

“My wife will be mistress”

The Loquacious Farce Wife
and Laughter in the House



Chères dames, par ma simplese
Il me conviendra fermer l’uys
Et ma femme sera mestresse.¹

[Dear ladies, because of my simplicity
I will have to shut the door
And my wife will be mistress.]

Mes bonnes gens, qui nous voyez,
Venez de la gajeure boire;
Et annoncez et retenez
Que les femmes que vous sçavez
Ont gagné le pris.²

1. The full title heading is *Farce Nouvelle Très Bonne des Drois de la Porte Bodès et de fermer L’Huis à Trois Personnages* (Cohen, *Recueil*, 20, vv. 379–81). Farces from Cohen’s collection will be indicated by *RC* followed by the number in the collection. All translations of the farces in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise indicated. The date of *Porte Bodès* is uncertain, but Cohen believes that it came after *Le Chaudronnier*, which is found in one printed edition (ca. 1550) from the Parisian printer Nicolas Chrestien (British Museum C20 e. 13) that Tissier, *Recueil de Farces* (1450–1550), speculates came well after the manuscripts (but no earlier than 1494).

2. Full title heading: *Farce nouvelle très bonne et fort joyeuse à troys personnages d’un Chaudronnier c’est assavoir l’homme, la femme et le chaudronnier* (Tissier, *Recueil de Farces*, 3:185–89). The farce is of probable Picard provenance. All farces from Tissier’s collection will be indicated by *T* and the volume number. Translations are my own. Also see the translation in Boucquey, *Six Medieval French Farces*, 143–64.

[My dear people who see us here,
Come and drink to the wager;
And make it known and remember
That women, as you have seen,
Have won the prize.]



he men who address the audience at the end of these northern French farces openly proclaim the victory of wives over their husbands. The husband in the *Chaudronnier* announces the victory with an almost celebratory tone, suggesting that all go off to the tavern together to drink on it. The husband in *Porte Bodès* shows particular interest in the women in the audience, admitting his own defeat at the hands of one of their sex. Why would these conjugal farces of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries celebrate a wife's overthrowing of her husband's authority?³ Who was laughing at the sight of a woman out-arguing her husband and forcing him to do the housework?

The plots of the conjugal French farce generally hinge, at first glance, on the most banal of issues, such as who gets to choose the bird to put in the cage (*Obstination des femmes*) or which of the spouses has farted (*Farce du pet*). It is the very triviality of marital quarrels such as these that makes the humor, as André Tissier has commented: "The more futile the reason for the quarrel, the less troubling it is, and consequently, the more amusing it is to watch the spouses quarrel with each other."⁴ Although seemingly superficial, their humor deriving in great measure from slapstick gestures and obscene puns, farces point to issues important to domestic relations in the Middle Ages, particularly the role of each spouse in maintaining the household. Both farces I discuss in this chapter center on the seemingly trivial bet between a husband and a wife over who can keep quiet longer. In *Le Chaudronnier*, a man of little means, perhaps a cobbler, bets his wife that he can remain silent longer than she. A kettle maker⁵ appears at their

3. Out of the 136 farces identified by Barbara Bowen, she classifies 61 as "farces conjugales" (*Les Caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française*, 13).

4. "Plus le motif est futile, moins la querelle est inquiétante et, par conséquent, plus il est amusant de voir les époux se querreler" (T 6:24).

5. The medieval *chaudronnier* not only made pots and pans, but sold and repaired them, evident in the ambulating *chaudronnier*'s hawking his services in the farce of the same name ("Qui veult ses poesles reffaire?" 91).

house and, puzzled by their silence, attempts to force the husband to speak by putting straw on his face and placing a spoon in one hand and a chamber pot in the other, an allusion to the game of Saint Cosme where the goal is for one person to remain silent while the other tries to make him laugh by presenting him with ridiculous gifts. The kettle maker then makes amorous advances to the wife, calling her his “little cutie” [ma godinette] and addressing her in mock courtly speech—“Baiser vous vueil et acoller” [I want to kiss and hug you, v. 163]—and touching her all over, advances that she silently allows. The outraged husband pummels the kettle maker and curses his wife for immodestly failing to protect her body, but when she replies that she would thereby have lost the bet, the husband concedes that she has won.

In *Farce des drois de la Porte Bodès* (twice the length of *Le Chaudronnier*), a cobbler and his wife argue over who should close the door, which is drawing in smoke from the fire. In this farce, the husband is confronted by two of the three things reputed to drive a medieval man from his home: “a drip, the smoke, a wife—these three compel a man his house to flee.”⁶ The husband suggests that whoever speaks first will have to close the door, and the two begin their wager. A judge comes by and, like the kettle maker, makes sexual advances to the wife, who, in contrast to the wife in the *Chaudronnier*, openly resists the male passerby’s advances, and angrily berates her husband for not having stopped him. The husband declares that his wife has lost the bet because she spoke first, but when she refuses to close the door as promised, he calls upon the judge to intervene and decide the case. After the husband presents his grievance against his wife, the wife claims that it was her natural right as a woman to speak out, citing as her legal evidence the “drois de la Porte Bodès,” edicts alleged to be posted on the Bodès door outside Paris that proclaimed women’s authority over their husbands.⁷ Thus, while not contest-

6. From the anonymous Latin satire against marriage *De Coniuge non ducenda* (Against marrying) of the thirteenth century, quoted in Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed*, 128. Initially, in Prov. 19:13 and in Jerome’s *Against Jovinian*, the dripping is used to describe the consistent nagging of the wife. The Wife of Bath also refers to this saying (ll. 278–80), as does Christine de Pizan, quoted later in this chapter.

7. Cohen, *Recueil*, notes that the Porte Baudoyer, Baudeer, or Baudet was located in the city wall of Paris from the eleventh century and was the site of a famous auberge, Heaume de la Porte Baudet. The place-name undoubtedly had a particular appeal for Parisian audiences, one that is lost to readers today.

ing her husband's claim that he has won the bet, she trumps him by presenting legal principles that supersede those of this individual case. The bewildered judge accepts this evidence, pronouncing in her favor and ordering the husband to close the door.

When read side by side, these two farces demonstrate the way in which medieval discourse placed women in a no-win situation. Learned anti-feminist texts and common proverbs alike characterize women both as excessively talkative and excessively libidinous. These farces imagine what happens when women attempt to defy such clichés by placing the female characters in a situation where trying to disprove one makes them inevitably confirm the other. While one wife is able to win the bet by demonstrating her ability to hold her tongue, but at the expense of her modesty, the other wife, conversely, assigns a greater value to her modesty than to the winning of a silence wager. Like the lady of *Frauendienst*, who cannot praise her suitor, as is expected of a courtly lady, without being perceived as accepting his love (but conversely is criticized if she is not courteous to his advances) the wives show that women are presented with false choices. Whatever attempts women might make at conforming to expectations about proper feminine comportment, they can never measure up since ready-made formulas about their deficiencies are ever available to castigate a woman for any "choice" she might make: all women, as the Wife of Bath has already taught, will go to the devil as far as men are concerned.

While the farces generate laughter through their world-upside-down structure of a woman wearing the pants in the house, and can thus be said to base their humor on subverted expectations about marital relations, they also play with the discourse on women itself. If the laughter of parody in *Frauendienst* brings attention to the sometimes ridiculous implications of the logic governing genre, the farces make clichés and proverbs that circulate in marketplace as well as literary text the subject of scrutiny. As public performances staged before an audience of mixed social groups, they also allow us to consider how a more socially diverse group of spectators participated in the culture of laughter in the Middle Ages. Looking at these farces side by side in the context of other farces, this chapter first examines how their humor responds to notions of women's alleged loquacity and points to concerns regarding the authority of a man over his wife, then considers what scenes of domestic dispute had to say about the value of women's work as it contributed to the medieval household.

Women in Medieval Theater: On Stage and Off

A particular difficulty we face in considering the relationship between the medieval farce wife and the audience is that both female and male roles were probably played by men, although information about the assigning of theatrical roles in the Middle Ages is sketchy. There is evidence of women having acted in some of the mystery plays of medieval England, and we know that women acted in plays on the continent, such as the women who played the female roles in the *Mystery of the Three Masters* in 1509 at Romans or the woman who played the role of St. Catherine in a mystery in 1468 in Metz.⁸ Scholars of the farce have by and large assumed that men played the roles of women in the French farce because there is no evidence of a woman acting in a farce until 1545: a contract in which the director of an ambulating troupe promises to feed and lodge the actress, Marie Ferré, as well as pay her “douze livres tournois.”⁹ A key reason for women’s exclusion from acting in farces comes from the fact that male-dominated organizations generally were in charge of mounting farce performances.¹⁰ In the first hundred or so years of the farce, performances were predominantly in the hands of various student groups or professional associations from which women would have been excluded, such as the Parisian Basoche (association of law clerks) or the Enfants-sans-Souci, known mostly for their performances of *sotties*. In the middle of the sixteenth century, however, the performance of farces was gradually being taken over by traveling troupes or by the Parisian companies based in the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

In performances where men did play female roles, how would this

8. According to records from Metz, the woman played so well that she made several people weep (Petit de Julleville, *Les Comédiens en France au Moyen Age*, 10). Apparently, the role most often played by women was that of the Virgin Mary. In some cases, in plays where other female roles were played by men, the role of the Virgin was played by a young woman. See Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context*, 150; and Ogden, “Women Play Women in the Liturgical Drama of the Middle Ages.”

9. Lacour, *Les Premières actrices françaises*, 6. Lacour remarks that the matter-of-factness of the terms of the contract suggest to him that the practice of hiring actresses by this time was routine rather than exceptional, and he suggests that the poor evidence for women’s playing on the stage may simply be due to a paucity of surviving documents. See also Lebègue, *Le Théâtre comique en France de Pathelin à Mélite*, 24; and Hindley, “Acting Companies in Late Medieval France,” 83.

10. Clifford Davidson, discussing primarily British theater, remarks the control of dramatic productions by male organizations (“Women and the Medieval Stage,” 102).

affect the relationship between the fictional women on stage and real women in the audience? Scarce attention has been given to this question by scholars of medieval French theater, but it has been the subject of lively debate among scholars of English Renaissance theater. Some of these scholars argue that the audience willingly suspended their knowledge of the male sex of the performer and that young male actors could perform so well that the audience forgot they were actually watching boys on stage.¹¹ Such suspension of disbelief in the context of medieval French theater is suggested by an account of a miracle play in Metz in 1485 where the young son of a barber apparently played the role of St. Barbara so well that all of the townspeople wanted to take him in under their roofs and a rich widow even wanted to adopt him. The following year, however, the same boy had less success playing St. Catherine because his voice had ripened.¹² In other words, the biological proximity of young boys to women (with their unripened voices and assumedly effeminate physique) allowed the audience to suspend their disbelief and accept the performance as authentically female.

But the image of a male on stage dressed as a woman could also have been exploited for burlesque purposes, particularly if the actor was a man rather than a boy. The male actor dressed as the farce wife might have used exaggerated tones and gestures to parody femininity and bring attention to the male body of the actor on stage, similar to Ulrich's masquerade as Queen Venus, discussed in chapter 4.¹³ Unfortunately, we have no evidence of how *Le Chaudronnier* or *Porte Bodès* were performed. Male actors playing the wives may have exaggerated their feminine roles for burlesque effect, or they may have been directed to play the parts straight so that the humor would focus on the marital quarrel and the silence wager. The response of men and women to the performance of the farce wife would undoubtedly have varied from one performance to the other based on such choices.

11. See Brown, "The Boyhood of Shakespeare's Heroines." On the unique possibilities of identification with the boy actors among both male and female viewers, see Barbour, "When I Acted Young Antinous."

12. Petit de Julleville, *Les Comédiens en France au Moyen Age*, 275–76.

13. Edelgard E. Du Bruck, "The Sociology of the Nuernberg Shrovetide Plays," 107, notes the burlesque results of men playing women in comic drama, as does Raymond Lebègue who cites one example where an actor playing a woman, having kept his beard while wearing a woman's kerchief and apron, asks her newly married friend how she spent her wedding night (*Théâtre comique*, 24).

This leads to the question of whether women were present at performances. Select audiences indoors sometimes watched farces performed by school groups or by the *puy*s, medieval versions of the literary salon. Women might have been excluded from such groups, although indoor performances could include family members of guilds or confraternities. But farces were frequently performed in a public square during the celebration of a religious or civic festival or a procession honoring the arrival of an important civic figure.¹⁴ Crowds would gather around the scaffolding and watch the performances while standing rather than sitting. A sixteenth-century painting by the Flemish painter Pieter Balten, *The Flemish Kermess*, shows a farce being performed in front of audiences comprised of men and women. Documents from Lucerne also show that women were in public areas in which plays were performed, although their presence near the stage was not appreciated by some.¹⁵ There is also evidence of women's presence toward the end of the sixteenth century in Paris, when the farce was often presented indoors in the houses run by the confraternities, such as the famous house run by the Confrérie de la Passion, L'Hôtel de Bourgogne. In 1588, a prelate complained about the mounting of plays on feast days and Sundays at the Hôtel, lamenting the licentious activities that took place and their threat to women's modesty:

In this place, a thousand scandalous assignations are made, which damages the honesty and modesty of women and ruins the families of the poor artisans, of which the lower room is always full and who, more than two hours before the performance, spend their time in immodest pastimes, in games of cards and dice, in gluttony and drunkenness . . . etc., and from which result several quarrels and fights.¹⁶

14. Farces were often performed as part of a larger religious drama. See Lintilhac, *La Comédie*, 33. In his discussion of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century processions of Lille, Alan Knight suggests that whereas the biblical plays were presented during the first day of the procession, farces were performed in the evening or the next day ("Processional Theatre and the Rituals of Social Unity in Lille," 101, 105). See also Hindley's discussion of the various venues for farces, including in public on platforms, or in private (wedding feasts and school groups) or professional performances indoors by troupes such as Triboulet's ("Acting Companies in Late Medieval France," 94).

15. The "to-ing and fro-ing" of the female servants or assistants was considered inappropriate, and the actors were asked to have *male* servants do any necessary errands (Meredith and Tailby, *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages*, 55).

16. This passage is quoted in Petit de Julleville, *Comédiens en France*, 79 (translation is mine). Petit de Julleville's source is a book entitled *Remonstrances très-humbles au Roy de*

This passage testifies not only to the presence of women, but also to the popularity of such spectacles, for which audience members would come two hours early to hold their places. There is also evidence of noblewomen attending farces. In 1498, Anne de Bretagne herself paid the Enfants-sans-Souci thirty-five "livres tournois" for having performed in front of her "plusieurs jeux, farces et esbatements" [several games, farces, and amusements].¹⁷ Perhaps the strongest evidence of women's attendance is that many farces themselves (including *Porte Bodès*) address women in such phrases as "Seigneurs et dames, hault et bas" [Gentlemen and ladies, high and low].¹⁸ Although participation of women as actors is difficult to document, it is clear that many performances included women among their audiences.

Women's Wagging Tongue and the Farce Wife's Challenge

According to farce husbands, the principal flaw of their wives is that they talk too much. The husband in *Le Chaudronnier* goes so far as to claim that female loquacity, in its sheer force, is capable of overpowering the Devil himself:¹⁹

Femme le gaignera à caqueter.
Vous verriez plustost Lucifer

France et de Pologne, printed in 1588 and attributed to Pierre d'Épinac, archbishop of Lyon, or to Nicolas Roland, counselor to the "Cour des Monnaies" in Paris. On the concern over women's attendance at plays, see Jean Howard's study of the Renaissance English stage, in which she argues that the antitheatricalists perceived women's access to the public realm, purchased with a theater ticket, as a threat because it allowed them to see the whole theatrical display of possibilities they otherwise would not know in the confines of their homes, the "proper" place for women (*The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 78–79).

17. Quoted in Petit de Julleville, *Comédiens en France*, 163.

18. Just a few examples of farces that address women at the end are *Maistre Mymmin qui va à la guerre* (RC 4), *Farce des esveilleurs du chat qui dort* (RC 34), *Farce de Martin de Cambray* (RC 41), *Farce du goguelu* (RC 45), *Farce de la trippière* (RC 52), and *Colin qui loue et dépète Dieu* (T 1).

19. One fabliau even attributes woman's loquacity and laughter to the Devil, who in making her, farted on her tongue, which is why she talks and jokes so much ("Por ce bordele et jengle tant": "Du con qui fu fait a la besche" [Barbazan, *Fabliaux et Contes*, 4]). The association between the shrewish wife and the Devil was common. Lucy de Bruyn, *Woman and the Devil in Sixteenth-Century Literature*, 129–49, notes that the shrew was such an indomitable figure that the Devil became a sympathetic character when viewed next to her!

Devenir ange salutaire
 Que une femme eust un peu de repos,
 Et soy taire ou tenir maniere.

(vv. 68–72)

[Woman will always win when it comes to yakking. You would be more likely to see Lucifer become a salutary angel than a woman calm down and keep quiet or to even look like she's trying to.]

Confident that the only victory available to his wife is in yakking—*caqueter* being a word onomatopoeic in origin and meant to compare a woman's prattling with the cackling of a hen—the husband declares that his wife will lose the silence wager and will have to pay. He in fact declares that the loser will have to buy “la soupe payelle,” a kind of soup fried in a pan, but perhaps, as Tissier suggests in his note, a word game: *paye elle* (she pays). This declaration conveys his confidence that he, unlike his wife, will be able to hold his tongue.

The husband in *Porte Bodès* similarly believes that victory is unquestionably his. His wife is surprised at his cocky confidence, but he explains:

Car je ne viz onques
 La femme qui se peust passer
 De caqueter ou de tencer.
 Leur langue, par Saint Matelin,
 Est comme le claquet du moulin,
 Jamais nul tour n'est à repos.

(vv. 141–46)

[For I have never seen the woman who can refrain from yakking or arguing. Their tongue, by Saint Matelin, is like the clacker of the windmill. It never ceases turning.]

The farce husbands' distaste for the allegedly wagging tongues of their wives reflects a long tradition of clerical and literary discourse on female speech in the Middle Ages, and it is thus no surprise that the husbands are fully confident that they will win the bet. The notion that man, gifted with reason, can speak, whereas woman, the irrational creature, can only make

noise can be traced back to the Bible.²⁰ A few examples will suffice to show the ubiquity of this topos in medieval discourse. St. John Chrysostom writes in the fourth century that women should be forbidden from speaking in church even about religious matters. Echoing St. Paul's famous ban on women as teachers, he explains that women should learn, not teach, "For thus they will show submission by their silence. For the sex is naturally somewhat talkative."²¹ Around 1185 Andreas Capellanus comments, "Every woman is also loud-mouthed, since no one of them can keep her tongue from abuses, and if she loses a single egg she will keep up a clamor all day like a barking dog, and she will disturb the whole neighborhood over a trifle."²² In the thirteenth century, Jean de Meun warns men "not to confide in their wives unless they want to hear their secrets repeated in town."²³ Boccaccio, following Juvenal's sixth satire, declares that women "chatter incessantly with the maid, the baker's wife, the green-grocer's wife, or the washerwoman, and become greatly put out if they are re-proved for talking to any of them."²⁴ Perhaps the best literary illustration of women's chattering is the farce in which women plagued with *taciturnité* go on a pilgrimage to their patron saint, Sainte Caquette, who heals them.²⁵ The preponderance of texts lamenting female loquacity in literary texts, conduct manuals, and church sermons, not just in clerical treatises, shows that women were well aware that they were considered to be the talkative sex.²⁶

Le Chaudronnier and *Porte Bodès*, while in some measure reinforcing these clichés, simultaneously end up questioning their shaky foundation.

20. Lucken, "Woman's Cry," locates the topos in the story of the Fall and traces its progress into the farce corpus.

21. Homily IX on Saint Paul's Epistle to Timothy I.2: *Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 435.

22. *The Art of Courty Love*, 207.

23. *Le Roman de la Rose*, vv. 16347–53 (through the words of Genius).

24. Boccaccio, *The Corbaccio*, 31.

25. *Le Grant voyage et pelerinage de Sainte Caquette à quatre personnages, composé à Caen par le nouveau général*, in E. Droz and H. Lewicka, *Le Recueil Trepperel*. See also the farce *Mâitre Mimin Etudiant*, where the moral at the end is in fact "Au moins on a bien veu comment femmes ont le bruyt pour parler" [At least we have seen how women have the reputation for talking, T 3].

26. For examples of sermons warning against women's talkativeness, see Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones vulgares* (ca. 1170–1240), quoted in Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed*, 145–46.

First of all, the farce wives challenge their husbands' assertion that loquacity is a quality particular to women. In *Le Chaudronnier*, the wife insults her husband by calling him "maubeq" [bad beak, v. 17], which as Tissier notes, is similar to the term *bequerelle* that one finds used to describe a loud-mouthed woman. The insult she hurls at her husband implicitly questions the natural association between femininity and loquacity; it is in fact the husband's failure to control his own tongue that causes him to lose the bet to his wife, who knows how to hold hers. Men's excessive speech is a more explicit topic in *Porte Bodès*, where it is the husband's continual nagging of his wife to shut the door that drives her to confront her husband with his hypocrisy:

Vous dictes bien qu'entre nous femmes
 Caquetons tousjours, mes vous-mesmes
 Ne vous en povés pas tenir.

(vv. 130–33)

[You say that we women are always yakking, but you yourselves can't refrain from it.]

The wife's use of the pronoun "you" is directed not only at her husband, but at all men in general, for she distinguishes the group of "nous femmes" [us women] from "vous-mesmes" [you yourselves], making clear that the battle is not just between spouses, but between men and women more generally. In fact, it is only at this point, after her husband has made his speech about women's alleged loquacity, that she defends herself and all women against the unfounded clichés that men make.

The wife continues to challenge the foundation of such clichés, for when her husband claims that women's tongues are like windmills, she responds:

N'esse pas à nostre propos
 Vous-mesmes qui l'avés conclus
 Et preposé; vous parlez plus
 Que je ne fois de la moitié.

(vv. 147–50)

[Isn't it true that you yourselves have concluded and asserted that about us? You speak twice as much as I do.]

Like the Wife of Bath, who questions the legitimacy of discourse about women since it is written by men, she points out that it is "you yourselves," men, who have crafted and perpetuated the myth of woman's wagging tongue. She challenges the cliché not only by undermining the legitimacy of its source, but also by bringing in her own personal observation that he talks more than she does. Christine de Pizan, too, questioned such assumptions in her attack on "gossips," in this case, men who bragged of their sexual conquests.²⁷

While on the one hand disputing the legitimacy of what men say about women's talkativeness, the women elsewhere praise their putatively feminine loquacity as an asset that they can exploit to their advantage. The wife in *Le Chaudronnier* brags, "Je ne crain femme de la ville / A caqueter ny à playdier" [There's not a woman in town I fear when it comes to yakking or arguing, vv. 65–66]. The wife in *L'Obstination des femmes* also brags about her loquacity and its usefulness to women. When her husband tells her to be quiet and let him be the boss in the house, she replies,

Cela n'est pas à nostre usage
Et ne sert point à mon propos.
Femmes n'ont jamais le bec clos,
Et ce n'est pas de maintenant!

(T 6:vv. 169–72)

[That is not our custom and doesn't at all serve my purpose. Women never have a closed beak, and that's nothing new!]

This wife admits that women are by nature talkative—it is "our custom"—but also suggests that there is a utility in this talkativeness: it serves her

27. Thelma Fenster notes that Christine's clever reversal of the gossipy woman topos is an example of her sense of humor (134). See also chapter 1 on the Wife of Bath's ridiculing of men's pretentious speech. R. Howard Bloch also points to the paradox underlying the discourse of male misogynists who go on at length about alleged feminine loquacity (*Medieval Misogyny*, 55–57), and Patricia Parker discusses Erasmus's 1525 treatise *Lingua, sive de linguae usu ac abusu* (On the use and abuse of the tongue), in which Erasmus claims that he would have dedicated his treatise to women since they are most often reproached for their wagging tongues but cannot because men's tongues are so uncontrolled "that women appear subdued and restrained in comparison." He then lists examples of overabundance in speech from Greek and Roman literature and oratory. Parker argues that the work is representative of a whole body of literature including conduct literature and Shakespeare's plays that show "the anxieties of effeminacy which attended any man whose province was the art of words" ("On the Tongue," 445–46).

purpose. In *Le Chaudronnier* and *Porte Bodès*, the question of what specific purpose woman's loquacity might serve hinges, ironically, not on woman's speech but on her silence. In *Le Chaudronnier*, although the wife first brags about her loquacity, as soon as her husband claims women are unable to keep quiet, she disputes him. In winning the bet, she demonstrates that women can remain silent when it suits their purpose, just as the wife in *Obstination des femmes* states that women talk when it suits their purpose (*propos*). Although in *Porte Bodès* the wife technically loses the bet by breaking her silence, she uses her tongue to serve her own purpose: to put a stop to the judge's advances and to point out her husband's own failure to protect her against them. The first wife had made the opposite choice, but with the similar goal of responding to men's claims about women's failings.

The false choice between staying quiet and staying chaste brings us back to the larger medieval preoccupation with woman's body. A farce that explicitly explores the trouble woman's body makes for men is the *Farce moralisée à quatre personnages*, a dialogue between two husbands where the mouth/vagina dichotomy is expressed as an opposition between the head (*teste*) and the backside (*bas*) or ass (*cul*). The negative behavior of each wife is thought to stem from a buildup of pressure caused by an improper venting of the humors through the two orifices in question. Husband one complains about the head of his wife who is bossy and argumentative, and withholds from him the pleasures of her *bas*. Too much pressure is released from the head and not enough from the backside. The second husband, by contrast, finds his wife both sweet of speech and generous with her backside. However, she is overly generous with the latter, since she offers it not only to him but to other men as well. The two men ponder how to remedy this problem and consider a laxative for the head of the first one and a *restraintif* for the backside of the second. The men realize, however, that this remedy will only end up reversing the problem. The men conclude: "Ici nous disons qu'il n'est femme / Qui ne crie, tempeste ou blasme, / Ou a quelcun le bas ne preste" [We state here that there is no woman who doesn't either shout, thunder, and castigate or (on the other hand) give her backside to someone, vv. 151–53].²⁸ As Jane Burns notes in her discussion of this farce, although the men frame the problem as an either/or deficiency

28. In Picot, *Nouveau recueil de farces françaises des XV^e et XVI^e siècles*. This farce is also called *Les Deux hommes et leurs deux femmes* (T 1). Translation is by Burns, *Bodytalk*, 36.

of female anatomy, what is really at issue is the men's inability to control their wives and the corresponding threat to their masculinity. The first husband is emasculated because his wife "wears the pants" at home, and the second husband is emasculated because he is made a cuckold because of his wife's activities outside of the home. The apparent concern over women's troublesome body parts covers up an underlying anxiety about female agency. Female speech and sexuality are shown to be "something mysteriously elusive and unknown to man," and woman is troublesome for man "because she has a head, a mouth, and a working mind, or because her 'ass' dares to have a mind of its own."²⁹

The context of the *teste/bas* dichotomy is somewhat different in the case of the wives in *Le Chaudronnier* and *Porte Bodès*—the wives' marital fidelity is not at issue, and their actions are constrained by the terms of the wager—but it frames similar concerns. Each woman attempts to rein in the troublesome body part, but in doing so the body part on the opposite of the binary causes trouble of its own. To a greater extent than the *Farce Moralisée*, these two farces explicitly dramatize female agency because the choice of the wife is highlighted. In her decision to speak or not to speak, each woman proclaims that she does have a mind of her own, that she can choose when to control her head and when to control her backside. In both situations, the husbands are forced to acknowledge their wives' victory. The wife in *Le Chaudronnier* not only gets to have soup at her husband's expense, she also invites the kettle maker along, despite her husband's grumbling. In the wife's desire for the company of the man whose sexual advances she had not discouraged, she reconfirms her association with the backside end of the binary. The wife in *Porte Bodès* manages to point out her husband's moral weakness and eventually succeeds in making him submit to her complete authority. In the closing lines of the play the husband gallantly admits his own foolishness to the dear ladies in the audience, whereas she threatens to throw her husband in a well if he talks back to her, thereby reinforcing her association with the first part of the head/backside binary. Both plays, in other words, allow women to have the last word, but demonstrate anxiety about female dominance in reasserting her association with either the loose tongue or the loose backside.

Medieval audiences, not yet equipped with the tools of feminist criticism, would probably not have interpreted these plays in quite this way.

29. Burns, *Bodytalk*, 37.

However, examining the structuring principle of the farce genre can shed light on how our observations on the patriarchal logic underlying these plays and medieval laughter might ultimately coincide. In her highly regarded study *La farce ou la machine à rire*, Bernadette Rey-Flaud explains the farce as a machinelike mechanism in which characters are manipulated by a trick or ruse. Far more important than the principle of moral right or wrong is that of trickery itself.³⁰ Although the inversion of social mores may play a role in creating humor in the farce, Rey-Flaud argues that it is the manipulation of the puppetlike characters by the mechanism set into motion that ultimately creates the humor. Thierry Boucquey similarly notes that farce does turn the world upside down, but the authority that is usurped is that of reason itself. Folly, rather than conventional morality, is the rule of order in the genre.³¹ Recently, scholars have also focused on the farce's self-reflexive attention to language, such as the farces that dramatize proverbial expressions, imagining them to mean literally rather than figuratively, such as the *Farce des femmes qui font accroire à leurs maris de vecies que ce sont lanternes*.³² Christopher Lucken notes that in the farces, the *folie* of language, verbal excess devoid of signification, and its representation of a fallen world, is the true subject of conjugal farces:

The authors of these farces are not concerned either to vindicate or to condemn the descendant of Eve. Using the figure of the shrew in pursuit of their own artistic purposes, using her in accordance with a rhetorical pattern rather than a simple expression of a misogynistic tradition, as a means to contradict the need for intelligibility represented by man and the theory of signs that goes with it, these farces play with their characters in order to play their own game, that of a language left to its sensuous fantasy in a world where the Fall has put an end to the Word of God.³³

Lucken emphasizes that medieval authors are often less interested in defending or defaming women than in “playing their own game,” using

30. Rey-Flaud, *La farce ou la machine à rire*.

31. Boucquey, *Mirages de la farce*, 31. Alan E. Knight, *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama*, 48–65, also notes that the world of the farce, governed by irrationality, is in sharp opposition to the morality play, where Reason is a fundamental structuring principle.

32. RC 14. This point has been made by Boucquey, *Mirages de la farce*, 66; and Lucken, “Woman’s Cry,” 176 n. 37. For examples, see RC 9, 19, 24.

33. Lucken, “Woman’s Cry,” 173.

female characters to explore questions of language and art rather than to engage in social questions related to gender. Jody Enders likewise considers the specific language of medieval law, whose practitioners were also authors of farces. She notes that *Porte Bodès* plays with legal rhetoric, for each spouse "accuses the other of the kind of 'chattering' and 'debating' with which the Basochiens habitually disrupted the court. . . . This is a description of the degeneration of law itself: too many words about nothing and too many words about words."³⁴ While the apparent subject of the dispute is conjugal authority, the laughter relies to a large extent on the audience's knowledge of legal disputation.

These studies, focusing on medieval rhetoric and poetics, help to explain why many farces allow women to prevail over their husbands in the end. While some farce wives are eventually put back in their place by the end of the play, such as the wife in *Le Cuvier*, who upon falling into the washtub is forced to return to her proper role as housewife, in many other farces a restoration to "natural order" never occurs.³⁵ This is because the laughter they generate does not always rely on whether one is to view the female characters negatively or positively. Yet we should not make the opposite mistake of ignoring the ways in which that laughter both reflects and reshapes the audience's understanding of gender. Explaining the humor of the farce through its structural mechanisms or its poetics while giving short shrift to the ideology of gender in which they are implicated implies that because texts equate women with language (or noise or folly), we need to erase historical women from the equation altogether.³⁶ In Adam de la Halle's *Jeu de la Feuillée* (1276), the cliché of women's shrewish speech is (playfully?) directed at the actual wives of the town of Arras, specific women well known to the play's spectators, which thus invites a clear connection between convention (whether popular or literary) and reality. The laughter of *Chaudronnier* and *Porte Bodès* may ultimately derive from

34. Enders, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama*, 213.

35. Farces where women remain "on top" at the end include (just to mention a few) *Farce d'un savetier nommé Calvin* (T 3), *L'Obstination des femmes* (T 6), *Femmes qui se font passer Maistresses* (RC 16), *Colin qui loue et dépète Dieu* (T 1), and *Farce du Dorellot* (RC 24). This is perhaps one important characteristic distinguishing medieval farce from Renaissance British comedy, where the happy ending places the rebellious heroine firmly in the hands of her husband. See Carlson, *Women and Comedy*, 21.

36. On the problem of scholarship on medieval culture that erases historical women in favor of Woman as sign, see the discussions in the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 6 (fall 1988) and 7 (spring 1989). This publication is now called the *Medieval Feminist Forum*.

the pleasure at seeing both husband and wife manipulated by the silence wager mechanism, but in the process, clichés about female sexuality and loquacity are put on display. It is not just language that takes center stage, but language *about women*. We might say that medieval discourse about gender is itself a “character” in the farce, and it is perhaps this character, more than the wife herself, which makes noise.

Domestic Authority: Cracks in the Household Walls

Whether husband or wife prevails in the end, conjugal farces do rely on the expectation that a man’s rule over his wife should be the norm. Both *Porte Bodès* and *Chaudronnier* connect this concern over who is the boss in the house to the issue of female speech. As the example of the Wife of Bath attests, in the Middle Ages, a talkative woman is inevitably a woman who talks back. In 1371 or 1372 Jehan LeFèvre, in his translation of Matheolus’s *Lamentations* argues that women’s quarreling results in an overturning of the natural order, for her poor husband cannot withstand her quarreling.³⁷ The loathing of female speech extends not just to loud or violent speech, but to any form of contradiction to a man’s word. Women were explicitly told to obey their husbands, no matter how seemingly trivial the issue at hand. In a conduct manual of 1394 known as *Le Ménagier de Paris*, an elderly Parisian husband counsels his young wife:

Et pour ce je vous conseille que les trespetites choses et de trespetite valeur, et ne fut fors d’un festu que vostre mary qui sera apres moy vous commandast a garder, que vous, sans enquerre pour quoy ne a quelle fin, puis que la parole sera telle yssue de la bouche de vostre mary qui sera, vous le gardez tressongneusement et tresdiligemment; car vous ne savez ne ne devez adonc enquerir, si ne le vous dit de son mouvement, qui a ce le meut ou a meu, se il a cause, ou se il le fait pour vous essayer. Car s’il a cause, dont estes vous bien tenue de le garder, et s’il n’y a point de le non garder, maiz le fait pour vous essaier, dont devez vous bien vouloir qu’il vous treuve obeissant et diligent a ses commandemens; et mesmement devez penser que puis

37. Jehan LeFèvre, *Lamentations de Matheolus*, 1:824–90. Also see Blamires, Pratt, and Marx, *Woman Defamed*, 178–79.

que sur ung neant il vous treuve obeissant a son vouloir, et que vous en tenez grant compte, croira il que sur ung gros cas vous trouveroit il encores en cent doubles plus obeissant.³⁸

[Therefore, I advise you that when your husband who will come after me asks you to do something, even though they are very little things of very little importance, that you do them very carefully and very diligently, even if were only some trivial matter, without asking why or for what reason, since such a command will be issued from your future husband; for you do not need to know, nor should you try to find out unless he tells you of his own accord since he decided it, whether he had a reason, or whether he is doing it in order to test you. For if he does have a reason, then you are obligated to follow it, and if there is no reason for doing it except the fact of testing you, then you should want him to find you obedient and diligent to his commands; and, in fact, you should figure that since he finds you obedient to his will when it comes to something trivial and that you take it very seriously, he will believe that when it comes to some serious situation he will find you even a hundred times more obedient.]

The author notes the importance of a wife obeying her husband even in the most trifling matters ("les trespetites choses et de trespetite valeur") and notes the right of a husband to test his wife. Christine de Pizan similarly notes that some foolish women think "that to be good housekeepers they must be disagreeable and make trouble for their husbands and households over nothing. So they make great disturbances over trivialities, criticizing everything and chattering unceasingly." By contrast, Christine urges her female readers that a good housewife should be judicious and wise and avoid "babbling, which is most unbecoming to a woman."³⁹ Good housekeeping thus requires restraint in speech.

That both authors focus on not quarreling over trivial matters suggests that the apparent triviality of the farcical domestic disputes, although it enables us to laugh at the quarreling couple, is actually central to the marital dispute. In the husband and wife's argument in *Porte Bodès*, it is not closing the door that is at issue, but domestic authority in general. The husband

38. *Le Ménagier de Paris*, 97. Translation is my own.

39. Christine de Pizan, *Treasury*, 189.

explicitly links his wife's tongue to her unruliness. Complaining before the judge about his wife's faults and why she should be punished, he laments that she never ceases cursing and insulting him: "Et veult par son caquet mesdit / Estre mestresse comme moy" [and with her cursed yakking, wants to be boss like me, vv. 280–81]. The husband of *Le Chaudronnier* announces this issue early on in the play, for as his wife scolds him for singing and calls him an idiot, he laments her sharp tongue thus: "A! ma femme, à ce que je voy, / Vous me voulez suppediter" [Oh, my wife, from what I see, you want to subdue/tame me, vv. 5–6].⁴⁰ With the sigh of the henpecked husband, the farce husband appeals to the men in the audience for sympathy, asking, "Me voudroit-elle suppediter?" [Is she trying to subdue me? v. 52]. The husband in *Porte Bodès* also looks for a sympathetic ear from the audience. While he and his wife are beating each other, the husband declares, "Haro! ma femme me veult battre, / Au meurtrier, à l'aide, bonnes gens!" [Ho! my wife wants to beat me. After the murderer, help, good people! vv. 103–4].

According to a common reading of the farce, these two works are conservative in that they ridicule the man who lets his wife rule the roost. Men, as well as women, are to be judged negatively, for the husband who let his wife dominate had forsaken his masculine role as head of the house.⁴¹ Images of authoritarian women in the farce are indeed sometimes associated with castration. The wife in the *Chaudronnier* calls her husband a "poupon" [little boy, v. 38] and a "chapon" [castrated cock, v. 39].⁴² Like the cuckold who was paraded through the streets to be mocked by his fellow villagers for letting his wife beat him, the farce husband was a cautionary example that served to remind men of their role as head of the house but simultaneously offered them an outlet to relieve anxieties should they fail to do so.⁴³ The male spectator could judge that he, at least, was superior to the emasculated man he saw on stage, or he might pass off

40. *Suppediter* literally means to put beneath one's feet. Thus the idea of the wife taming the husband is rooted in a physical, visual manifestation of the "woman on top" topos.

41. See, for example, Aubailly, *Le Théâtre médiéval profane et comique*, 184.

42. In *Le nouveau marié qui ne peut fournir l'appointement de sa femme* (T 1), a mother-in-law accuses her son-in-law of lacking *freres* ("little brothers," i.e., testicles) and threatens to beat him because said lack is bringing her daughter misery. It should also be noted that the use of the term *to wear the pants* was already in place in the Middle Ages to signify control over the household, since fabliaux showed husband and wife fighting over who would get to wear the breeches, literally and figuratively.

43. See Knight, "The Farce Wife," 23.

problems in his own household as the result of woman's inevitable triumph through her natural guile, thus exculpating himself of any blame.

Interpreting the function of the farce in this way of course also entails the assumption that if medieval men were anxious about their ability to maintain their role as paterfamilias, then wives were apparently not assuming their subservient roles so readily, which is demonstrated in court records in which wives are either accused of disobedience or justify their failure to obey violent husbands.⁴⁴ What is less often acknowledged is the way in which farces frame male anxiety in terms of the fragile separation between the private and public sphere. Whereas the *Tretis* shows medieval men imagining what women might say about them behind closed doors, the farces in fact demonstrate deeper concerns about how female subversion might circulate not only among women, but leak outside the household walls into the community at large.

These cracks in the wall of masculine authority are attested by the author of *Le Ménagier de Paris*, who lectures his wife on the scandalous behavior of women who dare to disgrace their husbands by talking back in front of others:

Jasoit ce qu'ilz sont aucunes femmes qui pardessus la raison et sens de leurs maris veulent gloser et esplucher; et encores pour faire les sages et les maistresses font elles plus en devant les gens que autrement, qui est le pis. Car jasoit ce que ne vueille mie dire qu'elles ne doivent tout savoir et que leurs mariz ne leur doivent tout dire, toutesvoies ce doit estre dit et fait apart, et doit venir du vouloir et de la courtoisie du mary, non mie de l'auctorité, maistrise et seignourie de la femme qui le doit par maniere de dominacion interroguer devant la gent; car devant la gent, pour monstrier son obeissance et pour son honneur garder, n'en doit elle sonner mot, pour ce qu'il sembleroit a la gent qui ce orroient que le mary eust acoustumé a rendre compte de ses vuloirs a sa femme. (77)

[These days there are some women who try to altercate and split hairs beyond the reason and understanding of their husbands; and what is more, in order to pass themselves off as wise women and bosses of the house, they do this more often in front of people rather than in some other way, which is the worst. For although this doesn't

44. Opitz, "Life in the Late Middle Ages," 276.

mean that they shouldn't know anything or that their husbands shouldn't tell them anything, nonetheless, this must be said and done in private, and must come from the wish and courtesy of the husband, and not in any way from the authority, bossiness, or dominion of the wife who, to show her domination, interrogates him in front of people; rather, in order to show her obedience and to guard her honor, in front of people, she should not speak a word, because it would seem to people who heard this that the husband was accustomed to accounting for his wishes to his wife.]

Although the elderly Parisian had first counseled his wife not to speak at all, he now urges her, if nothing else, to be discreet, suggesting that a husband's principal concern is to bolster his image as patriarch before the eyes of the world. His concern is echoed by the Knight of La Tour Landry, who, in his conduct book to his daughters, warned them that although a wife might gently point out her husband's error, she must not openly argue with him, right or wrong, especially not in front of people ("estriver à son seigneur, soit droit, soit tort, et par especial devant les gens").⁴⁵

Similarly, in both farces the men worry not just that their wives will get the upper hand but that people outside the household will find out. For example, the husband in *Porte Bodès* explains why his wife must close the door and not he:

Pas n'apartient
Qu'ung homme s'abesse à sa femme.
On me reputeroit infame
Devant Dieu et devant le monde!
Vas le fermer!

(vv. 75–79)

[It is not the place of a man to lower himself before his wife. People would consider me dishonorable before God and the whole world. Go close it!]

While reiterating clichés about a man's authority over his wife, the husband demonstrates considerable concern for public opinion. The husband in *L'Obstination des femmes* similarly worries that "Les gens me tiendront

45. *Le Livre du chevalier de la Tour Landry*, 41.

pour beste, / Ce n'estoye maistre à ma maison" [People would consider me stupid if I weren't master in my house, vv. 165–66].

The husband in *Porte Bodès* is so concerned about what people will think that he asks his wife to pretend he is beating her, although it is in fact she who is beating him:

Je me rends,
Par ma foy et mercys vous crie,
Mais d'une chose je vous prie
Pour garder l'onneur de nous deux
Que cries ung cry treshideux
Et les voisins qui vous orront
Si hault crier, ilz cuideront
Que je vous bate, entendez-vous?
Mais quoy, j'endureray les coups
Paciamment, soit droit ou tort.

(vv. 105–14)

[I submit, by my faith, I cry mercy to you. But I beg of you one thing. In order that we both keep our honor, let out a very hideous cry and the neighbors who hear you will think that I am beating you, okay? In actuality, I will endure your blows patiently, whether it be right or wrong.]

The husband's willingness to endure his wife's beating, whether right or wrong ("soit droit ou tort") echoes the knight's command to his daughters ("soit droit, soit tort"); but here the husband requests not obedience, but a performance directed at an audience outside the household itself. The husband's concern over what the neighbors will think brings us back to the important issue of the conservatism of the farce, for both spouses need to defend their reputation by putting on a show for the outside world in which ritualized violence of husband against wife proves that they are a normal couple. Yet in the face of clichés about absolute authority, this farce stages the possibility that woman can be mistress of the house as long as no one realizes that this is the case. The private power exercised by the wife is authorized as long as it does not slip through the cracks of the household into the public arena. By asking his wife to stage her submission, the husband effectively brings attention to his own authority as a performance

that requires his wife's participation. That the wife willingly goes along with this charade of husbandly authority suggests the usefulness of this performance for herself.⁴⁶

Women's Work and Women's Worth

It is significant that quarrels over conjugal authority were staged in the domestic sphere, where the running of the household is the woman's domain. In fact one way that a woman was expected to demonstrate her obedience to her husband was in her diligent attention to housework. This point is neatly illustrated in the farce where wives, upon receiving "diplomas" in being mistress of the household, refuse to do the housework, and in the farce where a husband brags that he has complete control over his wife who "is so ready to do her housework, she knows everything it is her duty to do."⁴⁷ The end of *Porte Bodès*, too, neatly fuses concerns with obedience and housework. When the wife pleads her case before the judge, she claims that not only do women have the right to chastise and beat their husbands; they can also make them do housework:

Nous les debvons tout à nostre aise
 Chastier et bastre tresbien
 Et outre plus, s'il y a rien
 A besongner en la maison,
 Selon nostre droit et raison.
 L'homme est tenu de faire tout
 Et s'il en veulx venir à bout,
 Il n'y doit jamaiz contredire
 Ne nulle chose nous mesdire,
 Mais l'accomplir tresvoulentiers,
 Velà les estatus entiers
 Que les femmes doivent avoir.

(vv. 308–19)

46. Another example of a farce where men's primary concern appears to be with public opinion is at the end of *Les deux maris et leurs deux femmes*, discussed earlier in this chapter, where the conclusion is that it is better to have an unfaithful wife than a bossy wife as long as she gives her backside *secretly* ("secretement") (T 1:627–31).

47. *Farce des femmes qui se font passer Maistresses* (RC 16, 388–89) and *Farce nouvelle de l'ordre de mariage et de prebstrise treshonneste et joyeuse* (RC 31, 40–41).

[We have the right to chastise them and beat them as we please. On top of it, if there is anything that needs to be done in the house, according to our right and privilege, the man is required to do everything. And if he wants to come out all right, he mustn't ever contradict anything nor say anything bad about us, but rather accomplish it very willingly. Those are the entire statutes to which women are entitled.]

That she claims both that women have a "natural" right to rule over husbands and that it is men's responsibility to tend to the house, suggests that these are a logical pairing. In medieval culture, images of men doing housework signified emasculation and always served satirical aims.⁴⁸ The wife's appeal to laws stipulating that men must do housework is a specific manifestation of the world upside down, resulting in laughter because the audience knows that, on the contrary, women are to be subject to their husbands. When the wife produces these imaginary laws, the judge is indeed amazed, finding it unlikely any (male) official in late medieval Paris would ever conceive of such legislation: "Qui est le hault Provincial / Qui a esté si liberal / De vous donner telle franchise" [Who is this high provincial official who was so liberal as to give you such license? vv. 326–28]. But the judge is faced with written evidence, and so he is forced to find in favor of the wife. The husband, although having won the silence wager, is now defeated because of the imaginary laws that substitute for Rey-Flaud's ruse. Although the trick results in the husband's defeat, men can laugh at women's victory precisely because such imaginary laws pose no threat to the status quo.⁴⁹

At the same time, the farces reminded men and women in the audience all that women did to maintain the household. When the judge reads the

48. A specific example of the emasculation of men through women's work are the images in the margins of medieval manuscripts in which cuckolded men are represented as carrying distaffs. See Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 301–2.

49. Another example of an imaginary female law may be found in the *Farce des femmes qui se font passer maistresses* (RC 16). A papal bull grants women the right to rule over their husbands since they have spent so many years in the study of ruling their husbands that they should be allowed to graduate. Once again, women's power revolves around their tongues because, as the women claim, "Certes nous sçavons bien parler / En toutes les Facultés" [Certainly, we know how to talk well in all of the Faculties, 104–5]. Konrad Schöell views this farce as an example of "feminist" farces that could be seen as advocating women's equal access to education ("Des farces féministes?" 180–85).

long list of all the things men are now required to do, we are reminded, on the contrary, of the reality for women:

Je treuve en escript cy devant
 Que l'homme doit estre servant
 De sa femme en toutes manières
 Pour escurer poilles, chaudières,
 Faires lis, houser la maison
 Et s'il fault que toute saison
 Il soit levé tout le premier
 Et qu'il se couche le dernier
 Et qu'il destaigne la chandelle
Et de ce ne soit point rebelle,
 Les escuelles aussi laver
 Et si ne doit jamais baver
 De chose que face sa femme
 Ou on le tiendra pour infâme.
 La farine luy fault sasser
 Et si luy convient sans cesser
 Filler et faire la lessive
Sans que jamais il en estrive,
 Aller au moulin et au four
 Et puis quant viendra ou retour,
 S'il n'a tresbien fait la besongne,
 Il doit avoir de la quenouille
 Deux ou trois coups *sans contredire.* (vv. 336–58, emphasis added)

[I find here in writing before me that the man must be a servant to his wife in every way—to scour frying pans and pots, to make beds, to sweep the house. And at all times of the year he must get up first and go to bed last and he must put out the candle and *not be rebellious about this*. He must also wash the bowls and he must never malign a thing that his wife does, or he will be considered despicable. He must sift the flour and he must without cease do the spinning and do the wash. *Without ever complaining*, he must go to the mill and to the oven, and when he comes back, if he hasn't done his work well, he must have two or three blows from the distaff *without contradicting*. (Emphasis added)]

In specifying several times that men must not resist these laws, this passage of course makes clear that men would find the performance of such tasks unthinkable, but for women in the audience, it is also an acknowledgment of the work of which they are in charge.

Through their point-by-point inversion of patriarchal law, the imaginary laws might furthermore have served to articulate women's frustration in not having their work valued. Indeed, a current running through many conjugal farces is that husbands fail to appreciate the contribution of their wives' labor to the household. The wife in *Porte Bodès* explicitly argues that her work is equally as important as her husband's, which is why he should shut the door and not she:

Escoutés,
J'ay bien autre besongne à faire,
Mais vous, c'est vostre droit affaire.
.....
Et j'ay à filer ma quenouille,
Qui me touche bien d'aussi près
Que vostre ouvrage.
(vv. 35-37, vv. 45-47)

[Listen, I have other work to do. But you, it's rightly your business (to close the door). And I have to do my spinning, which concerns me as closely as your work (concerns you)].

The wife's complaint to her husband that he undervalues her work compared to his own focuses on a new angle in the quarrel between the sexes. She accepts her place within the social fabric (the domestic sphere) but challenges the poor value that it is accorded by men. Women's work is as important and as deserving of respect as men's work, she seems to say.

Moreover, both farce wives implicitly challenge the notion that there even exists such a thing as men's work, since the men do nothing but sing and drink, and it is the wives' attention to the practicalities of everyday life that ensures the couple's survival. The husbands, however, show little appreciation for their wives' practical bent. Whereas the wife of *Chaudronnier* shows concern with the daily bread that must be put on the table, the singing husband views his wife as a "wet blanket" trying to spoil his fun. To her complaints, he responds, "Ne vault-il point mieulx de chanter /

Que d'engendrer melencolye?" [Isn't it better to sing than to bring about melancholy? vv. 10–11]. The wife retorts, "Il se vouldroit mieulx consoler / A robobeliner voz soulliers / Que de penser à leur follye" [It would be better to console yourself with fixing your shoes than to indulge in such foolishness, vv. 12–14].⁵⁰ This scene of domestic tension, which opens the farce, serves to highlight the conflict between the working woman and the lazy, singing husband, and although there are no stage directions indicating it, we can imagine the actor playing the wife engaged in some household task as the play opens.

The husband in *Porte Bodès* also complains about his wife's lack of good humor, explaining that even though he would like a drink, he must return home to his wife, who will complain about his bit of fun:

Il me fault estre diligens,
Devers mon hostel me retraire,
Il me semble que j'os jà braire
Ma femme et en suis bien loing,
Dieu sçait comme j'auray du groing,
Mais que venir elle me voye,
Elle dira: "Bien froide joye
Puissies-vous avoir des genoux!"
Et je diray; "Saint Jehan, mais vous!"
Mais ce sera tout bellement
Qu'elle ne m'oye, car vrayment,
Se une foiz m'avoit ouy,
Mieulx me vouldroit estre enfouy,
Elle est si malle que c'est raige.

(vv. 11–24)

[I have to be diligent and go back home. It seems to me I already hear my wife braying, and I'm quite far away. God knows how I'll have a scolding. As soon as she sees me coming she'll say, "May you have an entirely cold joy in your knees!" And I'll say, "St. John, the same to you!" But it will be just as well that she not hear me, for in truth, once she has heard me, it would better for me to flee. Her bad behavior is outrageous.]

50. Tissier notes the difficulty of translating the phrase "penser à leur folie" and wonders whether it might simply mean "dire des choses peu sensées," which I have loosely translated as "indulge in such foolishness."

Both wives are thus viewed by their husbands as enemies of good fun. The first wife cannot tolerate her husband's singing, while the second cannot bear her husband's drinking. The nagging of these women is a common characteristic of the farce wife who is of "mauvaise humeur."⁵¹ But whereas the farce husband appears to fault his wife for her bad humor—not unlike the typical charges of men who have accused women of having no sense of humor—some spectators viewing the conjugal quarrel might well have recognized the validity of such complaints.

That some women could understand the complaints of the farce wives is suggested by Natalie Davis's study of letters of remission, the letters one could write in order to receive pardon for a capital offense. These letters show that women would sometimes claim to have killed their husbands because their husbands were dissipating the goods of the household. One woman, Jeanne Regnart, complained that the troubles in her marriage started when her husband began drinking, making bad business transactions, and dissipating the goods and property of the household, particularly those she had brought to the marriage. Recounting her story, she says the fight started one night when he came home drunk from the tavern and she rebuked him for his ridiculous business transactions ("ses sotz marchez").⁵² That women would cite their husband's squandering of household resources to defend themselves in a court of law suggests that women in the audience of farces may have responded to the fictional representation of these complaints with sympathy. The list of household chores in the *Cuvier* that the husband must perform under his wife's command, while a farcical joke for the men in the audience, may have

51. Rey-Flaud, *La Farce ou la machine à rire*, 246. Other examples of men who see their practical wives as killjoys are in *L'Obstination des femmes*, where the husband complains he has to go to work in order to avoid her loud speech "haut langaige" (T 6:13–14); *Celui qui se confesse à sa Voisine* (RC 2); *Farce des femmes qui se font passer maistresses* (RC 16); *Les deux maris et leurs deux femmes* (T 1); *Savetier Calbain* (T 3); and *Colin qui loue et dépète Dieu* (T 1). A good example of a lazy husband is to be found in *Farce des botines gaultier* (RC 9, ll. 422–28). On the tradition of the woman as killjoy as it relates to men's fear of domestication, see Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys*, especially 101.

52. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 94. Christine de Pizan also notes the problem of men of the artisan class (especially in Paris) who spend all their money at the tavern rather than at home. Christine then puts the burden on wives to keep their husbands attracted to them so that they will stay at home, reminding them, "Common wisdom has it that three things drive a man from his home: a quarrelsome wife, a smoking hearth, and a leaking roof" (*Treasury*, 210), an argument echoed in *Le Ménagier de Paris*, 99–100. A widow also worries that in remarrying, her husband might squander all her goods (*Farce joyeuse à iii personnages*, in Philipot, *Six Farces Normandes*, 163–86, ll. 120–23).

represented for many women in the audience an embodiment of a housewife's dream. Like the imaginary edicts of the Bodès door, the list evokes a possibility, one that may have served as a focal point for discussion and joking between women.

The motif of women's work and its potential to engender laughter in female audiences occurs in other literary texts. For example, in "The Wright's Chaste Wife" (in a manuscript of about 1462), a woman outwits the three men who have taken advantage of her husband's absence to woo her, forcing them to do her housework as punishment. Barbara Hanawalt comments, "The wife has humiliated the suitors by forcing them into female roles. The humor of such role reversal was, no doubt, more amusing to a female audience than to a male one, and suggests that women were the weavers of the tale. Males might well have felt the punishment was too threatening." Hanawalt may be underestimating the pleasures of such a tale to men, who likely appreciated the inversion because they believed themselves smarter than the foolish (and adulterous) men who fell into the wife's trap, but she is certainly right to note the pleasures it offered to female readers.⁵³ Similarly, in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*, a servant thwarts her master's advances by making him dress in her clothes and perform her task of sifting grain. The master's wife, upon discovering him thus caught, laughs, claps her hands, and asks, "How much per month are you asking for your work, wench?"⁵⁴

Attention to women's work is also dramatized in one of the notoriously humorous scenes of the English Corpus Christi cycle in which Noah's wife berates her husband for his absence, remarking that she does all the work because they have little food and drink while he does nothing but amuse himself. Although the scolding tongue of Noah's wife, as well as her refusal to board the ark, are meant to indicate her failure to understand God's greater plan, and are humorous because they highlight the inappropriateness of domestic concerns in this context, her specific charges of husbandly neglect were likely to have resonated with women who were similarly frustrated with their husbands' drinking, singing, and domestic bungling.⁵⁵ From the perspective of women in the audience, the social

53. Hanawalt, *Of Good and Ill Repute*, 98.

54. "Goujate! combien veux-tu par mois de ton labour?" (*Heptaméron*, 465). See Polacheck, "Save the Last Laugh for Me," 155–70.

55. Mary Wack, in "Women, Work, and Plays in an English Medieval Town," 46, suggests that the Noah play had a specific meaning for women in sixteenth-century Chester.

issues that were dramatized concerned not so much obedience, but rather establishing and maintaining a household in which all members contributed to the common good. If women are to do the housework, then men should uphold their end of the bargain: providing for the household. It should be added that although medieval men believed that a woman's place was in the home, preachers such as Gilbert of Tournai emphasized that the work of husband and wife, although different, were complementary, and that a wife's labor in the home was equal in value to her husband's work outside of the home.⁵⁶ What the farces demonstrate, however, is that despite sermons on marital cooperation, woman's work was not generally accorded equal value to man's work.

This question of the maintenance of the household goes beyond the domestic chores we today call housework, for married women in the towns of northern Europe often worked in trades alongside their husbands or by themselves after their husband's death; this sort of work was also literally housework since most crafts in the Middle Ages were performed at home. Although the guild system generally excluded women from many of the political and economic benefits enjoyed by men, the work they performed was crucial to the livelihood of the family, and in given regions and time periods women even dominated some trades such as clothmaking (the trade of the Wife of Bath) and ale brewing.⁵⁷ Women in towns and villages were clearly doing more than the dishes; their work contributed in a vital way to the growth and prosperity of Europe in the later Middle Ages.

They had seen their female communities weakened in the face of laws restricting childbed and churching ceremonies and their economic participation greatly restricted in laws against women tapsters. The drinking of Noah's wife and her gossips, while meant to justify such legislation, also "publicly recognizes the value to women both of community among themselves and of a secure place within the social body," 46. See Laura Hodges's reading of the social context for spectators in Wakefield ("Noe's Wife"). Joseph Ricke discusses the carnivalesque meaning of Noah's wife more generally in "Parody, Performance, and the 'Ultimate' Meaning of Noah's Shrew." See also Viviana Comensoli's discussion of the persistence of the motif of the squandering husband into the early modern period in England. One particular conduct manual for families (1633) "denounced the growing number of husbands who wasted their earnings 'in whoring, idleness, drunkenness, [and] gaming,' leaving the support of the household entirely to their wives" (*Household Business*, 21).

56. On sermons praising wives' equal contribution to the household, see Vecchio, "The Good Wife," 125–26. See also Collingwood, *Market Pledge and Gender Bargain*, 157; and Schnell, "Discourse on Marriage," 781–82, who argue that the *Cuvier*, like many medieval treatises on marriage, emphasizes the importance of compromise and equality.

57. For a detailed discussion of women's participation in guilds as wives, widows, or single journeywomen, see Kowaleski and Bennett, "Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages," particularly 16–17, and 24.

Yet it is striking that the representation of women's work in the farce corpus rarely extended to the income-generating activities in which we know women participated. Given this discrepancy, it may be that the farce performed ideological work in addition to reasserting traditional power relations between spouses. Scholars have remarked that men's anxiety about women's active participation in the economic and civic life of towns and the erosion of male power it threatened led to a backlash in which women's economic and civic participation was curtailed.⁵⁸ Perhaps farces served to displace anxiety over women's participation in the urban economy onto the battle over who would control the household. With their emphasis on who wears the pants in the house, the farces could thus be said symbolically to confine women to the household by focusing the comedy on the battle over housework, suggesting that the threat posed by women was really only domestic after all; men need not be concerned that women's participation in urban work would shift the balance of economic power away from men.⁵⁹

On the Way to the Tavern

At the end of *Le Chaudronnier*, the actor playing the husband concludes by announcing that women have won and inviting the spectators to drink to the wager, and it is intriguing to ponder what men and women might have been saying to each other on the way to the tavern. But first some attention should be given to the ways in which many farce endings do attempt

58. Claudia Opitz notes that the backlash against women's economic importance within the artisan class was clearly visible in the increasing restriction of women's participation in guilds beginning with the fifteenth century ("Life in the Late Middle Ages," 303). Kowaleski and Bennett, "Crafts, Gilds, and Women," 23, note that when men in London took over the silkwork craft from women in the sixteenth century, one of their first moves was to form a guild and prohibit hiring women as apprentices. P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy*, discusses the rising demand for labor in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in Yorkshire, causing more women to enter the labor force and defer marriage. See also Felicity Riddy's argument that the good-wife treatises of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England were designed in part to keep bourgeois women at home and not in the streets selling cloth as "hucksters" where their independence became threatening to men ("Mother Knows Best"). On the threat of single women working in medieval German cities and their evasion of male supervision, see Rasmussen, *Mothers and Daughters*, 201–8.

59. Wilson and Makowski, in *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage*, 7, note that overt criticism of women and marriage tends to surface in periods when there are real or imagined improvements in women's status.

to announce or impose a specific ideology, particularly in the traditional envoi, in which the actors sum up the message of the play and ask their audiences to judge their performance favorably. At the end of *Le Savetier qui ne respont que chansons*, the actor comments on vain and greedy women and advises the beleaguered husbands of such women in the audience that just like the singing cobbler of the play, they too should just start singing when their wives ask for rings or dresses, for eventually their wives will just give up (RC 37). Other farces are more direct in making the women in the audience a final butt of their humor. At the end of *Les femmes qui font rembourer leurs bas*, in which women use the metaphor of stuffing saddles to ask two men to give them sex, the actor seems to enjoy his complicity with his fellow men ("Seigneurs"), noting that they have seen how the women of this city ("les femmes de ceste ville") get their saddles stuffed (RC 36). This envoi privileges its male spectators by addressing them and also targets the women of the city, making them the focus of the sexual humor. Whether or not women in the audience would have laughed at or been offended by the suggestion that they were looking to have their saddles stuffed, the ending clearly brings their own sexuality into the light and puts them in the position of comic object.⁶⁰

Farces that conclude with an antifeminist cliché generally have the husband deliver the moral, so that the man literally gets the last word. In a number of farces, however, the female character delivers the moral instead of the man or delivers an additional moral different from the one he gives, one that embodies feminine unruliness.⁶¹ The actors thus often deliver their morals in character, and not surprisingly, the moral varies according

60. A curious example of sexual address to female spectators is *Frère Guillebert*, where early in the play the male actor declares, "Entendez-vous bien, mes fillettes, / S'on s'encroue sur voz mamelettes / Et qu'on vous chatouille le bas, / N'en sonnez mot: ce sont esbatz, / Et n'en dictez rien à vos mères" [Listen well, little girls. If someone takes hold of your little breasts and tickles you "down there," don't say a word: it's just a bit of fun. And don't say anything to your mothers, T 6, vv. 15–19]. As Tissier notes, the farce seems to have been a performance for a school group, from which women were excluded. The address is thus to an imagined, or fictive, female audience, which one can only speculate served to heighten the men's enjoyment of the bawdy humor of the play.

61. In *Farce des Femmes qui font accroire à leurs maris de vecies que ce sont lanternes* (RC 15) the second wife boasts of women's ability to deceive men. In *Farce des femmes qui se font passer maistresses* (RC 16), Alison and her friend advise women in the audience to "plant" their dried-out husbands in the ground so that they will regain their verdure. At the end of *Farce de Resjouy d'Amours qui révèle son secret* (RC 18), Tendrette boasts of her cleverness, as does Sadinette at the end of *Farce du Dorellot* (RC 24).

to the (performed) gender of the speaker. That the plays get interpreted differently according to which character gets the last word further suggests an expectation that men and women in the audience might react differently to the spectacle they have just witnessed. One play that could be said to testify to anxiety about this interpretative ambiguity is *Le Pont aux anes*, in which a henpecked husband finds out that the best way to tame his disobedient wife is to beat her as he would his donkey, an anecdote also found in the *Decameron* (Day IX, Tale 9). The actor with the husband's role proclaims to "seigneurs, et près et loing" that the play has demonstrated the dictum that "necessity makes the old lady trot" [Besoing fait la vielle trotter, T 6]. The actor playing the wife confirms the same moral—understood to be that a beating is necessary to tame the unruly wife—but addresses this moral specifically to the "nobles dames." It is as though female spectators are being explicitly told not to misunderstand what they have seen, as if the ending of the farce, where the wife is "tamed" were not enough in itself.⁶²

The endings of the farces I have discussed above show that those producing the dramas were aware of differing audience responses to their spectacles and at times tried to control responses that might be at odds with the desired message. *Le Chaudronnier* and *Porte Bodès*, however, are less clear about what audiences are to make of the women's winning the wager. The husband in *Porte Bodès*, although he gets the last word, makes no moralizing speech, rather admitting his foolishness to the dear ladies in the audience. In *Le Chaudronnier*, the husband takes his defeat with good humor; when his wife points out that it would have been stupid for her to speak and thereby lose the bet, he simply responds, "Il est vray. Allons boire" [That's true. Let's go drink, v. 175]. The spouses are finally in agreement, for the wife simply interjects, "Dame! voire," which we could translate loosely as "You can say that again!" The husband then invites the whole audience to go to the tavern and make merry ("jouer de la machouere") and have a drink. As Tissier notes, everything ends up "dans la bonne humeur, autour de 'deux potz de vin'" [in a good natured way over 'two pots of wine,' 91].

Although messages about the natural order of domestic relations may well have been implicit, the endings of these and other farces certainly

62. A similar division according to gender is found in the envoi of *Colin qui loue et dépite Dieu* (T 1), where the woman addresses the moral to "bonnes dames" and the man addresses it to "messeigneurs."

leave open room for other reactions from medieval audiences.⁶³ It has rarely been asked what women in particular might have made of the unruly farce wife since it is commonly assumed that such spectacles offered pleasures only to men.⁶⁴ Of course, both husbands and wives were caricatures in the farce, exaggerations of the failings attributed to their sex and class roles, and so perhaps audience identification is a concept ill-suited to the genre. But we can imagine that after such performances women did go off to the tavern to exchange complaints or jokes about their own husbands who did not contribute enough to the welfare of the household. Medieval French townswomen did in fact go to taverns, some of which were even run by women. In *Le Brigand, le vilain, le sergent*, two wives share a drink together in a private room in a tavern and are served by a female *tavernière*.⁶⁵ Significantly, the two women are celebrating the misfortune of the one woman's husband (he has broken his arm), for he will no longer be able to beat her. The tavern, although coded negatively as a locus of sin throughout medieval literature, is here represented as a place in which women can share common bonds.

Whether or not women shared jokes with each other in taverns after performances of these farces is of course a matter of speculation, but remembering Dunbar's three wives privately joking about their husbands over a few cups of wine, we can similarly imagine how the mythical laws of the Bodès door could have become an inside joke between medieval women spectators, perhaps even serving as a kind of counternarrative to *Le Cuvier*; women joking with each other about how they would like to throw their husbands in the washtub and give them a list of household chores to

63. See similar arguments by Claire Sponsler ("The Culture of the Spectator"), who argues that views of medieval theater performances as mechanisms for fostering collective identity and communal feeling in urban settings are simplistic and that performances were just as likely to sow discord among competing interests in the audience; and Clark, "Community versus Subject in Late Medieval French Confraternity Drama and Ritual."

64. Bowen, *Caractéristiques essentielles*, 29–30, wonders whether women could possibly have laughed at farces since to her their humor is by men for men, but since they were performed in public settings that included female audiences, speculates that perhaps female spectators did not recognize themselves in the character of the farce wife.

65. This farce is contained within the morality play, *La Vie S. Fiacre* (Fournier IV). See also the female tavern owner in the *Farce d'un pardonneur, d'un triacleur, et d'une tavernière* (T 5) and the fabliau "Les trois dames de Paris" in Montaiglon and Raynaud, *Recueil général*, 3:145–56. On women going to taverns, see Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 213. See also Alan Hindley's discussion of some farces being performed in taverns at the end of the fifteenth century: "L'Escole au deable," 469. On the tavern as a popular site for gossips in the British tradition, see Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate*, 94.

do.⁶⁶ Furthermore, given that many tasks typically performed by women were carried out among other women—going to the oven and the mill and doing the wash—we can imagine women who had seen these farces laughing about these domestic themes precisely in that sphere of women’s work staged by the farces.⁶⁷

Like Ulrich’s lady and the Wife of Bath, the wives in *Le Chaudronnier* and *Porte Bodès* bring attention to the impossible bind in which medieval discourse places women. Rather than critique its logic, however, they do whatever they must to win, playing that game as strategically as the Wife of Bath. Whether the women choose to speak or to remain silent, each does so in order to win—to keep the upper hand within the household but also to win recognition for the work she contributes to the household. While both plays can be seen to demonstrate the folly of a husband who forgets his place, they also in some measure justify female unruliness, for the issue at stake is not simply that husbands allow their wives to dominate them, but that some men are too foolish, lazy, or irresponsible to be master of the house. While many men in the audience could undoubtedly laugh, confident that they were more capable than the poor husband on stage, women with their own wit and sense of humor may have turned the dramatic performance into a comic performance of their own, telling jokes to each other at the well, at the public oven, or on the way to the tavern.

66. In fact, a later revision of the *Cuvier* story shows a woman using the same trick of the list to teach her unreasonable husband a lesson. In a collection of comic German tales of 1522 is a story about a tyrannical husband who can find nothing good in his wife, despite her patient efforts. She finally has the clever idea to have her husband make up a list of all the things she must do. When the husband falls into a stream one day, she of course observes that pulling him out of streams is not one of the tasks on his list. He tells his wife, “Do what you think is right,” and they live harmoniously together thereafter. See the discussion by Schnell, “Discourse on Marriage,” 781. See also a similar inversion in a Dutch jestbook discussed by Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society*, 161.

67. A woodcut of about 1560, the *Caquet des Femmes* (Gossiping of women) depicts the many activities that brought women out of the house into the market. Some are doing wash, some have brought their bread to the oven, some are fetching water from a fountain, and some are bathing in a bathhouse. The title of the woodcut of course suggests the opportunity for frivolous gossip or bickering that contact with other women could allow.