ulrich von Lichtenstein’s

Frauendienst



Noch habt si dort, diu valsches vri,
uf ir pferde; ir stunden bi
ritter und chnappen vil,
mit den het si ir schimpfes spil.
das hebisen ich dar truoc.
si sprach: “ir sit niht starc genuoc,
ir mügt mich abe geheben niht,
ir sit chranc, dar zuo enwiht.”
Des schimpfes wart gelachtet da.

(133–34)¹

[She was still on her horse, that paragon; many knights and pages were standing next to her. It was with them she had her playful game. I held the stirrup for her. She said: “You are not strong enough, you won’t be able to lift me down. You are weak, and worthless on top of it.” People laughed at the joke there.]

1. There is only one extant manuscript of *Frauendienst* (Munich Staatsbibliothek cgm44). Middle High German quotations are from the 1987 edition by Spechtler. I cite strophe numbers and have omitted some of Spechtler’s editorial notations. For a concordance with the page numbers of the edition by Lachmann, see Schmidt, *Begriffsglossare und Indices zu Ulrich von Lichtenstein*, 1:xv–xvii. The only English translation of *Frauendienst* is the verse translation by J. W. Thomas, which omits the last part of the work and many sections within the first part. I have therefore provided my own translations. I thank Ann Marie Rasmussen for her generous assistance with these translations.



Ulrich von Lichtenstein's lyric narrative *Frauendienst* (ca. 1255) tells the comic story of a married noblewoman who becomes exasperated with the unwanted attentions of her foolish suitor and demands that he abandon his overblown lyrics and leave her in peace. While the refusal of the consummately beautiful courtly lady is standard fare in the courtly lyrics of the Minnesang or troubadour tradition, it is the form of the lady's refusal, her derisive jest (*schimpfes spil*) that commands center stage in this work. With her joke, the lady publicly humiliates Ulrich in front of his male peers, who recognize her joke and laugh. The lady dominates, using the joke to ridicule the source of her irritation in front of an appreciative audience. She not only subverts the lyric genre's conventional silencing of women (whose refusals are reported by the male poet) but attempts herself to silence the male voice, exposing its pretense to be dedicated to serving women as a sham. As many scholars have by now pointed out, the *canso*, formerly seen as heralding an age of chivalry that placed women on a pedestal, was largely part of a complex construction of the male self.² The jesting of Ulrich's lady seems calculated precisely to unmask this construction, for it exposes his obsessive claim to be motivated by *hohe muot* (lofty feelings) as foolish stubbornness and arrogance. The lady's refusal to be served in a work purportedly dedicated to the service of ladies (*frauendienst*) raises the question of whether some women may have been skeptical of the genre's claims to serve them. Like the Wife of Bath, who questions the discourse on women through her tendentious play, the lady interrogates the premises of the Minnesang genre, ridiculing its pretenses and exposing its contradictions. Yet her joke is also made with the men in attendance; it is with them that she has her playful game. The scene thus suggests the pleasures that such ridicule could hold for male audiences as well.

The work's humor has not been lost on readers, but most attempts to understand it have focused on the male hero. This is largely due to the fact that the story is told from the suitor's point of view and in the first person. Indeed, the work was long considered an autobiography. The author,

2. As early as 1967, Frederick Goldin exposed the myth of the lady on the pedestal as the "mirror of Narcissus," the male poet projecting idealized images of himself onto the lady. Since then, much feminist medieval scholarship has revealed the patriarchal values behind the texts that claim to elevate women. See, for example, Burns, "The Man behind the Lady in Troubadour Lyric," and the collection edited by Fisher and Halley, *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings*.

Ulrich von Lichtenstein, was an actual ministerial knight who lived in Styria during the second half of the thirteenth century. He was active in the politics of his time and was respected as a skilled diplomat and politician. Because the narrator calls himself Ulrich von Lichtenstein and recounts in the first person his past service as a knight, many scholars assumed that the events narrated by Ulrich were actual events from his life.

If Ulrich's autobiography followed the plot of *Frauendienst*, it would run as follows. As a boy of twelve, he enters into the service of a married noblewoman as a page, falls in love and serves her so earnestly (drinking her bathwater, for example), that his father withdraws him from her household and sends him to the court of Margrave Henry. Upon his father's death four years later, he returns to Lichtenstein, where he recommences serving his lady, fighting in numerous tournaments for her sake, cutting off his finger and sending it to her as a testament of his love. He then dresses as Queen Venus, in white gowns and long braids, and goes on an extensive journey throughout Europe in order to challenge worthy opponents in her name. None of his service helps him to obtain what he wants; to the contrary, he is forced by his lady to disguise himself as a leper, is urinated on by the watchman while waiting to enter into the lady's castle, and finds himself hung out of the window when his lady tricks him. After sending him on a crusade but then changing her mind, the lady apparently grants him her favors, although Ulrich alludes only briefly to this change of heart (1348–49).³ The lady then commits some unnamable deed that leads Ulrich to abandon her service, and two years later he begins serving another lady. This second service, which takes up less than a fourth of the whole narrative, appears to bring him happiness, although we hear very little about this second woman, who never speaks. During the course of this service, Ulrich masquerades as King Arthur and gathers together knights from the region who play the roles of other Arthurian knights in his service. This second service contains most of the fifty-eight love songs, and much of its narrative is simply explication of the songs.

Scholars have largely succeeded in dispelling the view of the work as a serious autobiography, and most scholars now agree that the work draws largely on models from literary fiction, while combining them with factual

3. The Provençal poet Peire Vidal's "Ajustar e lassar" may be a possible source for this motif. The poet complains that his lady asked him to go on a crusade just to get rid of him and then said cruel things to him while smiling to other men around him.

details from Ulrich's milieu of thirteenth-century Styria.⁴ The humor comes precisely from the gap between the historical Ulrich, a powerful, poetically gifted ministerial well known to the audience, and the fictional Ulrich, a young, naive fool for love. Furthermore, the narrative is recounted in hindsight by the narrator, who frankly refers to the folly of his youth. The gap between foolish youth and savvy poet results in a parodying of the figure of the courtly lover. Ulrich, with his frequent bouts of tears and his ridiculous services performed for his lady, certainly stretches the type of the suffering, steadfastly serving lover to an extreme.⁵ Others have claimed that the parody comes from Ulrich's inappropriate application of the rules he has learned from love poetry to a world of real men and women who do not behave according to these models.⁶ The intrusion of mundane uncourtly details, like the suitor's drinking his lady's bathwater, or the watchman's urinating on him, would serve to reinforce the incongruity of literary models transposed into real life. The work's humor has also been explained as the result of the transfer of lyric conventions (the protesting lover and the distant and haughty lady) into the narrative genre of the courtly romance.⁷ The work's hybrid genre would indeed suggest that a motivating impetus for creating the work was Ulrich's own pleasure in playfully combining and pastiching multiple literary motifs, types, and styles.

These explanations focus on the playing with generic conventions, which are certainly key to understanding the work's humor. Much more could be learned, however, by examining the specific function of women's laughter in this playing with genre. Ulrich's lady openly mocks her male suitor, ridiculing his masculinity. What pleasures does such mockery offer to male and female audiences? What do the jokes made from her perspective reveal about attitudes toward male and female roles in courtship? In what way does Ulrich's cross-dressing add to our understanding of medieval attitudes toward gender roles? How does reading for the lady's

4. See Milnes, "Ulrich von Lichtenstein and the Minnesang"; J. W. Thomas's introduction to *Ulrich von Liechtenstein's "Service of Ladies"*; Peters, *Frauentienst*; Jan-Dirk Müller, "Lachen-Spiel-Fiktion"; and most recently, Freed, *Noble Bondsmen*.

5. Martin, *Love's Fools*, 21, notes that such parodies were not uncommon, since the courtly lover "with his blond curls, his paroxysms of weeping, and his transports of joy, was an easy target" for parody from the very beginning.

6. See, for example, Brody, "The Comic Rejection of Courtly Love," 228.

7. See Wolf, "Komik und Parodie als Möglichkeiten Dichterischer Selbstdarstellung im Mittelalter"; and Milnes, "Ulrich von Lichtenstein."

laughter enable us to imagine what lady service might mean to women, not themselves the authors of the courtly genres that claim to speak on their behalf? Ulrich's work touches on subjects likely to affect most medieval women in some way: courtship, marriage, and even rape. Through the work's humor, these concerns are brought to the fore, and the lady's laughter serves to articulate a woman's response that places these concerns in a new perspective.

The Mocking Lady and a Woman's "No"

Like Ulrich, the lady is a parody of a conventional figure from the courtly love lyric. She is a married woman of noble birth, thus inaccessible to the poet/lover, and she tortures the lover with her haughty refusals. In the lyric tradition, the lady must say "no" because her refusal is what enables the male lover to suffer. By demonstrating his ability to continue loving against all odds, he demonstrates his nobility of character and superior moral worth. Where Ulrich's lady differs from the conventional lyric lady is that her refusals become part of the story. Whereas the "no" of the lady in the *canso* is reported by the male poet, in this narrative, the "nos" are given voice by the female heroine and played out in detail in front of us. Unlike the silent, distant lady of the lyric whose motives and desires are inscrutable, Ulrich's lady voices her refusals directly with an earthy mockery that makes her seem more playful than cold and distant.⁸ Her playful voice resembles more closely female voices in other lyric genres such as the *pastourelle* and *tenso* (debate poem) where the woman openly mocks the male suitor or poet; however, in this work this voice is realized to its fullest, since the narrative allows her a fuller range of responses than is possible in the lyric.

The narrative also brings out more fully one of the problems of women's laughter for medieval culture. While courtly poetry depends on the woman's "no" to establish the nobility of the male poet, conduct books of the later Middle Ages constantly advised women to be suspicious of the deceptive words men used to woo them: their "no," to be delivered unequivocally, was necessary to preserve their chastity and their reputation. Mixing laughter or

8. On this point, see Dussère, "Humor and Chivalry in Ulrich von Lichtenstein's *Frauendienst* and Gerhart Hauptmann's *Ulrich von Lichtenstein*," 304.

playfulness with a refusal was highly discouraged. For example, Robert de Blois in his late-thirteenth-century *Chastoiement des dames* exhorts his intended female readers to say “no” to zealous lovers politely but firmly. After modeling such a response as though speaking as a woman himself, he adds: “Ne le dites pas en riant, / Mes ausi con par mautalant” [Don’t say this laughingly, but with a certain irritation].⁹ Saying “no,” claims Robert, is a matter of utmost seriousness to the modest lady who values her honor, and laughter is therefore inappropriate. An example pertinent to the Germanic context is *Der Wülsche Gast* by the Tyrolian Thomasin von Zirclaria (1215 or 1216), in which women are instructed:

Ein vrowe sol niht vrevêlich
schimphen, daz stât vröwelich.
ich wil ouch des verjehen,
ein vrouwe sol niht vast an sehen
einn vrömeden man, daz stât wol.
.....

Ein juncvrouwe sol senfticlich
und niht lût sprechen sicherlich.
.....

zuht wert den vrouwen allen gemein
sitzen mit bein über bein.

(397–412)

[A lady should not impudently tease; that is more ladylike. I also say that a lady should not look straight at a man she does not know; that is for the best. . . . A maiden should certainly speak mildly and not loudly. . . . It is proper that all women sit with their legs crossed.]

Thomasin brings together the familiar clichés about women’s use of humor. Women should not joke, talk loudly, or let their legs be spread apart. His admonition that women not “schimphen” (tease) echoes the “schimpfes spiel” of the lady of *Frauendienst* who, in her violation of this norm, is unladylike.

Refusing a suitor playfully would potentially undermine a woman’s modesty, but it could have even more dire consequences, for a man might

9. Robert de Blois, ed. Fox, ll. 738–39.

take her “no” to mean “yes.” Christine de Pizan in fact counseled noble ladies who are wooed by men visiting their households to firmly refuse them and “be sure that her glance, words, laughter, or expressions do not give him any encouragement which might further attract him to her or give him any hope.”¹⁰ The danger of laughter to a woman was that it could authorize a man to interpret her words as not sincerely meant. This may also help to explain why some readers have not taken the lady’s rejection of her suitor seriously, claiming that she is “playing hard to get.” Some of the lady’s actions reinforce such an interpretation, as when she gives him a ring only to demand it back later, claiming he has been unfaithful. The motif of the scornful woman who enjoys testing her suitor and watching him suffer is a common motif in the lyric.¹¹ It is also a trait typically ascribed to women of the upper nobility, as Andreas Capellanus cautioned: “For a noblewoman or a woman of the higher nobility is found to be very ready and bold in censuring the deeds or the words of a man of the higher nobility, and she is very glad if she has a good opportunity to say something to ridicule him.”¹² Readers sympathetic to Ulrich’s plight might thus view his lady as a rather unsympathetic character, a “tease.”¹³ Although it is clear that the lady frequently does tease Ulrich, it is by no means evident that such teasing is a kind of flirtation meant to encourage her suitor. The lady in fact repeatedly refuses Ulrich’s advances in the narrative, and not always with mockery, commanding him to stop serving her nine times, either directly or through her letters and messengers.¹⁴

Despite her serious efforts, however, he refuses to believe her when she says no, twisting any response into a sign of hope. This is in fact the crux of

10. Christine de Pizan, *Treasury*, 134; “se garde bien que de yeux, de parole, de ris ne de contenance quelconques ne lui face nul semblant par quoy le puist attraire ne lui donner aucune esperance” (*Le Livre des trois vertus*, 102).

11. Peters, *Frauentienst*, 157.

12. Andreas Capellanus, *Art of Courtly Love*, 107. The Latin text reads, “Nobilis enim mulier sive nobilior promptissimo reperitur et audax hominis nobilioris facta vel sermones arguere multumque laetatur, si suis ipsum pulchre possit dictis illudere” (*Andreae Capellani regii Francorum, De Amore, libri tres*, 155). See also Joan Ferrante’s suggestion that this passage possibly reflects the actual presence of forceful women in twelfth-century courts (“Male Fantasy,” 69).

13. Thomas, introduction, 25.

14. The instances of the lady telling Ulrich to stop serving her are in the following stanzas: 74–80, 151–53, 399–406, 427–32, 454, 1019–22 (the lady claims Ulrich has been unfaithful to her and despises him), 1097–1105, 1207–13, 1228–37. I have not included stanzas where the messenger rephrases the lady’s direct words when those are given in the text.

the problem, for beliefs about women’s predilection for teasing their suitors, when coupled with beliefs about their insatiable sexual desire, ultimately mean that a woman always means yes (or at least “maybe”) regardless of what she actually says. Helen Solterer has deftly explored this implication in her discussion of Ovid and others who urge men to use force when women do not assent to their advances since they only refuse men because they are too modest to assent. She notes, “Both female ‘No!’ and female ‘Yes!’ are read to mean much the same thing.”¹⁵ If a woman truly means no, and her direct statements to that effect are merely seen as a deferred yes, what room is left for female agency? This problem is one perspective through which to understand the usefulness of women’s laughter, for although it may not be any more effective in persuading men to take women’s refusals seriously, it does allow the woman to recuperate a subject position that lies outside of the no-win discourse with the male interlocutor.

This is brilliantly demonstrated in a key scene in *Frauendienst*. Toward the end of Ulrich’s persistent service to his lady, her continued refusals having fallen on deaf ears, she invites him to her castle, where she makes him wait disguised in a community of lepers, claiming that she does not want her honor to be compromised. Once in her room, Ulrich’s rather uncourtly motives are revealed, as he wastes no time in asking her to sleep with him: “sol ich iu hie geligen bi, / so bin ich allez des gewert, / des min lip ie ze freuden gert” [If I lie with you here and now, I will be winning everything I have ever sought for my happiness (1206)]. The lady refuses and explains that the only reason she has allowed him to come is so that she can tell him that what he wants is impossible. Ulrich continues to proclaim that he has served his lady out of noble feelings, but in fact admits that he would rape her to get his reward were it not for the presence of her serving women. The lady has in fact prepared for this threat, for fearing that Ulrich might try to rape her, which is the custom of some men (“nach sumelicher manne sit”), she has asked all her women to stay in her room to protect her (1216).¹⁶ Ulrich is thus not able to carry

15. Solterer, *The Master and Minerva*, 46. Solterer sees the woman’s “no,” or what she calls “female prevarication,” as an intrinsic part of the “game” of love as described by male authors, the deferment of her submission serving to add to the man’s excitement in pursuit of his female quarry (35).

16. The lady’s comment that rape was something men were in the habit of doing may have recalled for readers the fate of the lady in *Moriz von Craún*. The lady, angered that her knight has fallen asleep, dismisses him. He later returns and rapes her (vv. 1525–1620). J. W.

out Ovid's advice that an apparently unwilling woman need only be raped to enable her to give the "assent" that her modesty prevents her from giving. Although Ulrich consequently abandons his threat of taking the lady by force, he continues to plead with her to sleep with him and again asks his aunt (*niftel*) for help in this matter. When she conveys to the lady that Ulrich is determined to stay until he either gets what he wants or dies trying, the lady finally sees that extreme measures are called for and concocts a clever trick to get rid of him. She offers to let him make a fresh start by lowering him back out the window so he can come up a second time and address her properly. He is to hold on to her hand and not let go. If he fulfills her request, she promises she will do whatever he wants. While Ulrich is holding her hand, she asks him to kiss her; in kissing her, Ulrich lets go of her hand and swiftly falls to the ground below. Ulrich, furious and humiliated, curses her cunning ("die gewan si mir mit listen an," 1277).

Ulrich's curse of course connects this work to the wider topos of female cunning in medieval culture. The trick Ulrich's lady plays on her suitor was in fact a popular one in medieval art. In the early-fourteenth-century *Codex Manesse* (also called the *Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift*), containing miniatures of 137 Minnesang poets, is a miniature of Kristan von Hamle, suspended in a basket out of a castle by a lady (fig. 2). The editor comments that this image represents the popular medieval story of the poet Virgil, who is lifted halfway to the woman's window only to be left dangling there overnight to endure the mockery of those who gather around the following morning. The story and image are, he notes, examples of the topos of feminine cunning and power over men, for even Virgil, the wisest of men, could be outwitted by a woman.¹⁷ H. Diane Russell's study of women in Renaissance and Baroque prints shows that the "power of

Thomas notes in fact that this work may have been a source for Ulrich, and calls it "a burlesque scene" where the lady "is punished for her lack of consideration" (introduction, 38). Although some medieval men may have seen the rape of the woman as just "punishment," it is possible that medieval women did not view the rape in this manner. In fact, the lady in this epic resembles Ulrich's lady in that she, too, complains that she does not want to be served by any man (1340–62) and also mocks Moriz (535–74).

17. *Codex Manesse*, 63. I have also found anecdotes about women humiliating unwanted suitors in an Arabic erotic manual of the thirteenth century, al-Tifāḥī, *Les Délices des coeurs*, 95–96. In one, a man who is known to be poor arrives at a lady's residence dressed in rags and asks to be admitted to her residence. When he refuses to leave, the lady, from her balcony above, pretends to offer him an apple that she will toss into his outer garment. Instead, she throws down a stone, which rips off the outer garment, leaving the man standing only in his underpants, as the whole town looks on laughing.



Fig. 2. The poet is suspended out of the window by his lady, a reference to the topos of the tricks women play on unwanted suitors. From the Codex Manesse, of the first third of the fourteenth century. Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek, cod. pal. germ. 848, fol. 71v. (Courtesy of the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.)

women” topos endured into the early modern period. A print by Lucas van Leyden (ca. 1512), for example, shows Virgil helplessly suspended in a basket as onlookers laugh at his plight.¹⁸ The trick of Ulrich’s lady, however, does more than demonstrate female cunning, for it exposes the male hero as anything but the noble courtly lover of *hohe muot* that he claims to be. We are invited to see her trickery and ridicule not as teasing, but as punishment for base behavior. For example, her command that Ulrich must dress as a leper, a probable play on the Tristan and Isolde story, might also be an allusion to the medieval belief that leprosy was a venereal disease that struck the lustful.¹⁹ The scene may give winking assent to clichés about feminine guile, but it simultaneously exposes masculine egotism and base sexual inclinations.

Furthermore, the way in which *Frauendienst* stages a woman’s cunning resistance to rape suggests several ways in which women’s laughter could rewrite medieval narratives that victimize women. Kathryn Gravdal, in her study of how medieval courtly literature frequently sanctions rape, notes in particular the misogynistic assumptions behind the “comic” encounters in the pastourelle. The “slapstick” ending of pastourelles where the shepherdess thanks the knight for raping her and asks when he might return never lets us feel sympathy or outrage for the female victim. Gravdal in fact compares the comic ending of the rape to Freud’s model of the smutty joke, for the rape scene is “an act of sexual aggression on the part of the medieval poet who, again in the Freudian view, would like to ‘rape’ the female listener on behalf of the male audience.”²⁰ Whereas the pastourelle makes light of rape, suggesting that women enjoyed it, Christine de Pizan clearly denied this: “I am therefore troubled and grieved when men argue that many women want to be raped and that it does not bother them at all to be raped by men even when they verbally protest. It would be hard to believe that such great villainy is actually pleasant for them.”²¹ Christine attempts to dispel this myth by giving a long list of women who killed themselves rather than submit to rape, thus attesting both to their abhorrence of rape and their virtue, courage, and determination in resisting it.²²

18. Russell, *Eva/Ave*, 159. See also Smith, *The Power of Women*.

19. Brody, “Comic Rejection,” 230.

20. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 109.

21. *Book of the City of Ladies*, II.44.1, p. 160.

22. See also the many exempla preached in medieval sermons in which women were lauded for killing themselves rather than lose their chastity at the hands of rapists. Two such

The strategy for resisting rape suggested by *Frauendienst* is for a woman to use her wit and cleverness, and to turn upside down the positions of power in the pastourelle encounter. In *Frauendienst*, it is the woman (perhaps significantly a noblewoman rather than a peasant) who controls the comedy of the rape scene by dangling the potential rapist out of the window and sending him to a literal as well as figurative downfall. The female counterreading to the misogyny in the pastourelle is further solidified by the female community (the serving women) that shares in the downfall of the aggressor, and one wonders whether women in Ulrich's audience also participated in this comic revenge. A provocative example of female solidarity in the face of male aggression is the play *Dulcitius* by the ninth-century German woman playwright Hrosvitha of Gandersheim. Three maidens who have been taken hostage are about to be assaulted by their captor. However, in a drunken state, the man mistakes the pots hanging in the kitchen for the maidens and starts copulating with them. Commenting on the play, Gravdal notes that "the three virgins, the inscribed audience, observe the violation scene, holding their sides with laughter. In this staging the female characters dominate the rapist."²³ One can imagine women in the audience of *Frauendienst* taking a similar pleasure at the comic humiliation of another would-be rapist, whose base sexual motives have been shown to be anything but courtly.²⁴ The laughter shared between the lady and her serving women spills over to include the larger community of women in the audience. Like the laughter of Dunbar's women, the laughter shared by the lady and the women of her court, although used to confront a man, seems oriented toward providing a pleasure ultimately unconcerned with his reactions.

Ultimately, then, the lady's derisive jests directed toward Ulrich are not teasing, but rather an attempt to take pleasure at transforming his unwanted service into an unwitting performance redirected toward the amusement of ladies. The lady's maid seems to enjoy taunting Ulrich as much as her mistress does, as when she appears after Ulrich's uncomfortable night amid various biting vermin and asks him whether he had a

exempla are contained in a recent study, Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 148–49. In these exempla, the women are miraculously saved by God, a more optimistic ending than the catalog of martyrs cited by Christine. See also Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, and the discussion by Smarr, "Boccaccio and Renaissance Women," 290.

23. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 33.

24. Dussère, "Humor and Chivalry," 305.

pleasant evening (1172). This kind of humor is sarcasm and contempt passing as politeness. An even better example of such humor is the trick Ulrich's lady plays on him. After having proposed to lower him out the window, she reassures him she will lift him back up again, and seemingly flatters him: "got weiz wol, daz ich nie gesach / so lieben ritter noch erchant / so der mich hat bi miner hant" [God knows that I have never seen or known such a dear knight as the one holding my hand, 1267]. Ulrich, of course, takes her at her word and allows himself to be lowered down, resulting in his humiliation. The seeming compliment has now been revealed as false flattery, and one can imagine a woman in such a situation enjoying the savor of her own sarcasm. As Regina Barreca says of women in more recent times:

Girls are taught to do this very early on, blinking darkly fringed round eyes at the most boring man in the room and telling him that he is fascinating, which he believes without the shadow of a doubt (having been told this by his relatives since birth), while her girlfriend stands behind the guy laughing silently but thoroughly at how completely, because of his arrogance, he is taken in by false flattery.²⁵

Applying this notion of contempt passing as flattery to *Frauendienst*, we can see the lady's comment as a staging of conflicting interpretations: the arrogant man who can only hear a woman's words as a reflection of his own worth versus the female audience complicitous with the woman's sly taunt.

A later passage in the work suggests that medieval men were in fact aware of women's use of false flattery. A young woman sent by a mysterious figure called Lady Honor has come to announce to the knights in the region a tournament in her name. The young woman praises Sir Kadolt, a man who has formerly served Lady Honor, so much that Sir Kadolt becomes flustered, believing he is the victim of her mockery:

"vrowe, ir lob mich alze ho,
ir lobt mich waen in spoten wis,
und het ich also hohen pris,

25. Barreca, *Snow White*, 17.

als ir von mir hie habt gesaget.
lat iwer n spot, vil schoeniu maget,
iwer übric lop mich machet rot,
des gat mir wol von schulden not!”
Der rede manic ritter lachte da.

(1509–10)

[“Lady, you praise me so highly, yet it seems to me you are praising me only mockingly, and as if I had as much worth as you have said about me here. Stop your mockery, most beautiful maiden. Your excessive praise is making me blush, and that is really making me ashamed!” Many knights laughed then about that statement.]

Sir Kadolt protests that the maiden’s high praise is meant to humiliate him (“in spoten wis”), and the men recognize his vulnerability, laughing at him. The man clearly appears anxious that a woman might not mean what she says and be having a joke at his expense.

In addition to ridiculing Ulrich for his base and self-serving behavior as a lover, the lady also mocks his role as a courtly poet. One striking example is in the scene (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) where Ulrich attempts to help the lady dismount. He has already declared his love to her in writing and been refused. Now he is confronted with her face to face, but he inconveniently falls mute (122–31), and the lady has her “schimpfes spil” with those observing the dumbstruck young suitor. When Ulrich finally does get up the courage, his attempts at courtly speech are clumsy, such as in his address to her as “gnade, vrowe gnade rich, / genadet mir genaediclich!” [Mercy, lady rich in mercy, show mercy on me mercifully! 146], an appeal repeated verbatim in his first little book (*büchlein*) to the lady and even rendered more verbose (ll. 234–44). In this, his first audience with his beloved, such efforts are hardly appreciated, and the lady tells him:

Swiget! ir sit gar ze kint
und gegen so hohen dingen blint,
ir sült die rede lazen sin,
als lieb iu sin die hulde min,
und ritet von mir palde hin!
iu ist noch gar ze tump der sin,

iu mac diu rede ze schaden chomen,
si kan iu nimmer niht gefrumen!

(151)

[Shut up! You are too much of a child and blind about such lofty matters. You should leave off speaking; if you esteem my favor, ride away from me immediately! You are really so foolish; your speech will bring you grief and can never bring you any success!]

This encounter, early in the narrative, focuses on Ulrich's childishness more than on his masculinity; the humor invites men as well as women to laugh at the bumbling attempts of the unskilled novice, and this youthful foolishness is clearly part of the narrative persona that Ulrich uses to safely ridicule himself in his own work. The encounter highlights nonetheless the question of what effective courtly speech might be. How does a lady judge speech to be worthy of bringing the poet success? Over and over again, the work presents a lady sitting in judgment of wooing talk.

A good example of this is the lady's response to his first *büchlein*. Ulrich receives the letter, but must wait ten days to have it read to him by his scribe since he is illiterate. His powerlessness is highlighted and his status as poet deflated, and we can speculate that Ulrich von Lichtenstein, far from illiterate, included this detail in order to amuse his friends and acquaintances in the audience. Once Ulrich finally does have his scribe read him the response, he is treated to the following repetitious message:

Ez sprichet manic man,
des in sin herze niht geleren kan,
wan als er von fremdem dinge
gert ze gewinnen sinne.
swer muotet des er niht ensol,
der hat im selb versaget wol.
swer muotet des er niht sol,
der hat im selb versaget wol.
swer muotet des er niht ensol,
der hat im selb versaget wol.

(Brief a)

[Many a man says that he cannot increase his worth unless he seeks unattainable things to acquire a lofty mind. He who desires what he

shouldn't has totally ruined himself. He who desires what he shouldn't has totally ruined himself. He who desires what he shouldn't has totally ruined himself.]

The message of the reply is that Ulrich should recognize the folly of his misplaced desires and leave her alone; failure to do so will result in his humiliation. The humor of the scene is further heightened by Ulrich's earlier declaration that during the ten days he waited for the arrival of his scribe, he slept with the book next to him in bed each night, little knowing the response that it contained. Furthermore, unlike the earlier prose letter to Ulrich's aunt, the lady has chosen to compose in a kind of doggerel verse, as though to mock Ulrich's poetic wooing. Her prosaic rendering of verse might in fact be read as a deliberate parody of Ulrich's frequently contorted rhetoric.²⁶ In the lady's "poem" and in much of her speech, the overblown rhetoric of the male speaker is deflated and reduced to the nonsense that it really is. Whereas the Wife of Bath literally rips the objectionable prose of her husband into bits, the lady shreds apart the poetic text of her suitor through parody.

Another episode that shows Ulrich's lady deflating courtly lyric is when Ulrich sends his second *büchlein* along with the finger he has cut off and sent along in a gold box. In the little book, he eulogizes his finger in epic proportions, claiming it was born to serve her and has faithfully died in her service (lines 281ff.). The lady responds sarcastically, "er möhte den vrowen verre baz / gedienen ob er in hete noch, / den vinger sin" [He could serve ladies far better if he still had his finger, 453]. The overblown epic description of Ulrich's serving finger is met with a flat sarcasm that deflates both the act of "service" (cutting off the finger—a possible castration metaphor) and the accompanying rhetoric.

The lady's chambermaid is similarly eager to participate in the deflation of courtly love clichés. When Ulrich comes to his lady's castle, she informs him that her mistress requires him to leave the castle secretly without anyone seeing him, adding, "tuot ir des niht, so sit ir tot" [If you don't do this, you will die, 1147]. The command is in itself rather unremarkable if somewhat hyperbolic. The form of the lady's command, however, must surely have rung in the ears of Ulrich's audience as a play on the debate

26. J. W. Thomas notes Ulrich's abundant use of circumlocutions and passive constructions that show "the deliberate avoidance of simple and concise statement" (introduction, 29).

between the two minnesingers Walther von der Vogelweide and Reinmar von Hagenau, who argue over who ultimately is more important, the lady or the lover. Reinmar's line is "stirbet si, sô bin ich tô" [If she dies, then I am dead, MF 158, 28],²⁷ voicing his absolute reliance on his lady. Without her, he is dead. Walther replies, "stirbe ab ich, so ist si tô" [But if I die, then she is dead, L 73, 16].²⁸ As the creation of the male poet, the lady has no existence without him. In Ulrich's line, the lady of Minnesang herself joins in the debate by threatening the man who does not do her bidding with death. Simultaneously, the lady can be heard to be reducing the male poet's power, while Ulrich the author can be heard having fun with his own literary predecessors. Like Chaucer, who uses the voice of his Wife of Bath to cleverly show his mastery of the debate on women, Ulrich uses his female characters to demonstrate his mastery of the topoi of Minnesang. Yet, we also hear the lady's voice asking, what does it really mean to serve a lady?

What Does It Mean to Serve a Lady?

By looking carefully at the comic strategies the lady deploys against her male suitor, we have been able to imagine medieval women mocking unwanted suitors. But even more than offering resistance to a specific suitor, the lady's naysaying interrogates and ridicules the central and avowed purpose of the work: serving ladies. Ulrich's service is comic precisely because he fails to consider the lady's own idea of what service might be. He often claims that he wants to do everything that his lady wants: "ich wil doch niht, wan daz si wil" [I don't want anything, except what she wants, 101]. Such a statement is ultimately contradicted by his repeated refusals to listen to her when she asks him to leave her free of service. Although she respects his friendship, she says, she insists that he desist from his so-called service of her: "daz er mich laze gar *dienstes vri*, / als liebe ich im ze vriunde si" [that he kindly leave me utterly *free from service* even though I am willing to be considered his friend/ally, 1105; emphasis added]. The lady's plea to be left *dienstes vri* challenges the title and premise of the work: *frauendienst*.

27. Reinmar, *Des Minnesangs Frühling*, 28.

28. Walther von der Vogelweide, *Walther von der Vogelweide. Gedichte*, 16.

It is important to note that the author has the lady repeatedly and explicitly voice her desire to be left free of service, making her ridicule of Ulrich look more like exasperation than caprice. The humor of the work, although perhaps initially based on an exaggeration of the type of the merciless *domna*, continually brings our attention to Ulrich’s inability to listen. It is this inability rather than the lady’s haughtiness that results in the hero’s serial humiliation. The trick the lady plays on Ulrich in her castle appears not so much as teasing as it does payment she had already promised him if he did not stop “serving” her, a threat she makes early on to Ulrich’s messenger, whom she commands to tell Ulrich to leave her free of courting (*gewerbes vri*); otherwise something terrible will happen to him (405). The lady’s threat helps us read Ulrich’s later humiliating fall as evidence of the lady’s seriousness rather than fickleness, a seriousness highlighted by her admonishment that the messenger listen to her words carefully (“nu merche es rehte, ich sag dir wes”), which seems calculated to focus our attention on the man’s refusal to listen rather than the lady’s own response. The lady’s challenge to the notion of lady service in fact goes beyond Ulrich himself to the category of men as a whole. When Ulrich clumsily tries to help her down from her horse, she orders her knights not to allow a single knight to approach her from then on (154), discouraging *all* knights seeking her favors. She later explains clearly to Ulrich’s messenger that there was never a man so high in birth that she would view his courting with anything other than contempt (406). This categorical refusal of all men (no matter how high in birth) emphasizes her resistance to the whole act of being served rather than contempt for Ulrich per se.

It is important to note that such resistance is not to be interpreted as a desire to remain faithful to her spouse, for the lady greatly downplays the role of her husband in her determination not to give in to Ulrich:

Min man und ouch der herre min,
der wil des gar ane angst sin,
daz ich geminnen müge immer man.
ob ichz durch got niht wolde lan
und durch min ere, so wolde er mich
doch wol behüeten; und wolt ot ich,
sin huote waer hie gar enwiht
und liez ichz durch min ere niht.

(1210)

[My husband and lord wishes to be without fear that I might ever make love to a man. Even if I had not already desisted on account of God and my honor, he would certainly guard against it; but if I wanted to do it, and if I did not desist because of my honor, his guardianship would be completely worthless.]

With this last line, she insists on the importance of her own will rather than the surveillance of her husband. When Ulrich later pleads for her to lie with him, she reiterates this claim of autonomy and insists on her cleverness, stating: “wold ich hie minnen iwern lip, / ich bin wol also witzic wip, / daz ich iuch het enpfangen baz” [Your request is good for nothing; if I wanted to make love to you here, I am a clever enough woman that I would have received you better, 1228]. The medieval wife was typically known for her cleverness at deceiving a husband who got in the way of her sexual adventures, but here the lady boasts of her cleverness to highlight her own agency in refusing sex and remaining chaste. Neither a pliant subject of her husband nor an inherently errant wife who cannot restrain her desires, she subtly revises the deceitful wife topos common in medieval literature.²⁹

Some of the comic situations in which Ulrich finds himself also put into question the notion of lady service, specifically in regard to this issue of choice and agency. In several situations, Ulrich is placed in the position of unwilling recipient of service from a woman. While masquerading as Queen Venus, he twice receives anonymous gifts and letters. On the first occasion he receives a skirt, a buckle, a belt, and a jeweled band, along with a letter (603). The lady sender clearly knows that Ulrich, although jousting in the region dressed as a woman, is in fact a man, for in her letter she thanks him for putting on women’s clothing (Brief d). Ulrich is furious with his steward for having brought him these gifts. The reason for his wrath becomes evident when Ulrich receives yet more gifts two weeks later. While he is sitting in the bathtub enjoying his bath, a page he has never seen before lays down a carpet in front of the tub, and places upon it a skirt, a veil, a belt and buckle, a bright headband, a ruby ring, and another letter (730–32). Although Ulrich demands with indignation that the page remove these unwanted gifts, the page goes out and returns with two more pages who

29. Examples of fabliaux in German concerning women’s trickery are the early-fourteenth-century adaptation of a French fabliau, “Aristoteles und Phyllis,” “Der Ritter und die Nüsse” (The knight and the nuts) and the thirteenth-century “Der Ritter unter dem Zuber” (The knight under the tub), another adaptation of a French fabliau. English translations of these tales may be found in Thomas, *Medieval German Tales in English Translation*.

proceed to scatter rose petals on Ulrich until he is completely covered. The pages leave and Ulrich, furious, chides his steward, explaining that a man should not accept gifts from someone other than his true love (742–43). But Ulrich also expresses his feelings of powerlessness, because these objects have been given to him against his will (*ane den willen min*, 738), a statement that recalls the lady’s repeated laments that her wishes have not been taken into consideration. Ulrich’s comic plight as a powerless victim of unwanted attention is highlighted by Ulrich’s comment that he himself was not amused: “man sach mich lachen doch niht vil, / wan zornic muot niht lachen wil” [No one saw me laughing very much, for an angry disposition doesn’t feel like laughing, 744].

Although this assault is clearly no laughing matter for Ulrich, it was surely calculated to amuse the audience. Not only is he wearing a woman’s clothes, he is also placed in the same position as the one in which he has attempted to place his lady—that of passive love object. Our laughter at Ulrich’s futile rage brings attention to his situation as a parallel to that of the lady and again raises the question of whether a woman can be served against her will. Even if we are to imagine that it is Ulrich’s own lady who has sent the gifts, we might reasonably assume that she is not testing him, but rather trying to teach him a lesson by having him put the shoe on the other foot: the skirt, belt, headband, and ring materially feminize him, while receiving these gifts against his will places him symbolically in a feminine position. And if we do imagine the letter to be from Ulrich’s lady, her apparent compliment could be read as sarcasm: “got müeze iu libes und eren pflegen / uf iwern ritterlichen wegen! / mit triuwen gib ich iu den segen” [May God protect your life and your honor on your knightly path. In fidelity, I give you my blessing, Brief d]. The adjective “ritterlich” (knightly) is incongruous with these feminine gifts, a joke that deflates Ulrich’s masculine identity as a knight.

If we read the scenes of Ulrich’s unwilling receipt of gifts as a means to show his ignorance of his own hypocrisy in serving a woman who does not want to be served, we may perhaps better understand another set of odd occurrences in the work: Ulrich’s visits to his wife. Whereas the lady of the courtly lyric is often assumed to be married, the poet never mentions a wife. Ulrich, however, makes three visits to his wife, and these occur suddenly, with very little explanation on Ulrich’s part. Ulrich is apparently married to the perfect wife, a welcome antidote to his scornful lady: “Diu guot enpfie mich also wol / also von reht ein vrowe sol / enpfahen ir vil lieben man” [The good woman received me as well as a lady should rightly

receive her most loving husband, 708]. Ulrich furthermore acknowledges the incongruity between the good treatment he receives and his wooing of another woman, but does not seem particularly troubled by it: “diu chünde mir lieber niht gesin, / swie ich doch het über minen lip / ze frowen do ein ander wip” [She could not have been sweeter to me even though I had chosen another woman as my lady, 1088].

These meetings with the good wife comically juxtapose the real-life Ulrich known to the audience and the fictional Ulrich and furthermore highlight the absurdity of Ulrich’s claim to serve women so well. How can he be angry at the lady for her refusals when he returns to his own wife only periodically, indeed serving her very poorly? This question of a husband’s service to his wife is raised in Ulrich’s other important narrative, the *Frauenbuch*, thought to have been written two years after *Frauendienst*. The long work is a debate between a man and a woman about who is responsible for the degradation of former ideals concerning romantic love. One of the woman’s charges against men is that they go off hunting, get drunk, and forget their wives. In a description bound to speak even to some modern housewives, she describes the man who comes home at the end of his day’s work:

ez ist sîn gescheftē und ouch sîn pet,
 daz man im bringe dar ein pret:
 dâ spilt er unz an mitte naht,
 und trinket daz im gar sîn maht
 geswîchet und verswindet.
 sô gêt er dâ er vindet
 sîn wîp dannoch warten sîn.
 diu spricht “willkumen, herre mîn”:
 mit zûhten si gên im ûf stêt,
 durch ir zuht si gên im gêt.
 sô gît er ir antwurte niht,
 wan daz er vlîzicliche siht
 wâ er sich dâ sâ nider lege,
 slâfens unz an den morgen phlege.

(608, ll. 1–14)³⁰

30. All quotations of *Frauenbuch* are from the edition by Karl Lachmann. Page numbers and line numbers are given. Translations are my own.

[It is his custom and also his request that a game be brought to him. Thus he plays until midnight and drinks so that he becomes completely weak and loses his power. And so he goes to where he finds his wife still waiting for him. She says, "Welcome, my lord": with good breeding she rises to greet him and goes up to him dutifully. But the only answer he gives her is to passionately throw himself down where he will go about his business of sleeping until the morning.]

Ulrich does not hunt, drink, or gamble, but he obviously does not attend very often to his wife since he spends most of his days tourneying for his lady. The parallel between his wife and the hypothetical wife referred to by the woman of the *Frauenbuch* suggests the possibility that the figure of Ulrich's neglected wife resonated with women in the audience. Furthermore, one questions Ulrich's claims of being faithful to his lady since he rides home to seek comfort in his wife's waiting arms. Even more questionably, Ulrich is frequently distracted by other women.³¹ Neither wife nor lady appears to be particularly well served.

If Ulrich is unable to imagine what service might mean to a lady, it is because he functions according to the logic of a genre that gives women no voice. Ulrich is not an inept courtly lover, but rather the manifestation of the very rules of the genre. Much of the humor comes of course from the deflation of the ideal of sacrifice and suffering performed in honor of a lady by the earthy or mundane examples. But the author is clearly doing more than parodying the hero's extreme or inept service. The repeated emphasis on the lady's refusal to be served and Ulrich's seeming inability to hear this refusal bring into focus the logic or *monologic* underlying lady service. Although there may be conversation between suitor and lady in the courtly lyric, there can be no dialogue since the woman's words have no meaning in themselves; according to the genre, a "no" is nothing more than a deferred "yes," and a lady is merely the projected mirror image of the lover

31. In church, for example, he is so distracted by the women around him that "God was served very little" (935). A few lines later, Ulrich comments that he would have succumbed to one beautiful woman had it not been for his constancy (*staete*) (937). But far from assuring us that he serves his lady faithfully, Ulrich only brings attention to the comic inconsistency of his wandering eye. See also the *Adevineaux Amoureux*, in which a woman characterizes men's love as false as foam, light as a feather, and flighty as a sparrow (250) and another in which a woman mocks the unfaithful heart of men (253).

himself. It is this logic that the author appears to be targeting in the many examples of how Ulrich empties his lady's words of any desire that does not reflect his own. Repeatedly, her refusals, no matter how patiently explained, are taken as signs of encouragement, as though she had offered no discouragement at all. For example, when Ulrich conceives the idea of dressing as Queen Venus, he sends word asking his lady to tell him whether she approves his plan. She encourages him, telling him that it will be good for his honor—even though it will not bring him any success with her. Ulrich tells his audience that he was quite happy with her reply: “daz ir min vart geuiele wol, / des wart ich aller freuden vol” [I was full of joy to know my undertaking pleased her so, 470]. Whereas the lady tries to make distinctions (gaining honor from the event does not mean he will gain her love), Ulrich takes any sign of encouragement as an indication of imminent reward. Like Henri Bergson's automaton who is comic because of his inflexibility in situations demanding flexibility, Ulrich is programmed, following to the letter the role of the ever faithful minnesinger, sublimely deaf to the words of the distant lady who now is present. Bergson's concept of “the mechanical superimposed on the living” [du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant] helps us to see that Ulrich's relationship with his lady is comic precisely because of his mechanical, puppetlike obedience to the norms of the lyric genre, by which the man must woo the woman whether she says yes or no.³²

This puppetlike behavior is demonstrated in the many examples of Ulrich's “selective listening.” He chooses to hear only those words that reflect his own desire. When Ulrich sends the lady his severed finger, his messenger relates to him that he has successfully delivered the finger to her but that she has told him that even were he to serve her for a thousand years, his service would never meet with success (454). Ulrich responds only to the fact that she has his finger in her possession, declaring, “da von ist mir lipe, daz si in da / hat behabet, daz tuot mir wol” [I am happy that she has it; that does me good, 456]. One laughs at Ulrich because his response is always the same regardless of what the lady may say.

One way for the lady to respond to this automatism is, as I have suggested, with laughter. If her words have no effect in altering his behavior, at least she can play him like a puppet for her own amusement. But the

32. Bergson, *Le Rire*, 39. On the notion of Ulrich's behaving with “marionettenhaften Automatismus,” see Wolf, “Komik und Parodie,” 78–79.

lady also at times seems to play the role of a wise teacher, as though trying to educate Ulrich in the inadequacy of his lover’s logic, to make him see that there is a middle ground. For example, when the lady receives Ulrich’s finger, she shows sympathy for his loss, but urges him (through his messenger) not to confuse sympathy with love:

mir tuot des vingers sterben we,
doch durch dins herren liebe niht,
wan daz din munt gein mir des giht,
er hab in von den schulden min
verlorn, des muoz ich truric sin.

[I feel bad about the death of the finger; however, it is not out of love for your lord, but because of what you have said against me, that it is on my account he has lost it: for that reason should I be sad, 450].

With her use of the conjunction “doch” (however), she attempts to prevent Ulrich from incorrectly equating her feelings of compassion with love.

One of the lady’s first lessons goes directly to the heart of courtly love: the love lyric itself. When Ulrich sends his first love song along with his *niftel* to plead on his behalf, the lady responds that good songs do not necessitate a woman’s love:

diu liet diu sint ze ware guot,
ich wil aber mich ir niht an nemen,
sin dienst mac mir niht gezemen.
du solt der rede gar gedagen
und mir von im niht mere sagen.

(74)

[The songs are indeed good, but I won’t concern myself with them; his service cannot be worthy of me. You must completely abandon this talk and not mention him to me any more.]

The lady’s use of the word “aber” (but) again points to the false binary logic that governs Ulrich’s thinking, whereby good lyrics are equivalent to successful courtship.

The lady later tries to explain to Ulrich (via his messenger) that there exists a broader range of feelings than simply love or hate:

ich bin für war im niht gehaz;
 du solt aber mir gelouben daz:
 des er von mir ze lone gert,
 des ist er immer ungewert,
 daz sol er niht für übel han,
 wan ichs gewern wil nimmer man.
 (1097)

[In truth, I don't hate him. But you should believe me about this: he will always be unworthy of the reward he wants from me. He shouldn't take that badly, for I will grant it to no man.]

Again, the lady uses the conjunction “aber” to explain that just because she does not love Ulrich does not mean she hates him. She would perhaps like to be his friend or ally, as when she says she wants him to stop serving her, “als liebe ich im ze *vriunde* si” [even though I am willing to be considered his friend/ally, 1105; emphasis added]. Hoping that they can be friends, but not lovers, Ulrich's lady attempts to transfer Ulrich's egocentric wooing onto a more neutral plane, spurning him not because she is married or because she hates him, but rather because she does not want to be served by any man. Her desire to be just friends echoes the equally frustrated woman in one of Reinmar's songs: “Das wir wip niht mugen gewinnen / frünt mit rede sü enwellent dannoch me, / das muet mich. ich enwil niht minnen” [That we women are not able to win friends with our conversation without their wanting more, this distresses me. I do not want to love].³³ The woman directly locates the problem of male-female relations in courtly talk (*rede*), since women's words are not taken to reflect the desire of the female speaker.

This problem is even better articulated in Ulrich's *Frauenbuch*. Responding to her male interlocutor's claims that women have brought about the downfall of love because they do not greet men graciously, the woman counters that if women do greet men, they are taken for women of easy virtue, and thus lose their honor:

33. The verse from Reinmar is number 6 from the monograph by Jackson, *Reinmar's Women*. Translation is Jackson's.

ob iuch ein frowe gruozte,
den gruoze mit lachen suoze,
ir daecht alsô, “si ist mir holt.
jâ herr, wie hân ich daz versolt
daz si mich als gûetlîch an siht,
sît ich ir hân gedienet niht?
si mac wol sîn ein gaehez wîp,
sit ir sô wol behagt mîn lîp
und si sô gûetlîch tuot gên mir.
si hât gein mir lîht minne gir.”
sît ir diu wîp nu sô verstât,
dâ von iuch gûetlîch gruoze vergât.
ir habt iuch frowen dienst bewegen:
ir kûnnet niht wan rûemens phlegen.

(600, ll. 3–14)

[If a woman greets you laughing sweetly, this is how you think: “She likes me. Oh Lord, what have I done for her to look at me so nicely since I haven’t served her? She may well be a loose woman since she finds me so attractive and treats me so well. Perhaps she desires love from me.” Since this is what you think of women, you forfeit the sweet greeting. You claim to be serving women, but you can do nothing but boast.]

Somewhat like the Wife of Bath, the woman voices frustration that men badmouth women no matter what they do.³⁴ The mocking tone with which she mimics men’s talk about women attacks its monologic that places women in a no-win position within discourse about male-female relationships in courtly society.³⁵ The punishment delivered to men by the woman is the withholding of sweet speech (*gûetlîch gruoze*). The lady similarly punishes Ulrich, not with silence, but with her laughter. Both

34. An additional charge the woman of the *Frauenbuch* levels against men’s unfair criticisms of women is that they complain that women don’t dress well in order to please them, but if women do dress well, men accuse them of looking for other lovers (603, ll. 15–16).

35. For a discussion of the comic and irony in the *Frauenbuch*, see Elke Brüggem, “Minnelehre und Gesellschaftskritik im 13. Jahrhundert,” who sees the text’s “kunstvoll-subversive Ironie” [artfully subversive irony] directed against the “dogmatischen Form der monologischen Rede” [dogmatic form of monologic discourse] (97).

silence and laughter appear as strategies for withdrawing from a discursive operation that typically marginalizes women's voices.

Ulrich's Narrative Games: Lady's Man, Fool, "Queen"

As one might expect from a work entitled *Frauendienst*, Ulrich frames his story as a dedication to women:

Den guoten wiben si genigen
 von mir, swie si mich doch verzigen
 nach dienest ofte ir lones hant.
 her, waz si tugent doch begant!
 der werlde heil gar an in stat.
 ich waen, got niht so guotes hat
 als ein guot wip: daz ist also,
 des stat ir lop von schulde ho.

[May good women be knelt before by me, however much they have denied me reward for serving them. Lord, what virtue they possess! The salvation of the world resides in them. I believe that God has made nothing as good as a good woman. That is why their praise is so high.]

Like Boccaccio, Ulrich opens his work by inviting women, so full of virtue and worthy of praise, to enjoy an especially privileged position.³⁶ That Ulrich expected his work to be read by women is probable. While few noblemen in thirteenth-century Germany were literate, German noblewomen were more likely to engage in reading, an activity sometimes considered beneath the dignity of men.³⁷ Ulrich's claim that his work serves ladies is thus in part an appeal to important patrons or judges of his work. Throughout the work he paints himself as their counselor, expecting them to appreciate his service, even claiming to serve women better than other men, who only want to deceive them.³⁸

36. Minnesang poets normally distinguished between *frau* (a lady, noblewoman) and *wip* (woman). Ulrich uses the two terms with no apparent distinction between the two.

37. Green, *Medieval Listening and Reading*, 215.

38. On these various characterizations of Ulrich's claim to be writing on women's behalf, see stanzas 1753, 1819, and 1843.

Yet even in Ulrich’s opening words to the women he serves, readers may be suspicious as to just how earnestly Ulrich sets out to praise women. Like Boccaccio, Ulrich’s narrator has apparently had an unfortunate history with women, making us wonder whether his adulation of women’s virtue (*tugend*) is in fact irony on his part.³⁹ Ulrich also shows a more flirtatious, lascivious side, like Boccaccio’s narrator. In a passage in which Ulrich advises women how to live well, he urges them to don the “clothing” of lofty spirits and goodness: “Swelch frowe hochgemüete treit, / da bi güete, daz ist ein chleit, / daz vrowe noch pezzere nie getruoc” [Whatever lady wears lofty spirits and goodness too, that is the best clothing that a lady could ever wear, 1755].⁴⁰ It is surely no coincidence that only a few strophes later Ulrich uses the same clothing motif to tell how he wanted to test his own (second) lady:

Ich gedaht: si mügen daz niht bewarn,
ich welle ir heinlich alle ervarn
und wil ouch al ir tugende spehen,
ich wil in in diu herze sehen
beidiu durch chleider und durch lip.
sich chan vor mir bewarn dehein wip:
sit ich die warheit sprechen sol
ich ervar ir heinlich alle wol.

(1780)

[I thought: she can’t prevent it—I want to find out all about her in secret and I also want to spy all of her worthy qualities. I will see them in her heart, both through her clothes and through her body. No woman can protect herself from me: since I must speak the truth, I spy on them all with pleasure (or: I discover all of their secrets completely).]

39. Wolf suggests, in fact, that in this opening *frauenlob*, as elsewhere in the work, Ulrich uses an overdose of clichés deliberately for playful effect (“Komik und Parodie,” 77). On Ulrich’s self-conscious narrative poses and his interest in highlighting writing itself, see Tinsley, “Die Kunst der Selbstdarstellung in Ulrichs von Lichtenstein *Frauentienst*.”

40. The notion of women clothing themselves with moral qualities has a long medieval tradition. Tertullian advises women in *De Cultu Feminarum* (The appearance of women), “Dress yourselves in the silk of modesty, with the linen of holiness, and with the purple of chastity. Dressed up in this way, you will have God as your lover” (II, 13). St. John Chrysostom urged women to be silent: “This is order, this is modesty, this will adorn her more than any garments. Thus clothed, she will be able to offer her prayers in the manner most becoming” (Homily X on St. Paul’s Epistle to Timothy I, 435).

Like a voyeur, Ulrich sees through women's clothing: although they have donned the protective clothing of their honor and goodness, women are not safe from his prying eyes, a notion that is confirmed a few strophes later in Lied 54, where the poet's eyes can see through a lady's clothes.

Like Dunbar, Ulrich is able to spy on women and find out their secrets. His risqué boast that he "knows" women is surely an innuendo to women in the audience, although cloaked in didactic clothing: "He delicately suggests stripping the ladies in the audience and simultaneously revokes the suggestion by turning it into a figure of speech in the service of a virtuous train of thought."⁴¹ Nor is this salacious address an isolated moment in the narrative, for many of the lyrics in the purportedly didactic section of the work, far from idealizing love, play with the motifs of love poetry in a way that emphasizes the poet's sexual power over the love object. In poems such as these, men in the audience are invited to share his privileged voyeuristic position, and women in the audience then become the naked recipients of this gaze.

This objectification of women readers is paralleled by the co-opting of the work's heroine. As though to punish her for humiliating him and making all the jokes, Ulrich abandons her and then sings angry and insulting songs about her, his lyric having become a weapon to keep her in her place. It is thus fitting that Ulrich's second lady is a much more manageable object of pursuit. She is virtually invisible, for the period of Ulrich's second service includes almost no mention of the lady herself except that she is a beautiful brunette who is pleasing because of her beautiful laugh and smile: "Ir chuslih munt so lachen chan, / swenne er mich gütlich lachet an, / daz da uf stiget mir der muot" [Her kissable mouth can laugh/smile so that whenever it looks at me, my spirits soar, 1646].⁴² Unlike the

41. Milnes, "Ulrich von Lichtenstein," 32. Milnes discusses in detail the smuttiness of Ulrich's lyric in the second service. For a detailed discussion of the "silly erotic fantasies" of Ulrich's lyrics, also see Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus and the Courtly Love Lyric*, 171–72. Goldin discusses in particular the lyrics of Song 41, in which Ulrich promises to lock up his *höber muot* in the lady's heart where it can do whatever it likes with her. It should be noted that Ulrich comments that after singing this song, he thought on his lady, thereby indirectly implicating her as the subject of his dirty song (1639).

42. There are several other references to the laughing or smiling body parts of the second lady or of women in general. The second lady has eyes whose laughter makes men feel better, which Joubert felt to be the purpose of women's laughter (strophe 1647 and similar passage from 1732–33). In Song 51, Ulrich suggests that women are desirable to men for their good laughter: "Swelch wip gütlich lachen chan / schone mit zühten, hat die roten munt, / diu mac einen werden man / siuffen bringen uz des herzen grunt" [Whatever

scornful laughter of the resisting lady of Ulrich's first service, her laughter is rather the compliant laughter of the appreciative girlfriend.⁴³

One wonders how medieval women reacted to this badmouthing of the comic heroine. Ulrich apologizes for having said unseemly things about her, but voices confidence that no good woman ("dehein guot wip") in his audience will be angry with him since the lady has deserved it on account of her bad deed (1368). Ulrich's appeal to his lady readers reveals an anxiety about their reaction to his negative portrayal of the comic leading lady, for it effectively raises the question of how women *should* feel about it. Not only has Ulrich said bad things about the woman he had been so lyrically praising for thirteen hundred strophes, but he has also co-opted the heroine of the narrative and taken her away from his female readers.⁴⁴ The female reader laughing along with the first lady as she tells Ulrich to shut up and tosses him out the window may find that she has stopped laughing once she becomes the object of Ulrich's own joke.

But the displacement of Ulrich's attentions from one woman to another also serves to implicate Ulrich's lady service in a further layer of irony. The hyperbole of Ulrich's claims to never-ending and boundless service in the first two-thirds of the work are suddenly undercut by a sudden and smooth transition to an equally hyperbolic service to another woman. This sudden juxtaposition makes it difficult to believe in the poet's claim to sincerely love either of the two women, and moreover, as Sarah Kay has pointed out in her discussion of "narratives of two women" in troubadour lyric, "The whole genre of the love lyric is implicated in this irony, because it suggests the possibility that *any* love narrative may be unreliable."⁴⁵ The displacement of Ulrich's lady service is thus polyvalent: simultaneously a punishment of feminine misbehavior (especially laughter) and a deflation, through overdeterminacy, of the whole discourse on courtly love.

The polyvalence of this procedure is echoed in Ulrich's self-fashioning as a fool. Because of his naïveté, he has been compared to the young and

woman can laugh nicely, prettily and with good breeding, if she has a red mouth, she can bring forth in a worthy man sighs from the core of his heart, III,1-4].

43. Barreca, *Snow White*, 6.

44. This appropriation of the heroine, with whom female readers have come to identify, is a procedure that Roberta Krueger has termed "displacement" in her discussion of medieval French romance (*Women Readers*, 11).

45. Kay, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry*, 26.

inexperienced Parzival.⁴⁶ But a key difference between Ulrich and his foolish literary confrere is that Ulrich tells his own story, recollecting in the present the follies of his youth. There is thus a gap between the wise Ulrich, a man who has been a knight for thirty-three years (strophe 1845), and the foolish Ulrich, the young page who from the age of twelve dedicated himself to serving a lady, a distance signaled early in the narrative. After explaining that he had heard wise men say that the best way to become a worthy man was to praise women, he comments on his *tumpheit*, a term encompassing both the naïveté of inexperienced youth and foolishness or stupidity:

Do ich daz hort, ich was ein kint
 und tump als noch die jungen sint,
 so tump, daz ich die gerten reit,
 und gedaht doch in der tumpheit:
 sit daz die reinen süezen wip
 so hohe tiurent mannes lip,
 so wil ich dienen immer me
 den vrowen swie so ez mir erge.

(10, 1–8)

[I was a child when I heard that, and naive as children are, so naive that I still rode a hobbyhorse, and I thought foolishly: “Since lovely sweet women bring esteem to a man, then I will serve ladies from now on, however it may go with me.”]

Rather than lament his past foolishness, of course, Ulrich delights in it, frequently remarking his own foolishness and having characters in the story comment on it as well. The lady’s page, for example, calls Ulrich crazy (“sinne bloz”) upon hearing that he will have his mouth operated on, which could kill him (92). The lady herself sees this as stupidity, exclaiming, “ez diiht mich tumplich gar getan, / wold er sich also sniden lan” [It seems to me completely stupid if he really had himself cut in that way, 98]. Her complaint about his mouth was in fact probably not about his mouth at all, but rather about his speech; he has taken her metaphorical criticism literally. The lady also calls him stupid after he has had his finger cut off and sent to her in a golden chest: “ich ensolt der tumpheit trowen niht, /

46. Thomas, “*Parzival* as a Source for *Frauendienst*,” 419.

daz immer ein versunnen man / im selben hete daz getan” [I cannot believe a sane man would ever be so stupid as to do that to himself, 448]. By having his own lady continually berate him for his foolishness, he creates self-deprecating humor in which he offers himself up as an object for laughter. In fact, almost every instance of laughter is directed against himself rather than against others.⁴⁷

What purpose could directing humor against himself have served? Two scholars of humor have suggested the following:

Self-deprecation is ingratiating rather than aggressive; it allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority.⁴⁸

We beat the others to the punch line and render ourselves the victim. This makes people in positions of power comfortable.⁴⁹

While these statements about self-deprecation fit Ulrich’s narrative pose, they come from discussions of women’s humor! Both scholars agree that women today commonly make jokes about their own deficiencies. If Ulrich the author, like a woman, is ingratiating himself to people in positions of power, who are these people in positions of power? Are they women?

Ulrich’s self-deprecating humor may well stem from his acute awareness of his power deficiency, but the power he lacks is more likely to be based on class rather than gender. The historian John Freed argues that Ulrich’s work is largely directed toward affirming the common bonds between the free nobility and the ministerials, those knights who, though wealthy and influential, were bound in service to higher lords. Ulrich’s self-deprecating humor, argues Freed, is a means of affirming his own cultural and social standing in a way that was nonthreatening to free nobles: “the *Frauendienst* may have been a humorous way to assert that the Liechtensteins and ministerial lineages like them were in fact the social equals of the old free nobles, who were in many cases their kinsmen or their former peers.”⁵⁰ Freed notes several examples in the text where Ulrich anxiously plays with differences in status, such as when Duke

47. This point has been made by Milnes, “Ulrich von Lichtenstein,” 36–37.

48. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 123.

49. Barreca, *Snow White*, 25.

50. Freed, *Noble Bondsmen*, 264.

Frederick II, the highest-ranking feudal lord and Ulrich's rightful lord, asks to serve Ulrich/Arthur (1457). Freed concludes that such playful examples of feudal inversion represent the powerful ministerial's anxieties about his unequal status. Through the fictional inversion of feudal relationships in *Frauendienst*, Ulrich is indulging in his own carnivalesque fantasy, imagining himself as the equal of the free nobility by playfully subverting the boundaries between free and unfree in his text while never truly challenging the status of such boundaries in real life. The humor relied on the fact that Ulrich's audience knew full well that Frederick II was a duke and he was not.

But Freed's discussion ignores gender altogether. Might there be a way to connect gender and class to understand Ulrich's use of humor? One way to consider the interdependence of these two factors is to see Ulrich's comic pose as a victim of women as a way to create a bond of common understanding between his fellow men, regardless of rank.⁵¹ Despite Ulrich's claim to be serving ladies, the work focuses heavily on what it means to be a man, demonstrated in Margrave Heinrich's advice to young Ulrich: "ez tiuret junges mannes lip, / der suoze sprichet wider diu wip" [It brings esteem to a young man when he speaks well of women, 33]. Furthermore, Ulrich's interest in appealing to his male readers is suggested by the fact that while there are no historical female personages named in the work, there are dozens of men named, particularly in the tournaments. Indeed, much of *Frauendienst* treats the jousts between men; women are simply the vehicles through which men prove their prowess to each other. The words *man* and *mannlich* (manly) appear repeatedly, and it is clear that Ulrich, the eager server of ladies, is equally eager to prove his manliness.⁵²

Assuming that Ulrich's fictional lady is superior to him in station, the equal of the powerful free nobility, Ulrich's comical masquerading as the emasculated man was thus meant not to emphasize his inferiority, but rather to highlight the common bond of masculinity that he, although a ministerial, shared with the free men in the audience. In this way, self-deprecatory humor allows gender solidarity to overcome class boundaries.

51. That artistic representations of femininity could serve as a leveling device between men is suggested by John Berger's discussion of female nudes in European art: "Men of state, of business, discussed under paintings like this. When one of them felt he had been outwitted, he looked up for consolation. What he saw reminded him that he was a man" (*Ways of Seeing*, 57).

52. Two stanzas in particular that emphasize manliness are 97 and 1034.

The notion that Ulrich might be using women to affirm his bond with men is furthermore suggested by his other narrative persona of the second part of *Frauendienst*, the narrator whose smutty joking appeals to men at women’s expense. Both the playful masquerade as the emasculated suitor and the lascivious narrator who strips women in the audience potentially function as a joke between men.⁵³

Ulrich’s ridiculing of his own masculinity is furthermore dramatized materially in his cross-dressing, which underlies much of the humor of the second half of the work, eliciting laughter from women in particular:

des smielten al die vrowen gar,
daz ich ez also blide an vie
und ouch in wibes chleiden gie
und also schoene zöpfe truoc—
des wart gelachet da genuoc.
(933.4–8)

[The ladies all smiled a lot because I was going along so merrily and was wearing women’s clothing and was wearing such beautiful braids—there was a lot of laughing about that.]

Although there are few instances of men dressing as women in medieval literature—the cases of women dressing as men are many⁵⁴—Ulrich’s cross-dressing is perhaps the most comic aspect of *Frauendienst*, evident in

53. Robert Allen, in his discussion of the American burlesque, notes cogently that resistance against “ordinate” groups by “subordinate” groups is often “not only directed against those conceived of as ‘above,’ but constructing yet another object of subordination. In this process, there is frequently a slide from one register of social power to another—from class to gender, from class to race, and so forth” (*Horrible Prettiness*, 33). In Ulrich’s work, the ministerials’ resistance to their subordinate status is displaced onto the register of gender.

54. Nicolette dresses as a man in the twelfth-century *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Silence dresses as a man in the twelfth-century *Roman de Silence*. Marjorie Garber notes the many female saints in the Middle Ages who dressed as men to preserve their virginity or to enter into the monastic life (*Vested Interests*, 210–17). Ulrich is the only medieval man to be mentioned in the survey of cross-dressing through history by Vern and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 64. As discussed in chapter 1, men were known to dress as women in the sixteenth century when rioting against civil authorities. Examples of literary male cross-dressing can be found in the fabliau *Trubert* and in book 10, chapter 49 of Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, where Lancelot dresses as a woman in a tournament and defeats Sir Dinadan, who is himself forced to don woman’s clothing and be paraded in public. Guinevere is described as laughing so hard she falls to the ground.

the laughter of the men and women who greet Ulrich. Not only emasculating himself through his pose as foolish lover, he literally dresses as a woman. What is the connection between these two poses? On a superficial level, Ulrich's cross-dressing reinforces the theme of serving ladies. By donning the garb of the goddess of love and jousting in her name, Ulrich conveys symbolically his service to ladies. Indeed, several ladies thank him for honoring them in this way.

But the author clearly has more in mind than honoring women symbolically, for he repeatedly exploits cross-dressing for burlesque effect. While a chivalric knight commonly dons a lady's sleeve or some other love token as he fights in her name, Ulrich exaggerates this topos, having his hero dress in full female garb, complete with braids and flowing robes. The parody of this topos serves to bring to center stage the rather vexed linking of chivalric masculinity and ladies' garments. Indeed, in the cross-dressing scenes Ulrich ironically juxtaposes terminology associated with male and female roles. For example, Ulrich explains his "knightly" bearing: "Ich fuort ein hemde, daz was planc / ze mazzen als daz rokel lanc, / dar an zwene vrowenrnel guot, / ich was vil ritterlich genuot" [I wore a shirt that was as white as the long skirt, and attached to it were two ladies' sleeves; I felt very knightly, 489]. Not only does Ulrich describe his feminine clothing with an attention to epic detail, but the deliberate juxtaposition of the feminine "vrowenrnel" (lady's sleeve) with the masculine "ritterlich" (knightly) underlines the play with gender. A few strophes later, Ulrich continues to note the incongruity: "Sus zoget ich sa von Meisters dan / (in vrowen wis und was ein man)" [Then I quickly left Mestre (dressed as a woman, and was a man), 492]. The conjunction "und" (and) highlights the incongruity between feminine appearance and manly reality. The ironic lady/knight pair is again repeated as Ulrich notes, "Sus chom ich durch die stat geriten / in vrowen chleit nach riters siten" [Then I came riding through the town, in women's clothes, with knightly manners, 514].

The constant juxtaposition between exterior and interior brings attention to the masculine identity hidden beneath feminine clothing. As Madeleine Kahn reminds us, generally the transvestite is "a heterosexual man who reaffirms his masculinity by dressing as a woman. . . . The cross-dressing, no matter how elaborate, is not the goal; rather, it is part of the process of creating a male self."⁵⁵ When Ulrich dresses as a woman, it is not to under-

55. Kahn, *Narrative Transvestism*, 13.

cut his masculinity, but rather to reinforce it. Rare examples in nonliterary texts of jousts in which knights cross-dressed may have performed the same function of underlining the masculinity of the participants by contrasting it with the femininity the performance was meant to exorcise.⁵⁶

Several of the cross-dressing scenes in *Frauendienst* dramatize succinctly the anxiety concerning not only masculine identity but homosexuality. The first important scene is Ulrich’s encounter with the allegedly homosexual knight Hademar. Exhausted from a full day of tourneying, Ulrich declines to fight a knight who requests to joust with him. Consequently, people begin to gossip that Hademar must be a homosexual since this is the first time Ulrich has declined to fight with a man: “man sprach: ‘diu küneginne hat verseit / hern Hademar ir tyoste hie, / daz tet si für war ritter nie; / ich waen, siz dar umbe hat getan, / daz man des giht, er minne die man’” [People said: “The queen has refused to joust with Sir Hademar; truly she has never done that for a knight; I think that she has done it so that people will know he loves men,” 878]. The implication is that since Ulrich as Queen Venus fights so that men may show their erotic attachment to women, if he does not fight, this means that the opponent is erotically attached to men. Ulrich functions as a perpetual machine, churning out “real men.” The machine breaks down when a “false” man tries to engage the man-making machine. Yet Ulrich is a man dressed as a woman!

The scene between Ulrich and the knight posing as a Slavic woman also demonstrates how masquerading as women returns to questions of masculinity. During the Venusfahrt, Ulrich’s page tells him that a Slavic woman has challenged Ulrich to a joust. Ulrich, far from being honored by this request, refuses to fight the woman, but offers her a different kind of “joust”:

Ich smielt und hiez dem boten sagen:
“swa ich noch ie bi minen tagen

56. See Brundage’s description of Cypriot knights dressed as women in *Law, Sex, and Christian Society*, 473; and Philippe de Navarre’s account of a tournament where knights dressed both as knights of King Arthur’s court and as women of “Femenie,” in *Recueil des historiens des croisades*, 2:793. See also Ad Putter, “Transvestite Knights in Medieval Life and Literature,” who argues that male transvestism, particularly when initiated by the knight rather than forced upon him (as in the case of Malory’s Lancelot or Ulrich), relieves anxiety about the threat to the male knight’s masculine identity by creating “the powerful illusion that the masculinity it manufactures (by assuming and dropping the female disguise) could always have been taken for granted” (287).

getyostirt het wider diu wip,
 da waer gar harnasch bloz min lip
 gegen ir aller tyost gewesen,
 und bin doch vor in wol genesen;
 ir tyost tuot herzenlichen wol,
 gegen in sich niemen wapen sol.”

.....

ist iwer vrowe für war ein wip,
 die sol gar harnasch bloz min lip
 vil wunnecliche alhie bestan,
 ir hulde ich wol verdienen chan.

(688; 690)

[I smiled and said to the messenger, “Whenever I in all my days ever jousted against women, my body was completely without armor against their jousting and yet I survived them quite well. Their jousting does heartfelt good; no one should arm themselves against them. If your lady is indeed a woman, I shall stand her a joust right here with great pleasure and I can certainly earn her favor.”]

This is a classic example of a medieval smutty joke, and Ulrich’s smile shows that he is conscious of the joke he is making (the “woman” has not yet been revealed to be a man). Ulrich attempts to deflate female pretensions to power and to put women in their place and parades his masculinity before the male page—and potentially before his audience. The reader forgets the work is addressed to “good women” and feels rather like a witness to a “stagparty.”⁵⁷ Ulrich’s smutty joke may very well have recalled a similar example from Heinrich von Veldeke’s *Eneit* (finished ca. 1187). The female warrior Camilla encounters an enemy Trojan, Sir Tarchon, who taunts her by offering to battle with her in a manner more “suitable” to her sex: lying comfortably on a fine bed. In such a battle, he proclaims, he would gladly suffer defeat and he knows that she too, would gain much profit from it.⁵⁸ Camilla reacts to this Trojan smut by killing Tarchon with

57. Wolf, “Komik und Parodie,” 92. On the notion of this passage as medieval smut, see Milnes, “Ulrich von Lichtenstein,” 35.

58. See strophe 241 of *Eneit* (p. 100 in Thomas’s translation). Sarah Westphal notes that this scene meets Freud’s definition of smut and takes away the woman’s power by reducing her to a sexual object (“Camilla,” 250). Westphal also notes that Camilla slays Tarchon and

a powerful thrust of her spear. In Ulrich’s story, the Slavic woman warrior actually turns out to be a man who, like Ulrich, has decided to don women’s clothing. Thus Ulrich’s smutty joke is actually directed at a man! Although the smuttiness appears quite similar to that of Tarchon’s taunting of Camilla, the dynamics are ultimately quite different. Dressed as a woman, Ulrich speaks as a man to a woman who is really a man, who may or may not know that Ulrich as Queen Venus is really a man. What is going on here? What did Ulrich’s audience make of this elaborate layering of gender poses?

Although we have seen that Ulrich’s cross-dressing does not put him in the true position of the feminine but rather reinforces his position as masculine, the encounters between cross-dressers bring attention to the comic precariousness of gender categories. It is part of the story medieval people tell themselves about themselves, to take up Geertz’s formulation. Even though the inversion of male and female roles ultimately reaffirms the status quo, it points to a certain anxiety about just what it means to be a man or a woman. If one becomes a man through serving women, what does this mean for masculinity?⁵⁹ Judith Butler argues that parody of so-called natural gender roles helps to show that there is, in fact, no such natural position to occupy. Rather, gender is a citational mode in which the subject “cites” norms regulating gender.⁶⁰ One does not assume a ready-made gender that remains fixed, for gender is itself a process that one continually acts out. This notion of gender as a process parallels Madeleine Kahn’s assertion that transvestism is “part of the *process* of creating a male self.”

Ulrich’s cross-dressing certainly does bring attention to the ways in which gender is performative, as when Ulrich, as Queen Venus, goes to give the offering:

attacks with a hostile joke of her own. See also Westphal’s discussion of the anonymous *Frauenturnier* (Ladies tournament) (1300), in which women who have been staging their own jousts are made to promise that they will “joust” only in the marriage bed (“The Ladies’ Tournament,” 170).

59. Ulrich Müller views Ulrich as fundamentally anxious about his masculine role, arguing that the cross-dressing, as well as the simultaneous quest for power and desire to completely subject himself to a woman, indicates that he is deeply insecure about his role as man and knight (“Männerphantasien”). I would add that the anxiety at the heart of Ulrich’s poses represents a social, not just personal, insecurity about masculinity, which an analysis of class helps to show.

60. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 13.

Ich gie ze dem opfer schone sa,
 nach mir gie vil manic vrowe da.
 daz ich den ganc so blide an vie,
 des wart gelachtet dort und hie;
 min nigen und min umbeswanc
 diu wurden da envollen lanc.
 ich gie nach blider vrowen sit,
 chum hende breit was da min trit.

(945)

[I went to give my offering in front; many ladies came after me. There was laughter here and there because I tripped so merrily up the aisle. My bowing and my turning around really took a long time. I was walking merrily the way women do. My stride was only as long as a hand's width.]

In this passage Ulrich's small ladylike steps show him citing femininity, playing at being a woman while putatively in control of his manhood, an incongruity that might have been even more comic in a live recital of the work since a male entertainer might accompany his recital with gestures and voice to capture the travesty.⁶¹

What does this gender travesty mean for women's laughter in particular? How does it reformulate the gendered dynamics between male narrator and female audience? For the women in Ulrich's audience, whether reading privately in their chambers or listening among others, Ulrich's performance creates a space that goes beyond the pattern of male as joke-maker, woman as joke-object. He not only dresses like a woman, he even speaks as a woman, using pronouns like "we" and "us" in a way to ally himself with his "fellow" women, as when he says, "von busunen grozen schal / hort man vor uns vrowen do, / man was uns an ze sehen vro" [One could hear the loud sound of trumpets before us ladies: people were happy to look upon us, 541].

Ulrich's pose as a woman meets with hearty approval from the women he meets. Perhaps the most comic episode of the masquerade is when Ulrich must give the kiss of peace in church and is unveiled as the man he really is:

61. Two similar passages where Ulrich's offering meets with laughter are in strophe 536 and 600.

Die schoene lachen des began,
si sprach: “wie nu, ir sit ein man?
daz han ich kürzlich wol gesehen;
was danne? der kus sol doch geschehen.
ich wil durch elliū guoten wip
iuch kussen, sit daz iwer lip
hat vrowen chleit an sich geleit,
des sol min kus iu sin bereit.”

(538)

[The fair lady began to laugh and said: “How is this, you are a man? I just saw this clearly. So what? The kiss should still happen. I intend on behalf of all good women to kiss you; since you have dressed yourself in ladies’ clothes, my kiss shall be extended to you.”]

The lady is amused and honored by Ulrich’s feminine masquerade, and the pleasure resulting from this masquerade is mutual: Ulrich gets an illicit kiss and the lady gets a good laugh. But the men within the narrative laugh too, such as when Ulrich’s companion jokes about his having been not only a woman, but a queen:

Er sprach: “got wunder hat getan
an iu, daz ir nu sit ein man
und wart vor vier tagen ein wip.
daz ir sus wandelt iweren lip,
daz ist ein wunder endelich.
ir wart ein chüēginne rich,
nu sit ir als ein ander man,
wem habt ir iwer chüēnicriche lan?”
Des lacht ich und manic ritter guot,
als man nach spaecher rede tuot.

(988–89)

[He said “God has performed a miracle on you that you are now a man and were four days ago a woman. That you have thus transformed yourself is truly a wonder. You were a rich queen and now you are like any other man. To whom have you given your realm?” I and many other good knights laughed at that, as people do after witty talk.]

Thus, inscribed laughers of both genders appreciate Ulrich's cross-dressing, suggesting the pleasures the text may have offered to men and women alike among Ulrich's readers.

While on the one hand offering women a female protagonist who ridicules the male hero and a narrator who self-deprecatingly serves women, and on the other hand displacing the female hero and casting a lascivious eye on women in the audience, *Frauendienst* in some ways created different kinds of laughter along gender and class lines. The cross-dressing scenes serve more as common ground, bringing attention to the socially constructed roles that must be continually performed by men and women alike. As Marjorie Garber argues, transvestism is "not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself."⁶² Beyond putting into question femininity or masculinity, the laughter generated by cross-dressing interrogates those categories as they relate to each other, those social conventions that men and women must daily cite. If we were able to eavesdrop on a performance of *Frauendienst* before a mixed audience of the thirteenth century, we might have witnessed moments of tension between the sexes: nervous laughs, sideways glances, angry blushes, exclusionary winks. But we might also have observed women and men laughing openly *with* each other in recognition (probably unconscious) of how gender is a social category requiring performance by men and women alike.

Making jokes about a man to his face, the lady uses her laughter as a public act in which she asserts herself rather than a private act solidifying bonds between women. Could scenes in Ulrich's work such as the lady's trick that sends her would-be rapist on his degrading fall have likewise instructed medieval German women how to use their wits to protect themselves, just as Boccaccio's ladies learned to use their wit to deflect unwanted attentions from men? Perhaps, but this was unlikely to have been Ulrich's intention. For him, the noblewoman ridiculing her suitor was instrumental in his parodying of the generic conventions of courtly love. Through the witty barbs of his heroine, Ulrich is able to ridicule the literary texts in which men weep and moan all in the service of women. And yet, his lady's laughter marks the many ways in which the classics of courtly love did not allow women a voice. If lady service in fact relies on a woman's silence or absence, then laughter is what exposes the operations of the genre's silencing of women.

62. Garber, *Vested Interests*, 17.

Furthermore, the self-deprecating humor of the male narrator and his pose as a woman at times push the terrain of comedy beyond the limits of male versus female and bring attention to the performativity of gender and genre alike. By playing the fool, the narrator offers himself up for the laughter of both men and women. This pose as a fool may also have relied on issues of feudal hierarchy. But by dressing, walking, and speaking as a woman, Ulrich adds a complicating layer to his narrative persona that distinguishes his tale from the tales of so many other hapless suitors. Even the smutty joke Ulrich directs at a person he believes to be a woman invites women in the audience to occupy a position other than the position of the passive object of aggression, for the smut is hilariously misdirected at another man so that the audience can no longer be so sure whom they are laughing *with* and whom they are laughing *at*. By understanding the multiple facets of the work’s humor and the pleasures it offered to women, we can recognize ways in which *Frauendienst* could indeed have been in the service of ladies.