

*Women & Laughter*  
*in Medieval Comic Literature*



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Lisa Perfetti



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I dedicate this book to the  
memory of my grandmother,  
*Oma Hager Perfetti*,  
who told some of her best jokes  
after the men had left the room.



## *Preface*



likely question in the mind of some readers of this book is how anything can be known about the laughter of women who lived more than five centuries ago. Scholars interested in medieval women have long been frustrated by the difficulty of researching women's lives given that the majority of texts we have about them are written by men. The difficulty of studying women's laughter is compounded by the fact that what texts we do have are part of an elite written culture and can only hint at the kinds of oral interactions that would have taken place between the man and woman of the street. Given the choice between abandoning the prospect of learning more about medieval women's laughter because of little evidence, or taking up the challenge of working with male-authored texts and accepting the speculative nature of any conclusions, I have chosen the latter, and for two principal reasons. The first is that, as a teacher of college students, I have found that one of the most effective ways to interest students in the Middle Ages is through its humor. Because relationships between men and women are so often the subject of medieval comedy, questions about what women and men would have laughed at inevitably surface in classroom discussion. This book has been shaped by these discussions, and I hope that it may provide other teachers with some avenues for responding to the probing questions of their most inquisitive students. I would add that the kinds of strategies I offer for reading women's laughter in fictional texts are similar to those that historians and literary scholars must employ when faced with the various challenges of reconstructing the culture of the past. Cultural historians, for example, read conduct literature not just for what it tells us about medieval norms for behavior, but also for what it reveals about the kinds of behavior in which medieval people were engaging often enough

to cause some authors to worry about censoring it. The strategy of “reading between the lines” is an imperfect one, but indispensable for any scholar attempting to understand the complexities of a culture that has left few written records.

I have also taken on the challenge of writing about women’s laughter in the Middle Ages because a sense of humor has historically been one of the most important assets for women in facing numerous challenges in their private and public lives. Laughter is both a defense mechanism and a weapon of attack, essential to groups struggling to be taken seriously by the rest of society. But it is perhaps women, more than any other group, who have had the most complicated relationship with humor in Western culture. People of every religion, nationality, ethnicity, class, and occupation have at some time found themselves the butt of an offensive joke and told to lighten up because “it’s just a joke.” But it is women who have been told that their refusal to laugh at jokes made at their expense shows that they don’t have a sense of humor at all. So a woman has to assert her right not to laugh at offensive jokes but simultaneously prove that she is capable of laughter or risk being seen as a humorless spoilsport: a balancing act requiring a quick wit. This is why I recommend to many of my female friends, colleagues, and students Regina Barreca’s marvelous book *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor*. Having already written several scholarly volumes on women’s humor, Barreca offers this book as a kind of how-to manual for women from all walks of life, from high school girls to college students, to corporate executives, to housewives and mothers. The constraints of my material have meant that my book is not focused solely on women’s strategic use of laughter, for I have had to account for why male authors created the laughter of their female characters as well as to explain why men also found this literature amusing. But I do think it is important for us as scholars and teachers of the past to imagine the important place laughter held for women and to reflect on where that laughter has led. I hope that teachers and scholars of humor in other historical periods will find in the medieval heroines of my book worthy companions for the other witty women who grace their syllabuses or take center stage in their research.

With this goal in mind, I have taken special care to make the medieval material accessible to nonmedievalists, providing background on various traditions that medievalists generally take for granted. I have also tried to make the study as inclusive as possible, choosing texts from diverse linguis-

tic traditions and a range of literary genres so that scholars in English or in language and literature departments, as well as comparatists, will find the material of interest. My choice to include Arabic material was made in great part in the belief that more comparative work needs to be done with European and Arabic traditions, which are strikingly similar in some respects and whose differences help to illuminate the particularities of each. Yet each work is chosen also for the specific perspective it offers to the study of medieval women's laughter. The perspectives overlap from chapter to chapter, but a specific question is the focus in each text. It goes without saying that I have not exhausted the sources that could potentially enrich the findings of the book; documents from female religious houses, joke books (mostly belonging to the early modern period), and trial proceedings are all potential sources that I hope others will have the opportunity to investigate.

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Material in chapter 6 on the *Thousand and One Nights* appeared in a different version in *Exemplaria* 10, no. 2 (1998): 207–41, and I am thankful to Pegasus Press for the permission to reprint. Parts of chapter 5 on the representation of women's housework were presented at the Thirty-fourth International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2000.

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