

## *Conclusion*



Both a source of pleasure and something to be feared, women's laughter aroused a complex array of responses in medieval men. As the figure of woman was a "vehicle to be used for thinking," her laughter, too, allowed male authors to articulate a spectrum of concerns. The haughty laughter of Ulrich von Lichtenstein's lady enabled him to express his anxiety over his inferior social status in the Styrian feudal hierarchy, his narrator of the humiliated suitor offering himself up as an object of their amusement, while showing their common bond of masculinity. The laughter of the seven Florentine ladies served Boccaccio in his justification of the healing power not only of laughter, but of comic fiction, during a time of social chaos. These authors were furthermore able to display their own talent as writers through the words of the women they used, nowhere more evident than in Chaucer's use of his *Wife of Bath* to engage playfully with a long-standing masculine tradition of praising and blaming women. To give their heroines the last laugh did not require them to be particularly sympathetic to women. As the antitheatricalists lamented, the devils were far more entertaining to watch than the saints, and they got the best lines. Although this may be because, as Dioneo suggested, humans as fallen beings are more likely to laugh at scandalous behavior than virtuous deeds, it is also because our minds seek the opportunity to turn around commonly accepted truths. The *Wife of Bath* wins us to her side and *Madonna Filippa* wins her case, not because of their feminism, but because of the privileged space of laughter they have opened and in which the audience is invited to share.

Yet the men who used their witty heroines for their own purposes were also drawing from the world around them; their fictional creations do give us glimpses of a culture of medieval women's laughter. While we have a

tendency to envision medieval women, like the two women who objected to the bookseller's wares in *Le Vendeur de Livres*, running away from humor that is offensive, the literary texts I have examined allow us to imagine under what circumstances women were not only the willing recipients of jokes, but active producers of jokes as well. Given what we know about the many ways in which women's lives, both public and private, were constrained by an economic, political, and social system that privileged men, it is reasonable to suppose that the kind of reactive laughter we see in fictional heroines may have resembled that of actual women. The pragmatic laughter that the Wife of Bath carves out for herself faced with a tradition that will never take her seriously anyway, like the derisive laughter of the lady of *Frauendienst* confronted with a lady service tradition that figures women as absent, is a logical response entailed by women's limited options. The mocking jokes that Dunbar's unhappily married women make in their own minds, like the elaborate anatomical riddles of the Baghdad sisters, similarly allow them control over mental space, when control over social space is not so easy. The experiences about which these women laugh were furthermore shared by many medieval women. The lady of *Frauendienst*'s clever plan to foil her would-be rapist invokes the specter of rape, with which many medieval women were threatened, and the farce wives' appeal to imaginary lists of household chores to be done by their husbands and their call for men to recognize the value of their work must have struck some chords.

It is not surprising to observe that the laughter of fictional heroines is most often linked to subversive strategies of appropriation rather than open confrontation and critique. Rather than claim that women are men's intellectual equals, the Wife of Bath cheerfully advocates reading like a mere woman to suit her own purpose. The farce wives do not so much contest the feminine loquacity topos as they do appropriate it to win the game against their husbands, whether this means speaking up or remaining silent. Shahrazad does not tell the king that his misogyny is based on ignorance; by seducing him with her storytelling, she makes it appear that he has reeducated himself.

The literary texts I have examined are also strikingly similar in their concern with female community, most evident in the example of Dunbar's women, whose joking and drinking bring them together in their complaints about men. The women in *Frauendienst* also band together to laugh

at the less-than-courtly man who will rape the lady if she does not submit to his offer of “service.” The three sisters from Baghdad exclude men from their dwelling, taking solace in shared rituals and laughter whose meaning is obscured for men. Female audiences, too, are asked to join this community, as when the Wife of Bath addresses “wise women” and claims to speak on their behalf. The farce wives, although each alone in her struggle against her husband, repeatedly speak on behalf of “we women” against “you men.” This communal aspect of women’s laughter arouses concern on the part of male narrators, who often try to contain or co-opt their space, physical and symbolic. In Dunbar’s poem, the women’s privacy is invaded by the voyeuristic gaze of the man who then offers the women up as the comic object of scrutiny for the male audience. In the *Nights*, the exclusionary female space of the three Baghdad sisters is opened up as all are then removed, like Shahrazad, to the conjugal sphere. In addition to containing their female characters, narrators often attempt to turn women in the audience into sexual objects who are invited to sample and enjoy the author’s sexual as well as literary wares. Boccaccio, boasting of his fine “tongue,” declares that he is a “weighty” writer, inviting his lady readers to sample his weight, and Ulrich insinuates that he can strip his lady readers of their clothing to see what lies underneath.

That narrators put the lid on their female heroines and on their female readers can be seen to reveal men’s anxiety about the disruptive social potential of women’s laughter. Indeed, as conduct manuals fret over women’s disruptive laughter, medieval literary texts invoke women’s unruly interpretive practices, suggesting that medieval women were not always compliant readers. Ulrich’s apologies to his lady readers for any offense they might take, like Boccaccio’s concern that ladies might object to the things he has made them hear, suggest women’s contestive reading practices. Perhaps Boccaccio’s own suggestion of “reading for roses,” or reading selectively, was a strategy women applied to other comic texts as well, taking pleasure in the parts of the narrative they liked while rejecting those that they did not.

Given the predominantly communal and oral nature of medieval literary culture, many women were also likely to have been sharing their responses with others. Even with an increase in literacy toward the end of the Middle Ages, the pleasures of the communal experience of listening to a story meant that literary texts continued to be read aloud to a group of

people who could discuss with each other their reactions.<sup>1</sup> The performance of a farce, the recitation of a tale, or an oral reading from a romance may well have functioned as springboards for discussion or playful verbal duels between men and women. Storytelling may also have been an occasion for women, in particular, to share their reactions with each other. The frequent separation of women's work from men's work meant that there were numerous opportunities for women to interact with each other. Women of the towns would go to public ovens and washing places where they would meet other women engaged in these daily tasks. Women in rural areas would also meet each other at the flour mill or during communal spinning and weaving. This is perhaps particularly true for Arab cultures in which women, especially in urban centers, generally lived secluded from men in a world of their own. As the anthropological research I discussed in chapter 3 suggests, one can well imagine that one of the primary activities of medieval women during these all-female gatherings was to exchange stories and tell jokes, many of which they would not tell in front of men.

Although the texts I have discussed allow us to imagine a culture of women's laughter, this is not to say that women's sense of humor in the Middle Ages was qualitatively different from that of men; rather, it is the multiple relationships of the comic transaction that shape the nature of laughter. The texts suggest that when women were in private, their laughter was irreverent and even bawdy, whereas in front of men, it was more restrained. Women were more likely to make jokes at the expense of men when they were superior in social status to the men. The interactions in the *Decameron* and in the *Thousand and One Nights* suggest that women could well have appreciated sexual humor (typically considered more masculine) when it was offered to them in a spirit of communal play, in the effort to include rather than exclude; the scene between the porter and the three sisters suggests that the gift of laughter itself can transform the male outsider who is forbidden to know women's secrets into an insider who becomes part of the household.

Although not always for the same reasons, men too could laugh along with the heroines of medieval comic literature. If women were often invited to enjoy the rule of the unruly woman, men could be reassured that

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1. See, for example, Joyce Coleman's study of medieval English readers, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*, 221.

their own anxieties were shared by other men. Many of the texts offer up inferior specimens of manhood (the old and impotent husbands of the Wife of Bath or Dunbar's women, the naive and inept suitor of the lady in *Frauendienst*, jealous or stupid husbands of the *Decameron*, the lazy cobblers of the farce) against which men in the audience could judge themselves to be superior. The serious business of masculinity itself becomes the target in the *Frauendienst*, which has fun with the central problem in courtly culture—masculine identity comes from service to women—pushing this idea to the extreme so that the way to demonstrate one's manhood is to dress as a woman.

Antifeminist discourse, too, is targeted in comic literature, and although male authors may wink in complicity with their male audiences even as they have their female characters critique this discourse, one can often hear in their uneasy laughter an awareness that the privilege accorded to them as men had the ironic result of excluding women from discourse about them. The self-consciousness with which Chaucer has his Wife chastise men for comparing everything to women suggests a willingness to concede that men's discourse on women has become so excessive as to be emptied of meaning, whether or not this means that women should be entitled to have their say. Women's laughter often renders tit for tat, reversing the charges men make against them, so that men's words are deflected onto themselves, nowhere more clear than in the critique of clichés of feminine loquacity and deceit. The *Decameron* and *Frauendienst* both caution women against the deceptive and beguiling speech of men, even as the narrators of both in fact enact this process in their attempt to flatter and seduce female readers of the text. The farce wives mock the pat clichés voiced by their rather long-winded husbands about the evils of female speech, showing that they can either hold their tongues or speak as it suits them, thereby challenging the assumption that loquacity is an essentially female property.

Women's laughter also points to the ways in which the logic of medieval discourse on women works against itself. Not only does it unfairly place women in a no-win position but, if read to its fullest implication, ironically makes it impossible for women to be good. Chaucer's Wife, after all, does not simply rant and rave like an emotional woman, but implies that it is men's inconsistent or contradictory criticism of all women that authorizes this behavior. While men may take great pleasure in laughing about women's stupidity and hypersexuality, it is in their interest to appeal

to women's reason to police their own behavior since the honor of any man's household depended on the chastity of its women. Boccaccio may have been so ready to give his ladies sickles of wit to match men's arrows in part because he recognized that sheep would need better defenses if they were to resist the wolves. The lady in *Frauendienst* in fact shows that it is not so much women's responses to men's wooing that is the problem, but men's failure to listen. For if there are men who hear "no" as "yes," a woman will need to be more resourceful in deflecting men's advances. This does not mean that medieval authors were consciously attempting to undo the logic of medieval antifeminism through their comedy. Yet educated authors naturally turned to the tools of their trade (especially logic and rhetoric) in order to demonstrate their wit; a bit of fun through twisting an argument inevitably ended up exposing the vulnerabilities of truths otherwise taken for granted.

If in joking there is truth ("en burdant dit hom veir") what precisely was the truth of comic literature about gender? Was it that deviating from social norms would be punished by laughter? Or was it that other, more liberating ways of viewing male and female roles could or should be possible? The laughter of medieval texts suggests both. As the story medieval people told themselves about themselves, the deep play of comic texts provided a space for medieval culture to play with the problems of its gender system. Woman's laughter could be used to reinforce dominant views of women's subordinate status, but it could also unsettle these views in ways that pointed to the limits of such views. I have argued that one way of reconciling these seemingly opposing truths about medieval comedy is to consider the difference between the initial purpose of a comic text and its effect. Chaucer may have intended to make his Wife laughable, but with her resourceful, irreverent strategy of reading the authorities, the Wife herself invites us to join in her own laughter. Boccaccio may perhaps have been using his ladies to wishfully laugh away women's objections to antifeminism, yet his heroines model for readers the power of women's wit in their battles against men. In many respects, laughing women reconfirmed for men their fears of the weaker sex, and reassured them of the need for the gender system that privileged them, but it also sent the message to women, in Natalie Davis's words, to "keep up the fight."

Indeed, I imagine that many of my readers who have been as entertained as I have by the words of the medieval women in this book would like to think that this fictive laughter had a real effect—that it spurred on

“uppity” women in everyday life to resist with the jokes told to each other at the public oven or with the wisecracks made to rebuff or ridicule men.<sup>2</sup> We would perhaps also like to imagine that this playful unwritten culture is what would eventually give voice to women such as Jane Austen or Dorothy Parker who would take all this laughter and put it in writing. That it has so often been difficult for women writers to claim laughter as their own is a sign of the energies they have needed to claim writing itself for their own. Christine de Pizan may have had a keen sense of humor, but she may well have sensed that comic writing, with its ambivalence, was not the vehicle best suited to a woman who wanted to make herself perfectly clear.

The laughter of the fictive women populating medieval literature invites us to consider the specific cultural conditions that shape women’s relationship to humor today, to appreciate the gains women have made as well as reflect on the limitations that they share with their medieval forebears. The most significant difference between today and the Middle Ages of course is that we now have documented examples of female writers, stand-up comediennes, cartoonists, playwrights, filmmakers, actresses, and situation comedy writers who have invaded the formerly all-male arena, often creating humor specifically calculated to amuse women in their audience.<sup>3</sup> A recent current of “male-bashing” humor testifies that women can use their humor to render tit for tat, daring to do in public what medieval women may have done in private. Feminist academics, too, use their sharp wit and a “playful, punning attitude to language” as they perform their work of critiquing language and thought patterns harmful to women, testifying to their increasing ease with an academic discourse they have claimed for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, women continue to be charged as lacking a sense of humor and women themselves continue to be common targets of male comics. Moreover, they are targets in ways that readers of this book now recognize as all too familiar. Jokes about women continue to characterize them as vehicles

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2. I have in mind here the recent coffee-table books on “uppity women” by Vicki León, which provide short anecdotes about known historical women. These books cover “ancient times,” “medieval times,” “the Renaissance,” “Shakespearean Times,” and “The New World.”

3. See Susan Horowitz’s 1997 study of women’s stand-up comedy in the United States, *Queens of Comedy*, 133–61.

4. Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter*, 35, thinks that it is not mere coincidence that contemporary feminist scholarship (notably the work of Cixous) employs a playful attitude toward language, for it serves to “de-familiarize language itself, to expose the hidden agendas behind words taken for granted.”

for men's sexual pleasure but unpleasant in their incessant talking. Wise-cracks about nagging and bossy wives have changed little since Juvenal and Ovid wrote their antimarriage satires.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the backlash against women comics suggests that some of the social structures that limited women's laughter in the Middle Ages remain in place. A woman who uses her humor publicly still risks being considered too aggressive, unfeminine. One example is the stand-up comedienne turned situation comedy star Roseanne, whose show of the same name ran from 1988 to 1997. Roseanne unleashed her cutting wit against all levels of the male establishment, including her boss, her husband, and the male-dominated domain of television. This assertive humor resulted in great ratings and spawned many fan clubs, but unleashed a tide of negative responses from the mainstream press that castigated Roseanne's physical and verbal unruliness, that familiar combination that made her "unfeminine." Complaints by male critics about Roseanne's "bitchy, crass" humor echo the complaints about "bossy, ribald" women made by medieval conduct book writers.<sup>6</sup>

That complaints about women's behavior in the thirteenth and twentieth centuries share common features should caution us against assuming any inevitable progress in the history of women's laughter. While feminist theory has helped us to theorize women's comedy in the Middle Ages, I hope that my study of medieval women's laughter will in turn provide useful lines of inquiry for feminist investigations of contemporary humor. Medieval texts may surprise some readers with the complexity of their concerns, many of which can still speak to contemporary audiences. Given the long history of the censure of women's laughter, it is unlikely that women who laugh assertively and loudly in public will be able to escape any time soon being perceived and labeled as unfeminine. But perhaps women can work within this bind that they have inherited, finding new ways to adapt it for their own purposes, just as medieval heroines willingly admit to the faults men attribute to them, but take pleasure in their ability to put these attributes to their own use. The Wife of Bath's pragmatic wit as a response to antifeminism, the *Decameron* ladies' sharp sickles in sparring with their male companions, the *Tretis* women's ribald mockery of pretentious husbands, the *Frauendienst* heroine's ridiculing of her arrogant

5. The syndicated cartoon strips *Beetle Bailey* and *Dagwood* are examples.

6. See Kathleen Rowe's discussion of the attacks on Roseanne in *The Unruly Woman*, 51–65. See also Dresner, "Roseanne Barr." It should be noted that class is also at issue in the response to Roseanne's blue-collar values.

suitor, the farce wives' triumphant victory over their lazy husbands, and the three Baghdad sisters' unabashed joking over sexual body parts: all offer portraits of medieval women laughing for their own pleasure, making us take a second look at texts long assumed to serve solely as amusement for men. And in reading for women's laughter we will do justice to the rich layering of medieval comic literature, whose ambivalent female characters beckon to us with a wink, and whose narrators equivocate and tease, ultimately letting readers, from multiple and diverse perspectives, have the last laugh.