

Introduction



She never will be coy, but will speak well-considered words, soft and rather low-pitched, uttered with a pleasant face and without excessive motion of the hands or body, nor facial grimaces. She will avoid excessive or uncalled-for laughter. . . . Her humor also will be discreet.¹



With this advice, Christine de Pizan warns her women readers that too much laughter and joking are unbecoming to the well-bred medieval lady. Her advice is not an isolated warning, for it was echoed in varying forms in an extensive body of conduct literature written (most often by men) in French, Occitan, English, Italian, German, Scots, and Arabic from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. Despite this wealth of texts discouraging laughter, a rich body of medieval literature represents women laughing and joking exuberantly and openly. The unruly laughter of these heroines invites us to consider women's relationship to humor in the Middle Ages. What made medieval women laugh? What kinds of jokes did they tell? What functions did their laughter serve? How was their laughter portrayed by the largely male authors of medieval comic texts, and to what end?

In the past two decades, feminist approaches to literary and cultural studies have recognized the value of studying women's relationship to

1. *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 92. The original text reads: "Prudence et Sobrece apprendront a la dame a avoir parler ordonné et sage eloquence, non pas mignote mais rassise, coye et assez basse, a beaulz traiz, sans faire mouvemens des mains, du corps, ne grimaces du visage; la gardera de trop rire, et non sans cause. . . . et en ses joyeusetéz lui commandera a garder toute mesure et honnesteté" (*Livre des Trois Vertus*, 45). Christine later reiterates these warnings in her model letter of how a governess should counsel her former mistress should she disregard her wise teachings after leaving her care (140; 179).

humor. Several studies on women and laughter have been written on literature from the Renaissance to the present, and a series has been devoted to the study of humor and gender.² This pairing of laughter and feminism has been a recent one in academe, since for centuries studies of humor took a distinctly masculine perspective, and in the popular imagination (of men, at least), women simply had no sense of humor.³ Feminists now point out that the humorless woman is a figure created by men when women have refused to laugh at jokes made at their expense. By asking what women find amusing and what kinds of jokes they tell, we learn much about how they negotiate the limitations they face in a culture largely dominated by men. By examining jokes that men make *about* women, we discover attitudes toward the place of women in that culture.

Because we have scant evidence of texts written by medieval women, for the Middle Ages it has of course been easier to investigate the latter question, and thus little work has been undertaken to discover how humor might have been used and enjoyed by medieval women.⁴ It has in fact generally been assumed that medieval comic literature as a whole was hostile to women, the label *antifeminist* or *misogynous* being affixed to entire genres such as the fabliaux. Much comic literature of the Middle Ages unquestionably does reaffirm misogyny, which is scarcely surprising since many works of fiction meant to amuse were authored by the univer-

2. See the four volumes in the series published by Gordon and Breach, *Studies in Humor and Gender*, particularly the first, Gail Finney's collection *Look Who's Laughing* (1994). On American women's humor, see Walker, *A Very Serious Thing* (1988) and the collections by Barreca, *Last Laughs, They Used to Call Me Snow White but I Drifted*, and *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (1988, 1991, 1992) and Sochen, *Women's Comic Visions* (1991). On British literature, see Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer* (1983); Carlson, *Women and Comedy* (1991); Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed* (1994); and Gray, *Women and Laughter* (1994). On Shakespeare, see Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men* (1982). On Restoration comedy, see Gill, *Interpreting Ladies* (1994). Also see Rowe, *The Unruly Woman* (1994), which covers a wide range of examples from literature, television, and cinema.

3. For a discussion of the masculine perspective on humor, see June Sochen's introduction to *Women's Comic Visions*. It could be added that feminism itself has been perceived as humorless (and laughable). One common joke runs, "How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Answer: That's not funny!" Along similar lines, a cartoon shows a man in a bookstore requesting assistance from the female employee. She yells, "What do you mean 'humor section'? This is a *feminist* bookstore!"

4. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, for example, note that the voices of women in comic literature are "faked" (*A Cultural History of Humour from Antiquity to the Present Day*, 5).

sity clerks who inherited and disseminated a tradition of antifeminist texts extending back to the church fathers and classical authors such as Ovid. These clerks compiled collections of misogynous miscellany, often containing humorous exempla, which were then used by preachers in their sermons to their congregations.⁵ Literature of entertainment was thus part of a clerical culture in which satirizing women was part of a man's intellectual training.

When we look closely at these male-authored texts, however, we find that clichés about woman's talkativeness, excessive libido, and deceitfulness are played with, reversed to charge men with the same faults, or reconfigured in ways that make trouble with an easy antifeminist essentialism. It is my contention that reading between the lines of the laughter of these fictional women not only allows us to discover the uses male authors made of their unruly heroines; it also alerts us to the possible ways that debates about feminine and masculine reflected and elicited the responses of medieval women. Furthermore, it helps us to imagine women's laughter, in particular, as part of this larger discussion. Because actual instances of laughter or joking (whether women's or men's) are rare in the historical record, the nature of this exploration is of course speculative. What I offer in this book is a collection of readings that take a second look at comic texts from a range of genres, framing them within discussions of medieval and contemporary views of humor that draw from anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and medicine. Each text features a female character who laughs and makes jokes about men or uses her wit to joust verbally with men. Laughter is thus a term I use to encompass both the appreciation and the making of humor.

The theoretical ground to be covered before undertaking readings of individual texts is considerable. First, I explore medieval attitudes toward women's laughter in medical and philosophical treatises and religious and didactic literature. I then discuss the figure of the unruly "woman on top" in medieval literature in the context of models that theorize misrule in life and literature. Finally, I outline my approach to reading for women's laughter in literary texts, tracing the multiple layers of interpretation made possible by the complex interplay between the author/narrator, character, and audience.

5. For example, see the exempla in Berlioz, *Le Rire du prédicateur*. Exempla on women, both negative and positive, are found in pp. 119–41.

Woman's Laughing Body

Although references to laughter and joking can commonly be found embedded in a variety of texts in the Middle Ages, it was rarely a topic given extensive treatment by itself. In about 1560, Laurent Joubert, the first European to write a full treatise on the subject, prefaced his own study by noting, "The subject of laughter is so vast and deep that few philosophers have attempted it, and none has won the prize of treating it properly."⁶ Such neglect may have been due to an uneasiness, if not outright hostility, concerning levity within the clerical milieu that produced most texts of the Middle Ages. Monastic rules often forbade laughter because it was thought to show pride or to interfere with prayerful contemplation; some writers also claimed that because Jesus was never known to laugh, it should be avoided. Other writers, however, recognized the futility of trying to ban that uniquely human proclivity, even arguing that laughter could be useful, giving the mind renewed energy to return to more serious matters or making didactic messages more palatable.⁷ Medieval thinkers also distinguished between good laughter, which was to be found in the joy one takes in God or his works, and bad laughter, the ignorant and derisive laughter in which one abandons proper Christian humility.⁸

Where medieval thinkers most often agreed was that one should laugh in moderation, reflecting the broader concern with *mesura*, the avoiding of excess.⁹ Both men and women were urged to be moderate in their behavior, but it was women in particular who were thought to be prone to excess, for they were believed to be subject to the sway of their unruly bodily passions,

6. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 11. Joubert translated his Latin version into French in 1579.

7. On these mixed attitudes within the church and their effect on comic authors, see Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*; and Suchomski, "Delectatio" und "Utilitas."

8. On the distinction between good and bad laughter, see Le Goff, "Laughter in the Middle Ages." Distinctions were also made in a nonreligious context. According to the widely known thirteenth-century *Mensa Philosophica*, Macrobius discouraged raillery that is insulting, but noted that discreet (presumably affectionate) raillery was acceptable (113–14).

9. See, for example, Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogia*, bk. 2, chap. 5, p. 135; John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, bk. 1, 38. In the Arab world, laughter was less problematic because of Muhammad's reputation for having a fine wit, as opposed to the unlaughing Christ often mentioned by European clergy, but Arab writers, too, cautioned against excessive jesting. See Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humor*, 37; and the medieval treatise by al-Tifāchī, *Les Délices des coeurs*, 19.

and thus less able to control their behavior. Women were in fact often associated with the body itself, whereas men represented the rational head that would govern the irrational female body, furthermore considered defective because excessively moist and lacking the heat of the male.¹⁰

Such views of woman's biological otherness had implications for how her laughter was viewed within medieval culture, for laughter was thought to be fundamentally attached to the operations of the body, specifically its balance of the four humors (hence the two associated meanings of the word *humor*). According to medical thinkers like Galen, whereas black bile was associated with melancholy, the blood was associated with joy. The Arab physicians Ibn al-Matran and Ishaq Ibn Umran located laughter in the spleen or liver because these organs purified the blood, and good blood caused joy. Pliny, later followed by Isidore of Seville, also cited this purifying function to identify the spleen as the seat of laughter. Joubert, a physician at the famed Ecole de Médecine in Montpellier (where François Rabelais studied), also believed that laughter was more common in those with good blood, leading him to conclude that the seat of laughter was the heart, and also that women (with their abundance of moist blood) were more prone to laughter than men: "women generally laugh more often and more easily than men, and fat people more than skinny people. For fat people and women engender much good blood, from which comes much oil, if one takes care of oneself, in peace and tranquility of mind."¹¹

A woman's body also predisposes her to laughter because her fluids are subject to constant shifting. Joubert argues that both tears and laughter are more common in women, children, and fat people, but less likely in men, who are wiser: "Now the soft, such as women and children, are not only less conscious and less wise, but are also easily moved by every occasion, be it sad or happy."¹² Joubert's contrast of emotionally unstable women (who

10. Medical treatises on reproduction, following Aristotle, viewed the female as the passive matter upon which the male impressed the active form or spirit. On the influence of Aristotle on medieval theories of conception, see Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 24–26.

11. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 104–5. It is interesting to note that while Joubert focuses on moisture and softness when discussing women's likelihood to laugh, he emphasizes heat when explaining why children (more hot because of their youth) are more likely to laugh than adults, whose heat has been depleted. Woman's greater coldness does not appear to override her abundant moisture and softness.

12. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 103. The French original reads, "Or les mous, comme fames & anfans, ne sont pas seulement peu aisés & moins sages, ains aussi sont emeus fort aisement de toute occasion, soit elle triste, ou joyeuse" (258).

presumably laugh and cry more often) with wise men emphasizes the emotional, irrational character of women, since their emotions, governed by the humors, shift constantly. *La Contenance des Fames*, a thirteenth-century didactic poem, satirizes woman's laughter as a symptom of her shifting moods: "Now sings, now thinks, now laughs, now cries; / Her mood will change, just blink your eyes!"¹³ This notion of mutability was also connected to the belief, espoused by some medical writers, that a woman's uterus could wander around the body, which caused her to be fickle and moody.¹⁴ Etymologically, extreme or excessive laughter is connected to the womb, the word *hysterical* (as in hysterical laughter) deriving from the Greek *hyster* (womb). Medieval medicine links woman's laughter to her unstable body, whose excessive, shifting fluids and wandering uterus make her less able to control any inappropriate impulse to laugh. The condemnation of laughter in monastic circles in fact stems partly from the concern that it made the body a more vulnerable doorway to sin. The good Christian should use the filters of the eyes, ears, and mouth to prevent any evil from entering the body. Laughter interfered with these "barriers," and was therefore to be avoided.¹⁵ It is not surprising that women, allegedly less able to control their bodies, were associated with the sinful implications of laughter.

The laughing person whose bodily defenses are weak is furthermore associated with foolishness and inferior intellectual ability. Joubert notes that a person laughs if his brain, the seat of reason, consents to it by allowing it as proper or appropriate. But the brute emotion coming from the heart (the seat of laughter) is often too rebellious to obey reason. This is connected to Joubert's belief that men, particularly those who study a lot, are less likely to laugh than women because study depletes the blood, a notion that implicitly allies women with foolishness (and scholars with melancholy!).¹⁶ Joubert's contemporary, Erasmus, in his *Praise of Folly*, embodied the voice of folly in a woman, and paintings and sculptures in

13. Fiero, Pfeffer, and Allain, *Three Medieval Views of Women*: "Or chante, or pense, or rit, or pleure; / Moult mue son cuer en pou de heure!" (ll. 109–10). See also Chaucer, who describes fickle Lady Fortune in the *Book of the Duchess*, "She ys fals, and ever laughynge / With oon eye, and that other wepynge" (ll. 631–32).

14. See, for example, Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 14–15.

15. Le Goff, "Laughter in the Middle Ages," 45–46. See also the discussion of laughter as a lack of control over the body in Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society in the Spanish Netherlands*, 2–5 and elsewhere.

16. Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society*, 60–61, notes that melancholy becomes a "trendy" disease in the sixteenth century when it is discovered that study depletes the warmth and moisture of the body.

the Middle Ages represent wise virgins as smiling whereas the foolish ones snigger.¹⁷ Centuries earlier, Clement of Alexandria warned against joking or laughing with women, for “Laughter can easily give rise to misunderstandings, particularly among boys and women.”¹⁸ All three authors link women to children because of their presumed inferior rational faculties.

At the same time, woman’s foolish laughter can endear her to men. In the *Praise of Folly*, woman is described as “a stupid animal, God wot, and a giddy one, yet funny and sweet—so that in domestic familiarity her folly [*stulticia*] might leaven the lumpishness [*tristiciam*] of the male temperament.”¹⁹ Joubert, too, invokes the pleasure that women’s laughter offers men. In dedicating his treatise to his female patron, Marguerite de Navarre, he explains that laughter is most apparent in the face. Therefore, it is in women, whose faces are more beautiful than men’s, that laughter is more fitting. A wife’s beautiful laughing face is a particular boon to her husband, “who, finding recreation in her company and acquaintance, diminishes and erases with it the injuries received in his toils and labors, gently relaxing the tension of his mind. This is why God created woman, the companion of man, prettier, lovelier, placing in her the careful desire to preserve her beauty so as to be more desirable with it.”²⁰ Like Erasmus, Joubert sees woman’s laughing disposition as a source of pleasure to men. Whereas *he* toils, engaged in serious affairs, *she* is there to refresh him, restoring him for his labors, a function that echoes the justifications for laughter spelled out in medieval recreative theories. A woman’s subtle humor, in harmony with her beauty, make her desirably feminine, like Chaucer’s Duchess, who can “laughe and pleye so womanly.”²¹

That such humor is coded positively when oriented toward the pleasure of men is suggested by the conduct manuals that urge women to adapt themselves to the disposition of their husbands, to be gay when he is gay and

17. Le Goff, “Laughter in the Middle Ages,” 49.

18. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogia*, bk. 2, chap. 5, p. 136.

19. Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, 21. The original reads: “nempe vti mulierem adiungeret, animal videlicet stultum quidem illud atque ineptum, verum ridiculum et suaue, quo conuictu domestico virilis ingenii tristiciam sua stulticia condiret atque edulcaret” (ll. 331–34). It should be noted that although Erasmus is likely echoing popular notions of women’s natural silliness, his use of Dame Folly is positively charged, an example of “carnival laughter” cited by Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 14.

20. Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, 9. Christine de Pizan also talks about the importance of a cheerful countenance because a husband works all day long (*Treasury*, 187).

21. Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, l. 850.

sad when he is sad.²² Women's laughter is welcomed by men if it enhances the pleasure she gives him, but discouraged if it diminishes such pleasure, an implication contained in Joubert's caution to women to avoid *excessive* laughter lest she disfigure the naturally feminine beauty of her pleasing face with "such opening of the mouth, from which come many wrinkles in the face."²³ Joubert's concern over the disfiguring effect of laughter is common to many discussions of women in medieval texts. Centuries before Joubert, Jean de Meun's old bawd, la Vieille, proclaims that the woman who wants to attract suitors should laugh with her mouth closed:

A woman ne'er should laugh with open mouth;
Her lips must cover and conceal her teeth;
For if too wide a gulf appears, it looks
As though her face were slit—it's no fair sight—
And if she have not even, well-shaped teeth,
But ugly, crooked ones, she'll be less prized
Should she let them appear in laugh or smile.²⁴

22. Examples of such conduct literature include Garin lo Brun's *Ensenhamen*, the anonymous *Dodici avvertimenti*, and Anne of France's "enseignements" to her daughter, synopses of which may be found in Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique du moyen âge s'adressant spécialement aux femmes*. The notion also makes its way into popular literature, such as the farce where a cobbler brags of the malleability of his new wife, who cries when he cries, and laughs when he does: "Si je vueil plourer, elle pleure, / Rire et plourer tout à une heure, / Je fais d'elle ce que je veulx" (Cohen, *Recueil de farces françaises inédites du XV^e siècle*, XXXIII, vv. 114–16).

23. *Treatise on Laughter*, 55. The French reads, "De ce discours nous pouvons antandre, pourquoy on avertit les jeunes filhes, de ne rire follatremant, les menassant qu'elles an seront plutot vielhes. C'est pour autant que le Ris dissolute & trop continué, cause une laide mine de telle ouverture de bouche, d'où se sont mains plis au visage" (116).

24. *The Romance of the Rose*, 279. The original text of *Le roman de la rose* reads:

Fame doit rire a bouche close
Car ce n'est mie bele chose
Quant el rit a goule estendue,
Trop semble estre large et fendue.
Et s'el n'a denz bien ordenés
Mes [tres] laiz et sans ordre nés,
Se les moustroit par sa risee
Mains en porroit estre prisee.

(vv. 13359–66)

The word *rire* could suggest either laughing or smiling since the distinction between the two only came about gradually in the later Middle Ages with the increasing use of the specific word *sourire* for smiling (Ménard, *Le Rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen Âge*, 31).

Jean de Meun, like Joubert, brings attention specifically to the unseemly opening of the mouth (“Trop semble estre large et fendue”).²⁵

As E. Jane Burns has suggested, La Vieille’s concern about the “slit” created when women open their lips too widely in laughter implicitly relates to the association made in the Middle Ages between the woman’s facial and genital mouths. Noting that the Old French *fendue* (split or broken open) is related to the noun, *fendace*, the term used to refer to female genitalia, Burns says, “La Vieille suggests pointedly that to laugh with a gaping mouth means in some sense to split apart the lower body and open the lower, genital mouth as well. Neither gesture becomes the elegantly attired and properly attractive medieval lady.”²⁶ This linking of the two female orifices is commonly found in French fabliaux and farces, perhaps nowhere dramatized so succinctly as in the fabliau of the “Knight who could make cunts talk.”²⁷ The association is also evident in the fact that the Old French *langue* could refer both to the clitoris and the tongue, a double entendre exploited by a medieval joke that asks why women talk more than men. The answer: they have two tongues.²⁸ This confounding of facial and genital mouths, a likely offshoot of the ancient Indo-European motif of the *vagina dentata*, is also found in Arab texts of the period, where men are warned that a woman with a large mouth also has a large vagina, and should therefore be avoided.²⁹

Controlling women’s laughter is thus related to the control of their sexuality, which helps to explain why in many medieval conduct manuals advice to women not to laugh with their mouths wide open is found alongside instructions to restrict their bodily movements, to keep their legs

25. Jean de Meun’s source is Ovid’s *Ars amatoria*, bk. 3, ll. 281–90. Later, in around 1280, the anonymous *Clef d’amors*, a loose translation of Ovid, goes so far as to instruct women who have a horrible laugh to pretend not to be amused even when everyone else is laughing (ll. 2525–52). Another imitation of Ovid is Francesco da Barberino (1264–1348), *Del Reggimento e costume di Donna* (synopsis in Hentsch, *De la littérature didactique*, 104–19).

26. Burns, *Bodytalk*, 204.

27. “Le Chevalier qui fist les cons parler,” Noomen and Van den Boogaard, *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, 3:158.

28. “Demande: Pourquoi est ce que les femmes parlent plus que les hommes? Response: Pource qu’elles ont deulx langues” (Roy, *Devinettes françaises du Moyen Âge*, no. 568, p. 171). Roy explains the double entendre in a note.

29. Ait Sabbah, *La Femme dans l’inconscient musulman*, 48. See al-Nafzāwī’s *Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight*, which describes God’s giving woman’s pudenda a mouth, tongue, and lips (3).

closed. Because a woman's value resided above all in her chastity, the central, albeit not exclusive, concern of conduct literature for women was the control of the body. Philippe of Navarre observed that whereas men must demonstrate that they are courtly, generous, courageous, and wise, a woman's sole object of concern was to be chaste.³⁰ Contemporary anthropological studies echo the association between sexual modesty and restraint in laughter, for in a variety of different cultures, spanning South America, Greece, India, and the Middle East, "norms of modesty cause women who laugh freely and openly in public to be viewed as loose, sexually promiscuous, and lacking in self-discipline."³¹ Drawing on these studies, Regina Barreca has shown how this simultaneous restriction of sexuality and laughter continues to operate in the portrayal of women in American culture as well, creating a good girl/bad girl dichotomy. Bad girls tell jokes, laugh loudly, and don't cross their legs. Good girls smile appreciatively at the jokes of their boyfriends or husbands, but they do not tell jokes of their own. They keep their mouths—and their legs—discreetly closed.³²

The fear that exuberant laughter and joking might compromise a young woman's reputation was particularly keen among the nobility. Anne of France, the daughter of King Louis XI, advised her daughter upon her marriage:

Avoid making silly faces and turning your head here and there, no matter how private a place where you are. And don't look around loosely or precociously. Do not laugh too much, regardless of the reason, for it is very unbecoming to noble girls in particular, who must always behave more seriously, gracefully and with more dignity than others. You also shouldn't speak too much or stridently like many foolish coquettes. . . . For because of this they are often judged foolish and unchaste; one philosopher says that you can ascertain a woman's chastity based on her eyes and her tongue. . . . Also refrain from running, jumping, and frolicking.³³

30. Philippe de Navarre, *Les quatre âges de l'homme*, sec. 31, p. 20. Philippe's specific term is "ele est prode fame de son cors."

31. Apte, *Humor and Laughter*, 75.

32. Barreca, *Snow White*, 6.

33. "[V]ous gardez, quelque privauté où vous soiez, de faire nulles lourdes contenance, tant de branler ou virer la teste çà ne là, comme d'avoir les yeulx agus, légers, ne espars. Aussi de beaucop ne trop rire, quelque cause qu'il y ait; car il est très mal séant, mesmement à filles

It is worth noting that women, since they are frequently the ones responsible for educating their daughters or other women in their care, are often as conservative as men in discouraging young women from laughter, particularly in the case of the upper classes.³⁴ Women such as Christine and Anne understand that both class and gender place constraints upon their daughters' behavior, and that failure to conform to such expectations might result in a lack of desirable offers of marriage. Such a danger is clearly dramatized in the Knight of the Tour Landry's book of counsel to his daughters (ca. 1371), in which he recounts how in his youth he flirted with a woman who responded to his joking with witticisms of her own. This woman of loose behavior ("très grant legière manière") was later criticized for it, and he was therefore glad that he had not pursued his acquaintance with her. The message of this anecdote is made clear in the knight's caution to his daughters that they should "be good-mannered, humble, and solid in behavior and manners, not too chatty, and respond courteously and not be too hard to rein in nor unmanageable, and not look around in a loose way."³⁵

The knight's desire that his daughters not be "too hard to rein in" also links laughter to disobedience, and the frequent instructions to girls and young women not to laugh would seem to indicate that the practice existed enough among young medieval women to need some reining in. An anecdote told by the elderly Parisian author of the *Ménagier de Paris* (1394) to his young wife illustrates this very point. In a section on wifely obedience, he recounts a story in which men wager with each other that whichever of them could get his wife to count to three without arguing,

nobles, lesquelles, en toutes choses, doivent avoir manières plus pesantes, douces, et asseurées que les autres; de parler aussi beaucoup, n'avoir langaige trop afilé comme plusieurs folles coquardes. . . . Car, à ce, sont elles souvent jugées folles et non castes de leur corps; et dit un philosophe, que aux yeulx et à la langue est évidamment congneue la chasteté d'une femme. . . . Gardez vous aussi de courir ne saillir, d'aucun pincer ne bouter" (*Les Enseignements d'Anne de France à sa fille Suzanne*, 43–45). Translation is mine.

34. The distinction between the "vulgar" amusement of the uneducated versus the more refined amusement of the educated extends as far back as Aristotle. See Bremmer, "Jokes, Jokers, and Jokebooks in Ancient Greek Culture," 30. On the increasing association of vulgar humor with lower classes in the sixteenth century, see Verberckmoes, who looks at the Dutch pictorial tradition that depicts those considered uncivilized, such as Africans, as laughing (*Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society*, 41–45 and 58–79).

35. "[E]stre de douces manières, humbles et fermes d'estat et de manières, poy emparlées, et respondre courtoisement et n'estre pas trop enresnées, ne surseillies, ne regarder trop legierement" (*Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*, 29). Translation is my own.

contradicting, or mocking would win dinner. Those whose wives make sarcastic retorts lose the bet.³⁶ Historically, such derisive laughter has been censured in women because it has been viewed as incompatible with the passivity expected of them. Even when jokes are made at their expense, girls are urged to turn the other cheek, to shrug it off with a smile, whereas boys have been expected to render tit for tat.³⁷

It is precisely laughter's potential to resist the construction of women as passive that has led some feminists to embrace it. Perhaps the most notable example is Hélène Cixous, who recounts a tale in which a king seeks to test the expertise of his general by challenging him to turn his 180 wives into good soldiers. The women, rather than obeying the general, continue laughing until the general threatens to cut off their heads. Cixous comments, "It's a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter, its inability to take the drumbeats seriously, to the threat of decapitation."³⁸ The women's disorder is signaled not by a verbal response, but by their laughter, as though to refuse to speak the men's language. Threatened with beheading, the women are forced to abandon their laughter and brought under the general's control.

The Multivalent Figure of the "Woman on Top"

That the laughter of the unruly woman of medieval literature is so often not reined in is a testament to the complexity of this highly charged figure, which has generated considerable debate among scholars. Is the woman who bosses her husband, tricks him, and manages to stay "on top" a subversive invitation to destabilize the rule of men over women sanctioned by medieval church writing? Or does the figure in fact function conservatively as a warning to men not to let their wives get the better of them?

36. *Ménagier de Paris*, 81.

37. The aggression in laughter has commonly been explained as a vestige of the primitive instinct to bare teeth when faced with enemies. See the introduction by Keith-Spiegel to *The Psychology of Humor*, ed. Goldstein and McGhee, 5–6. The link between laughter and aggression sheds light on Verberckmoes's observation that in the sixteenth century, whereas men were urged to reply when someone made a joke at their expense, women were advised only to smile (*Laughter, Jestbooks, and Society*, 79).

38. Cixous, "Castration and Decapitation," 43. The message that feminists should use their own laughter to assert themselves when faced with misogynistic remarks is shared by many contemporary studies on women's humor. See Rowe, *Unruly Woman*, 11–12; Barreca, *Snow White*, 37.

This debate on the “woman on top” topos is nowhere more evident than in the scholarship on the short rhymed comic tales called fabliaux. Early scholars of the genre, who tended to see the fabliaux as realistic reflections of everyday urban life, asserted that the tales reflected medieval society’s hatred of women.³⁹ Scholars now recognize the danger of viewing fabliaux as documents describing actual social conditions in the Middle Ages, but there is nonetheless significant disagreement as to what such literary portrayals of feminine misrule might mean. While some argue that fabliaux are meant to condemn women because they portray them as deceitful, libidinous, and quarrelsome, others assert that fabliaux show admiration for the woman on top, who impresses us with her ingenuity, making the man, usually her husband, look ridiculous.⁴⁰

This debate is part of the much larger discussion concerning the function of images of misrule, known in literary studies primarily through Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival. Bakhtin argued that in a remote preclass society comic and serious were accorded equal status, but with an emerging class consciousness, comic forms were suppressed by the official sphere of feudal hierarchy so that laughter became an integral part of the “unofficial” sphere of folk culture.⁴¹ This folk culture of laughter could be seen in the ritual festivals of inversion during the carnival celebrations of Mardi Gras or the feast of fools associated with the Church, verbal compositions and spectacles such as parodic poems and mystery plays, and “market-place speech.” Bakhtin imagined a medieval society divided in two: a solemn “official” culture represented by church and state and a merry popular culture of the oppressed. The official sphere sanctioned ritual spectacles of misrule only in order to give it temporary vent lest it get out of hand and threaten social stability. Bakhtin’s loose definition of folk humor, which includes everything from fabliaux to mystery plays to parodies of liturgy, leads him to some inconsistencies in his claim about who is served by such laughter. He consistently allies laughter with liberation and freedom, but this liberation is alternately described as a victory over the authoritarianism of the ruling class and as a more cosmic defeat of the “mystic terror of

39. Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, 319–25. See also Neff’s categories of misogynous topoi in *La Satire des femmes dans la poésie lyrique française du Moyen Age*.

40. For a good illustration of the positions in this debate, see Johnson, “Women on Top”; and Lacy, “Fabliau Women” or his later *Reading Fabliaux*.

41. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Although Bakhtin discusses the history of laughter’s evolution repeatedly throughout his study, it is most concisely elaborated at pp. 73–97.

God,” “the awe inspired by the forces of nature,” and “death and punishment after death” (90–91). It would seem that the “hierarchs and learned theologians” of the official sphere can be brought down a peg by the laughter of those over whom they have power, but that they share *with* the people the kind of laughter that liberates from greater cosmic forces.⁴² Although Bakhtin clearly asserts that carnival laughter is temporary and limited, the implications of this temporary license are not clear. On the one hand, he acknowledges that “[t]he consciousness of freedom could be *only* limited and utopian,” (95; emphasis added) but on the other, argues that “[t]he very brevity of this freedom increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism” (89). Does Bakhtin mean by radicalism that carnival laughter can effect change in the social fabric? Or, because it is utopian, is the desire for such change merely an unfulfilled wish, limited to the “fantastic” realm of the imagination?

Anthropologists, in their studies of rituals of reversal in a variety of cultures, have tried to answer such questions. Victor Turner, for example, analyzed rituals of status reversal in Africa and India, and explained their function as the easing of tensions between different social groups in order to preserve harmony for the whole community.⁴³ The anthropologist Max Gluckman in fact asserted that such rituals are effective *only* in societies that have a stable and unchallenged social order, not in societies that are prone to shifts in status. According to his reading, although distinctions in status are played with a few times a year and allowed to be released in a sort of “steam-valve,” ultimately everyone accepts and complies with these distinctions.⁴⁴ As French clerics explained in 1444 in their defense of the practice of carnival: “We do these things in jest and not in earnest, as the ancient custom is, so that once a year the foolishness innate in us can come out and evaporate. Don’t wine skins and barrels burst very often if the air-hole is not opened from time to time? We too are old barrels.”⁴⁵ Images of status reversal in medieval culture would thus be likened to a kind of release valve, allowing for a temporary vent of the pressures created by status boundaries. The implication is that women are allowed to rule in images of

42. On the laughter of high-status groups, see pp. 13, 82–83, and 95. As Martha Bayless has noted, Bakhtin also underestimated the function of humor, specifically parody, in reaffirming religious values (*Parody in the Middle Ages*, 196–208).

43. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, particularly the chapter on “Liminality and Communitas.”

44. Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, esp. 130.

45. Quoted in Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 202.

reversal because in daily life they are expected to stay in their place. Moreover, the laughter produced by the image of a woman beating her husband or cuckolding him before his very eyes is often directed at the husband, who has received his due by letting her violate the natural order. Laughter is thus, in Bergson's terms, a correction of aberrant behavior: although it is the man who is ridiculed, the figure of the unruly woman is used to reassert social norms.⁴⁶

Others, however, have asserted that rituals of misrule could destabilize the status quo. Anthropologists have observed, for example, that misrule during specific rituals is often done by those members of a society who are the most unruly *throughout* the year.⁴⁷ Moreover, unruliness is not confined to specific, sanctioned rituals. The historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in his study of one carnival festival in 1580, has shown how carnival rituals could overflow out of the actual ritual period and lead to social change.⁴⁸ The historian Natalie Davis shares Le Roy Ladurie's view of the potential for social resistance in carnival rituals, applying it specifically to the topos of the woman on top. In her discussion of carnival rites in which husbands said to be beaten by their wives were paraded through the streets and mocked, she argues that although the message was sent that henpecked husbands would be punished by the community through ridicule, a possible *side effect* created by the ritual was that it "invited the unruly woman to keep up the fight."⁴⁹ In distinguishing between intent and effect, Davis's explanation suggests how men and women alike could take pleasure from the image.⁵⁰

Given the extensive debate on images of misrule, it would seem that they can be either subversive or conservative depending on the specific context in which they are used. Yet examining images of misrule enables us to locate and understand the crucial dividing lines or "hot spots" of a

46. Bergson, *Le Rire*: "Le rire est, avant tout, une correction. Fait pour humilier, il doit donner à la personne qui en est objet une impression pénible" (150). On the ridicule of male figures as it relates to "antifeminism," see Goldberg, "Sexual Humor in Misogynist Medieval Exempla."

47. See the essays in the volume edited by Barbara A. Babcock, *The Reversible World*.

48. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, 191.

49. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 140.

50. The notion of mixed pleasures created by the unruly woman topos has also been applied to the visual arts. Diane H. Russell postulates that prints such as *Phyllis Riding Aristotle* (ca. 1500) may have been interpreted differently by each gender (*Eva/Ave*, 150). See also Smith, *The Power of Women*.

culture. In his study of Balinese cockfighting, Clifford Geertz argued against Gluckman's "functionalist" explanation of images of reversal serving to bolster existing hierarchies, asserting instead that they are a form of "deep play" that serves as "a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves."⁵¹ I find this formulation useful, for it enables us to get around the impasse relating to the subversive versus conservative debate: whether or not the woman on top subverts male/female hierarchies, the laughter generated by her unruliness does bring attention to the "story medieval people tell themselves about themselves." This in fact appears to be Kathryn Gravdal's operating assumption in her work on how medieval parody plays out shifting paradigms of class: "Medieval culture expresses and defines itself in these comic texts. In literary parody, medieval society stages its own tensions, rehearses its own dilemmas, and plays with its own worst fears."⁵²

The staging of their own tensions may have been pleasurable to medieval audiences because it enabled them to, in the words of one anthropologist, "abstract and comprehend cultural crises by casting them in the form of ludic antitheses."⁵³ The pleasure comes not so much from promoting or contesting existing hierarchies as it does from being able to stand back at a distance and see how they operate. In this detachment, the seemingly pervasive and controlling social forms are shown to be mechanisms that could be otherwise. This seems to be the point of Bakhtin's statement that carnival laughter, which is always ambivalent, "frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities."⁵⁴ Even Bergson, who

51. Geertz, "Deep Play," 26.

52. Gravdal, *Vilain et Courtois*, 146.

53. Sutton-Smith, "Play as Adaptive Potentiation." See also Sutton-Smith's later discussion of how this explanation is a way to reconcile competing theories of play as prophylactic (allowing for irreverent reversals of social norms) and preparatory (leading to integration into socially sanctioned forms of behavior): "Towards an Anthropology of Play," 232–37. The anthropologist Mary Douglas also sees the joke as a social activity that frees the mind for imagining other social relations. She notes that while it is a temporary attack on classification and hierarchy, it nonetheless "implies that anything is possible" ("Jokes," 107–8). Similarly, Robert Williams calls the comic mode a zone of "exploration of values, judgments, and emotions" (*Comic Practice/Comic Response*, 80–83).

54. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 49.

emphasizes the conservative function of laughter, notes that it often has more to do with human flexibility, the ingenuity to adapt to circumstances, than with the enforcement of prevailing values.⁵⁵ A clever woman who takes advantage of circumstances to get the best of her dull-witted husband earns our appreciative laughter, whereas her husband receives only our scorn. Although we cannot recover the actual responses of medieval people to comic rituals or texts, we can view the comic moment as a metasocial indicator pointing to the codes that mark the alternating flow between subversion and compliance. We can then ask how women's laughter shows the forces at work in the story that medieval people tell themselves about themselves, a story that alternately contests and enforces social and cultural boundaries.

That so much medieval comic literature—fabliaux, farce, debate poetry, novella—centers on the battle between the sexes suggests that gender was a central part of the tensions, dilemmas, and worst fears of medieval culture. The female characters who challenge the subordination of women are not, of course, a mirror reflection of actual women, but neither do they have no relation to the construction of gendered identities of people in the Middle Ages. Although medieval writers asserted that there was a biological basis for gender difference, it was also thought that individuals, through self discipline, could shape what nature had given them; through prayer and proper behavior, they could correct deficiencies inherited from nature.⁵⁶ Beginning with the thirteenth century, courtesy manuals and other didactic works obsessively rehearsed different kinds of behavior for men and women, which suggests a consciousness that male and female were not automatically given in nature, but must be demonstrated or performed by the individual.⁵⁷ In comic texts, laughter highlights the performance of masculine and feminine as though to distance, through play, the pressures such performances place on men and women alike.

This preoccupation with the performances of male and female characters makes sense in light of Judith Butler's influential theory of gender as

55. Bergson, *Le Rire*: "Un vice souple serait moins facile à ridiculiser qu'une vertu inflexible. C'est la raideur qui est suspecte à la société" (105).

56. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 205–6.

57. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*, 158 and elsewhere. Simon Gaunt argues that the fabliaux show "a desire to negotiate and renegotiate what masculinity and femininity are" (*Gender and Genre*, 288). See also Robert Allen's similar argument regarding the rise of burlesque in America (*Horrible Prettiness*, 27).

performance. Butler has argued that one does not assume a ready-made gender existing prior to subjectivity; rather, gender is produced by innumerable “reiterations” or “citations” of a model of gender that itself exists nowhere.⁵⁸ This does not mean that an individual chooses a gender identity to perform at will. The citations of gender are enmeshed in cultural forms that we generally learn unconsciously. However, gender is something continually in the process of becoming since it demands repeated performances for its existence. The comic, as a mode that continually plays on the difference between appearance and reality, with its clever masters of disguise always ready to deceive the unobservant, is thus a fitting vehicle for highlighting the performative aspect of gender. It is also worth noting that Butler’s theory suggests the appropriateness of studying literature in order to understand a culture’s gender system. Because literature itself participates in the process of citation, it is not detachable from historical reality, and thus the tendency to oppose historical fact to literary fiction is a false dichotomy.

Reading Women’s Laughter: The Comic Transaction

To fully understand the figure of the woman on top and her laughter, it is not enough to ask what the author meant, for as the ambivalence of images of misrule illustrates, the power of the figure is woven within the fabric of medieval culture itself. Even to understand what an author means, we are obligated to look at an array of complex relationships. As Quintilian noted, in order to evaluate the intent behind a jest, “we must first consider who speaks, in what cause, before whom, against whom, and to what effect.”⁵⁹ Quintilian’s attention to the different parties in a jesting moment is articulated even more distinctly in the twentieth century by Ernest Dupréel, who argued for developing a “sociology of laughter,” because it is precisely group dynamics, and not the subject matter itself, that constitute the nature of laughter.⁶⁰ The importance of the interaction between parties in a joke is evident in the fact that many cultures have “joking relationships” that specify members of a kinship group that may joke with each other; the

58. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.

59. “Primum itaque considerandum est, et quis et in qua causa, et apud quem et in quem et quid dicat” (*The “Institutio Oratoria” of Quintilian*, 6.3.28).

60. Dupréel, “Le Problème sociologique du rire,” 31.

same words spoken with someone who is not in a joking relationship with the speaker could be perceived as inappropriate or insulting.⁶¹ In medieval texts, too, there are clearly social relationships and contexts that shape the interpretation of comic moments. My approach is to view the words spoken by female characters as part of a “comic transaction” between the different parties of a comic situation, whose relationship to each other one must examine in order to uncover its meanings.⁶² In each text I consider how the female character’s laughter engages with medieval discourse on gender; how the narrator portrays the female character and invites readers, as men and women, to judge her; how the reader’s perspective, based on marital and social status, daily work and leisure activities, and knowledge of other texts, might bear on his or her interpretation.

One of the most well known theorists of humor, Freud, has already presented a model of a joking transaction in which gender figures prominently. In the only section of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* to discuss women, Freud explains that the man whose sexual desire for a woman is thwarted (because of her resistance or some other obstacle) tells a joke to another man in order to channel his unfulfilled desire into a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure of comic production. Such a joke, says Freud, calls for three people: “in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke’s aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled.”⁶³ In this paradigm, the woman functions as the comic butt of the exchange between the two men who laugh at her expense. In medieval literature, one often sees the same sort of bond formed between narrator and audience. What Freud’s model cannot account for, however, are literary texts in which the female character is both speaker and spoken, both the target of her male author’s laughter and the author of her own joke.

61. The literature on joking relationships is extensive. One of the best-known essays is Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships.”

62. I take the term “comic transaction” from James English, *Comic Transactions*. English explains in his very useful introduction that formalist or cognitive approaches to humor ultimately fail, for they do not take into account the multiple social, cultural and interpersonal contexts in which a specific comic transaction occurs.

63. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 100. It should be noted that class is important in Freud’s discussion. In lower classes, he claims, men talk smut in the woman’s presence (the barmaid). In “civilized” circles, men mask smut in a joke and “save up this kind of entertainment, which originally presupposed the presence of the woman who was feeling ashamed, till they are ‘alone together’” (99). In either case, the woman, whether physically present or not, is the object of exchange between the men.

Women Laughing, Men Writing

Ascertaining an author's view of women through his female characters is a particularly problematic undertaking, for by the end of the Middle Ages, the very topic of women had become a rhetorical exercise through which the budding scholar at the medieval university, which was restricted to men, could prove himself. With the methodology of the *disputatio*, students were taught to argue both *pro* and *contra*, and authors could be found praising and blaming women in a single treatise; women were thus, in Howard Bloch's words, a "vehicle to be used for thinking."⁶⁴ Comic texts in fact convey their authors' delight in the reshuffling or reshaping of well-worn misogynous motifs, so that the topic of women is only an incidental vehicle in a larger discursive game between men. Even works claiming to be defenses on behalf of women may themselves be humorously undermining a feminist argument.⁶⁵ Moreover, male authors often used the laughter of female characters as a vehicle for engaging with some other social or cultural question not directly related to women. The witty retorts of the shepherdess to the wooing of the passing knight in the *pastourelle*, for example, clearly served to reinforce class boundaries as well as to have fun with the idealizing pretensions of the courtly lyric.⁶⁶ Her voice, the creation of the male author, ridicules the pat clichés and overly stylized conventions of the literary culture in which the author himself participates.

At the same time, the female character "authors" her own text, and her words can flow beyond the bounds intended by the author. The female characters I examine do not simply talk back; they critique specific clichés, using their laughter to respond to what men say about women, ridiculing its inconsistencies, biases, even contradictions. Both spoken and speaking, mocked and mocking, female characters produce a doubled discourse that invites us to read through various layers. They often reiterate antifeminist clichés, thus seeming to assent to and perpetuate them; however, such clichés can change their valence when they come from the mouth of a

64. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 90–91, argues that the seemingly opposite images of Woman as Eve and Mary are in fact a result of a single impulse in clerical culture to erase individual women by abstracting them into essentializing polar opposites.

65. Karen Pratt, "Analogy or Logic?" 6, notes that the figure of Lady Leëſce in Jean LeFèvre's *Livre de Leëſce*, an apparent spokeswoman for women, uses arguments in a way that may in fact humorously undermine her defense.

66. On the seemingly "realistic" voices of the shepherdess and other female figures, see Ferrante, "Male Fantasy and Female Reality."

character inhabiting a female body. We can hear the female character's words, or "bodytalk" as Jane Burns has termed it, as an ironic critique of misogyny, so that her voice, even when presumably created by a male author, can be heard to question conventional conceptions of "female sexuality, wifely obedience, courtly love, and adultery so often used to define and delimit femininity in the French Middle Ages."⁶⁷ Comic heroines often alert us to the contradictions that inhere in the construction of femininity in medieval discourse by pushing antifeminist clichés to their limits or showing how assumptions about women contradict each other. The laughter of medieval heroines is most striking in its unmasking of the fundamental structure underlying medieval concepts of gender difference: the binary pairs of male/reason/head versus female/passion/body. Products of this structuring principle, female fictional characters never completely escape an association with the sexualized body, but through their clever wit (in its multiple forms of retort, repartee, wordplay, jokes) they often make us aware of the very operation of binary thinking that erases real women in the abstracted opposites of Eve/Mary. Their laughter points to a paradoxical absence of women in discourse putatively *about* women.

That women's laughter could be a response to the absence of women in the Western discursive tradition is evoked in Hélène Cixous's well-known essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." Seeing men's fear and loathing of the Medusa as a symbol of their failure to see the female as anything other than a castrated male, Cixous counters, "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."⁶⁸ Through her laughing Medusa, Cixous critiques a discourse in which the feminine exists only to bolster the masculine, and envisions writing that would be able to "shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter."⁶⁹ Whereas the "truth" (of patriarchal discourse) has traditionally pushed women to the margins, metaphorized them out of existence, Cixous suggests that laughter breaks up this truth, offering a new kind of space, an array of imaginative possibilities that allow us to think around the images of women fixed in the cultural imaginary that we have inherited, an idea evoked in Cixous's description of women as "a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble," "an

67. Burns, *Bodytalk*, 15.

68. Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 885; "Le Rire de la méduse," 47.

69. Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 888. In the original French: "à mettre en pièces les bâtis des institutions, à faire sauter la loi en l'air, à tordre la 'vérité' de rire" (49).

immense astral space.”⁷⁰ This notion of space is echoed in Cixous’s description of “[l]aughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women—which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it’s a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen.”⁷¹ Like anthropological views of play as a distancing giving a society a kind of freedom to comprehend its structures, Cixous describes laughter as a way to see beyond apparent “truth,” to give voice to a kind of desire that is otherwise impossible to articulate, or in Luce Irigaray’s words, “untranslatable, unrepresentable, irrecoverable.”⁷² While medieval authors were unlikely to have used their female characters to the ends advocated by contemporary French feminists, they may well have used them to play with the discursive traditions they had inherited. Reading for woman’s laughter as a marker pointing to this space, we are able to understand more fully the cultural tensions articulated in the author’s use of his female character.

Who’s Laughing and Why? The Medieval Audience

In considering the laughter of medieval literature, we need, above all, to imagine how the space opened by the comic moment invited the active participation of the medieval audience, both men and women. Let us consider a scene from a French farce in which women’s response to literature is actually the focus. In this farce, a traveling bookseller tries to sell books to two women, continually proposing titles that they find insulting, some of which we know actually existed, like the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles* or the *Roman de la Rose*.⁷³ When the women ask him what kind of pleasing stories he has, he offers them a farce about “women with big asses.” When they ask for stories about saints, he offers instead stories about cuckolded

70. Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 889. The French terms are “ensemble mouvant et changeant” and “immense space astral” (“Rire,” 50).

71. Cixous, “Castration and Decapitation,” 55.

72. Irigaray, *This Sex*, 163. I view the articulation of laughter as “space” or “elsewhere” as analogous to Teresa de Lauretis’ use of the space-off in film theory, “the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible,” to describe the movement in gender between the represented space of hegemonic discourses and the “elsewhere” of those discourses (*Technologies of Gender*, 26). See Burns, *Bodytalk*, 4–6, on the helpfulness of this concept for reading the speech of medieval heroines.

73. The full title is *La Farce Joyeuse à trois personnages, c’est ascavoir deulx femes et un vendeur de livres* (Picot and Nyrop, *Nouveau recueil*, 140–53). Translations are my own.

husbands. The women reply over and over “Fy! ostés! cela est infaict” [Fie on you, shame, that’s disgusting!], showing their disapproval of his lewd suggestions. Concluding that there is no use reasoning with the man, for he is “worth nothing but badmouthing,” they grab him by the hair and force him to the ground. The women explicitly charge the bookseller’s texts with dishonoring their sex: “Que maudict soyt y qui l’a faicte / Ainsy au desonneur des dames!” [May he who made them to the shame of ladies be cursed!] (vv. 138–39). While the farce pokes fun at women’s failure to find popular texts humorous, the women’s objection to material they claim is injurious to women echoes the actual charges of defamation Christine de Pizan made against Jean de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose*, and could thus be said to reflect the wider debate in late medieval culture concerning anti-feminist themes in literature and the response of women readers.⁷⁴

The question of what it might mean to read as a woman has in fact been a contentious one in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Can we even speak of “the woman reader?” Does a woman have specific experiences unavailable to the male reader, or can a man choose to read from the perspective of a woman (a perspective about which he feels he has sufficient knowledge)?⁷⁵ To assert that a woman reads as a woman is to assume that she reads with a conscious awareness that she belongs to that class called “women.”⁷⁶ Would it be anachronistic to say that medieval women read consciously *as* women? It is important to recognize that medieval texts do not let their readers forget they are gendered. Female characters claim to speak on behalf of all women or directly speak to fellow women in

74. See Helen Solterer’s discussion of Christine in chapter 6 of *The Master and Minerva* as well as her discussion of how the fictional female respondent figure, although created by a male author, could later enable women such as Christine to articulate a response to the defamation of women (especially 148).

75. This debate is perhaps best articulated in the collection of essays edited by Jardine and Smith, *Men in Feminism*. On the one hand, Jonathan Culler has argued that experience is a construct and therefore not a natural phenomenon that would directly produce a woman’s reading. Men, like women, can read “as” women insofar as they take on the role of woman reader they construct. Robert Scholes has taken Culler to task for denying the important role in reading played by women’s lived experiences that differ from those of men, and argues that women read “like” women at least in part as a result of a body of experiences that they carry with them (208–18). For a critique of the false dichotomy of essentialist versus nonessentialist characterizations of reading positions, see Fuss, “Reading as a Feminist,” in *Essentially Speaking*, 23–37.

76. For studies on the role of gender in reading, see Flynn and Schweickart, *Gender and Reading*. On women as spectators, see Doane’s discussion of Freud’s joking triangle, “Film and the Masquerade,” and Tania Modleski’s response: “Rape versus Mans/laughter.”

the audience. Moreover, narrators explicitly address their readers as men and women, making clear that they expect women to respond differently than men. In their apologies to women readers or patrons, medieval narrators in fact frequently anticipate that women will respond negatively to their statements about women, which suggests that women could actively resist misogynistic fiction rather than always passively assenting to it.⁷⁷ Medieval texts thus *create* gendered positions for their readers; to argue for gender as an important factor in reader interpretation is not to impose a contemporary concept on a medieval context.

Christine de Pizan is of course the most celebrated example of a medieval woman who was aware of her status as a woman reader and the legitimacy it lent her objections to literature she claimed was injurious: “And it is precisely because I am a woman that I can speak better in this matter than one who has not had the experience, since he speaks only by conjecture and by chance.”⁷⁸ Although the problematic question of what exactly the “experience” of a woman is would not be taken up until centuries later, Christine’s description suggests that some medieval women were aware that their life experiences meant that they would read a text differently than men would. Christine indicated that she shared the same perspective as other women because of their common experience and claimed to have written her *Book of the City of Ladies* based on her discussions with women of all classes.⁷⁹ Medieval women were in fact commonly thought to comprise a class of their own, as is clear in the so-called estates literature in which discussions of men are organized according to three main estates (clergy, knights, laborers), whereas women are treated elsewhere, making them a “fourth estate” unto themselves.⁸⁰

77. See in particular Krueger, *Women Readers*, 6. On apologies to women, also see Utley, *The Crooked Rib*, 26–27; and Mann, “Apologies to Women,” who notes that one function of such apologies is to generate readers’ involvement.

78. Baird and Kane, *La Querelle de la Rose*, 53.

79. In *Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine mentions the “princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes, who had graciously told me of their most private and intimate thoughts” (I.I.I, p. 4). See June Hall McCash’s overview of women as cultural patrons in the Middle Ages, in which she notes an increasing “gender awareness” among women beginning in the fourteenth century, concomitant with the production of works praising women sponsored by them (*Cultural Patronage*, 27–31).

80. Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 1–4. Even in Jean de Condé’s “Estas dou monde,” which makes more room for growing middle classes that do not fit the three estates model, he nonetheless leaves women in one group at the end. This is also true of the Arab world, where women were discussed in chapters by themselves, whereas discussions of men were organized according to occupation.

This is not to say that differences between women were unimportant. Despite Christine's claim that she speaks for all women, in her *Treasury of the City of Ladies* she directs her advice to her readers according to their social class as well as marital status. As psychologists have shown in contemporary studies, the factors of class, ethnic group, religion, age, and gender all bear on a person's reaction to humor.⁸¹ Works like the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Decameron*—in which characters themselves tell stories and respond to those of others—demonstrate that medieval authors were keenly aware of, and perhaps anxious about, the different perspectives brought to the reading experience. Moreover, because of the different, sometimes competing, factors bearing on the interpretation of a text, and because the comic often invites us to take the side of the character who demonstrates ingenuity and flexibility, men may in fact “root for” the female character, and enjoy the comic downfall of her husband, who has earned their scorn, and women may similarly cheer on the male character who brings down a woman who overestimates her own cleverness. Moreover, reading positions are not fixed, and as recent studies in film theory suggest, spectators can feel an affinity alternately with heroes and villains as the narrative unfolds.⁸²

The points I want to stress are that medieval authors created gendered positions for their readers and that although gender may have caused men and women to interpret a comic text differently, they could both respond with laughter. When a woman outwits her husband, a man in the audience can laugh because he judges himself to be superior to the man who has let a woman usurp his authority or because he recognizes that his own fears about his masculine role are not his alone. Women, observing what the heroine gets away with, release, through their laughter, the frustrations built up by the limitations they experience but cannot express so directly.⁸³ Although my emphasis is on women's potential readings because these have been given little attention in studies of medieval literature, I assume

81. One such study is La Fave, “Humor Judgments as a Function of Reference Groups and Identification Classes.”

82. See, for example, Clover, “Her Body, Himself.” Diana Fuss similarly makes the point that readers may occupy several reading positions at the same time, positions that may be contradictory (*Essentially Speaking*, 32–35).

83. This example describes both the “superiority theory,” of laughter, in which the laugher feels a “sudden glory” (in Hobbes's terms) at his own superiority, and the “relief theory,” where laughter allows the release of desires that are repressed because of various social taboos. See the chapters on these theories in Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*.

the reading positions constructed for men to be equally vexed, and an integral part of the layering of meaning created by the laughter of the female character.⁸⁴

By emphasizing the varied interactions in the comic transaction between author/narrator, character, and audience, I examine women's laughter within an intricate web of cultural and textual strands. My project is not to discover a women's humor that would be essentially different from masculine humor, for differences in humor production by men and women have more to do with social context and socialization than with any innate psychobiological differences.⁸⁵ In the following chapters, I examine the multiple pleasures offered by medieval women's laughter in a range of texts chosen both for their geographical and chronological diversity and for the specific questions each raises about this complex web of relationships.

Chapter 1 explores how the Wife of Bath playfully participates in the "game" of antifeminist discourse. While showing her as a pawn in Chaucer's game, I will also argue that reading for her playfulness enables us to interpret her "defense" of women as a response to the ludic impulses behind clerical antifeminism. Chapter 2 looks at how the laughter of the unmarried noblewomen in Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Decameron* is shaped by the presence of the men in their company and how the laughter of Boccaccio's own female readers was shaped by the simultaneously flattering and salacious pose of his narrator. It also shows how women's cultivation of wit is presented not only as a means to enable them to play flirtatious games pleasurable both to them and to their male companions, but also as a way to circumvent restrictions placed on them as women. Chapter

84. A recent trend in studies of masculinity or men in the Middle Ages (paralleling the rise in "men's studies" or "gender studies" programs in American universities) reflects a growing feeling that to study women without studying men is to further objectify them by treating women alone as gendered. See Lees, *Medieval Masculinities*. The risk, of course, is that the specificity of women's marginalization may be erased into the larger category of gender. I discuss men's readings alongside those of women to explain how a male-authored text could please both genders.

85. For an excellent critique of the notion of "woman's humor," see Finney's introduction to *Look Who's Laughing*. Also see McGhee, "The Role of Laughter and Humor in Growing Up Female," which finds that there is no demonstrable difference between boys and girls until the age of six, when boys initiate more of the joking, but the more physically active girls who have resisted norms of feminine passivity are the same girls more likely to engage in joking. Apte similarly notes in his discussion of anthropological studies that differences between males and females come from the constraints that models of feminine comportment put on the use of humor, which "prevent women from fully using their talents" (*Humor and Laughter*, 69).

3 contrasts the more modest public laughter of Boccaccio's unmarried ladies with the private bawdy laughter of Dunbar's wives and widow in their women-only community. It also examines how the presence of an eavesdropping narrator invites the early sixteenth-century Scottish audience to interpret the women's laughter according to their own gender. Chapter 4 explores how the noblewoman of Ulrich von Lichtenstein's *Frauendienst* (ca. 1250) uses her wit not only to ridicule her persistent suitor but also to unmask the whole genre of the courtly love lyric as a genre claiming to serve women while actually reducing them to silence. The narrator's multiple and shifting personae, along with the male hero's cross-dressing, illuminate the performative aspect of gender as well as point to important issues of class and status in thirteenth-century Styria. In chapter 5, we listen to the wives of two fifteenth- or sixteenth-century French farces reconfigure the topos of feminine loquacity to reveal the logical inconsistencies entailed by competing clichés about women. The wives in these farces, in leveling complaints against their lazy husbands and even forcing them to do the housework, also bring attention to the value of women's work. Chapter 6, on the *Thousand and One Nights*, explores women's laughter in the Arabo-Islamic literary tradition, which has specific characteristics distinguishing it from the European material. Yet readers unfamiliar with the Arabic corpus will recognize many of its preoccupations, such as the association of women with corporeality and the belief that women are naturally libidinous and deceitful. The *Nights* also introduces a new angle in investigating women's laughter: a female narrator, Shahrazad, who reshapes clichés about feminine guile, inviting us to see wit as an asset that can be used for women's pleasure but also for constructive social purposes. The joking of three sisters from Baghdad, embedded within Shahrazad's own story, similarly challenges a tradition whereby women's wit is merely a valuable commodity for men's pleasure. Using their wit to expand men's vision of women as unruly corporeality to be feared, they teach their male guest how to make jokes, and suggest how an initially exclusionary principle of laughter can be opened up to include the outsider.

By assembling this diverse chorus of women's laughter, I want to demonstrate that medieval comic literature, often labeled misogynous, could in fact offer pleasures to both women and men. More importantly, these female heroines with their various forms of laughter, from the playful, yet barbed witticisms of the Wife of Bath to the salacious jokes of the

Baghdad ladies, will help us to imagine the kinds of things that made medieval women laugh and to consider how their laughter might have engaged with their experiences as women in a culture dominated by men. Male authors used their female characters for their own purposes, but by reading for women's laughter, listening closely to how its special textual and cultural space points to the gaps and contradictions in the discourse on femininity, we will be able to hear medieval women, so often considered laughable in medieval literature, talking back to this tradition with laughter of their own.