

DE GRUYTER

Albrecht Classen (Ed.)

LAUGHTER IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND EARLY MODERN TIMES

EPISTEMOLOGY OF A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN
BEHAVIOR, ITS MEANING, AND CONSEQUENCES



FUNDAMENTALS OF MEDIEVAL
AND EARLY MODERN CULTURE

Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times

Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Edited by
Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge

5

De Gruyter

Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times

Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior,
its Meaning, and Consequences

Edited by
Albrecht Classen

De Gruyter

ISBN 978-3-11-024547-9
e-ISBN 978-3-11-024548-6
ISSN 1864-3396

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Laughter in the Middle Ages and early modern times : epistemology of a fundamental human behavior, its meaning, and consequences / edited by Albrecht Classen.

p. cm. — (Fundamentals of medieval and early modern culture ; 5)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-3-11-024547-9 (alk. paper)

1. Laughter in literature. 2. Humor in literature. 3. Laughter — History. 4. Humor — History. 5. Laughter — Philosophy. 6. Laughter — Religious aspects. 7. Wit and humor, Medieval. 8. Wit and humor — History and criticism. I. Classen, Albrecht.

PN56.L3L39 2010

809'.93354—dc22

2010011924

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

© 2010 Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin/New York
Printing and binding: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen
∞ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany
www.degruyter.com

Table of Contents

Albrecht Classen

Laughter as an Expression of Human Nature in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Literary, Historical, Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Reflections. Also an Introduction	1
--	---

Chapter 1

Judith Hagen

Laughter in Procopius's <i>Wars</i>	141
---	-----

Chapter 2

Livnat Holtzman

"Does God Really Laugh?" – Appropriate and Inappropriate Descriptions of God in Islamic Traditionalist Theology	165
--	-----

Chapter 3

Daniel F. Pigg

Laughter in <i>Beowulf</i> : Ambiguity, Ambivalence, and Group Identity Formation	201
--	-----

Chapter 4

Mark Burde

The <i>Parodia sacra</i> Problem and Medieval Comic Studies	215
---	-----

Chapter 5

Olga V. Trokhimenko

Women's Laughter and Gender Politics in Medieval Conduct Discourse	243
---	-----

Chapter 6

Madelon Köhler-Busch

Pushing Decorum: Uneasy Laughter in

Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône* 265**Chapter 7**

Connie L. Scarborough

Laughter and the Comic in a Religious Text:

The Example of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* 281**Chapter 8**

John Sewell

The Son Rebelled and So the Father Made Man Alone:

Ridicule and Boundary Maintenance in the *Nizzahon Vetus* 295**Chapter 9**

Birgit Wiedl

Laughing at the Beast: The *Judensau*:

Anti-Jewish Propaganda and Humor

from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period 325

Chapter 10

Fabian Alfie

Yes . . . but was it funny? Cecco Angiolieri,

Rustico Filippi and Giovanni Boccaccio 365

Chapter 11

Nicolino Applauso

Curses and Laughter in Medieval Italian Comic Poetry:

The Ethics of Humor in Rustico Filippi's Invectives 383

Chapter 12

Feargal Ó Béarra

Tromdhámh Guaire: a Context for Laughter

and Audience in Early Modern Ireland 413

Chapter 13

Jean E. Jost

Humorous Transgression in the Non-Conformist Fabliaux:

A Bakhtinian Analysis of Three Comic Tales 429

Chapter 14

Gretchen Mieszkowski

Chaucerian Comedy: *Troilus and Criseyde* 457**Chapter 15**

Sarah Gordon

Laughing and Eating in the Fabliaux 481

Chapter 16

Christine Bousquet-Labou rie

Laughter and Medieval Stalls 499

Chapter 17

Scott L. Taylor

Vox populi e voce professionis: Processus juris joco-serius.

Esoteric Humor and the Incommensurability of Laughter 515

Chapter 18

Jean N. Goodrich

“So I thought as I Stood, To Mirth Us Among”:

The Function of Laughter in *The Second Shepherds’ Play* 531**Chapter 19**

Albrecht Classen

Laughing in Late-Medieval Verse (*m eren*) andProse (*Schw nke*) Narratives: Epistemological Strategies

and Hermeneutic Explorations 547

Chapter 20

Rosa Alvarez Perez

The Workings of Desire: Panurge and the Dogs 587

Chapter 21

Elizabeth Chesney Zegura

Laughing Out Loud in the *Heptaméron*: A Reassessment
 of Marguerite de Navarre's Ambivalent Humor 603

Chapter 22

Lia B. Ross

You had to be there: The Elusive Humor of the *Sottie* 621

Chapter 23

Kyle DiRoberto

Sacred Parody in Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592) 651

Chapter 24

Martha Moffitt Peacock

The Comedy of the Shrew: Theorizing Humor in
 Early Modern Netherlandish Art 667

Chapter 25

Jessica Tvordi

The Comic Personas of Milton's *Prolusion VI*:
 Negotiating Masculine Identity Through Self-Directed Humor 715

Chapter 26

Robert J. Alexander

Ridentum dicere verum (Using Laughter to Speak the Truth):
 Laughter and the Language of the Early Modern
 Clown "Pickelhering" in German Literature
 of the Late Seventeenth Century (1675-1700) 735

Chapter 27

Thomas Willard

Andreae's *ludibrium*: Menippean Satire in the *Chymische Hochzeit* 767

Chapter 28

Diane Rudall

The Comic Power of Illusion-Allusion: Laughter, *La Devineresse*,
 and the Scandal of a Glorious Century 791

Chapter 29

Allison P. Coudert

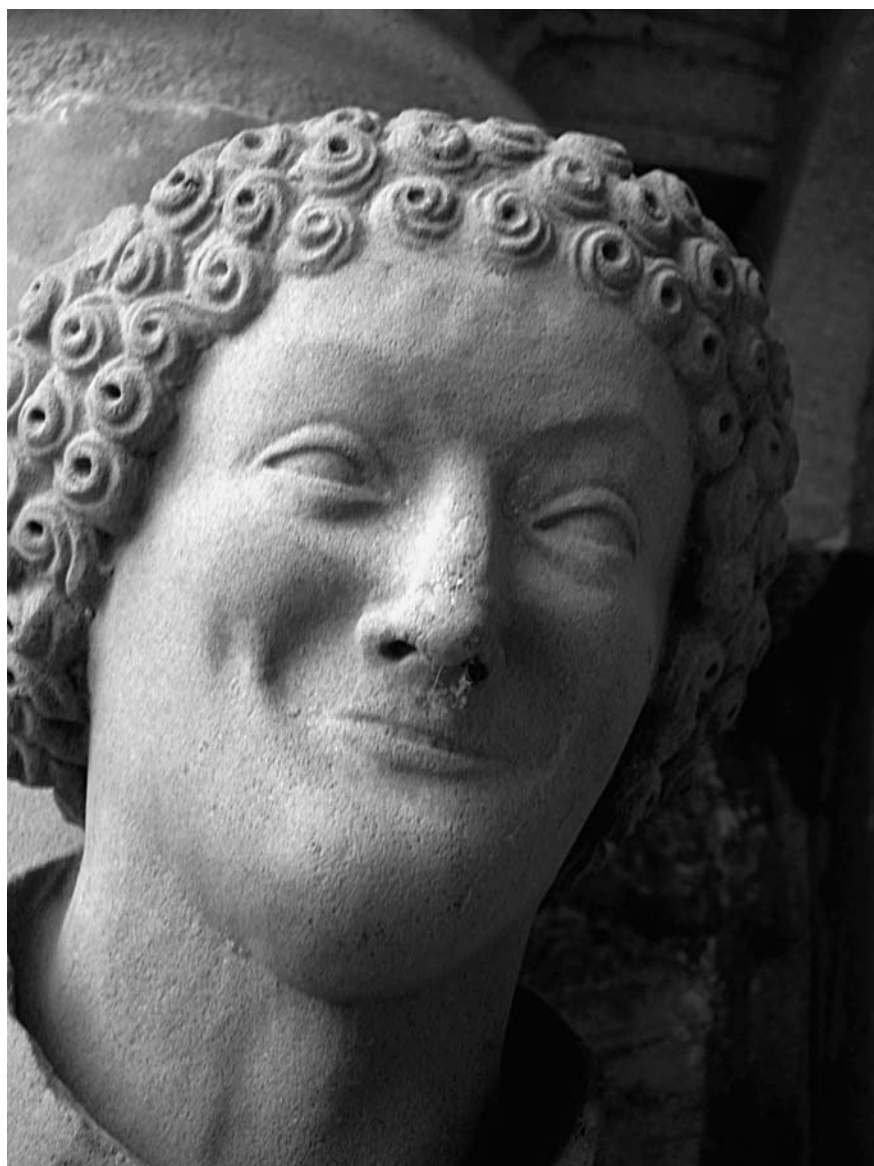
Laughing at Credulity and Superstition in the

Long Eighteenth Century 803

List of Illustrations 831

Contributors 835

Index 847



Albrecht Classen
(The University of Arizona, Tucson)

Laughter as an Expression of Human Nature in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Literary, Historical, Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Reflections. Also an Introduction¹

Human beings tend to laugh on many occasions and for countless reasons, whether in antiquity or today, whether in Asian, African, or Western culture. Most people at one time or another engage in, and engage one another with humor, wit, jokes, comedy, ridicule, and the like, even though each country, language, religion, or society expresses itself somewhat differently, laughs about somewhat different objects, comments, or images.² Whether animals laugh, as some people claim, cannot be determined easily, if at all,³ but we can be certain that laughter, just like

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Elisabeth C. Zegura, The University of Arizona, and Marilyn Sandidge, Westfield State College, MA, for their critical reading of this introduction. Mark Burde, University of Michigan, also offered most helpful constructive criticism. Jean N. Goodrich, University of Arizona, was kind enough to point out some additional errors and misspellings. Of course, all remaining mistakes are my own. I am also very grateful to Susanne Mang from Walter De Gruyter for her assistance in the final copy-editing process.

² For some Dutch perspectives, for instance, see Johan Verberckmoes, *Schertsen, schimpen en schateren: Geschiedenis van het lachen in de zuidelijke Nederlanden, zestiende en zeventiende eeuw*. Memoria (Nijmegen: SUN, 1998); Rudolf Dekker, *Lachen inde gouden Eeuw: een geschiedenis van de Nederlandse humor*. Historische reeks (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1997); see also Ali Abdul, *Arab Legacy to Humour Literature* (New Delhi: M. D. Publisher, 1998); *Humor in Arabic Culture*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009). This list could be extended infinitely because laughter is such a mainstay in all cultures throughout time.

³ Norman R. F. Maier and T. C. Schneirla, *Principles of Animal Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964); Rajpal Kaur, *Animal Psychology: New Trends and Innovations* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 2006); E. P. Evans, *Evolutional Ethics and Animal Psychology* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1898; rpt. s.l.: Gardner Books, 2007). See also Mary Douglas, "Do Dogs Laugh? A Cross-Cultural Approach to Body Symbolism," eadem, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*

anger and sorrow, represents one of the fundamental aspects of human life—as much in the Middle Ages as today—and reveals essential characteristics if we analyze it carefully and comprehensively, even if this takes the ‘fun’ out of the joke because of the intellectual analysis.

As many experiments have demonstrated, people laugh when they are tickled, for example, meaning that there is a sensory relationship between physical input and behavioral output, as Aristotle had already recognized;⁴ but the central point of our investigations will be laughter that results from a certain thought process in response to a surprise development, or a reaction to a curious situation, odd behavior, images, and the like. In other words, laughter implies extensive and complex thought processes that happen consciously or not, but which are certainly in contradiction to the standards, norms, and common ideals of a specific community. The analysis of laughter, or of a comical situation, of public humor, and group joking consequently allows us to gain deeper insight into the way people interact and communicate with each other, how they view their world, and what constitutes, by default, their identity and value system.

By the same token, the semantic range of meanings of the medieval terms for ‘laughter,’ in Latin ‘ridere,’ in Old French ‘rire/sourire,’ and in Middle High German ‘lachen,’ for instance, proves to be extensive and requires ever new investigations based on the context and specific philosophical intention pursued by an author. This analysis will always have to take into account the universally present ambivalence and complexity of the subject matter, speech act, discussion, and communication.⁵ Moreover, laughter implies a plethora of intentions, strategies, forms of aggression; it can also hide fear and insecurity, or expose an individual’s deeply-hidden feelings.

To be more precise, the point of our examination cannot be to question what is comical, funny, satirical, or ironic all by itself or in isolation, which would require a vast perspective and countless investigations into specific social, historical, and economic contexts, taking into consideration endless amounts of literary and art-historical material, for instance. In fact, such an endeavor would actually require

(London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 83–89.

⁴ Helen Adolf, “On Mediaeval Laughter,” *Speculum* 22.2 (1947): 251–53; here 251. Citing Boethius’s *In Isagogen Porphyrii commenta*, who had stated that “omnis homo risibile est, et nulla alia species risibile potest proprio nuncupari,” Adolf points out the uninterrupted admiration of Aristotle’s logic in this regard, without anyone ever questioning this position by means of animal experiments. She also alerts us to the curious phenomenon that many medieval philosophers acknowledged laughing as a characteristic element of man’s property, yet, at the same time, excluded it from his essence.

⁵ Philipp Ménard, *Le Rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen Âge (1150–1250)*. Publications romanes et françaises, 105 (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 28–34, 431–32; for a critical response, see Barbara Nelson Sargent, “Mediaeval Rire, Ridere: A Laughing Matter?” *Medium Aevum* XLIII.2 (1974): 116–32.

that we study each document individually without the larger picture or the social context in mind. Instead, the focus will rest on performative aspects, laughter in public, or at least in a group, even if only two people are involved, or within the context of specific situations, and all these dealt with in medieval and early-modern material (literature, visual objects) where laughter is unmistakably indicated or implied.⁶ Laughing represents both a theatrical act and also an expression of personal feelings and thoughts.⁷

Those who laugh either join a community or invite others to create one because laughter excludes and includes, it attacks and belittles, but it also evokes sympathy and understanding. Any survey study of medieval literature would quickly unearth this remarkable phenomenon that pleasure and entertainment received great attention because they constituted an essential aspect of medieval culture at large.⁸ Laughter was commonly identified as a very important therapeutic instrument, justifying the performance of music, literature (narration), and drama. In Glending Olson's words: "The popular *Secretum secretorum* similarly lists 'pleasaunt songis' and 'delectabil bookis' among the pleasures that work to better people's 'helth and digestion'. The *Tacuinum sanitatis* includes an entry on the *confabulator* in its inventory of items related to hygiene; a good conversationalist-storyteller (*recitator fabularum*) will know both the right material and the best strategies of presentation in order to bring pleasure to an audience, which in turn will purify people's blood, enhance digestion and promote untroubled sleep."⁹

⁶ For some important preliminary thoughts about laughter in the Middle Ages, see Jacques Le Goff, "Rire au Moyen Age," *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 3 (1989), here quoted from the online version at: <http://ccrh.revues.org/index2918.html> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010). He emphasizes, for instance: "La société prend l'habitude de se regarder dans un miroir, les états du monde aperçoivent leur image ridicule: d'où le développement de la satire et de la parodie, et, du côté de l'Eglise, comme pour le rêve, comme pour le geste, l'établissement d'un contrôle du rire. Et au niveau des moeurs, on retrouve l'importance de la cour comme milieu de domestication du rire." Referring to St. Francis of Assisi, Le Goff adds the important observation regarding laughter in the spiritual sphere: "Le rire devient véritablement une forme de spiritualité et de comportement." Overall, however, Le Goff does not reach a radical breakthrough and mostly summarizes what previous scholars have said about laughter, commenting, for instance, on its communicative function within a group, a social class, or an intellectual milieu. Nevertheless, similar to the approach taken here, Le Goff makes clear how many functions there are that determine laughter as a public phenomenon.

⁷ See, for instance, Matthew Steggle, *Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatres*. Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama (Aldershot, Hampshire, and Rochester, NY: Ashgate, 2007).

⁸ Glending Olson, "The Profits of Pleasure," *The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson. The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, 2 (Cambridge, New York, et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2005; paperback ed. 2009), 275–87.

⁹ Olson, "The Profits of Pleasure," 277–78; see also his *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 39–64, 77–83.

In another respect, considering the social and political implications of laughter and general entertainment in public, Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten have recently observed:

Somit erscheinen uns Lachgemeinschaften zunächst als offene, labile und performative soziale Gebilde, die aus gemeinsamem Gelächter entstehen. Sie sind nicht auf Dauer angelegt, können sich rasch wieder auflösen, sie sind nicht auf eine bestimmte Teilnehmerzahl (mindestens zwei) fixiert und haben keine festen Orte Lachgemeinschaften können über soziale Exklusion oder Inklusion, Reputation oder Verachtung entscheiden. Sie vermögen Machtpositionen durchzusetzen, ermöglichen aber auch Transgressionen der gewohnten Dispositionen des Verhaltens oder aber bestätigen den moralischen oder rechtlichen Konsens einer Gesellschaft, der in der Lachgemeinschaft mit ihrer Hilfe vollzogen und durchgesetzt wird.¹⁰

[Hence we believe that laughing communities are, at first, open, unstable, and performative social structures that develop out of mutual laughter. They are not destined for permanence and can quickly dissolve again; they are not fixated on a specific number of members (at least two, however), and they have no fixed locations. . . . Laughing communities can decide on social exclusion or inclusion, reputation or contempt. They can establish power positions, but they also facilitate transgressions of the usual dispositions of behavior, or they confirm the moral and legal consensus of a society, which is carried out and enacted with the help of the laughing communities.]

Moreover, laughter reflects human culture in a profound fashion insofar as each person who breaks out in laughter has been confronted with an image, an object, a person, an idea, a word or a peculiar sound and responds to it, signaling what value concepts determine him or her, by contrast. As Anton Hügli comments in his concise survey, laughter is always associated with a form of intentionality and rationality because the laughing person recognizes a dissonance; a transgression, disharmony, shortcoming, failure, or an odd, unusual composition of objects or people.¹¹ Laughter signals what the standards and norms might have been, insofar as the one who becomes the butt of the joke has voluntarily or involuntarily crossed some boundaries. Similarly, we would have to consider laughter as fundamentally communicative because “it can be used to express an unending variety of emotions.”¹²

¹⁰ Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten, “Einleitung,” *Lachgemeinschaften: Kulturelle Inszenierungen und soziale Wirkungen von Gelächter im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. id. Trends in Medieval Philology, 4 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), IX–XXXI; here XV.

¹¹ Anton Hügli, “Lachen, das Lächerliche,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding, vol. 5 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2001), 1–17; here 1.

¹² Martin Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter* (New York, Toronto, and London: The Blakiston Division, 1957), ix. I disagree, however, with Grotjahn’s corollary that laughter is a “guilt-free release of aggression, and any release makes us perhaps a little better and more capable of understanding one another, ourselves and life Laughter gives freedom, and freedom gives laughter” (ibid.).

The comic by itself results from a conflict between norms, their breach or transgression, though mostly not too egregious to hurt or to insult badly, otherwise laughter would choke in our throats and give way to tears or wrath. Comic triggers laughter, or at least a smile, a chuckle, or a giggle, whereas the tragic causes sorrow, shock, horror, and profound sadness, subsequently expressed in tears and perhaps even screams. In comic, we observe basically two levels of conflicts that erupt in laughter and are compensated thereby. An audience, or an individual, is invited to laugh because the transgression has not caused serious damage to the norms in ethical, religious, social, aesthetic, or sensitive terms. Moreover, laughter signals that there will be sanctions, and harmony can be reconstituted without too many efforts since the entire community backs up the traditional order and regards the sanctions as appropriate. The audience can laugh, for instance, because it feels superior to the ignorant, foolish person on the stage or in its general presence. But there is also the possibility that the transgression of the norms assumes greater proportion, yet the audience, or those who laugh about it, feel that they are on the same level with the foolish or extraordinarily acting person. In that case those who laugh indicate that they are not concerned either about the norms or about the sanctions imposed on the transgressor. In other words, in this situation laughing opens the eyes toward the margin, the obscure, the devious, and relays how much the negative element can be enjoyed and cherished. Accordingly, as Markus Winkler emphasizes, the comic and laughter are highly culture and situation specific, reflecting in a myriad ways, either directly or indirectly, what constitutes norms, ideals, and values. In other words, the study of laughter carries tremendous cultural-historical significance and can be regarded as foundational for all humanistic studies.¹³

For the purpose of this volume, and the present introduction specifically, I will not distinguish as cleanly and rigidly as one might expect or like it, but certainly in conformity with the common approach today in scholarship, between laughter itself—the comical, humor, the ridiculous, guffaws—and, globally speaking, jokes and witticism, among other manifestations of the comic element.¹⁴ They all certainly operate on somewhat different yet interrelated levels, and in different

This is true only in specific cases and cannot be generalized. There is, for instance, laughter out of fear, embarrassed laughter, innocent laughter, and foolish laughter, not to speak of mocking, contemptuous, or satirical laughter, or laughter out of a sense of superiority or inferiority.

¹³ Markus Winkler, "Komik, das Komische: Zur Vorgeschichte des neuzeitlichen Begriffs," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding. Vol. 4 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998), 1166–68.

¹⁴ This volume will also not deal with specific literary modes of speech or genres connected with laughter, such as satire, irony, parody, jokes, etc., although laughter is regularly informed by such aspects.

genres or communicative situations, at times; but they all share fundamental philosophical characteristics and functions concerning human behavior, thinking, and attitudes. As Arthur Koestler once remarked, "In all its many-splendoured varieties, humour can be simply defined as a type of stimulation that tends to elicit the laughter reflex."¹⁵ Our collective critical approaches will investigate, above all, scenes and moments in the lives of individuals when someone laughs out audibly with a specific intention or reason, if not simply in response to an external event, or when a certain condition makes the by-standers smile or giggle. These are crucial epistemological moments that shed important light on cultural conditions, assumptions, feelings, and traditions.

Henri Bergson refused to constrain the phenomenon of laughter by a narrow definition, and went so far as to acknowledge it as a "comic spirit" which "has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness. It dreams, I admit, but it conjures up, in its dreams, visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group."¹⁶ Although individuals might laugh by themselves, overall, "[o]ur laughter is always the laughter of a group."¹⁷ As he underscores further, laughter is always a basic human trait and pertains only to human life and culture. Moreover, it is intimately connected with an involuntary action or statement within a specific social setting that clashes with new conditions that the individual cannot meet. In Bergson's terms, "For exaggeration to be comic, it must not appear as an aim, but rather as a means that the artist is using in order to make manifest to our eyes the distortions which he sees in embryo" (13). This would also apply to concrete, historical, and cultural conditions where laughter arises out of the conflict between two norms, the one familiar, traditional, and well established; and the other irregular, surprising, and not normative at all, as long as that other norm, or condition, is not threatening to the observer (14–15). We might add, however, that fear and nervousness can also trigger laughter, such as insecure laughter, but that would constitute a different category which Bergson did not consider.

In a further context, Bergson emphasizes the clash between an object or a person, on the one hand, and, on the other, its disguise, masquerade, or ceremony, which, once revealed, triggers laughter: "It might be said that ceremonies are to the social body what clothing is to the individual body: they owe their seriousness to the fact that they are identified, in our minds, with the serious object with which custom

¹⁵ Arthur Koestler, "Humour and Wit," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., vol. 9 (Chicago et al.: Helen Hemingway Benton, 1974), 5; here quoted from Dieter Hörhammer, "Humor," in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 66–85; here 68. See also Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 3.

¹⁷ Bergson, *Laughter*, 4.

associates them, and when we isolate them in imagination, they forthwith lose their seriousness" (20).¹⁸ But Bergson is not content with limiting himself to narrowly drawn perspectives regarding laughter; instead he continues to probe and reveal ever further dimensions, as when he specifies that "any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person when it is the moral side that is concerned" (22). Here he insightfully examines comic elements in situations and words, and continues by uncovering many further angles that determine laughter in a group setting or alone.

It cannot be the purpose of these few remarks to summarize all of Bergson's findings; suffice it instead to conclude here, with Bergson, that laughter itself represents one of the most complex and multifarious phenomena resulting from human life and determining it as well. As he concludes, "laughter cannot be absolutely just. Nor should it be kind-hearted either. Its function is to intimidate by humiliating. Now, it would not succeed in doing this, had not nature implanted

¹⁸ We find extraordinary evidence for this phenomenon in Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauendienst* (ca. 1255) where the protagonist's disguise as Lady Venus, for instance, is regularly met with happy, communal, laughter; see Albrecht Classen, "Moriz, Tristan, and Ulrich as Master Disguise Artists: Deconstruction and Reenactment of Courtliness in *Moriz von Craûn*, *Tristan als Mönch*, and Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauendienst*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 103.4 (2004): 475–504. See also the contributions to *Ich – Ulrich von Liechtenstein: Literatur und Politik im Mittelalter: Akten der Akademie Friesach "Stadt und Kultur im Mittelalter," Friesach (Kärnten), 2.–6. September 1996*, ed. Franz Viktor Spechtler and Barbara Maier. Schriftenreihe der Akademie Friesach, 5 (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 1999). See, for instance, stanza 536, l. 6–8: "min offer ich so blide an vie, / do ich her von dem offer gie, / daz man daz pece sa dar truoc, / gelachet wart des da genuoc" (Ulrich von Liechtenstein, *Frauendienst*, ed. Franz Viktor Spechtler. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 485 [Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1987], 117). The English translation reads: "I tripped along so feminine / they laughed—the women and the men. / The kiss of peace was started then" (Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Service of Ladies*, trans. by J. W. Thomas. University of North Carolina Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures, 63 [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969]). See also stanza 989, in which the entire company responds to a rhetorical statement about the curiosity of Ulrich having changed so quickly from appearing as a fanciful lady to being the ordinary man they all know: "The knights and I all laughed a bit / as always at such clever wit. / Then those who'd ridden out to me / came thronging in the hostelry" (l. 1–4). Most recently, Hans Rudolf Velten offers an insightful examination of the transformative process involving many ritual functions in the text, making them appear similar, or parallel, to the liturgy: "Sakralisierung und Komisierung im 'Frauendienst' Ulrichs von Liechtenstein," "risus sacer – sacrum risibile": *Interaktionsfelder von Sakralität und Gelächter im kulturellen und historischen Wandel*, ed. Katja Gvozdeva and Werner Röcke. Publikationen zur Zeitschrift für Germanistik. Neue Folge, 20 (Bern, Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2009), 116–45. However, although the onlookers tend to laugh about certain actions or words, the attempt to identify sacral comic in Ulrich's texts seems to be rather problematic. Even Ulrich's self-crippling (cutting off of a non-functioning finger, for example) does not support this reading, at least as far as I can tell (Velten, 137–38). For further passages that contain references to laughing in a variety of contexts, see the *Middle High German Conceptual Database* (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010) at: <http://www.mhdbdb.sbg.ac.at:8000/mhdbdb/App?action=SelectQuotation&c=FD+3571>.

for that very purpose, even in the best of men, a spark of spitefulness or, at all events, of mischief" (82–83).

Neither philosophers nor theologians, rhetoricians nor semioticians, literary scholars nor art-historians have ever reached a global agreement as to the meaning of laughter, the object of laughter, or how to define concretely the victim or purpose of laughter, although there do not seem to be insurmountable difficulties preventing us from grasping the operative elements and processes involved when people laugh, giggle, chuckle, smile, smirk, or quip with the intent to evoke laughter. Nevertheless, the list of those who have probed the meaning of laughter is long and extends to antiquity, including Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, George Santayana, Herbert Spencer, Sigmund Freud, and Henri Bergson.¹⁹ We can gain as much a very solid insight into the mind-set and mentality characteristic of Greek antiquity as to those typical of the Renaissance insofar as the study of laughter is also a study of fundamental cultural conditions.²⁰ Entertainment by itself has never been regarded as sinful or morally debase; it all depends on the context, as numerous comments from the entire Middle Ages confirm.²¹

Only by the eighteenth century do we observe a pronounced distinction between the comical and the ridiculous, whereas for earlier periods we would not have to separate both areas from each other as strictly because neither the concept nor the terminology was in place then. There is nothing that can be objectively described as comical by way of referring to its own nature; instead everything turns into something comical because a subject might perceive it as such and consider it (a person, a word, an object) as incongruent, transgressive, grotesque, or irreverent.²² This finds excellent confirmation in the peasant satire by the Constance notary public Heinrich Wittenwiler, in his *Der Ring* (ca. 1400), in which the stupidity and

¹⁹ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). See also the contribution to this volume by Mark Burde.

²⁰ Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge, New York, et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Daniel Ménager, *La Renaissance et le rire. Perspectives Littéraires* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995); see also the contributions to *2000 ans de Rire: Permanence et Modernité. Colloque International Grellis-Laseldi/Corhum, Besançon 29–30 Juin, 1er Juillet 2000*, ed. Mongi Madini. Collection Annales littéraires, 741 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), and *The Anatomy of Laughter*, ed. Toby Garfitt, Edith McMorran, and Jane Taylor. *Studies in Comparative Literature*, 8 (Leeds: Maney Publishing: Legenda, 2005); *Lachgemeinschaften: Kulturelle Inszenierungen und soziale Wirkungen von Gelächter im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten. *Trends in Medieval Philology*, 4 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

²¹ Glending Olson, "The Profits of Pleasure," 281–83.

²² Klaus Schwind, "Komisch," 332–84; here 333; see also Christian Janentzky, "Über Tragik, Komik und Humor," *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts* 36 (1940): 3–51; here 23.

brutality of the Lappenhausen peasants ultimately lead to the decimation of the entire village, with only the exception of the male protagonist Bertschi Triefnas, who subsequently withdraws into the Black Forest without having learned any significant lesson from the horrendous slaughter. We laugh about them nevertheless, although the grotesqueness of their military bragging and aggressive dealings with their neighbors, particularly during the final marriage episode, make us rather cringe.²³

As Klaus Schwind notes, “Im Komischen werden für die Wahrnehmung inkongruente Kontexte über zwei- oder mehrwertige Bezüge auf eine ungewohnte Weise überraschend miteinander kombiniert, so daß plötzlich eine Durchlässigkeit zwischen diesen Kontexten aufscheint” (333; In the comical situation contexts become surprisingly incongruent for the perception of double or multiple references, which illuminates a transparency between these contexts). Those who laugh about someone or something remove themselves from the communicative configuration and turn into observers, but often they create a new community of those who are privy to the irony or satire expressed by the laughter. However, the comical attributes or characteristics do not automatically turn against the individuals who are laughed even if the attempt might be to damage or hurt them (unless in slapstick humor); otherwise inherent sympathy might destroy the tendency to perceive the comical.²⁴

Dieter Hörhammer defines the emergence of humor by means of referring to people who begin to laugh when they try to understand the meaning of an experience, drawing from cognitive associations, but are suddenly disrupted in that process and confronted with an unexpected context. Laughter then compensates for the loss of orientation. However, Hörhammer also admits that laughter might, or might not be, a sign of recognition, and that laughing might not be always associated with a comical situation. As one question, which was contained in an Interrogatory for Lechery published at the Synod of Rodez in 1289, indicates, laughter could also constitute a concrete strategy to create a community, or to establish connection with other people; here in an erotic, sexual context:

²³ Stephanie Hagen, *Heinrich Wittenwilers ‘Ring’ – ein ästhetisches Vexierbild: Studien zur Struktur des Komischen*. Literatur – Imagination – Realität. Anglistische, germanistische, romanistische Studien, 45 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2008), 220–21, emphasizes, above all, the author’s perception of his world as having turned topsy-turvy, in a grotesque transformation of all traditional norms and values. She observes elements of horrified amusement, the perception of a profound crisis affecting the world, and the absence of the Horatian principle of “delectare et prodesse,” all resulting from a loss of wisdom, a pervasive profanation, and the carnevalesque transformation of society.

²⁴ Klaus Schwind, “Komisch,” 333; see also Karlheinz Stierle, “Komik der Lebenswelt und Komik der Komödie,” *Das Komische*, ed. Wolfgang Preisendanz and Rainer Warning. Poetik und Hermeneutik, 7 (Munich: Fink, 1976), 372.

"Have you ever laughed or sang [sic] or gestured towards a woman or she [towards] you with the intention of committing that sin?"²⁵

Hence, we truly face a most complex facet of human existence subsuming a vast variety of causes and conditions, and combining joy and anger, fear and hope, all in one. This is perhaps best captured by Miguel Cervantes Saavedra (1547–1616) in the protagonist of his famous *Don Quijote* (1605/1615), a literary masterpiece that has exerted timeless influence and provided enormous inspiration, particularly because of its witticism, satire, and irrespective laughter.²⁶ As Harold Bloom wisely ruminates: "Yet how sly and subtle is the presence of Cervantes? At its most hilarious, *Don Quixote* is immensely somber. Shakespeare again is the illuminating analogue: Hamlet at his most melancholic will not cease his punning or his gallows humor, and Falstaff's boundless wit is tormented by intimations of rejections. Just as Shakespeare wrote in no genre, *Don Quixote* is tragedy as well as comedy."²⁷

Ancient and medieval thinkers normally attributed laughter only to the lower ranks of people and to simple, rural life, hence to the world of comedy, viewing it primarily negatively and as something condemnable (if they were Christians) in reference to the Biblical word in Luke 6, 25: "Woe to you who are full now, / for you will be hungry. / Woe to you who are laughing now, / for you will mourn and weep."²⁸ Nevertheless, there is promise for true laughter, in Heaven, of course, and this just a few lines before, also in Luke: "Blessed are you who weep now, / for you will laugh" (Luke 6, 21). In the Old Testament laughter erupts more than once, for instance, when Abraham is told that his wife Sarah will conceive: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" (Genesis 17:17). Once Sarah herself has overheard the announcement, she "laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure'" (Genesis 18: 12). Somewhat irritated, God Himself complains to

²⁵ Quoted from Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession, 1150–1300*. Studies and Texts, 163. Mediaeval Law and Theology, 1 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2009), 212.

²⁶ James Iffland, *De fiestas y aguafiestas: risa, locura e ideología en Cervantes y Avellaneda*. Biblioteca áurea hispánica, 7 (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt a. M.: Vervuert, 1999); John Jay Allen, "Smiles and Laughter in Don Quixote," *Comparative Literature Studies – Urbana* 43.4 (2006): 515–31. See also the contributions to *International Don Quixote*, ed. Theo D'haen and Reindert Dhondt. Textet. Studies in Comparative Literature, 57 (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2009).

²⁷ Harold Bloom, "Introduction: Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra," Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*. A New Translation by Edith Grossman (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), xix–xxxv; here xxii–xxiii.

²⁸ The Biblical texts are quoted from *The Holy Bible from the New Revised Standard Version Bible* (1989); here from the online version at: <http://bible.thelineberrys.com/BIBLE.HTM> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

Abraham that Sarah has laughed, and the latter tries to deny it, but the Almighty retorts: "'Oh yes, you did laugh'" (Genesis 18:15). This uncanny (because holy) laughter seems best interpreted as an expression of the human incapacity to grasp fully the grace and power of the Godhead; yet the Latter knows it all, and so also understands the nature of human weakness, reconfirming what He has witnessed, Sarah's laughter.²⁹ As a side note, it also deserves to be mentioned that this passage, and in particular Sarah's laughter in the various scenes, attracted long-term interest and was commented on throughout the Middle Ages, as documented by the so-called *Ménagier of Paris* in his household book for his wife (ca. 1400) who confirmed that God's great love for Abraham and Sarah found human reflection in her laughter: "Et pour certain toutes gens qui oyent de ce parler peuvent bien croire et penser que Dieu ama moult Abraham et Sarre aussi, quant il leur fist si belle grace" ("Assuredly, all the people who heard about this knew and believed that God loved Abraham and Sarah dearly when He granted them such a fine favor.")³⁰

If we then fast-forward to Christ's passion, we come to another monumental scene of laughter; here the mocking of Christ by Pilate's soldiers. In Halliwell's words, "At the most basic level the situation manifests the aggressive ridicule of an individual by a crowd, a 'classic' pattern of the social focusing of laughter on a spotlighted victim."³¹ A careful perusal of the Biblical text would uncover many passages where the dialectical nature of the Godhead comes to the surface, especially when He is seen within a human-like relationship with man.³²

²⁹ There are numerous, certainly many more references to 'laughter' in the Bible than commonly assumed, such as in Psalm 59, then in Ecclesiastes 3, 4, and then many times we come across phrases such as 'joy,' or 'rejoice.' See under 'laugh,' 'laughed,' 'laugheth,' 'laughing,' and 'laughter' in the "Concordance of the 12,856 words in the King James Version of the Bible," at <http://www.abibleconcordance.com/L085.htm#L04> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010). Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter*, like many others, marvels at the many instances of laughter in ancient Greek literature (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*), and expresses his astonishment at the dearth of laughter in the Bible, only to cite immediately a whole series of explicit examples contradicting his view, 25–31.

³⁰ *Le Menagier de Paris*, ed. Georgine E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier, with a Foreword by Beryl Smalley (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1981), 61. For the English trans., see *The Good Wife's Guide: Le Ménagier de Paris. A Medieval Household Book*. Trans., with Critical Introduction, by Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 97.

³¹ Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 472. He also adds that this scene includes sadism and, in general, a form of military humor, "providing the soldiers with a temporary escape from the rigours of obedient discipline and allowing them to give vent to pent-up anti-authoritarian (if also, perhaps, all-too-habitual brutal) feelings" (ibid.). He also lists other examples of laughter (implied and explicit) in the New Testament, 475–79. See also Jeannine Horowitz and Sophie Menache, *L'Humour en chaire: Le Rire dans l'Eglise médiévale*. Histoire et Société, 28 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1994).

³² Lothar Steiger, "Humor," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. XV (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 696–701, identifies numerous passages both in the Old and the New Testament that illustrate how much the Biblical authors depict either God Father or Christ as an individual characterized by humor; see Gen. 11:7; Matt: 8:8–9; 15:28. For fascinating parallels with Islamic concepts of God laughing, see the contribution to this volume by Livnat Holzman.

Of course, ancient classical authors such as Plato and Aristotle embraced laughter as a typical element of human life (the animal that laughs). Laughing then allowed the individual to find some compensation for all the hardship in life or to see reality through a different lens. In the world of rhetoric, laughter assumes an important role, allowing one side to fend off the attacks by the other carried out in a serious mood with wit and the facetious. When the opponent operates with jokes and laughter, one has to counteract the earnest.³³ In other words, laughter in this context proves to be a deeply social phenomenon and mostly characterizes group behavior and group responses to transgressions, shortcomings, and changes of all sorts.³⁴ When Clarice in the Middle English *Floris and Blauncheflur* suddenly finds herself face to face with Floris who had jumped out of the flower basket, assuming that she was his beloved Blauncheflur, and shrieks in fear and surprise, many of the other maids rush into her room to protect their friend from the presumed danger. But in the meantime Clarice has realized who the young man must be, that is, Blauncheflur's ami, and she resorts to a smart explanation, slyly admitting that a butterfly frightened her out of her wits. The maidens respond with laughter, or "glee," as the text says in ms. E: "þe maydons þerof hadden glee, / And turned hem, and lete hur be" (775–76), and in ms. C the emphasis on laughter is even stronger: "þis oþer lo₃en I hadde gleo" (477).³⁵

But when we carefully browse through high-medieval courtly romances, we find many passages where the protagonist or a secondary figure simply laughs out loud because a situation or object proves to be something very different than expected.³⁶ In yet another context, we discover numerous examples of the comic pertaining to food and eating, as Sarah Gordon recognized: "Culinary comedy works in romance as a contrast chiefly to conventions such as the commonplace of opening feast in the Arthurian court. It is against this idealized and conventional backdrop of the familiar Arthurian feast that comedic treatment of everyday life and bodily functions begins to appear. Later-thirteenth-century poets reevaluate the traditional Arthurian dining scene and guest-host relations, setting them against less courtly, less traditional episodes involving eating."³⁷

³³ Klaus Schwind, "Komisch," 340–01. Surprisingly, he then skips over the Middle Ages altogether and turns to the seventeenth century when many new theories regarding the comical emerged.

³⁴ Fabio Ceccarelli, *Sorriso e riso: Saggio di antropologia biosociale*. Einaudi Paperbacks, 185 (Turin: Einaudi, 1988); see also John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983).

³⁵ *Floris and Blauncheflur: A Middle English Romance* ed. with introduction, notes and glossary by Franciscus Catharina de Vries (Groningen: V. R. B., 1966).

³⁶ One of many examples would be the anonymous *Reinfrid von Braunschweig*, ed. Karl Bartsch (1871; Hildesheim, Zürich, and New York: Olms, 1997), 21238–39: "der fürste rîch erlachtet / dô er diu mære reht bevant" (the prince began to laugh loudly when he learned the full story [about a deceptive image]).

³⁷ Sarah Gordon, "Culinary Comedy in French Arthurian Romance," *Medievalia et Humanistica*. New Series, 30 (2004): 15–31; here 17–18.

Other protagonists laugh once a danger is over and they can relate their adventure and their ability to deceive an opponent.³⁸ Tristan, for instance, in Gottfried von Straßburg's eponymous romance, regales his uncle and lord with the delightful tale of how he had managed to trick the Irish queen to let him depart before the completion of the contracted year, pretending that a loving wife was waiting for him, despairing over his long absence. In fact, the entire court seems to enjoy the account, laughing communally because their most dangerous enemy, the Irish queen, had healed Tristan through her personal care, without ever having found out his true identity. The courtiers express their amazement and wonder, and then also laugh about the entire report, both as a relief of their previous tension and as medium for their contempt of the queen from whose subjugation they have finally been freed.³⁹

The options to explore specific functions and angles of laughter, particularly in the Middle Ages and the early modern age, almost seem endless, although, or perhaps particularly because, leading intellectuals in the Christian Church voiced such vehement protests against and criticism of laughter, not to mention peals of laughter. In the heroic (?) poem *Kudrun* (ca. 1230–1250), when the court festivities have reached their high point and everyone is enjoying him/herself, this finds its expression in communal laughter: “die liute begunden lachen allez über al” (53, 2; the people began to laugh everywhere).⁴⁰ Much later, once *Kudrun* is already engaged to King Herwic, King Hartmuot arrives at her court and tries to woo her, which subsequently leads to a catastrophic development affecting her entire country and herself.

When *Kudrun* learns from Hartmuot's messengers about the implied military threat of a deadly attack if she does not comply with his wishes, she haughtily laughs about this, as she sees it, foolish presumption: “des erlachte diu vil wol getâne” (771, 4; the love lady laughed about that). However, this laughter will come back with a vengeance to her in the subsequent events during which she will

³⁸ See, for instance, the contributions to this volume by Judith Hagen and Daniel F. Pigg.

³⁹ Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan*. Nach dem Text von Friedrich Ranke neu herausgegeben, ins Neuhochdeutsche übersetzt, mit einem Stellenkommentar und einem Kommentar von Rüdiger Krohn (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980), 8237–47. For a solid introduction, now see Tomas Tomasek, *Gottfried von Straßburg* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007). There are 32 passages in total where the term ‘laughing’ is mentioned, see the online Middle High German dictionary at: <http://www.mhdbdb.sbg.ac.at:8000/mhdbdb/App?action=TextQueryModule&string=lachen&exts=!&startButton=Start+search&contextSelectListSize=1&contextUnit=1&verticalDetail=3&maxTableSize=100&horizontalDetail=3&nrTextLines=3> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

⁴⁰ *Kudrun*. Nach der Ausgabe von Karl Bartsch, herausgegeben von Karl Stackmann. Altddeutsche Textbibliothek, 115 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000). Oddly enough, this text was copied only once, and this ca. 300 years later after its original composition, in the so-called *Ambraser Heldenbuch* from ca. 1504–1516; see Stackmann, IX–XI. For a good introduction, see also Marion E. Gibbs and Sidney M. Johnson, *Medieval German Literature: A Companion* (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 399–402.

be violently abducted. Nevertheless, once again jumping forward almost to the end of the poem, we hear her laughing another time after she has learned of her imminent liberation through her brother and her fiancé. To hide the arrival of these messengers and of their army, Kudrun suddenly pretends her willingness to marry Hartmuot, who then prepares the wedding festivities (1284ff.). Kudrun's chambermaids begin to cry when they have to assume that their lady has finally changed her mind and will stay at this foreign court for good, making it impossible for all of them to return home. Realizing their misconception, however, Kudrun breaks out in hearty laughter: "des erlachte Kudrûn diu hêre" (1318, 4; the lady Kudrun laughed about them/or it). Her worst oppressor, Hartmuot's mother, Queen Gêrlint, immediately suspects a double meaning behind that laughter, especially because Kudrun had not laughed for fourteen years during her imprisonment and torture as a washing woman.

This laughter, indeed, proves to be unprecedented and almost uncouth, highly uncharacteristic for the well-bred princess-slave: "Ein teil ûz zûhten lachen si began, / diu in vierzehen jâren freude nie gewan" (1320, 1–2; Almost in contradiction to good manners she, who had never experienced any joy for fourteen years, began to laugh). Not surprisingly, Gêrlint interprets this laughter as an indication that Kudrun has secretly received news about her possible liberation: "ich enweiz wes hât gelachet Kûdrûn diu <schæne> kûniginne" (1321, 4; I do not know what the beautiful queen [princess] has laughed about). Consequently she warns her son to be on his guard, but he dismisses his mother's alert perception as idle and pointless because he regards women's laughter as meaningless and not worth his attention (1323). Nonetheless, as we will learn only too soon, Kudrun's laughter was prophetic, and Hartmuot will die indeed, and so his father and mother, at their enemies' hands after the liberation has occurred. The poet, to be sure, explicitly underscored the hermeneutic significance of laughter insofar as it reflects inner feelings, character weakness or strength, and also serves as a signal about future events about to happen.

For Konrad Fleck, who rendered the Old French *Floire et Blancheflor* (ca. 1160) into Middle High German (*Flôre und Blanscheflûr*, ca. 1220–1230), laughter represents the highest level of courtly values and joy, especially in women, if they express their happiness in appropriate fashion and under the right circumstances. While he severely criticizes men who abuse women and make them cry, he ardently praises those men who can achieve the opposite goal: "'... swer aber daz gemache / daz ein frouwe lache, / dem müeze ir minne werden teil!'" (463–65; he who manages to make women laugh will be the recipient of their love).⁴¹ Crying

⁴¹ Konrad Fleck, *Flore und Blanscheflur*, ed. Emil Sommer. Bibliothek der gesamten deutschen National-Literatur von der ältesten bis auf die neuere Zeit, 12 (Quedlinburg and Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von Gottfried Basse, 1846); a new edition was recently created, but it is not yet

thus proves to be an unequivocal sign of the moral and ethical decay of courtly society, whereas laughter—the specific kind of laughter is not indicated here, but the poet certainly thinks of a happy, well-meaning, harmonious type of laughter free of sarcasm, satire, or irony—expresses the well-being of the courtly world.⁴²

The evidence concerning laughter provided by the more or less contemporary *Carmina Burana* (ca. 1200–1220/1230) actually speaks a very clear language confirming the great interest in humor, jokes, and various types of mockery, satire, and irony, especially among the learned, whether students or their teachers at the various cathedral schools because laughter reveals and veils at the same time, profiles and obscures, hence serves precisely as an extraordinary heuristic instrument. Apart from those songs determined by moral and satirical approaches, and apart from the love songs in the tradition of courtly love—here not counting the clearly noticeable strategy to undermine the very concept, whether by means of elements of violence (rape) or an artificial game with classical-learned features—the mostly anonymous poets also ventured into the field of drinking and gambling songs.⁴³ Although we also know a few names, all university-trained scholars such as Gautier de Châtillon, Giraldus of Bari, Hugo Primas of Orléans, and the Archpriest, the poets normally took cover behind the mask of anonymity to laugh about their world and to criticize its shortcomings in biting, sarcastic, and even bitter fashion, obviously relying on the comic energy of their songs, drawing their audience into a hilarious, entertaining setting determined by communal laughter that rips away the facade of all authorities.⁴⁴

publicly available, Christine Putzo, “Konrad Fleck, Flore und Blanscheflur. Neuedition und Untersuchungen zu Autor, Text und Überlieferung,” Ph.D. diss. Hamburg 2009. I have not had a chance to consult her work, and was only informed by the author that she submitted her thesis for approval (personal e-mail message, September 8, 2009). For the pan-European dissemination of this narrative, see Elisabeth Frenzel, *Stoffe der Weltliteratur: Ein Lexikon dichtungsgeschichtlicher Längsschnitte* 8th, revised and expanded ed. Kröners Taschenausgabe, 300 (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1992), 227–29; Albrecht Classen, “Floire et Blancheflor,” *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*, ed. Jay Ruud (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 233–34.

⁴² Siegfried Christoph, “The Language and Culture of Joy,” *Words of Love and Love of Words in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 347 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 319–33.

⁴³ *Carmina Burana*. Texte und Übertragungen. Mit den Miniaturen aus der Handschrift und einem Aufsatz von Peter und Dorothee Diemer. Ed. Benedikt Konrad Vollmer. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 13 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987); see also the English translation by David Parlett, *Selections from the Carmina Burana: A Verse Translation* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, and New York: Penguin, 1986), and *The Love Songs of the Carmina Burana*, trans. by E. D. Blodgett and Roy Arthur Swanson. Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series B, 49 (New York and London: Garland, 1987). See also my study “The *Carmina Burana*: a Mirror of Latin and Vernacular Literary Traditions from a Cultural-Historical Perspective: Transgression is the Name of the Game,” online in *Neophilologus* (12–24–09; last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010): <http://www.springerlink.com/openurl.asp?genre=article&id=doi:10.1007/s11061-009-9188-2>.

⁴⁴ Albrecht Classen, “*Carmina Burana*,” *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*, ed. Jay Ruud (New York:

As Edwin H. Zeydel notes, "In the drinking and gaming songs there is often almost blasphemous parody of convent rules and of the mass. Bogus tippling and gambling 'masses' are solemnized, and gods like Bacchus and Decius celebrated as though they were truly divine."⁴⁵ But he also alerts us to the serious undertone, which we can often, if not regularly, find in most expressions of humor and laughter, especially in the Middle Ages. In reference to "In illo tempore: Inicium sancti evangelii secundum marcas argenti," Zeydel alerts us that it "serves as a weapon in the moral-satirical struggle against corruption among the upper clergy, against simony and the worship of material things Parody, then, developed into an instrument of satire against Church officials."⁴⁶ Of course, it continues to be a point of debate what 'parody' really implies, and whether we can assume that parody in the Middle Ages was the same as we understand it today.⁴⁷ David Parlett emphasizes the representational function of this song collection and the irreverence of its poets: "Their composers are witty, urbane and charming, with no illusions about their own or their contemporaries' spiritual strengths and fleshly frailties, who find no subject too high or too low for their probing consideration and verbal dexterity."⁴⁸ Of course, the drinking songs in the *Carmina Burana* do not refer to specific scenes of laughter, but they are consistently predicated on hilarious transgression and the poet's implied, yet very concrete invitation to laugh about the poetic jokes, such as:

Meum est propositum in taberna mori,
ubi uina proxima morientis ori;
tunc cantabunt lecius angelorum chori:
"Deus sit propicius isti potatori."⁴⁹

[I have the firm determination to die in the pub,
where the wine jugs are very close to the mouth of those who are dying;
then the choirs of the angels will sing filled with joy,
"May God be merciful to this heavy drinker."]

Just a few stanzas further, the poet emphasizes that his verses would be worth nothing unless he would first have eaten and drunk his fill of wine. At that point,

Facts on File, 2006), 114–15.

⁴⁵ Edwin H. Zeydel, *Vagabond Verse: Secular Latin Poems of the Middle Ages*, trans. with an introduction and commentary (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 25.

⁴⁶ Zeydel, trans., 25–26.

⁴⁷ See the contributions to this volume by Mark Burde, John Sewell, Jean N. Goodrich, and Kyle DiRoberto.

⁴⁸ David Parlett, *Selections from the Carmina Burana: A Verse Translation* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, and New York: Penguin, 1986), 16–17.

⁴⁹ Here I quote from Vollmann's excellent edition, but see also the online edition at: http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost13/CarminaBurana/bur_cpo1.html (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

Tu scis linguas impedire.
titubando solet ire
tua sumens basia;
uerba recte non discernens,
centum putat esse cernens
duo luminaria. (stanza 9)

This kind of laughter and joking was (and still is) rather typical of young people who have not yet completed their educational phase (students), but since all poets certainly were trained by members of the Church (clergy), mostly for future service in the Church, this open and unabashed exploration of transgressions in public and private life (considering the love songs), proves to be a most remarkable demonstration of how little theologians and philosophers were really

in command of public demeanor and how much their stern warnings about proper behavior, which was certainly not supposed to include laughter (loud or quiet), in the long run really expressed the very opposite, that is, the delight in basic human nature, indicating the true extent to which people in the Middle Ages could and did laugh.⁵⁰ Both the bawdy and the irreverent, both satire and irony, and then the ever present willingness to transgress most ethical, moral, religious, and philosophical standards and norms determine many of the songs in the *Carmina Burana*, and they certainly shed important light on the culture of laughter in the medieval world which obviously permeated many more circles and social groups than we have traditionally assumed.⁵¹ The same applies to much of the learned literature, particularly since the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when new learning developed—first Cathedral schools, then the universities—and the students acquired a thorough familiarity with classical Roman literature with its deep sense of satire, irony, and parody.⁵²

For courtly ladies, for instance, loud laughter was regarded as inappropriate and uncultured, perhaps as an expression of lack of self-control and boorishness. The daughter in the famous mother-daughter dialogue poem *Die Winsbeckin* (first half of the thirteenth century) expresses most clearly how much laughter was to be feared as a sign of unwomanly behavior. The poet (gender identity remains uncertain even today) puts into her mouth the significant words: “swelch wîp diu ougen ûf, ze tal, / und über treit als einen bal, / dar under ouch gelachet vil: / diu prîset niht der zûhte ir sal” (A woman who casts her glances everywhere, up and down, and runs around like a ball, and then also laughs much, does not count good manners among her praised blessings).⁵³ I am rather positive that here we

⁵⁰ Moshe Lazar, “*Carmina Erotica, Carmina Iocosa: The Body and the Bawdy in Medieval Love Songs, Poetics of Love in the Middle Ages: Texts and Contexts*,” ed. id. and Norris J. Lacy (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1989), 249–76.

⁵¹ See James W. Marchand, “The Bawdy in Wolfram,” *Monatshefte* 69 (1977): 131–49; see also the contributions to *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed. Albrecht Classen. *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 3 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), especially by Siegfried Christoph, Sarah Gordon, and Albrecht Classen. The issue here at stake is picked up again by Mark Burde, Jean Goodrich, and Sarah Gordon in their respective contributions to the present volume.

⁵² Ronald Pepin, *Literature of Satire in the Twelfth Century: A Neglected Mediaeval Genre*. *Studies in Mediaeval Literature*, 2 (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 8–12, emphasizes, above all, the sarcastic criticism of the new schools themselves both from the outside and from within, the criticism of the new courtier class, and the new interest in misogyny as a favorite pastime and rhetorical strategy by the learned authors.

⁵³ “Winsbeckin,” *Winsbeckische Gedichte nebst Tirol und Fridebrant*, ed. Albert Leitzmann. Third, newly rev. ed. by Ingo Reiffenstein. *Altdeutsche Textbibliothek*, 9 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1962), 50, stanza 8, 4–7; see also *Frauen in der deutschen Literaturgeschichte: Die ersten 800 Jahre. Ein Lesebuch*. Ausgewählt, übersetzt und kommentiert von Albrecht Classen. *Women in German Literature*, 4 (New York, Washington, DC, Baltimore, et al.: Peter Lang, 2000), 71–91.

come across a text composed by an unknown female writer, or at least by a writer who harbored mostly sympathetic feelings toward women at large.⁵⁴ Insofar as the young woman confirms herself that excessive and loud laughter appears as transgressive and lacking in modesty, she formulates broadly conceived notions about behavioral norms as they applied to women at large.⁵⁵

If we take the wide range of so-called *ridicula* (funny stories), *nugae* (trifles in metrical verse), *comediae elegiacae*, and *satyrae* also into consideration, many of them composed already in the eleventh century and then throughout the entire Middle Ages and beyond, such as the work of Marbod of Rennes (*Carmina*),⁵⁶ we begin to fathom the true dimension of everyday life in the premodern world where not everything and everyone was serious and only concerned about the well-being of his or her soul, dreading to the deepest extent one's death. In other words, despite its great impact, medieval *Angst* was not the exclusive factor determining premodern mentality, as pervasive as it might appear at first sight and viewed through a specific lens.⁵⁷

Many times medieval and early-modern narrators describe laughable scenes when they discuss communal events, and they regularly illustrate how much laughter—certainly a kaleidoscopic phenomenon, as we have seen already numerous times, and for which I will provide many more examples in this Introduction—can contribute to the establishment of this very community, whether in mockery or in approval of certain words, actions, or ideas. A wonderful and most delightful example can be found in the anonymous Middle High German verse narrative “Das Gänselein,” extant in six of the major

⁵⁴ Albrecht Classen, *The Power of a Woman's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures: New Approaches to German and European Women Writers and to Violence Against Women in Premodern Times*. Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 159–86. Olga V. Trokhimenko, “On the Dignity of Women: The ‘Ethical’ Reading’ of Winsbeckin in mgf 474, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz,” *Journal of English and German Philology* 107.4 (2008): 490–505, follows the same approach without knowledge of my own study. But see now also her contribution to the present volume.

⁵⁵ For a parallel text, though composed several decades later, see *The Good Wife's Guide: Le Ménagier de Paris. A Medieval Household Book*. Trans. Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2009). There we learn: “Gaze four *toises* straight ahead and toward the ground, without looking or glancing at any man or woman to the right or left, or looking up, or in a fickle way casting your gaze about in sundry directions, nor laugh nor stop to speak to anyone on the street” (59).

⁵⁶ For a discussion of late-medieval and early modern *sotties*, hilarious, but often also rather bizarre brief dialogues carried out on the stage, see the contribution to this volume by Lia B. Ross.

⁵⁷ Marc Wolterbeek, *Comic Tales of the Middle Ages: An Anthology and Commentary*. Contributions to the Study of World Literature, 39 (New York, Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1991); Alison Williams, *Tricksters and Pranksters: Roguery in French and German Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 49 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000); see also the contributions to *Lachgemeinschaften*, ed. Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten, 2005.

manuscripts containing samples of such *mæren*, all from the fourteenth and fifteenth century. This story originated probably in the world of ancient Indian literature, best represented by the *Barlaam and Josaphat* account that found reception throughout Europe in countless different languages. The narrative about an innocent, naive young man (in our case a young oblate in a [Cistercian?] monastery) who learns about all things in this world only once the abbot is taking him on a business trip and then provides him with the names of all objects and animals, is predicated on the arbitrariness of human language, and for that purpose probably found so much favor by numerous writers throughout time (*Vitaspatrum*, Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, the anonymous Italian *Novellino*, Jacob of Vitry's *Exempla*, etc.).⁵⁸ Ironically, however, the young monk has never seen women and does not even know anything about their existence. The abbot now tries to protect his innocence and calls the wife and daughter of his innkeeper 'geese' (84). Full of surprise about the beauty of these 'farm animals,' the monk exclaims that such geese would be an exceedingly welcome enrichment of the monastery's pasture, to which the two women respond with laughter, though they are rather surprised about the discrepancy between the young man's utter ignorance and physical attractiveness (92–95). But they even doubt his sanity, quietly inquiring with the abbot (96–97), who then explains the curious situation.

The entire situation signals that the women's laughter reveals a certain degree of surprise, even shock, and puzzlement, and yet also an element of delight, if not a sense of having been facetiously ridiculed. For the further development of the narrative it is important to consider that only these two women laugh, both with each other and about the monk, demarcating their gender group identity and distance to a member of the other sex. At any rate, the young woman then utilizes the opportunity and seduces the monk at night, pretending to be a goose that needs some warmth from him, to which he happily complies.

Once the abbot and the monk have returned home, the entire community awaits them eagerly because they are curious to learn about the young oblate's experiences outside in the world, fully aware of his astounding ignorance and naiveté, which he must have displayed to them before. They immediately take him aside and question him about his observations and what he has learned. His

⁵⁸

Novellistik des Mittelalters: Märendichtung, ed., trans., and commentary by Klaus Grubmüller. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 23 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1996), 1237–42. The original text (based on the manuscript created by the Würzburg cleric and administrator Michael de Leone in his so-called "Hausbuch," today housed in the Universitätsbibliothek München, 2^o Cod. ms. 731, written at ca. 1350 in Würzburg) and a German translation are contained in Grubmüller's edition. For an English translation, see *Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany*. Selected and trans. by Albrecht Classen, with a contribution by Maurice Sprague. And with an edition of Froben Christoph von Zimmern's "Der enttäuschte Liebhaber." *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 328 (2007; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009), 73–76.

responses elicit, as expected, much laughter (193), probably because they prove his foolishness and utter lack of comprehension despite the abbot's efforts at least to name everything to him: "sîn rede was ir aller spil" (199; his words were the butt of their jokes). But the monk demonstrates at least enough smartness not to reveal his adventure with the young 'goose' (195–200), although the outside audience is thereby invited to laugh about the entire set-up because we know through the narrator what has really happened.

This laughter gains in intensity, even without any clues in the text, in the subsequent scene when the abbot begins with the preparations for Christmas and the young oblate suddenly insists that they all should get a 'goose' because this would give them all the greatest possible enjoyment here on earth (214–21). To the same degree that he irritates the abbot with his seemingly foolish comment, as much are we invited to laugh about this revelation because the monk has truly taken the abbot's instruction verbatim, whereas the term 'goose' was in actuality intended only as a metaphor to hide the true identity of women to the innocent monk. Despite the abbot's threats, the monk repeats his request for 'geese' (238–40), but now translates them into culinary delights: "guot unde wolgetan" (240; good and well done), which probably evokes even further laughter.⁵⁹ Ultimately, however, this laughter is not directed against the monk specifically because the narrator defends him as an innocent victim of the abbot's failure to provide him with the proper education and sexual enlightenment (275–79). Laughter erupts, in other words, because the principles of communication have been disregarded and the concept of linguistic arbitrariness has found its full application in the wrong context at the wrong time and with the wrong character. The fact by itself that the abbot called women 'geese' in order to protect the oblate actually leads to the young 'goose's sexual awakening, and hence to the monk's seduction. Only the abbot is to be blamed, and so he is rightfully made the object of laughter, whereas we are obviously invited to sympathize with the monk and the inn-keeper's daughter.

An earlier example for laughter that channels extensive mockery can be found in a thirteenth-century *fabliau* by Henri d'Andeli, "The Lai of Aristotle," which deals with the almost 'classical' topic of *Aristotle and Phyllis*. Here this famous teacher, who is working as a private tutor for Alexander, later called 'the Great,' is made into an utter fool because he reveals his own hypocrisy regarding his admonishments to stay away from women's erotic temptations and to focus on the class materials instead. Readers throughout the Middle Ages enjoyed this *lai* and retold it many times,⁶⁰ and each time at the end the wise, old, but also foolish

⁵⁹ For a discussion of laughter predicated on culinary aspects, especially in the *fabliaux*, see the contributions to this volume by Sarah Gordon, Jean E. Jost, and Gretchen Mieszkowski.

⁶⁰ The theme was also used in the visual arts throughout the Middle Ages, see Yvonne Bleyerveld,

master Aristotle, who had tried to enjoin his young student Alexander not to get distracted from his studies because of a lovely maid in the royal household, becomes himself entangled in the woman's erotic seduction and hence the object of his own disciple's laughter.

The maid had figured that she in her youthful beauty would easily dazzle the old man and prove him to be as gullible about, though much less entitled to, erotic pleasures as the young man. Indeed, while she is walking through the garden outside of Aristotle's window one early morning, picking flowers for a garland, the philosopher looks out of the window and immediately desires to sleep with her. When he approaches her, asking for her favors, she hesitantly agrees, but on the condition that he would allow her to sit on his back and ride on him like on a beast. The old man knows only too well that he is making a fool of himself (332), but he is so much love smitten that he cannot help himself and so submits to all her wishes: "por vous metrai et cors et ame, / vie et honor en aventure" (498–99; For you I will put both body and soul, / Life and honor at stake). But as soon as she has placed the saddle on his back and sat herself on it, Alexander, who has observed the entire scene from a window, being a lustful voyeur,⁶¹ almost dies of laughter: "Qui lui donast trestout l'empire / ne se tenist il pas de rire" (4720–21; Not even if someone had given him the whole empire / Could he have kept from laughing).⁶² Then he calls out, not mincing his words and pouring all his sarcasm over the humiliated philosopher:

"Mestre," dist il, "por Dieu! Que vaut ce?
Je voi molt bien c'on vous chevauche.
Comment! Estes vous forsenez
qui en tel point estes menez?
Vous me feïstes l'autre fois

"De gevaren van vrouwenmacht: Vrouwenlisten als thema in de beeldende kunst en literatuur," *Spiegel Historiae* 37.5 (2002): 212–217; for late-medieval German literary adaptations, see Marija Javor Briski, "Eine Warnung vor dominanten Frauen oder Bejahung der Sinnenlust? Zur Ambivalenz des 'Aristoteles-und-Phyllis-Motivs' als Tragezeichen im Spiegel deutscher Dichtungen des späten Mittelalters," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 59 (2004): 37–66.

⁶¹ A. C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); see also the contributions to *Schaulust: heimliche und verpönte Blicke in Literatur und Kunst*, ed. Ulrich Stadler and Karl Wagner (Paderborn: Fink, 2005); cf., further, Dana E. Stewart, *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender, and Subjectivity in Medieval Love Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, and London: Associated University Presses, 2003).

⁶² *The French Fabliau: B.N. MS. 837*. Ed. and trans. Raymond Eichmann and John DuVal. 2 vols. Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series A, 16 (New York and London: Garland, 1984), 112–13. The literature on *fabliaux* is very rich; see, most recently, the contributions to *The Old French Fabliaux: Essays on Comedy and Context*, ed. Kristin L. Burr, John F. Moran, and Norris J. Lacy (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 2008). See also the contributions to this volume by Jean E. Jost and Sarah Gordon.

de li veoir si grant defoiz,
 et or vous a mis en tel point
 qu'il n'a en vous de reson point,
 ainz vous metez a loi de beste." (474–82)

["Master," he said, "for God's sake, what's this?
 I see very well that someone is riding you.
 What? Are you crazy,
 Letting yourself be brought to such a low point?
 The other day you made
 Such a great prohibition against my seeing her,
 And now she's put you in a position
 Where there's no reason in you at all;
 Instead, you act according to the law of beasts."]

Significantly, however, Aristotle, at least in this version, finds an elegant explanation for his humiliation, turning it into a great teaching lesson, demonstrating to everyone how subject men are to female attractiveness and that his student would have to learn from this example that no one is free of folly, especially not when one falls in love (490–502). The king, once he has learned of this story, highly praises the young maid, but approvingly laughs about Aristotle's profound explanation and pardons him: "qu'en riant li rois li pardone" (514; laughingly the king pardoned him). For us this means that even within a very short textual passage different types of laughter can erupt, and each signifies completely different mental approaches to particular situations, reflecting, first, contempt, ridicule, and mockery, then, however, in the figure of the king, wisdom, a free spirit, and understanding of typical male behavior in the presence of an attractive young woman.

Despite countless references to laughter in all of medieval literature, scholars have often thought that the discovery and critical discussion of laughter as an essential part of human life did not begin until the Renaissance.⁶³ Despite the period rubrics, Boccaccio was probably one of the first, with his *Decameron* (ca. 1351), to develop and to elaborate a more comprehensive theory on laughter as a critical aspect in human life, irrespective of social class; instead he regarded it as an important element in all intellectual and cultural activities, but particularly important for its

⁶³ This myth was already debunked by J. S. P. Tatlock, "Mediaeval Laughter," *Speculum* 21.3 (1946): 289–94, although his findings did not have the impact which they really deserved. His article met, however, with great approval by a few of his contemporaries; see Helen Adolf, "On Mediaeval Laughter," 1947. Tatlock's evidence for his thesis, mostly taken from Latin literature composed in medieval England, proves to be fully convincing, though he does not pursue theoretical reflections.

therapeutic effect.⁶⁴ He underscores in the prologue to his famous collection of tales: "In which pleasant novels will be found some passages of love rudely crossed, with other courses of events of which the issues are felicitous, in times as well modern as ancient; from which stories the said ladies, who shall read them, may derive both pleasure from the entertaining matters set forth therein, and also good counsel, in that they may learn what to shun, and likewise what to pursue. Which cannot, I believe, come to pass unless the dumps be banished by diversion of mind."⁶⁵ The key term, "*diletto delle sollazzevoli cose*," clearly signals the author's heightened awareness of the delightful, entertaining, comical nature of his tales that are supposed to instruct and to provide a basis for laughter. Of course, I'd hasten to add, we cannot limit our interpretation of Boccaccio's collection to the comic alone; instead the careful analysis can always detect moral, political, philosophical, ethical, and religious purposes as well. This convolution has invited virtually countless and contradictory interpretations throughout the centuries, but the element of entertainment, hence of laughter, has never been missed as a central one. Robert Hollander offers the following thesis regarding the proper understanding of the *Decameron*:

an exploration of humankind's inability to be governed by, or to govern itself in accord with, traditional morality or to find a harmonious way of living within nature; yet the work does envision humanity's ability to develop an aesthetic expression which is fully capable of examining its own corrupt and unameliorable being.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer, *Boccaccio und der Beginn der Novelle: Strukturen der Kurzerzählung auf der Schwelle zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Munich: Fink, 1983); Elisabeth Arend, *Lachen und Komik in Giovanni Boccaccios Decameron*. *Analecta Romanica*, 68 (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004), 11–2, 178–254. For a wonderful comprehensive interpretation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, with a focus on linguistic features and communication, see Marilyn Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2003). On laughing women, see Lisa Renée Perfetti, *Women & Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); on laughter in the *Decameron* specifically, see Beatrice Jakobs, *Rhetorik des Lachens und Diätetik in Boccaccios Decameron*. *Schriften zur Literaturwissenschaft*, 28 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2006).

⁶⁵ The text is copied from the online version (Gutenberg Project), by now a bit outdated, but still acceptable for our purposes at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/thdcm10.txt> (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*. Faithfully trans. by J. M. Rigg, 2 vols. [London: H. F. Bumpus, 1906]; this translation was reprinted as late as 2006 in a large-print format [Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2006]); for the Italian original, see, also only, at: <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameronNew/DecIndex.php?lang=it> (both last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010). For a printed edition of another translation, see *The Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio*, trans. Richard Aldington (1930; New York: Dell Publishing, 1970), 26.

⁶⁶ Robert Hollander, "The *Decameron* Proem," *The Decameron First Day in Perspective*, ed. Elissa B. Weaver. *Lectura Boccaccii*, 1 (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 12–28; here 15. Hollander, however, does not even consider the specific aspect of laughter that permeates the entire narrative framework.

Nevertheless, many of the specifically comical elements in the *Decameron* hark back to very similar ones in literary texts from previous centuries, and so from antiquity, especially Ovid, even if they might not yet have been developed so systematically for a narrative framework. However we might view and understand laughter, whether as an expression of aggression or as a form of delightful entertainment, Boccaccio clearly indicated that the laughter contained in his tales and the laughter triggered by them establishes community among the protagonists, between text and reader, and among the audience at large, allowing them to overcome melancholy and to learn the positive and negative sides of erotic relationships.⁶⁷ After all, the primary purpose of his tale-telling framework aims at entertainment, coupled with a degree of education as well, much in the ancient Horatian tradition of *delectare et prodesse*. Those who can laugh, we might say, will become better lovers and will be able to handle the vagaries and vacillations of life's fortune, will be empowered to go through the many trials and tribulations in a more relaxed, perhaps even philosophical, manner.⁶⁸

But he also emphasizes that his entertaining, laughter producing tales would address women above all because they are much more restricted than men in leading their lives, and hence are considerably more subject to the dangers of melancholy: "If thereby a melancholy bred of amorous desire make entrance into their minds, it is like to tarry there to their sore distress, unless it be dispelled by a change of ideas. Besides which they have much less power to support such a weight than men." This then leads Boccaccio to underscore the significant importance of laughter as a counter-measure to life's many challenges: "I, for the succour and diversion of such of them as love (for others may find sufficient solace in the needle and the spindle and the reel), do intend to recount one hundred Novels or Fables or Parables or Stories, as we may please to call them, which were recounted in ten days by an honourable company of seven ladies and three young men in the time of the late mortal pestilence, as also some canzonets sung by the said ladies for their delectation."⁶⁹

As previous scholars have repeatedly observed, the *Decameron* also provided respite from melancholy and emotional distress. Glending Olson captures this

⁶⁷ Arend, *Lachen und Komik*, 253–54.

⁶⁸ For a congenial, highly refreshing, and innovative reading, with an emphasis on philosophy, see Kurt Flasch, *Vernunft und Vergnügen: Liebesgeschichten aus dem Decameron* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), 185–99; here 195: "Die Heiterkeit Boccaccios kommt von der Kunstform ironischer Distanz und artistisch plzierter empirischer Versatzstücke; sie kommt nicht aus dem wirklichen Leben" (Boccaccio's mirth derives from the artistic form of ironic distance and from artistically placed empirical pieces arbitrarily arranged; it does not derive from real life). The latter point, however, seems rather questionable; isn't the very opposite the case?

⁶⁹ Again, the text is copied from the online version (Gutenberg Project) at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/thdcm10.txt> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010). For the print version by Richard Aldington, see 26.

sense most poignantly when he remarks: "The analogy between the *brigata's* movement from distress (*noia*) to a rationally controlled cheerfulness (*allegrezza*) and the intended change in Boccaccio's audience of idle ladies gives to the entire work a large element of the therapeutic." In fact, Boccaccio's comedy with its intended laughter was commonly treated as a remedy against the plague.⁷⁰

Countless other authors, actually even long before him have explored this complex network and set of strategies in their own works, even if they did not develop such a comprehensive theoretical approach as Boccaccio. Nevertheless, we still seem to be struggling with how to come to terms with the comical per se, with laughter, or humor in a critical fashion despite countless philosophical tracts and treatises dealing with this phenomenon.⁷¹ In fact, we could write a whole history of human culture by focusing on laughter, as some scholars have suggested recently.⁷² Indeed, it would make very good sense to identify laughter as a form of discourse, which it certainly is, but we cannot limit ourselves to just one strategic aspect concerning all forms of laughter or humor as they emerge in a myriad of literary genres and artistic manifestations.⁷³

Even the intensity of laughter differs profoundly, ranging from a silent mirth to an uncontrollable peal of laughter which often transgresses behavioral norms; as a result the laughing person may be characterized as boorish, foolish, or even insane, unless there is aggression and hostility involved, often at members of lower social classes (peasants, above all). However, the evaluation of that kind of laughter depends very much on the social and cultural value system in every historical period, so we could easily endeavor to distinguish among laughter, say, in the ancient world, in the early Middle Ages, the late Middle Ages, and so on.⁷⁴

In Renaissance art and literature, for instance, we observe a remarkable spike in the depiction or treatment of the fool and of human folly, which deserved to be

⁷⁰ Olson, "The Profit of Pleasure," 279; see also his *Literature as Recreation*, 198.

⁷¹ Anton C. Zijderveld, *Humor und Gesellschaft: Eine Soziologie des Humors und des Lachens* (1971; Graz, Vienna, and Cologne: Styria, 1976); *Lachen – Gelächter – Lächeln: Reflexionen in 3 Spiegeln*, ed. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wolf (Frankfurt a. M.: Syndikat, 1986); Éric Smadja, *Le Rire. Que sais-je*, 2766 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993); Elisabeth Arend, "Das Lachen angesichts des Scheiterhaufens: Zum Lachen im *Decameron*," *Komik der Renaissance, Renaissance der Komik*, ed. Barbara Marx et al. (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2000), 1–19. The list of respective studies is legion, particularly because laughter has been recognized by scholars in many disciplines and in many countries as a crucial dimension of human existence.

⁷² Rainer Stollmann, "Zur Kulturgeschichte des Lachens," *Impulse aus der Forschung* 1 (2001): 24–27; Wayne H. Storey, "Parodic Structure in *Alibech and Rustico*: Antecedents and Traditions," *Canadian Journal of Italian Studies* 5 (1982): 163–76; Joachim Suchomski, "Delectatio" und "Utilitas": Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis mittelalterlicher komischer Literatur. *Bibliotheca Germanica*, 18 (Bern and Munich: Francke, 1975).

⁷³ Elisabeth Arend, *Lachen und Komik*, 28–35.

⁷⁴ For an intriguing example of how to grasp the meaning of laughter in an early-medieval text, see the contribution to this volume by Daniel F. Pigg.

laughed at.⁷⁵ But then we would also have to discriminate very carefully among specific textual genres, for instance, or art works where laughter functions in a more pronounced fashion or where comical situations determine the account or the image. We might also want to keep in mind that laughter poignantly reveals certain emotions, as humanist scholars already tried to determine in greater depth.⁷⁶

The famous humanist and apostolic secretary Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) irritated and incensed many conservative critics and members of the Church with his irreverent, witty, sarcastic and satirical *Facetiae* which he began to compose at the age of seventy in 1450,⁷⁷ taking multiple swipes at all, including everyone who held authority, power, influence, and enjoyed public esteem by way of exposing their weaknesses and vices, and also by predicating his jokes on sexual, if not pornographic, allusions and intimations. Not surprisingly, despite its sometimes rather dubious character, as some of his vociferous critics opined, his collection quickly attracted great popularity all over Europe, as Poggio observed himself: “they flooded all Italy and overflowed into France, Spain, Germany, England and every other country where Latin was understood.”⁷⁸ Yet the opposition also grew, and the *Facetiae* were eventually placed, upon the order of Pope Paul IV, on the *Index Expurgatorius* of the Catholic Church during the Council of Trent in 1559.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Yona Pinson, *The Fools' Journey: A Myth of Obsession in Northern Renaissance Art* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 2: “While in medieval morality, folly held a traditional position in the psychomachic pattern among the vices opposed to Prudence, in northern Renaissance thought, folly was no longer limited to the symbolic moral failing. The new notion of folly . . . became universal, and took, ironically, the leading position that had, in the past, been reserved exclusively for death. However, unlike death, an external menacing entity that presents a definite end for man, folly, according to the new moralistic values, presents an internal and continual threat.”

⁷⁶ Robert Schnepf, “Huarte de San Juan und Suárez: Lachen im spanischen Humanismus und in der Spätscholastik, *Klassische Emotionstheorien: von Plato bis Wittgenstein*, ed. Hilge Landweer and Ursula Renz (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 223–46.

⁷⁷ They were first printed in 1470 by the German printer Georgius Lauer in Rome and in Venice by Christophorus Valdarfer. Subsequently, the *Facetiae* appeared all over Europe in countless reprints. In the sixteenth century many authors, especially in Germany, imitated, translated, or copied Poggio's collection of tales, see Albrecht Classen, *Deutsche Schwankliteratur des 16. Jahrhunderts: Studien zu Martin Montanus, Hans Wilhelm Kirchhof und Michael Lindener*. Koblenz-Landauer Studien zu Geistes-, Kultur- und Bildungswissenschaften, 4 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009), 27–28 fn. 87, 37, et passim. According to WorldCat, there were at least 202 printed versions that appeared between 1470 and 1600, many of which contained edited or translated texts. For the role of Poggio in literary-historical terms, see Riccardo Fubini, *Humanism and Secularization: From Petrarch to Valla*. Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁷⁸ <http://www.elfinspell.com/PoggioSecondTitle.html> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010). See also *The Facetiae of Giovanni Francesco Bracciolini*. A new trans. by Bernhardt J. Hurwood (New York and London: Award Books/Tandem Books, 1968), 21.

⁷⁹ The entire works of ca. 550 authors and some individual titles were banned, altogether an enormous expression of fear on the side of the Catholic Church of the power of the written and

But Poggio had found his own niche as a comical writer and developed, similarly to Boccaccio, a complex theory about the meaning of laughter. In the preface he emphasizes:

Honestum est enim ac ferme necessarium, certe quod sapientes laudarunt, mentem nostram variis cogitationibus ac molestiis oppressam, recreari quandoque a continuis curis, et eam aliquo iocandi genere ad hilaritatem remissionemque converti. Eloquentiam vero in rebus infimis, vel in his in quibus ad verbum vel facetiae exprimendae sunt, vel aliorum dicta referenda quærere, hominis nimium curiosi esse videtur. Sunt enim quaedam quæ ornatus nequeant describi, cum ita recensenda sint, quemadmodum protulerunt ea hi qui in confabulationibus coniiciuntur.⁸⁰

[It is, indeed, a desirable, I might almost say, a necessary thing, in accordance with the belief of philosophy, to relieve the spirit, burdened by numerous cares, and by jest and banter to refresh it from time to time. It would be out of place, however, to attempt a fine style in such light matters, where the chief concern is to reproduce a witty retort of the truthful saying of another. For in such material ornament becomes a vice, where the author seeks to reproduce the form and spirit of the words, as they came from the mouths of those who spoke them.⁸¹]

On the other hand, Poggio defended himself more specifically, mindful of his particular expertise as a philologist, with a reference to the need to practice the Latin language and to demonstrate that it could be employed even for such rather mundane and entertaining tales:

Modo ipsi eadem ornatus politiusque describant, quod ut faciant exhortor, quo lingua Latina etiam levioribus in rebus hac nostra ætate fiat opulentior. Proderit enim ad eloquentiæ doctrinam ea scribendi exercitatio. Ego quidem experiri volui, an multa quæ Latine dici difficulter existimantur, non absurde scribi posse viderentur, in quibus cum nullus ornatus, nulla amplitudo sermonis adhiberi queat, satis erit ingenio nostro, si non inconcinne omnino videbuntur a me referri.⁸²

[I ask only, however, that those who believe this take these same stories and ornament and refine them, so that the Latin tongue of our age may be enriched even in light things; and the practice of this art will lead to the development of a more eloquent style. For I, myself, in this work sought to make trial to find if many thoughts which were said to be difficult of expression in Latin could nevertheless be treated without absurdity. And since I did not find it possible, for my purpose, to employ a brilliant

printed word, and especially of the comic, of laughter, parody, and satire; see Georges Minois, *Censure et culture sous l'Ancien Régime* ([Paris]: Fayard, 1995); Margaret Bald and Ken Wachsberger, *Literature Suppressed on Religious Grounds*. Rev. ed. (1998; New York: Facts on File, 2006); see also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Index_Librorum_Prohibitorum (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

⁸⁰ Poggio Bracciolini, *Facezie*, con un saggio di Eugenio Garin, introduzione, traduzione e note di Marcello Ciccuto, testo latino a fronte (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1983), 108.

⁸¹ I quote here from the online edition; see above.

⁸² Poggio Bracciolini, *Facezie*, 110.

display of words, I shall be content if I at least give the impression that my tales are not clumsily told.

Whereas laughter operates, according to Arend, as a primary and fundamental expression of humans, the comical itself might be best defined as the result of a specific kind of perception and interpretation of our environment, which is closely associated with our cultural history.⁸³ In this regard, laughter, if closely examined, not only sheds important light on specific characteristics of our culture, but also determines and defines this very culture, such as in the case of sixteenth-century French literature.⁸⁴ We might have to agree that for laughter itself there has never existed a wide ranging lexicon,⁸⁵ yet this by no means implies that laughter does not carry a multiplicity of meanings, depending on the context, the persons involved, the value system, and the concrete situation. Arend's definition, however, concerning the difference between laughter and the comical can be employed effectively:

Lachen muss also nicht an Komik gebunden sein. Es lässt sich vielmehr folgendes Verhältnis formulieren: Das Lachen ist zwar der wichtigste Anzeiger des Komischen . . . ist jedoch nicht auf diese Funktion beschränkt. Überspitzt heißt dies, dass es keine Komik ohne impliziertes Lachen gibt, sehr wohl jedoch Lachen ohne Komik.⁸⁶

[Laughter does not have to be associated with the comical. We can rather determine the following correlation: Laughter is always the most important indicator of the comical . . . but it is not limited to this function. To formulate it more poignantly: there is no comical without implied laughter, but there can certainly be laughter without the comical.]

Subsequently Arend examines the intricate phenomenon of smiles, which carry again a host of further meanings, but suffice it here to emphasize that we are on the right track when we differentiate as much as possible and examine specific cases one by one. This approach will provide a fundamental platform for cultural-historical studies, and this from more or less interdisciplinary perspectives, as they constitute the contributions to the present volume.

Henri Bergson argued that laughter erupts when an individual is confronted by the incongruent which exists in opposition to the norm and what is standard. This laughter, however, is highly dependent, according to Bergson, on "a human

⁸³ Arend, *Lachen und Komik*, 30–31.

⁸⁴ Arend, *Lachen und Komik*, 31. See, for instance, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*, as discussed by Elizabeth Chesney Zegura in this volume.

⁸⁵ Michael Schlaefer, *Studien zur Ermittlung und Beschreibung des lexikalischen Paradigmas "lachen" im Deutschen*. Germanische Bibliothek. Neue Folge, Reihe 3, Untersuchungen (Heidelberg: Winter, 1987).

⁸⁶ Arend, *Lachen und Komik*, 34.

manifestation of mechanical inelasticity, or a rigidity of manner, belief, or personality. When the exposure of such inelasticity leads to laughter, two groups are immediately formed: those who laugh and those at whom the laughter is directed. Laughter is thus a form of social criticism or a force for social conformity, in which those who laugh see more or see differently from those who are laughed at."⁸⁷ Joachim Ritter claimed, by contrast, that those who laugh recognize the incongruous and alert us to it, thus inviting it, in a way, to enter the world of the congruent, or normative reality. When we laugh, we undermine and permeate the border between both areas, recognizing that the foolish and vain, the irrelevant and absurd might be found in the normal and relevant as well.⁸⁸

There is, for instance, nothing more destructive than laughter at a pompous person, in a seemingly most serious situation, such as a religious ceremony, or in a violent context. As the proverb goes, "he who laughs last laughs best." There is laughter out of desperation, and laughter as an expression of simple joy; then there is laughter as a signal of power, or as a signal of defeat. In fact, the range of meanings implied with laughter seems almost infinite, which underscores the necessity to investigate the sources most carefully and from as many perspectives as possible. We might want to go so far as to specify laughter as one of the fundamental manners to communicate, in private and in public.

Sigmund Freud had famously claimed in 1905 (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*) that the power of jokes rests in their power "to overcome a person's defenses against the content of a witicism, a content that a person might ordinarily resist if it were presented in another form."⁸⁹ In Martin Grotjahn's summary of Freud's findings we read:

Laughter occurs when repressing energy is freed from its static function of keeping something forbidden under repression and away from consciousness. A witticism starts with an aggressive tendency or intent—an insult like, shocking thought. This has to be repressed and disappears into the unconscious like a train into a mountain tunnel. The wit work begins there in the darkness of the unconscious, like the dream work; it disguises the latent aggressive thought skillfully. It combines the disguised aggression with playful pleasure, repressed since childhood and waiting for a chance to be satisfied. After this wit work is accomplished, the witticism reappears at the other end of the tunnel and sees the daylight of consciousness and conscience again. By now

⁸⁷ Here I use the concise summary by Michael Payne, "Comedy," *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. id. (1996; Malden, MA, Oxford, and Melbourne: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 109–10; here 109.

⁸⁸ Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (1904; Paris: Quadrigue/Presses Universitaires de France, 1985); Joachim Ritter, "Über das Lachen," id., *Subjektivität: Sechs Aufsätze*. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 379 (1940; Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1980); see also the contributions to *Das Komische*, ed. Wolfgang Preisendanz and Rainer Warning. Poetik und Hermeneutik, 7 (Munich: Fink, 1976); Arend, *Lachen und Komik*, 75–76.

⁸⁹ Payne, "Comedy," 109.

it has become acceptable, and the energy originally activated to keep the hostility under repression is freed into laughter. The repressed energy is no longer needed; the shock of freedom of thought and freedom from repression is enjoyed and leads to laughter.⁹⁰

Finally, Northrop Frye suggested in his essay “The Argument of Comedy” — see also his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) — two types of comedy, the old one determined by Aristophanes (ca. 446 B.C.E.–ca. 386 B.C.E.); and the new one, fundamentally reflected by Menander (ca. 342 B.C.E.–291 B.C.E.), whose literary principles ultimately influenced Shakespeare and his disciples. The former was based on the idea that social structures never change, though aberrations occur or are brought about occasionally (festivals, jokes, comedies); yet normal order, or traditional life, quickly returns and reestablishes itself. The new comedy, on the other hand, signals that the social order can be changed and severely criticized, especially through laughter, and hence the value of comedy, which then can contribute to a reform, if not revolution, of traditional society.⁹¹

To what extent, however, did people really laugh in the Middle Ages and the early-modern period — and do any of the modern theories touched upon above really address this question? When and where did they laugh? Why did they laugh, and about whom or in what context? As we can easily imagine in light of the previous discussion, raising this question implies that people then were not that much different from us today and that they had plenty of occasions to laugh or to enjoy the comical because of specific constellations, utterances, power relationships, and because of certain prejudices, misogyny, fear, or contempt, for instance.⁹² Nevertheless, to direct the focus of our critical analysis toward that situation also allows us to raise the awareness of how much the study of laughter can shed significant light on the culture, or civilization, of a certain age and people and their psychology. For instance, a number of scholars have even applied the study of laughter and humor to psychology and medical healthcare because laughter always improves a person’s mind, which then can also lead to overall improvement of the rest of the body.⁹³ Not surprisingly, this has already been

⁹⁰ Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter*, 255–56.

⁹¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1965; New York: Atheneum, 1969), 43–44. See also Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Third ed. (1997; Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 70–72.

⁹² Paul G. Ruggiers, *Versions of Medieval Comedy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977); Felice Moretti, *La ragione del sorriso e del riso nel Medioevo*. Il grifo / Centro ricerche di storia e arte, Bitonto, 5 (Bari: Edipuglia, 2001); Guy Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Lloyd Bishop, *Comic Literature in France: From the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2004).

⁹³ Robin Andrew Haig, *The Anatomy of Humor: Biopsychosocial and Therapeutic Perspectives*. American

observed in medieval medical treatises and narratives—in the former, perhaps, as facetious irony directed against their own profession, and in the latter, as a biting satirical attack against false authorities.⁹⁴

Although Benedict of Nursia had stipulated in his monastic rules that his monks should avoid laughing as inappropriate behavior in specific contexts, he did not condemn it altogether in principle. And he never said anything about laughter outside the convent walls, which should alert us to the danger of inappropriate generalizations regarding the function of the comical in the Middle Ages. In the chapter on silence, for instance, Benedict emphasizes:

Nam loqui et docere magistrum condecet, tacere et audire discipulum convenit. Et ideo, si qua requirenda sunt a priore, cum omni humilitate et subiectione reverentiae requirantur. Scurrilitates vero vel verba otiosa et risum moventia aeterna clausura in omnibus locis damnamus et ad talia eloquia discipulum aperire os non permittimus.⁹⁵

For it belongeth to the master to speak and to teach; it becometh the disciple to be silent and to listen. If, therefore, anything must be asked of the Superior, let it be asked with all humility and respectful submission. But coarse jests, and idle words or speech provoking laughter, we condemn everywhere to eternal exclusion; and for such speech we do not permit the disciple to open his lips.⁹⁶

In the seventh chapter on humility, Benedict underscores: “Decimus humilitatis gradus est si non sit facilis ac promptus in risu, quia scriptum est: Stultus in risu exultat vocem suam” (59; The tenth degree of humility is, when a monk is not easily moved and quick for laughter, for it is written: ‘The fool exalteth his voice in laughter’” [Sir 21:23]).⁹⁷ Monks are supposed to avoid laughter and behave seriously, according to their status: “Undecimus humilitatis gradus est si, cum loquitur monachus, leniter et sine risu, humiliter cum gravitate vel pauca verba et rationabilia loquatur, et non sit clamosus in voce, sicut scriptum est: Sapiens verbis innotescit paucis” (60–61; The eleventh degree of humility is, that, when a monk

Series in Behavioral Science and Law, 1079 (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1988); Vera M. Robinson, *Humor and the Health Profession: The Therapeutic Use of Humor in Health Care*. 2nd ed. (1977; Thorofare, NJ: Slack, 1991); Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Publication, 2007); see also the contributions to *Motivation to Humor*, ed. Jacob Levine (New York: Atherton Press, 1969); for general remarks on the comical and laughter, see Jacques Veissid, *Le Comique, le rire et l'humour* (Paris: Lettres du Monde, 1978).

⁹⁴ Sebastian Coxon, *Laughter and Narrative in the Later Middle Ages: German Comic Tales 1350–1525*, *Legenda* (Leeds: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2008), 35–36.

⁹⁵ http://www.luisvives.com/servlet/SirveObras/jlv/02580516454693584321157/p0000001.htm#I_8_ (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

⁹⁶ Chapter VI: Of Silence; here quoted from the online edition of the English translation at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule2/files/rule2.html#ch54> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

⁹⁷ http://www.luisvives.com/servlet/SirveObras/jlv/02580516454693584321157/p0000001.htm#I_8_ (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

speaketh, he speak gently and without laughter, humbly and with gravity, with few and sensible words, and that he be not loud of voice”⁹⁸ However, we might have to exert considerable caution in the interpretation of how Benedict addressed the issue of “risus” in specific terms. He does not reject laughter outright, on the contrary. First of all, he recognizes that people tend to laugh, yet he observes that some go overboard and make fools of themselves. Second, he specifies laughter only in the context of monastic life, and, even more importantly, he does not condemn it completely and for everyone. Instead, he recognizes that people, even once they have joined a convent, still display interest in mirth and light entertainment, as otherwise his focus on the problem of laughing within the quiet context of the monastery would not have played such an important role.

As is so often the case, whether we examine expressions of anger, fear, or happiness (laughter), espousing the research method underlying the history of mentality, we are quickly in a solid position to gain deeper insight into the value system and the ‘household’ of emotions determining a society. Those like Benedict, who voice criticism of and try to impose a ban on certain behavior, such as laughter, reveal more about that phenomenon than they might have intended, especially because laughter reflects upon society at large, being predicated on communication and social interaction.⁹⁹ Most significantly, we would badly misread the world of the medieval church if we entirely divorced it from laughter, despite the specific statements by Benedict and many others.¹⁰⁰

One of the greatest authorities in the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica* (written between 1265 and 1274),¹⁰¹ specifically addressed this issue and supported play and laughter, if done innocently and without evil intent, as follows:

Quies animae est delectatio, ut supra habitum est, cum de passionibus ageretur. Et ideo oportet remedium contra fatigationem animalem adhibere per aliquam

⁹⁸ For the Latin version, see <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/benedict.html> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

⁹⁹ Marcella Tarozzi Goldsmith, *Nonrepresentational Forms of the Comic: Humor, Irony, and Jokes*. American University Studies. Series V: Philosophy, 117 (New York, San Francisco, Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 1991), 6–7.

¹⁰⁰ Jeannine Horowitz and Sophia Menach, *L’Humour en chaire*, 22–53; Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), ch. 5, 78–101, refers to the great theoretical discussions by Thomas Aquinas on the meaning of laughter as a means to relax the soul (*eutrapelia*), in his *Summa Theologica*, qu. 168, art. 2–4; here 79. But she mostly examines the Feast of Fools, Carnival, and religious plays. Cf. also Charles Mazour, “La Dérision dans les mystères médiévaux,” *Rire des dieux*. Études rassemblées par Dominique Bertrand et Véronique Gély-Ghedira (Clermon-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2000), 73–83.

¹⁰¹ For an excellent overview and summary, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summa_Theologica (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

delectationem, intermissa intentione ad insistendum studio rationis. Sicut in collationibus patrum legitur quod beatus Evangelista Ioannes, cum quidam scandalizarentur quod eum cum suis discipulis ludentem invenerunt, dicitur mandasse uni eorum, qui arcum gerebat, ut sagittam traheret. Quod cum pluries fecisset, quaesivit utrum hoc continue facere posset. Qui respondit quod, si hoc continue faceret, arcus frangeretur. Unde beatus Ioannes subintulit quod similiter animus hominis frangeretur, si nunquam a sua intentione relaxaretur.¹⁰²

[Consequently, the remedy for weariness of soul must needs consist in the application of some pleasure, by slackening the tension of the reason's study. Thus in the Conferences of the Fathers xxiv, 21, it is related of Blessed John the Evangelist, that when some people were scandalized on finding him playing together with his disciples, he is said to have told one of them who carried a bow to shoot an arrow. And when the latter had done this several times, he asked him whether he could do it indefinitely, and the man answered that if he continued doing it, the bow would break. Whence the Blessed John drew the inference that in like manner man's mind would break if its tension were never relaxed.

Further, as Aquinas reasons,

Ergo his uti interdum ad sapientem et virtuosum pertinet. Philosophus etiam ponit virtutem eutrapeliae circa ludos, quam nos possumus dicere iucunditatem . . . Huiusmodi autem secundum regulam rationis ordinantur. Habitus autem secundum rationem operans est virtus moralis. Et ideo circa ludos potest esse aliqua virtus, quam philosophus eutrapeliam nominat. Et dicitur aliquis eutrapelus a bona versione, quia scilicet bene convertit aliqua dicta vel facta in solatium. Et inquantum per hanc virtutem homo refrenatur ab immoderantia ludorum, sub modestia continetur..

[Therefore there can be a virtue about games. The Philosopher gives it the name of wittiness ({eutrapelia}), and a man is said to be pleasant through having a happy turn* of mind, whereby he gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn: and inasmuch as this virtue restrains a man from immoderate fun, it is comprised under modesty. (*{Eutrapelia} is derived from {trepein} = 'to turn')].¹⁰³

In Article 4 Aquinas goes even one step further and emphasizes the great need of mirth, or laughter, as the glue that holds human beings together and facilitates communication. In clear contrast to many theologians before him, he regards the lack of mirth as a vice and justifies this as follows:

Et ideo tales vitiosi sunt, et dicuntur duri et agrestes, ut philosophus dicit, in IV Ethic. Sed quia ludus est utilis propter delectationem et quietem; delectatio autem et quies

¹⁰² Here quoted from: <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth3155.html> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁰³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Qu. 168, art. 2: Whether there can be a virtue about games?; here cited from the online English translation at: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS_Q168_A2.html (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

non propter se quaeruntur in humana vita, sed propter operationem, ut dicitur in X Ethic., defectus ludi minus est vitiosus quam ludi superexcessus. Unde philosophus dicit, in IX Ethic., quod pauci amici propter delectationem sunt habendi, quia parum de delectatione sufficit ad vitam, quasi pro condimento; sicut parum de sale sufficit in cibo.

[Now a man who is without mirth, not only is lacking in playful speech, but is also burdensome to others, since he is deaf to the moderate mirth of others. Consequently they are vicious, and are said to be boorish or rude, as the Philosopher states (Ethic. iv, 8.

Since, however, mirth is useful for the sake of the rest and pleasures it affords; and since, in human life, pleasure and rest are not in quest for their own sake, but for the sake of operation, as stated in Ethic. x, 6, it follows that “lack of mirth is less sinful than excess thereof.” Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. ix, 10): “We should make few friends for the sake of pleasure, since but little sweetness suffices to season life, just as little salt suffices for our meat.”]¹⁰⁴

Before we continue with our theoretical ruminations, let us turn to a concrete case to illustrate the issues at stake more dramatically. A most intriguing example of implied laughter can be found, for instance, in the famous poem “Under der linden” (L. 39, 11) by the Middle High German poet Walther von der Vogelweide (fl. ca. 1190–ca. 1220).¹⁰⁵ This beautiful variant of a pastourella is well known and has attracted much research, but a quick summary may be useful before we begin. A young woman sings about her love experience one day when she goes out to the meadow to meet her lover who has already prepared a bed of flowers and grass for them. She expresses her great delight about how tenderly he welcomed and treated her, but she now also formulates a deep sense of shame and embarrassment, hoping that her secret affair might not be divulged. Only a little nightingale observed the two lovers, but the female voice expects it to be trustworthy and loyal: “daz mac wol getriuwe sîn” (40, 18; IV, 9; it will probably be loyal; or, more loosely translated: it will not give us away).¹⁰⁶

The critical, and for us most important, statement, however, appears in the third stanza when she reflects upon the love bed where they enjoyed their time together. Although she ardently desires that this wonderful erotic experience will remain undiscovered, she also addresses her audience, pointing out the reddishness of her lips (“seht, wie rôet mir ist der munt” [39, 28; II, 9]), and unexpectedly transforming

¹⁰⁴ http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS_Q168_A4.html (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ Walther von der Vogelweide, *Leich, Lieder, Sangsprüche*. 14th completely newly ed. by Christoph Cormeau (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996); here song no. 16 (“L. 39, 11” refers to the old counting system established by the original editor Karl Lachmann).

¹⁰⁶ The latest critical treatment of this song was offered by Susanne Köbele, “Ironie und Fiktion in Walthers Minnelyrik,” *Fiktion und Fiktionalität in den Literaturen des Mittelalters: Jan-Dirk Müller zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ursula Peters and Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 2009), 289–317.

the audience into immediate witnesses. Moreover, referring to the bed of flowers, she knows only too well that everyone who passes by that location will quickly understand what has happened there because her head has left a clear imprint on the flowers. Those, however, who observe that, and then understand the entire situation, would chuckle quietly by themselves: “des wirt noch gelachtet / inneclîche” (40, 4–5; III, 4–5; people are still laughing happily about it). The use of the adjective “inneclîche” conveys a sense of privacy and also support for the lovers, since all those who pass by would express a sense of understanding, if not happiness because the female singer—still a male projection—imagines a utopian situation for all future lovers. This laughter, however, would be close to the concept of “Lächeln” (smile) as discussed by Arend, that is, not a loud, rude, or hateful laughter; instead it seems to express a degree of intimacy and understanding because this happy love situation appeals to all people who accept and believe in that kind of erotic meeting outside in delightful nature near the forest, but still in the open of a pleasant meadow.

In other words, Walther here projects a truly important situation in which two young lovers experience the dream many others would like to enjoy as well, but these observers who pass by that site later are not jealous; instead they laugh about the welcome opportunity of being entitled to have a chance to assume the position of a voyeur, so to speak, and they delight in the imagination provoked by the left-over bed of flowers. This then triggers their intimate laughter, which indirectly creates a community of those who approve of this happy love affair, outside of society, based on mutual respect and affection.¹⁰⁷ Susanne Köbele now observes: “In Walthers *Lindenlied* setzt Ironie ein artifizielles Spiel mit Zeichen- und Referenzebenen in Gang, über das recht genau beschreibbar wird, worin die komplexe Fiktionsironie, die durchgängige ironische Konstruktion dieses Liedes besteht” (In Walther’s *Lindenlied* [Song of the Linden Tree] irony initiates an artistic game with the levels of signs and references, through which it becomes quite easy to describe what constitutes the complex irony of fiction, or the pervasive ironic

¹⁰⁷ A. C. Spearing, “The Medieval Poet as Voyeur,” *The Old Daunce: Love, Friendship, Sex, and Marriage in the Medieval World*, ed. Robert R. Edwards and Stephen Spector (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 57–86. He does not, however, consider the intriguing element of laughing voyeurs. Heike Sievert, *Studien zur Liebeslyrik Walthers von der Vogelweide*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 506 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1990), 93–106, offers a most sensible reading of this poem, but she ignores this very important line referring to people happily laughing about the site of the love-making. Other scholars also seem to ignore this significant element in their interpretation of this truly famous love poem; see Gerhard Hahn, “Walthers Minnesang,” Horst Brunner, Gerhard Hahn, Ulrich Müller, and Franz Viktor Spechtler, *Walther von der Vogelweide: Epoche – Werk – Wirkung*. Arbeitsbücher zur Literaturgeschichte (Munich: Beck, 1996), 74–134; here 106–07. See also Achim Masser, “Zu den sogenannten ‘Mädchenliedern’ Walthers von der Vogelweide,” *Wirkendes Wort* 39 (1989): 3–15.

construction of this song).¹⁰⁸ We can certainly subscribe to this analysis, but we still cannot forget that this irony is strongly supported by actual, though silent, laughter, which, in a way, creates a community of people who firmly believe in the value of courtly, but truly fulfilled love.

In the Middle English version of *Floris and Blancheflur*—a branch of a huge pan-European literary tree of related narratives—once Floris has related to the Admiral/Emir how he had succeeded in making his way to his beloved by tricking the guard, the court company breaks out in scornful laughter: “Alle þes opere lowe peruore” (ms. C, v. 776), which creates an important distance between the court and the outside world, populated by secondary figures, such as the guard, inn-keepers, merchants, and the like. Nevertheless, this laughter also reveals the extent to which individuals are easily subject to material temptations and can thus break or switch their oath of loyalty. Even the best noblemen would be subject to this danger, whereas true lovers emerge as the most powerful and forceful individuals in society.

Let us explore another example, this one from the middle of the fifteenth century, by an unknown author, though we are given, as far as we can tell, the name of the historical editor of the anthology, Antoine de la Salle. In the French *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* we come across numerous examples of the typical late-medieval narrative (perhaps already belonging to the Renaissance) in which erotic relationships, marital problems, disloyalty, and love affairs, as well as foolish behavior, ridiculous ideas, and the like, are addressed, and often predicated on the comic.¹⁰⁹ No doubt, this anthology of facetious narratives is very much predicated on the model developed already by Boccaccio with his *Decameron*. Antoine de la Salle had composed similar works before the *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, and in the fiftieth novella he is identified as the author of this tale. But all this remains doubtful, as is the question of whether the collection was supposed to entertain the Burgundian court, or some other noble audience. It was created sometime after 1453 and 1467, although the only surviving manuscript dates it as 1432, which must have been a scribal error for specific reasons that do not need to be addressed here. The *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* were first printed in 1486 and ca. 1495, and many times thereafter.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Susanne Köbele, “Ironie und Fiktion in Walthers Minnelyrik,” 296.

¹⁰⁹ Armine Kotin Mortimer, *The Narrative Imagination: Comic Tales by Philippe de Vigneulles*. Studies in Romance Languages, 18 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977); David A. Fein, *Displacements of Power: Readings of the Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (Lanham, MD, New York, and Oxford: University Press of America, 2003), focuses on a handful of individual tales and discusses them in detail. He observes that sexuality, betrayal, and politics play some of the strongest roles in the entire collection.

¹¹⁰ Here I use the English translation by Robert B. Douglas: *One Hundred Merrie and Delightsome*

In the twenty-seventh story a married woman invites her lover to visit her at night, without yet knowing how to get rid of her husband at the crucial moment. Luckily, there happens to be a suitcase at the end of her bed, which arouses his curiosity. He wonders about the bag's small size, which makes it unfit to contain her long dresses. The ensuing debate results in a wager as to whether he himself would fit into the suitcase, which we might have to read also metaphorically insofar as he replaces her dresses. After the clothes have been removed, he places himself inside, fitting quite snugly. When he confirms that he has lost the wager, his wife and the chambermaids close and lock the suitcase, and then, laughingly and jokingly, carry it away to a remote room. None of his protests achieve the desired result, so he has to spend the entire night in this unpleasant position, to the great surprise of the lover who arrives shortly thereafter. He and the wife enjoy the night together most pleasantly without being bothered by anyone.

Once the young man has left in the morning, the lady returns to the suitcase but skillfully pretends to be completely surprised to find her poor husband inside, blaming the maids for having failed to follow through with her command to release him from his small prison. At first the cuckolded man voices his intention to get his revenge against the maids, but when they arrive, laughing cheerfully about their alleged trick to get even with him for some assumed wrongful behavior, they channel all his anger away from them and quickly appease him. Interestingly, despite his long suffering, the victim cannot uphold his angry mien and even joins their laughter, which turns into a communal act through which all anger and frustration disappear: "all the women came into the room, and laughed so loudly and so heartily that they could not say a word for a long time; and Monsieur, who was going to do such wonders, when he saw them laugh to such a degree, had not the heart to interfere with them." In fact, he even thanks the maids quite sarcastically for their kind behavior toward him during the night, but they know how to retort, reminding him of all the trouble and worries that he had caused them for a long time.

The entire scene concludes with both sides promising to prepare clothes for each other as a reward, though the women continue to laugh about him even during the subsequent mass because they have to think about his involuntary imprisonment and the fact that the lady could cuckold him so easily: "And you may imagine that during the Mass there was more than one giggle when they remembered that

Stories (Paris: Charles Carrington 1899), cited from the online version at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18575/18575-h/18575-h.htm> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010). The commentary by Peter Amelung in the German translation by Alfred Semerau (Vienna: Buchgemeinschaft Donauland, 1965), offers a good overview. For a recent critical edition, see *Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, ed. Pacifico Massimi. Texte inédit, publié, traduit et présenté par Juliette Desjardins Daude. Les Classiques de l'Humanisme, 29 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008).

Monsieur, whilst he was in the chest (though he did not know it himself), had been registered in the book which has no name.”

The laughter proves to be double-edged, complex, irreverent, but not evil or aggressive, though certainly determined by a deep sense of *Schadenfreude*. The lady has obviously profited the most from the entire set-up since she could enjoy the love affair without her husband ever finding out what happened behind his back. But he does not demonstrate any significant impact on his own position in life since he remains happily ignorant and continues to trust and love his wife. The maids have gained their lady's additional respect through their most skillful handling of the situation in the morning, diverting his possible suspicion away from their mistress to themselves, thus closely collaborating with the lady to create a cover for her love affair. The maids seem to laugh honestly, and play far more than only an artificial role in this amazing performance pitting the entire female household against the poor husband. They have been indirect witnesses of the love affair and now relive it in their minds while confronting the cheated lord. Moreover, being laughed at so profusely, he cannot refrain and joins their outburst of laughter as well, reducing the damage to himself considerably because now he can interpret the situation as a minor infraction on the part of the maids, or as a silly and certainly not mean plot to punish him for some unknown harsh behavior against them. Although he confirms that the maids add insult to his injury, he perceives it as a huge joke; hence he cannot counteract or destroy their open display of happiness.¹¹¹

We as the audience know only too well that he was cuckolded, but insofar as the husband joins the public laughter, the actual damage to his honor finds its compensation, especially because he does not turn into an old fool who deserves to be cheated by his wife. Of course, the husband at the end is the butt of the joke, but this does not destroy or belittle him in light of the entire court society because no one finds out the truth behind his wife's scheme with the suitcase, except for the readers/listeners, with whom the author pleads to keep the story a secret, in a manner very similar to the female voice in Walther von der Vogelweide's song.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Judith Bruskin Diner, “Comedy and Courtliness: the Form and Style of ‘Les cent nouvelles nouvelles,’” Ph.D. diss. New York, 1984; see also Luca Pierdominici, *La Bouche et le corps: Images littéraires du quinzième siècle français*. Bibliothèque du XVe siècle, 65 (Paris: Champion, 2003); for source studies, which do not concern us here, see Raphael Zehnder, *Les Modèles latins des Cent nouvelles nouvelles des textes de Poggio Bracciolini, Nicolas de Clamanges, Albrecht von Eyb et Francesco Petrarca et leur adaptation en langue vernaculaire française* (Bern, Vienna, et al.: Peter Lang, 2004).

¹¹² For further studies of the *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, see Roger Dubuis, *Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles et la tradition de la nouvelle en France au Moyen Age* ([Grenoble]: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1973); Margarete Zimmermann, *Vom Hausbuch zur Novelle: didaktische und erzählende Prosa im Frankreich des späten Mittelalters*. *Studia humaniora*, 12 (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1989); David A. Fein, *Displacement of Power: Readings of the Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

Significantly, the audience proves to be complicit in the humorous scheme which operates exceedingly well with its multiple screens, levels of meaning, group behavior, and carefree attitude regarding marital loyalty. Both the lady of the house and her maids know all too well that they have pulled the carpet out from under the husband's feet and are only too aware how they can manipulate him in the future as well because as a female collective they have triumphed over his feeble attempts to maintain his masculine superiority. Intriguingly, we find a most striking reflection upon this type of laughter in the 'superiority theory' developed by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who, in his *Human Nature* (ch. 8, §13, in *English Works*, vol. 4, 1840), offers the following explanation:

There is a passion that has no name; but the sign of it is that distortion of the countenance which we shall call laughter, which is always joy; but what joy, what we think, and wherein we triumph when we laugh, is not hitherto declared by any. That it consists in wit, or, as they call it, in the jest, experience confutes: for men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lies no wit nor jest at all. And forasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous when it grows stale or usual, whatsoever it be that moves laughter, it must be new and unexpected. Men laugh often, especially such as are greedy of applause from every thing they do well, as their own actions performed never so little beyond their own expectations, as also at their own jests . . . Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated.¹¹³

Both in the high and in the late Middle Ages secular writers never faced serious problems or expressed reservations about incorporating specific scenes, motifs, and themes that included the element of laughter. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, as I have observed already above, even within the strict framework of the Christian Church, laughter could be heard, and no monastic rule could suppress it completely, although Saint John Chrysostom had (ca. 347–407 C.E.) already proclaimed that Christ had never laughed, underscoring the profound value of dignity of an honorable human life aspiring to enter the glory of the divine afterlife. Athanasius praised Anthony for his inner stoic mind that never had to struggle against laughter, an ideal that Sulpicius Severus (ca. 363–ca. 425) also observed in St. Martin (315/316–ca. 395–405).

Nevertheless, even among these great Church authorities there was no complete consensus regarding the relevance and meaning of humor, jests, wit, and the like, as the probing questions of Petrus Comestor (d. ca. 1178) and by Walter Châtillon (ca. 1135–ca. 1204) indicate.¹¹⁴ Already the tenth-century canoness Hrotsvita of

¹¹³ Quoted from *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall. SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 19–20.

¹¹⁴ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. from the German by Willard R. Trask. Bollingen Series, XXXVI (1948; 1953; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 420–22.

Gandersheim composed religious plays—in specific competition with the Roman playwright Terence whose works she regarded as too immoral for her fellow sisters—in which egregious elements of humor, sometimes almost grotesque and unabashed, boldly surface. The play *Dulcitus* contains some of the most interesting elements because the three virgins to be martyred for their steadfast adherence to their Christian faith can observe at one point how the official Dulcitus, who had intended to rape them while they are held in a prison next to the kitchen in preparation for their execution, ends up in the kitchen instead. With his mind confused by God, he mistakes the pots and pans for the women, hugs and kisses them, and thus gains his (sexual?) satisfaction. The three prisoners, perceiving the noise of the clanging and banging next door, discover a hole in the wall, gleefully watch the fool, and laugh about his egregious mistake.¹¹⁵ They act as voyeurs, and we, as the audience, are also entertained through this form of voyeuristic eroticism.¹¹⁶

Going further back, we discover even types of black humor, as exemplified by the accounts of the martyrdom suffered by Laurence and Eulalia.¹¹⁷ As we read about the former in the *Golden Legend* (ca. 1260–1275), he was roasted on a grill, and yet did not feel any pain. In fact, the author Jacob de Voragine has him say at the worst moment to his tormentor, ridiculing all their futile attempts to subdue his spirit by means of hurting his body: “Ecce, miser, assasti unam partem, gira aliam et manduca! Et gratias agens dixit: ‘Gratias ago tibi, domine, quia ianuas tuas ingredi merui!’” (“Look, wretch, you have me well done on one side, turn me over and eat!” And giving thanks, he said: “ I thank you, O Lord, because I have been worthy to pass through your portals!”).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ For a somewhat radical and feminist reading, see Eva Cescutti, *Hrotsvit und die Männer: Konstruktionen von “Männlichkeit” und “Weiblichkeit in der lateinischen Literatur im Umfeld der Ottonen, eine Fallstudie*. Forschungen zur Geschichte der älteren deutschen Literatur, 23 (Munich: Fink, 1998); Albrecht Classen, “Sex on the Stage in an Early Medieval Convent: Hrotsvita of Gandersheim. A Tenth-Century Convent Playwright’s Successful Struggle Against the Roman Terence,” forthcoming in *Orbis Litterarum*. For Hrotsvit’s works, see Hrotsvit, *Opera omnia*, ed. Walter Berschin. Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Munich: Saur, 2001).

¹¹⁶ For the concept of voyeurism as developed in the Middle Ages, see Anthony C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyer: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹¹⁷ Max Wehrli, *Literatur im deutschen Mittelalter: Eine poetologische Einführung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 166–73; for a global overview, see Armando Bisanti, *Un ventennio di studi su Rosvita di Gandersheim*. Studi. Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’ Alto Medioevo, 12 (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’ Alto Medioevo, 2005); see also the contributions to *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. Phyllis R. Brown and Katharina M. Wilson, and Linda A. McMillin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

¹¹⁸ Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea con le miniature del codice Ambrosiano C 240 inf*. Teste critico riveduto e commento a cura di Giovanni Paolo Maggioni (Florence: Sisme, Edizioni del Galluzzo; Milan: Bibliotheca Ambrosiana, 2007), 846; for the English, see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden*

This philopassianism was rather common in the late Middle Ages and reflected the deep concern with the body as the medium to come to terms with human sinfulness and to fight it as the prison of the soul that desired liberation.¹¹⁹ But already beforehand in the same text we observe Saint Laurence smiling at the foolishness of his tormentors, so when Emperor Decius enjoins his soldiers: “‘Viri Romani, audistis demones istum sacrilegum consolantes, qui nec deos colit nec tormenta metuit nec iratos principes expauescit’ Iussitque iterum eum scorpionibus cedi” (844; “Men of Rome, you have heard the demons consoling this blasphemer, who does not worship our gods, does not fear torments, does not quail before angry princes! He ordered him beaten again with scorpions,” 66). The saint knows only too well that God supports him and that all human efforts will be in vain to crush his determination and deep inner Christian faith because his spirit will always prove to be stronger than his flesh: “Subridens autem Laurentius gratias egit et pro astantibus exorauit” (844; “Laurence smiled, gave thanks, and prayed for those who stood by,” 66).

Max Wehrli offers the insightful explanation that all these religious scenes with humorous elements are not directed against God; on the contrary, they invite the divine element to enter the human sphere which is characterized by laughter—a world identified by its corporeality and sinfulness, hence a world where laughter is the appropriate response to transgression and failure, providing freedom from physical constraints.¹²⁰

But there were significant differences, between a form of *laetitia saecularis*, on the one hand, and the *gaudium spirituale* officially tolerated by the Church, which could not deny at least the *risus moderatus*, to combat a generally feared form of depression, the *tristitia*, or *acedia*. On the other end of the spectrum we even hear of a spiritually inspired form of laughter, evident, for instance, in one of Meister Eckhart’s sermons: “rehte ein spiln, ein lachen in dem guoten werk” (really a game, a laughter in the good work); and the reborn person “kriuchet der muoter ûz der schôz und lachet den himelschen vater ane” (he crawls out of the mother’s womb and smiles at the heavenly Father).¹²¹

Legend: Readings on the Saints, trans. by William Granger Ryan. Vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 67; see also the online version at:

<http://www.aug.edu/augusta/iconography/goldenLegend/lawrence.htm> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹¹⁹ Esther Cohen, “Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages,” *Science in Context* 8.2 (1995): 47-74; here 51. See also Martha Easton, “Pain, Torture and Death in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*,” *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih. Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 9-64.

¹²⁰ Wehrli, *Literatur im deutschen Mittelalter*, 173.

¹²¹ Quoted from Wehrli, *Literatur im deutschen Mittelalter*, 179. The relevant text passages are quoted there.

At the same time, however, as Wehrli observes, and as we learn from many other sources, medieval laughter could be of a satirical, aggressive, hostile, or disrespectful nature; an expression of the struggle of the various social classes against each other; or, specifically, the contempt felt by the noble class about the lower class. Altogether, as he concludes:

Das Lachen ist nicht nur ein Akt natürlicher, profaner Entspannung und Befreiung (der ja auch nicht sinnlos und sündhaft zu sein braucht); die Vernichtung falscher Ansprüche, die es leistet, kann vielleicht auch einen Weg zum Heil frei machen. Die *Risibilitas* bezeichnet ein Humanum nicht nur im diesseitigen Sinn, sie ist im Guten wie im Bedenklichen ein Kennzeichen des *geschichtlichen* Menschen.¹²²

[Laughing is not only an act of natural, profane relaxation and liberation (which does not necessarily have to be meaningless or sinful); the destruction of false claims, which is brought about by laughter, can possibly also open a path toward salvation. *Risibilitas* signifies a human character not only in a transcendental sense, it is also, both in the positive and the negative, a character trait of man as a historical being.]

Even if lexical references to laughter or the comical seem to be used sparingly in the Middle Ages, it would be erroneous to claim that the condemnation of both aspects by the Church Fathers and many other theologians in later centuries led to their utter disappearance, as we have seen already in a number of cases.¹²³ Both Bernard of Clairvaux and Anselm of Canterbury resorted to humor and explored laughter in their discourse on a wide variety of matters, though regularly associated with man's frailty and sinfulness.¹²⁴ The great interest in the topic of laughter and the rich world of comical literature in the Renaissance and beyond would not be explicable without an extensive foundation already in the Middle Ages. After all, the incessant preaching against laughter and the comical, such as in Benedict of Nursia's monastic rules, solidly confirms that it was directed against insubordination, hence against the common occurrence, or eruption, of laughter in all facets and conditions of human life. We might have good reasons, though, to assume that people in the Middle Ages and the early modern age allowed humor and the comical to come to life much more commonly,¹²⁵ even within the context of the sacred, than we tend to believe because we give too much weight

¹²² Wehrli, *Literatur im deutschen Mittelalter*, 181.

¹²³ Anton Hügli, "Lächerliche," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter † and Karlfried Gründer. Vol. 5 (Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co. AG, 1980), 1–7; here 2. It is curious how the same author can formulate such a claim (pertaining, however, primarily to the 'ridiculous') and observe the opposite in another major reference work (see above).

¹²⁴ See, for instance, Anselm's epistle no 41; cf. Lothar Steiger, "Humor," 696–701. See also André Derville, "Humour," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*. Vol. VII (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969), 1188–92.

¹²⁵ See, for instance, the immensely popular genre of late-medieval plays, such as the *Corpus Christi* plays like *The Second Shepards' Play* and *Noah's Ark* where the comic devils all show this merging of comic and sacred. See the contribution to this volume by Jean N. Goodrich.

to the normative texts opposed to all forms of humor and comic and overlook their specific struggle to overcome the disrespectful merriment.¹²⁶ We can no longer uphold the traditional viewpoint that all laughter was a profane force against sacrality per se. As art historians, theater scholars, and literary historians can amply demonstrate, laughter also arose in the middle of the Church in many different contexts and could even lend voice to the *numinosum*.¹²⁷

Whether there was a tendency toward evil, encased in ever growing forms of nasty and aggressive types of satire, ridicule, and poking fun at people, as Werner Röcke has suggested by pointing toward the significant corpus of surprisingly deconstructive and irreverent late-medieval verse narratives (*mæren*) and prose jest narratives (*Schwänke*), seems rather questionable. Focusing primarily on the latter genre, popular in the sixteenth century, he believes that he can recognize a specific tendency toward the dark side of life as the primary intention of humor:

Diese Schwankhelden stehen nicht über den Dingen, sondern führen – im Gegenteil – mitten in ihre Vielfalt und Widersprüchlichkeit hinein. Die gewohnten Formen des Denkens und Handelns verbinden sie oder besser noch: konfrontieren sie mit bislang Ausgegrenztem, Tabuisiertem, Undenkbarem, mit dem Körper, seinen Reaktionen und Obszönitäten; mit dem Häßlichen, Bösen und Teuflischen.¹²⁸

[These protagonists of jest narratives are not free of all contingency; instead they lead into the midst of all variability and contradictoriness. They connect the habitual forms of thinking and acting with, or rather, they confront them with those aspects that had so far been excluded, subject to a taboo, had been unthinkable, and then also confront them with the body, its reactions and obscenities; with the ugly, evil, and the devilish.]

Heavily drawing on Joachim Ritter's theory, Röcke then proceeds to formulate the general claim: "Komik bezieht das Böse, Häßliche, Befremdliche so ein, daß es applikabel wird. Sie resultiert aus dem Kontrast unterschiedlicher Normensysteme und sichert zugleich ihr mögliches Nebeneinander"¹²⁹ (the comical incorporates

¹²⁶ Basilius Steidle, "Das Lachen im alten Mönchstum," *Benediktinische Monatsschrift zur Pflege religiösen und geistigen Lebens* 20 (1938): 271–80; Gerhard Schmitz: ". . . quod rident homines, plorandum est: Der 'Unwert' des Lachens in monastisch geprägten Vorstellungen der Spätantike und des Mittelalters," *Stadtverfassung, Verfassungsstaat, Pressepolitik: Festschrift für Eberhard Naujoks zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Franz Quarthal and Wilfried Setzler (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1980), 3–15; Irvn M. Resnick, "Risus monastica: Laughter and Medieval Monastic Culture," *Revue Bénédictine* 97 (1987): 90–100; Tobias A. Kemper, "Iesus Christus risus noster: Bemerkungen zur Bewertung des Lachens im Mittelalter," *Komik und Sakralität: Aspekte einer ästhetischen Paradoxie in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Anja Grebe and Nikolaus Staubach. Tradition – Reform – Innovation, 9 (Frankfurt a. M. and New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 16–31.

¹²⁷ See Katja Gvozdeva and Werner Röcke, "Performative Kommunikationsfelder von Sakralität und Gelächter," "risus sacer – sacrum risibile," ed. id., 9–28; here 10–11.

¹²⁸ Werner Röcke, *Die Freude am Bösen: Studien zu einer Poetik des deutschen Schwankromans im Spätmittelalter*. Forschungen zur Geschichte der älteren deutschen Literatur, 6 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987), 157.

¹²⁹ Röcke, *Die Freude am Bösen*, 158.

the evil, ugly, foreign in such a way that it becomes applicable. It results from the contrast of diverse normative systems and guarantees, at the same time, their possible existence side by side). Undoubtedly, there are many examples in late-medieval literature, and we can also find some refractions in earlier texts, but it would be truly dangerous to narrow our critical approach to such extreme terms and perspectives. Of course, laughter sometimes aims at criticizing moral failure in order to correct specific types of behavior, and it also expresses admiration for an intelligently strategizing trickster or goliard.

But again, moral issues rarely play such a substantial role in the world of laughter, a point, which, to be fair, Röcke observes as well.¹³⁰ Insofar as he focuses on late-medieval jest narratives and collections thereof, often determined by a central figure who appears in each individual tale, however, he still argues quite forcefully that in the late Middle Ages and beyond the discursive emphasis rested on the treatment of evil, dirt, and the obscene, which hence represented the crucial material framework for the operation of laughter and humor. There is no doubt that we can observe a remarkable increase of interest in transgressive elements in literary works, such as *Till Eulenspiegel*, profoundly predicated on laughter in many different situations, mostly, but not only, by the roguish protagonist;¹³¹ but Röcke's attempt to generalize from those to establish a global cultural-historical perspective might seriously mislead us in our understanding both of the complex field of laughter/comical and public discourse in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹³²

Considering the wide range of possible narrative constellations, which also implies a multiplicity of situations where individual characters laugh about others, with each other, ridicule foolish people, or express admiration and/or surprise about a situation, may well question the validity of this rather radical approach.¹³³ Similarly, it seems questionable to argue, as Klaus Grubmüller suggests, that the majority of late-medieval verse narratives are simply predicated on cunning, funny subterfuges, punning, and rhetorical witticism. Of course, there is no doubt that much laughter in medieval literature (including the *fabliaux* and the *novelle*) is created through funny, devious, conflictual and problematic amorous

¹³⁰ Röcke, *Die Freude am Bösen*, 158; he criticizes Joachim Suchomski, 'Delectatio' und 'Utilitas', 1975, for the very same problematic approach, *ibid*.

¹³¹ Albrecht Classen, "Der komische Held Till Eulenspiegel: Didaxe, Unterhaltung, Kritik," *Wirkendes Wort* 42, 1 (1992): 13–33; *id.*, "Transgression and Laughter, the Scatological and the Epistemological: New Insights into the Pranks of Till Eulenspiegel," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 33 (2007): 41–61; *id.*, "Laughter as the Ultimate Epistemological Vehicle in the Hands of Till Eulenspiegel," *Neophilologus* 92 (2008): 417–89.

¹³² Röcke, *Die Freude am Bösen*, 11–18; for contrastive approaches, see Albrecht Classen, "Laughter as the Ultimate Epistemological Vehicle in the Hands of Till Eulenspiegel"; *id.*, *Deutsche Schwankliteratur des 16. Jahrhunderts*.

¹³³ See my own contribution to this volume.

relationships, the duping of husbands, sexual trysts of all kinds, and attempts by the lovers to avoid being detected.¹³⁴

Significantly, Grubmüller quickly corrects his own position, realizing that in a critical analysis many other strategies surface and force us to operate much more carefully with definitions of laughter and the comical. As it turns out, sexuality, for instance, proves to be not the only purpose or basis for laughter evoked through literary discourse. Instead: "Es geht nicht einfach um die Zwänge der Leidenschaft, es geht um brillante Täuschung als intellektuelle Herausforderung"¹³⁵ (The topic is not limited to the control of passions; instead it deals with brilliant deception as an intellectual challenge). Significantly, he then proceeds to uncover new dimensions, emphasizing, for instance, that eroticism and sexuality, oscillating between accepted conventions and equally accepted transgression ("Attraktivität" — I am not sure whether his choice of word is precise enough here), only provide an opportunity to enact an effective undermining of social norms: "List wird vorgeführt als die subversive Seite der Klugheit"¹³⁶ (Cunning is presented as the subversive other side of intelligence). In general, he insists, laughter erupts when borders, limits, or specific values and ideals are transgressed, hence when individuals expose systematic and personal weaknesses, without taking on an extremely aggressive stance, aiming for the destruction of the opponent or the institution.¹³⁷ A good example for this observation would be the highly pervasive anticlericalism that determined much of the public discourse from the late Middle Ages to at least the late sixteenth century.¹³⁸

But laughter also attacked foolish husbands and the institution of marriage at large, in recognition of the problematic nature of arranged marriages in obvious conflict with love and individual happiness.¹³⁹ Moreover, and this may be the biggest problem in all research on humor and laughter, considering the ponderous nature of historical and cultural-historical implications, attempts to ridicule others from a jocose, silly perspective, have always proven to be negligible aspects, as pervasive as they might have been. The contrary is the case, however, since we can really grasp fundamental aspects of human life and society much better through the lens of laughter than heretofore assumed.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz und das Chaos: Eine Geschichte der europäischen Novellistik im Mittelalter: Fabliau – Märe – Novelle* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), 137.

¹³⁵ Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz*, 138; see also my contribution to this volume.

¹³⁶ Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz*, 139.

¹³⁷ Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz*, 140.

¹³⁸ *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, 51 (Leiden and Cologne: Brill, 1993); Silke Tammen, *Manifestationen von Antiklerikalismus in der Kunst des Mittelalters*. Afra akademische Schriften: Kunstwissenschaften (Frankfurt a. M. and Griedel: Afra-Verlag, 1993).

¹³⁹ Albrecht Classen, *Der Liebes- und Ehediskurs vom hohen Mittelalter bis zum frühen 17. Jahrhundert*. Volksliedstudien, 5 (Münster, New York, et al.: Waxmann, 2005).

¹⁴⁰ For a broader discussion of this aspect, see Guy Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics*, 2002, 1–4;

Let us consider, once again, a concrete example that will profile exceedingly well how problematic all global theories regarding laughter might be and how carefully we would have to analyze each individual text in order to gain a truly complex understanding of the reasons behind the comical. This example takes us back to the ninth or early tenth century when a monk, probably in St. Gallen (today Switzerland), composed the *Waltharius* epos in Latin hexameter.¹⁴¹ Without going into any unnecessary details in the current context, this epic describes Waltharius's successful flight from the Hunnish court, although at the end he is threatened by King Gunther and his men. However, Waltharius has taken an extraordinarily effective defensive position and proves to be a superior warrior, so he can kill all of Gunther's men, until only three have survived. In the final, most brutal battle, Waltharius manages to cut off the king's leg, but when he is about to slaughter him, Hagen extends his helmeted head and thus rescues his lord. However, Waltharius's sword breaks when it hits the helmet, which then allows Hagen to strike at him and to cut off his right hand. Nevertheless, undaunted, his opponent pulls another, shorter, sword from his other side and cuts out Hagen's right eye and badly wounds him in his face.¹⁴²

This puts an end to the ferocious fighting, and the three warriors sit down and start chatting with each other, resorting, however, to a grotesque form of humor, which finds hardly any parallels in medieval heroic poetry. With the help of Waltharius's female companion, Hiltgunt, who had escaped together with him from Attila's court, they bandage their wounds and then enter into a dialogue, making fun of each other in a most brutal, but no longer hurtful manner:

see also the contributions to *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2000); *Laughter Down the Centuries*, vol. III, ed. Siegfried Jäkel, Asko Tomonen, and V.-M. Rissanen (Turku: Turun Yliopisto, 1997); Ross Balzaretti, "Liutprand of Cremona's Sense of Humour," *Humour, History and Politics*, 114–28, emphasizes how much gender identity (in the world of jokes very often male) has a deep impact on the type of humor displayed by an individual, such as Liutprand.

¹⁴¹ *Waltharius: Lateinisch / Deutsch*. Trans. and ed. by Gregor Vogt-Spira. With an appendix: *Waldere: Englisch / Deutsch*, trans. by Ursula Schaefer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994). For the Latin text, see also http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost10/Waltharius/wal_txt0.html; for the English translation, see <http://www.northvegr.org/lore/waltharius/index.php> (both last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁴² See the seminal study by Wolfram von den Steinen, "Zum 'Waltharius'," *Mittellateinische Dichtung: Ausgewählte Beiträge zu ihrer Erforschung*, ed. Karl Langosch. Wege der Forschung, CXLIX (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 193–218 (orig. published in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 84 [1952]: 12–32). See also F. B. Parkes, "Irony in 'Waltharius,'" *Modern Language Notes* 89 (1974): 459–65; Wolfgang Haubrichs, *Die Anfänge: Versuche volkssprachiger Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter (ca. 700–1050/60)*. Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der Neuzeit, I (Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum, 1988), 167–69.

Post varios pugnae strepitus ictusque tremendos
 Inter pocula scurrili certamine ludunt.
 Francus ait: 'iam dehinc cervos agitabis, amice,
 Quorum de corio wantis sine fine fruaris:
 At dextrum, moneo, tenera lanugine comple,
 Ut causae ignaros palmae sub imagine fallas.
 Wah! sed quid dicis, quod ritum infringere gentis
 Ac dextro femori gladium agglomerare videris
 Uxorique tuae, si quando ea cura subintrat,
 Perverso amplexu circumdabis euge sinistram?
 Iam quid demoror? en posthac tibi quicquid agendum est,
 Laeva manus faciet' . . . (1424–34)

[The Frank says: "Henceforth you will chase the stags, my friend, so that you may enjoy endless gloves made from their hide! But I advise you to stuff your right glove with tender wool so that you can deceive those who do not know with the appearance of a hand. Wah! Well, what will you say since you seem to break the custom of your race by fixing a sword by your right thigh? And, if ever you feel the desire, will you really put your left arm about your wife in a perverse embrace? Now why do I go on? Behold! From now on you must do everything with your left hand!"]

But Waltharius knows how to give tit for tat and responds in an equally reckless manner, ridiculing Hagen for having lost one eye, which would force him to look at his servants sideways. Even eating would cause him problems:

Si venor cervos, carnem vitabis aprinam.
 Ex hoc iam famulis tu suspectando iubebis
 Heroum turbas transversa tuendo salutans.
 Sed fidei memor antiquae tibi consiliabor:
 Iam si quando domum venias laribusque propinques,

Effice lardatam de multra farreque pultam!
 Haec pariter victum tibi conferet atque medelam (1436–42)

[If I shall hunt stags, you will avoid boar meat. Henceforth in fear you will order your servants—greeting the crowds of heroes with a sideways glance. But, mindful of our old pledge, I will give you counsel: Now, when you come home and near your household, make a larded poultice of barley and milk. This will give you both sustenance and healing.]

However, neither one proves to be mortally hurt, and we can actually imagine that they laugh about their funny, rather sarcastic comments, before departing, so to speak, as good friends:

His dictis pactum renovant iterato coactum
 Atque simul regem tollentes valde dolentem
 Imponunt equiti, et sic disiecti redierunt

Franci Wormatiam, patriamque Aquitanus adivit (1443–46)

[This said, they renewed their pact with repeated pledge; and, together lifting up the king, who was in great pain, they put him on his horse; and separated; thus the Franks returned to Worms, and the Aquitanian came to his homeland.]

The epic concludes peacefully, insofar as they all part from each other and return home, Waltharius reaching his own land, Aquitaine, where he subsequently rules over his people for thirty years after having married Hiltgunt. We are not told anything about his future war activities, or whether the loss of his right hand represented a major shortcoming. To be sure, Waltharius maintained his honor and achieved most glorious victory over all those men, including King Gunther, whereas he and Hagen appear as equal in their fighting abilities, so they are fully entitled to their gruesome jests and mocking.¹⁴³

Instead of entering the complex research history concerning this epic, suffice it here to underscore how deliberately the poet resorts to laughter as the most effective way of concluding his epic.¹⁴⁴ Horrible slaughter and violence have determined the entire text, but now, as the last surviving warriors are so badly wounded that they have no chance of continuing the fight, they suddenly sit down together and make jokes about their own bodily injuries. The resulting laughter, though not explicitly expressed, overcomes all tensions and establishes peace. In such a situation often the victim succeeds in turning the situation up-side down and laughs along with the others, probably the most affective way to handle all such challenges because it proves to be so unexpected and disarming.¹⁴⁵ Humility might be one of the most affective tools in evaluating and analyzing people. This finds full confirmation in Hrotsvita von Gandersheim's plays (see above) as well

¹⁴³ There is much research on this intriguing epic, but the element of laughter has not found much interest; see, for instance, Karl Langosch, *"Waltharius": Die Dichtung und die Forschung*. Erträge der Forschung, 21 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973); Alf Önnersfors, *Das Waltharius-Epos: Probleme und Hypothesen*. Scripta minora / Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-samfundet i Lund, 1987/1988, 1 (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1988); Dennis M. Kratz, *Mocking Epic: Waltharius, Alexandreis, and the Problem of Christian Heroism*. Studia humanitatis (Madrid: J. Porrúa Turanzas, 1980); David Townsend, "Ironic Intertextuality and the Reader's Resistance to Heroic Masculinity in the *Waltharius*," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler. The New Middle Ages (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 67–86; Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Fighting Words: Wordplay and Swordplay in the *Waltharius*," *Germanic Texts and Latin Models: Medieval Reconstructions*, ed. K. E. Olsen, A. Harbus, and T. Hofstra (Louvain: Peeters; 2001), 29–51.

¹⁴⁴ See also the contribution to the present volume by Daniel F. Pigg, who uncovers significant moments of laughter in the Old English *Beowulf* that powerfully distinguish the individual protagonists and shed light on the sense and quality of community in the Danish world.

¹⁴⁵ For a close reading of the conclusion, see Wilhelm Lenz, *Der Ausgang der Dichtung von Walther und Hildegund*. Hermaea, 34 (Halle a. d. S.: Niemeyer, 1939); Victor Millet, *Épica germánica y tradiciones épicas hispánicas, Waltharius y Gaiferos: la leyenda de Walter de Aquitania y su relación con el romance de Gaiferos*. Biblioteca románica hispánica; II; Estudios y ensayos; 410 (Madrid: Gredos, 1998).

as in late-medieval verse narratives and prose narratives (*mæren*, *Schwänke*; see above).

Sometimes laughter, or rather a contemptuous smile, reveals much about our internal thought processes, as we observe, for instance, in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200). In the early part the Burgundian King Gunther woos the Icelandic Queen Brünhild, but he has to compete against her in three challenges which no normal person could even dare to accept. To make matters even worse, the Burgundians have been forced to give up their weapons and feel terribly frightened because the queen seems to be more a she-devil than a regular woman. Gunther, realizing the great danger they are in, now deeply regrets his decision to travel to Iceland to win this monster woman as his wife (stanza 442), and the warrior Dankwart similarly vocalizes his thoughts, expressing his great worries about losing his life at the hand of women (stanza 443). If, however, they still had their weapons in their hands, he would feel much less fear and dread (stanza 444). His brother Hagen echoes this sentiment (stanza 446), which Brünhild overhears. Smilingly, thus expressing her complete sense of superiority and utter contempt for the men's martial yet, at least in her eyes, silly performance, she orders the return of the weapons because she does not fear them at all:

Wol hôrt' diu maget edele, waz der degen sprach.
mit smielendem munde si über ahsel sach:
"nu er dunke sich sô küene, sô traget in ir gewant,
ir vil scharpfen wâfen gebet den recken an die hant." (stanza 447)¹⁴⁶

[The noble lady heard what the hero had said.
With a smile on her lips she looked over her shoulder and said:
"If he regards himself as such a bold person, then bring them their armor,
put their sharp weapons into their hands."¹⁴⁷]

The only other person who ever smiles with such an air of superiority and condescension is Siegfried shortly before his murder at the end of a hunt, not being

¹⁴⁶ *Das Nibelungenlied: Mittelhochdeutsch / Neuhochdeutsch*. Nach dem Text von Karl Bartsch und Helmut de Boor ins Neuhochdeutsche übersetzt und kommentiert von Siegfried Grosse (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997). See also the edition *Das Nibelungenlied*. Nach der St. Galler Handschrift herausgegeben und erläutert von Hermann Reichert (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005); here it is stanza 445. There are numerous other passages in Middle High German literature, but the specific use of "smielen" in our context might well be one of the most sarcastic ones. For other examples, see the *Middle High German Conceptual Database* (online at: <http://www.mhdbdb.sbg.ac.at:8000/mhdbdb/App?action=DicSelect> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁴⁷ Irmgard Gephart, *Der Zorn der Nibelungen: Rivalität und Rache im "Nibelungenlied"* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2005), 56, observes correctly: Ein grundsätzlicher weiblicher Überlegenheitsgestus, bei dem die Waffen zu einer Art Spielzeug und der Held zu einem Kindmann schrumpfen, wird so subtil wie eindeutig in Szene gesetzt" (A fundamental female gesture expressing superiority, through which weapons are reduced to a form of toys and the [male] hero to a child-man, is thus enacted in a subtle but unmistakable fashion).

aware, just like Brünhild, of his imminent death.¹⁴⁸ Brünhild smiles, but she does not know what her immediate future will hold for her. When Siegfried returns with all the slaughtered animals, the huntsmen complain and ask him to keep some prey for them as well: “‘. . . ir tuot uns hiute lære den berc und ouch den walt’” (940, 3; you empty today both hills and the forest). Both flattered and amused, but certainly also fully aware of his triumphal success, Siegfried only smiles without responding in any way: “des begonde smielen der degen küene unde balt” (940, 4; the bold and strong warrior began to smile about it).

By contrast, Gunther and Hagen had laughed out loud about Brünhild when they observed her precaution in having her own servants watch over the chests that are being filled with jewels from the queen’s treasure to be shipped with her to Worms. Before, Dankwart had excessively squandered all her wealth, obviously in order to weaken and to humiliate her (stanzas 515–16). Now, Brünhild tries to regain some of her control, but her future husband and his vassal dismiss her efforts as vain and ridiculous, laughing at her: “Gunthêr und Hagene dar umb lâchen began” (521, 4; Gunther and Hagen began to laugh about it). Whereas before they had been pale with fear, now they know of their renewed strength and are amused by Brünhild’s desperate attempt to hold on to some of her remaining power and wealth.¹⁴⁹

Much later in the course of events, long after Siegfried’s murder and Kriemhild’s second marriage to the Hunnish King Etzel/Attila, she plots revenge and invites all her family for a visit. When the Burgundians actually arrive, the royal couple stands in a window, watching the entire troop of warriors riding in. She expresses joy in general terms, expressing her absolute power as a queen and also her hope that this situation will provide her with the long-sought opportunity to get even with Hagen who had killed her first husband (1717). Her husband, by contrast, a truly high-minded lord who embraces the ideals of courtliness and seemingly knows nothing about his wife’s intention to avenge her profound pain, perceives the Burgundians with great joy and laughs out loud, expressing his delight about their arrival, an honorable event for his own kingdom: “der kunic vriesch ouch diu mære, vor liebe er lachen began” (1716, 4; the king also learned of the news, and out of great joy he began to laugh).

As Kathryn Starkey comments this passage, “Etzel’s laugh—similar to the smiling countenance of Rüdiger upon the arrival of the Burgundians in Pechlarn—signals his peaceful relationship with the visitors. As a conventional gesture of welcome, Etzel’s expression of love reiterates his bond of fealty with the

¹⁴⁸ For similar examples in late-antique history, see the contribution to this volume by Judith Hagen.

¹⁴⁹ See, for instance, Jan-Dirk Müller, *Spielregeln für den Untergang: Die Welt des Nibelungenliedes* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998), 349.

Burgundians while underlining his status as lord, that is, as the person who is in the position to bestow or withhold fealty."¹⁵⁰

Even when heroes find themselves in battles that threaten their lives, they still find time to laugh. In the *Eckenlied*, for instance, composed sometime in the first half of the thirteenth century, the protagonist Dietrich encounters a hostile knight, Eggenot, who guards the entrance to a cave and is curious about rumors that his lord Ecke had been killed.¹⁵¹ Indeed, Dietrich has already accomplished this task, and he has also defeated Ecke's brother, though he has not killed him and keeps him instead as a vassal. When Eggenot inquires who might have been so strong as to overpower Ecke, he first promises Dietrich safety: "es mag dir hie kain schad gesin" (217, 4; you will not experience any damage). As soon, however, as Dietrich has revealed the truth, Eggenot pronounces that he intends to kill his opponent in return: "' . . . das kostot uwer leben!'" (217, 13; that will cost you your life). Considering his two previous triumphs, however, Dietrich can only laugh at this assumption: "Des lacht der herre Dietherich" (218, 1; Sir Dietrich laughed about it). Moreover, we can be certain that our protagonist will surely gain the upper hand in good time. But what kind of laughter is it? Dietrich does not laugh happily; rather, he finds Eggenot's comment most irritating, insulting, and foolish; hence he perceives the need to subjugate him, and his laughter only initiates the fight to follow soon, which both pursue filled with fury and wrath: "mit grimme su die swert erzugē" (218, 7; furiously they pulled out their swords). In other words; here Dietrich's laughter expresses his profound contempt and complete determination to squash this opponent as well.¹⁵²

But the poet (or one of the poets, since the manuscript versions differ so extensively) also includes a scene where Dietrich laughs out of joy because he encounters his two friends Wolfhart and Hildebrand who are deeply relieved to find Dietrich again, still alive: "der Perner lachen do began; / er sprach: / 'wer hot euch paide / do her getragen in den than?'" (327, 11–13; the man from Bern [=

¹⁵⁰ Kathryn Starkey, "Performative Emotion and the Politics of Gender in the *Nibelungenlied*," *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 253–71; here 265.

¹⁵¹ *Das Eckenlied: Mittelhochdeutsch / Neuhochdeutsch*. Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar von Francis B. Brévert (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986); for a historical-critical edition, see *Das Eckenlied: sämtliche Fassungen*, ed. id. Altdeutsche Textbibliothek, 111 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999). See also Matthias Meyer, *Die Verfügbarkeit der Fiktion: Interpretationen und poetologische Untersuchungen zum Artusroman und zur aventiurehaften Dietrichepik des 13. Jahrhunderts*. Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift, Beiheft, 12 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1994).

¹⁵² As to the element of unfettered violence in the *Eckenlied*, see Harald Haferland, *Mündlichkeit, Gedächtnis und Medialität: Heldendichtung im deutschen Mittelalter* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 173–82.

Dietrich] began to laugh. He said: “Who has sent you both into the forest?”). The subsequent events lead to public joy and jubilation, and the heroic conflicts come to an end. Remarkably, then, even within the context of heroic poetry laughter or variants thereof demarcate the feelings and emotional responses, providing inner depth and a psychological profile.¹⁵³

Another aspect of laughter emerges in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (ca. 1205) where the young hero at first displays complete ignorance of how to cope in the courtly world because his mother Herzeloide has kept him deliberately away, raising him as a boorish young man in her forest solitude. When Parzival finally leaves this utopian space and reaches King Arthur’s court, he is confused as to how to find the king. Helplessly he turns to the squire Iwanet who quickly realizes that this curious stranger, whom the others have also noticed because of his odd appearance, immediately needs support. Parzival inquires: “ich sihe hie mangan Artûs: / wer sol mich ritter machen?” (Section 147, 22–23; “I notice here so many an Arthur, who is supposed to knight me?”). Iwanet laughs about this silly statement: “Iwânet begunde lachen” (24) because they have not even reached the palace and find themselves only in a throng of knights (and ladies).¹⁵⁴

Later, once the king has knighted him and Parzival is most eager to depart to find the red knight Ither whose armor he hopes to gain as a gift from King Arthur, the young man suddenly comes into view of the courtly lady Cunneware. She has pledged, or has been forced by the circumstances, never to smile again until she perceives the savior of the Grail kingdom, a most significant perspective toward laughter which is thus identified as an epistemological sign of the highest order, almost with theological undertones: “sine sâhe in der den hôhsten prîs / hete od solt erwerben: / si wolt ê sus ersterben” (Section 151, 14–16; until she would see the one who would have earned or would acquire the highest praise; otherwise she was willing to die).¹⁵⁵ Surprisingly, however, in a prophetic manner, she begins to smile as soon as she has espied Parzival: “allez lachen si vermeit, / unz daz der

¹⁵³ For a helpful introduction and overview, see Joachim Heinzle, *Einführung in die mittelhochdeutsche Dietrichepik*, de Gruyter Studienbuch (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 109–27.

¹⁵⁴ Sebastian Coxon, “Laughter and the Process of Civilization in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*,” *Un-Civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 17–38.

¹⁵⁵ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*. Nach der Ausgabe Karl Lachmanns revidiert und kommentiert von Eberhard Nellmann. Übertragen von Dieter Kühn. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 8/1 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994). As an aside, the German translation modifies the text too much and adds numerous modern French terms in order to modernize it in a rather slangy fashion. For recent studies on *Parzival* (in English), see the contributions to *A Companion to Wolfram’s Parzival*, ed. Will Hasty. Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999).

knappe für si reit: / do erlachte ir minneclîcher munt" (17–19; she avoided all laughter until the squire came riding by her: at that moment she began to smile [laughed her loving lips]).

Of course, this provokes great anger in the court steward Keye, who immediately gives her a hard beating as punishment for this seemingly inappropriate behavior. She could have smiled or laughed many times before when worthy knights had attended the court, whereas designating this boorish young fool as the savior of their world would be tantamount to deep embarrassment and to sending a wrong signal (20–30).¹⁵⁶ But the squire Antanor, who had kept complete silence for the same reason that Cunneware had stopped smiling, now suddenly speaks up, confirming the truth of her designation of Parzival as the future leader. Keye also punishes him harshly, which the narrator condemns severely, and Parzival himself would have liked to propel his javelin against this mean man, though the throng prevents him from doing so, stopping him from killing Keye. Nevertheless, as we know from the subsequent narrative development, Cunneware had laughed for good reason, insofar as Parzival will later rise to the rank of successor to the Grail King Anfortas and thus restore the world of knighthood and chivalry.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Irene Erfen, "Das Lachen der Cunnewäre: Bemerkungen zu Wagners 'Parsifal' und Wolframs 'Parzival'," *Sprachspiel und Lachkultur: Beiträge zur Literatur- und Sprachgeschichte*, Rolf Bräuer zum 60. Geburtstag, ed. Angela Bader et al. Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 300 (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1994), 69–87; Waltraud Fritsch-Rößler, "Lachen und Schlagen: Reden als Kulturtechnik in Wolframs 'Parzival'," *Verstehen durch Vernunft: Festschrift für Werner Hoffmann*, ed. Burkhardt Krause. *Philologica Germanica*, 19 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 1997), 75–98. For a critical study of the steward figure Keie in Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Die Crône* (ca. 1220/1230), who cuts an even more ridiculous figure, evoking much laughter, see Christiane Schonert, *Figurenspele: Identität und Rollen Keies in Heinrichs von dem Türlin "Crône"*. *Philologische Studien und Quellen*, 217 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2009). She emphasizes, above all, Keye's role as the mocking person, 90–101 (note: the spelling of his name varies according to the manuscripts).

¹⁵⁷ In many passages of Wolfram's *Parzival* a comical element comes to the surface; in fact, Wolfram can be identified as a deeply comical author, even when he addresses most serious topics, see Sebastian Coxon, "Der Ritter und die Fährmannstochter: Zum schwankhaften Erzählen in Wolframs 'Parzival'," *Wolfram-Studien XVII: Wolfram von Eschenbach – Bilanzen und Perspektiven. Eichstätt Kolloquium 2000*, ed. Wolfgang Haubrichs, Eckart C. Lutz, and Klaus Ridder (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2002), 114–35. He does not, however, examine the specific nature of laughter in this famous passage. See the research literature cited here, note 2–5. In his article "do lachete die gote: Zur literarischen Inszenierung des Lachens in der höfischen Epik," *Wolfram-Studien XVIII: Erzähltechnik und Erzählstrategien in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters. Saarbrücker Kolloquium 2002*, ed. Wolfgang Haubrichs, Eckart C. Lutz, and Klaus Ridder (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2004), 189–210, Coxon probes the nature of laughter from a broader perspective, but leaves out Wolfram altogether. See also his "Laughter and the Process of Civilization in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*," *Uncivilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias*, ed. Mary Fulbrook. *German Monitor*, 66 (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 17–38; here 31–32. Moreover, cf. Christoph Huber, "Lachen im höfischen Roman: Zu einigen komplexen Episoden im literarischen Transfer," *Kultureller Austausch und*

Altogether, Wolfram skillfully put to use laughter in a variety of ways, with individuals laughing in surprise (or rather expressing their astonishment) about Parzival's ignorance and boorishness in the splendid context of King Arthur's court, with the squire Iwanet laughing in a rather friendly and supportive manner about Parzival's complete lack of understanding concerning the world of the court, and with Cunneware laughing because she has suddenly recognized the future king in the young man, unconsciously delighted about her epiphany.

Tragically, she has to suffer for it because the irascible court steward Keie badly beats her up, deeply irritated about her impulsive response to the foolish and boorish looking young man, but this laughter is evoked throughout the text as an essential moment when the deeply hidden truth about the future Grail king has been revealed by her.¹⁵⁸ In fact, if we pursued our search further, we would have to deal with numerous other passages in Wolfram's text where people laugh or smile, sometimes in a supportive, and sometimes in a hostile manner, which indicates how important this human expression was for our author since he intended to project a comprehensive *Bildungsroman* (novel about an individual's education and successful growth into adulthood) and also a literary platform for the search of a new world, combining the Arthurian with the Grail dimension.¹⁵⁹

However, almost mindful of Benedict of Nursia's monastic rules, Wolfram also emphasizes close to the end – when Parzival undergoes a religious conversion and spends meditative time with his uncle Trevrizent, indirectly in preparation for his rise to the Grail throne – that these two men hardly ever laughed, almost having assumed the habit of monks themselves: “si wuoschen wûrze und ir krût. / ir munt wart selten lachens lût” (section 486, 3–4; they washed the roots and herbs. They hardly ever laughed). We can certainly agree with Michael Dallapiazza that Wolfram's comic focuses very much on the disparity between sacredness and the mundane, but it would diminish the grandiose literary quality of Wolfram's romance *Parzival* if we were to ignore the extensive range of alternative comic situations and conditions, including puns, satirical allusions, dirty, or sexual, jokes, and the comic that simply establishes distance between the narrator, his figures, and the audience.¹⁶⁰

Literaturgeschichte im Mittelalter, ed. Ingrid Kasten, Werner Paravicini, René Perennec. Beihefte der Francia, 43 (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1998), 34–58.

¹⁵⁸ See, for instance, Book 135, 16ff.; 151, 11–20; 152, 7–12; 152, 23–29; 158, 26–199, 9; 215, 6–9; 221, 19–25; 304, 16ff.; 305, 305–06.

¹⁵⁹ There are thirty-eight passages with the verb ‘lachen’ (to smile), and the treatment of laughter in other syntactical functions also proves to be very rich; see the *Middle High German Conceptual Database* at:

<http://www.mhdbdb.sbg.ac.at:8000/mhdbdb/App?action=SelectQuotation&c=PZ+3571> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁶⁰ Michael Dallapiazza, *Wolfram von Eschenbach: Parzival*. Klassiker-Lektüren, 12 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2009), 141–44. He also points out the jest-like portrayal of Parzival's half-brother

Laughter often signals that a wise person has perceived the whole truth and realized how much everyone has been stuck in an illusion about him/herself and the entire social setting. Merlin in the thirteenth-century romance *Silence* by Heldris of Cornwall (or de Cornuälle) breaks out in almost unstoppable laughter when he is led as a prisoner to the court of King Ris because he observes the various masks that individual members of the court wear, including Silence. But he also foresees the future and can prophesy, which makes him laugh even harder since the others around him obviously do not understand anything about the inner nature of things or people and prove to be utterly deluded.¹⁶¹ However, Merlin resists for a long time all physical threats and efforts to force him to admit the true cause of his laughter. Only when he suddenly faces the death penalty does he finally explain and prove that he was absolutely right in laughing about the various people surrounding him both outside and inside of the court.

At first Merlin observes a peasant carrying a new pair of shoes, and laughs about this sight (6190–95). Later he will reveal that he could foresee the peasant's imminent death, making the purchase of these shoes unnecessary and foolish (6321–23). The next sight is a leper begging for alms near an abbey, which again triggers almost uncontrollable laughter (6202–05). Subsequently, Merlin explains that he had laughed so hard because right under the beggar's feet a large treasure was hidden (6333–37), confirming for him again how blind people turn out to be, not capable of comprehending where the true values are lying. In the next scene a priest is chanting the burial service for a deceased child, while the sorrowful father sheds bitter tears (6212–15), which Merlin finds enormously hilarious. The reason for this turns out to be, as he later reveals, that he realized to what extent the true conditions were just the opposite, without either man knowing that insofar as the dead child had been the priest's, so the mourner should have been happy to have gotten rid of this bastard child as the product of his wife's adultery (6359–65).

When Merlin finally looks at Silence and overhears her conversation with the queen, however; here disregarding an exchange with a nun before, he laughs the hardest (6276–77). The reasons why the king, his wife, the nun, the knight Silence, and he himself were the object of his amazing laughter are then finally divulged, but not before everyone present grows alarmed because they suddenly realize how much Merlin, indeed, knows how to uncover the truth and rips off the mask that everyone seems to wear at court (6497–6505):

“ . . . Cil doi, Silence et la none,

Feirefiz who converts to Christianity because he wants to marry one of the Grail ladies, Repanse de Schoye. As Dallapiazza emphasizes, the parody of the baptism ritual and Feirefiz's love craze cast everything that might be holy or sacrosanct in the light of laughter (143–44).

¹⁶¹ *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*. Newly ed. and trans. with intro. and notes by Sarah Roche-Mahdi. *Medieval Texts and Studies*, 10 (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992).

Sont li doi qui gabés nos ont.
 Et nos li doi qui gabé sunt.
 Rois, cele none tient Eufeme.
 Escarnist vos ses dras de feme.
 Rois, or vos ai jo bien garni.
 Silence ra moi escarni
 En wallés dras, c'est vertés fine,
 Si est desos les dras meschine.
 La vesteüre, ele est de malle.
 La nonain, qui n'a soig de halle,
 Bize, ni vent, ki point et giele.
 A vesteüre de femiele.
 Silence qui moult set et valt,
 Bials sire rois, se Dex me salt,
 Ne sai home qui tant soit fors
 Ki le venquist par son effors.
 Et une feme, tendre cose,
 Vos poet honir et set et ose.
 Et c'une feme me ra pris,
 Quele mervelle est se j'en ris,
 Qu'ansdeus nos ont ensi deçut,
 Qu'eles nos ont tel plait esmut
 Comme .xx. .m. ne porent faire.
 Sire, jo ris de cest affaire." (6538–552)

[These two, Silence and the nun,
 are the deceivers;
 you and I are the deceived.
 King, this nun is Eufeme's lover;
 he is deceiving you in woman's dress.
 Now I've spoken plainly enough, King.
 Silence, on the other hand, tricked me
 by dressing like a young man: in truth,
 he is a girl beneath his clothes.
 Only the clothing is masculine.
 The nun, who has no need to fear the scorching sun
 or the north wind's blast that stings and freezes,
 is a woman in clothing only.
 Silence is wise and valiant,
 good Sir King, so help me God,
 I don't know any man, however strong,
 who could have conquered him in combat.
 A woman, a tender little thing,
 knows she can dishonor you and does.
 And it was a woman who captured me.
 Is it any wonder I'm laughing,

when they have deceived both of us like this,
 when they have set a snare for us
 such as twenty thousand men couldn't?
 Sire, I think this is really funny."]

Of course, the full truth comes out, and no one feels like laughing anymore, everyone being afraid of being exposed. Nevertheless, for Merlin the entire set-up at the court just proved too much for him, recognizing masks employed everywhere; hence his shocking outbursts of laughter, but this provided the very basis from which enlightenment can then develop. Without his laughter there would not have been any provocation and rupture. But this way, allegorical nurture wins over allegorical nature, leading to the harmonious and happy outcome of the entire romance. Women's inheritance rights are restituted, the Queen Eufeme and her lover in the mask of a nun are executed, and the King Ris actually marries Silentia—formerly Silentius—thus making everything right that was badly wrong in the world as depicted in this romance.¹⁶²

Of course, laughter determines Merlin's character already much earlier in Geoffrey of Monmouth's probably foundational text in the long history of the Merlin myth, his *Vita Merlini* from ca. 1150, here disregarding likely older Welsh sources, and then all kinds of other possible earlier narratives, perhaps even of Indian origins.¹⁶³ There are numerous references to silly, foolish, meaningless, or everyday laughter that erupts over pedestrian events or trifle objects, such as when Merlin and his friends find apples and all eat them, except for Merlin, half-famished, without realizing, however, that this food robs them of their sanity: "porrexitque michi subito pro munere ridens. / Ergo distribui data poma sodalibus et me / expertem feci quia non suffecit acervus. / Riserunt alii quibus impertita fuerunt / meque vocant largum cupidis quoque faucibus illa / agrediendo vorant et pauca fuisse queruntur" (1411-16; "quickly gathered them and gave them to me, laughing over our unexpected present. I handed the gift of apples round my friends but left myself without any, because the pile was not large enough. Those who had received apples laughed and called me generous. Then they eagerly fell

¹⁶² This romance has been discussed from many sides recently, see, for instance, Suzanne Kocher, "Accusations of Gay and Straight Sexual Transgression in the *Roman de la Violette*," *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 278 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 189–210; Karen Pratt, "Humor in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthurian Literature* 19 (2003): 87–103. But 'laughter' as such has hardly been the focus of scholarly investigations.

¹⁶³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin/Vita Merlini*. Ed. with Introduction, facing translation, textual commentary, name notes index, and translation of the *Lailoken* tales by Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 12–14; for a comprehensive overview of the history of dissemination of this and other narratives focused on Merlin, see Stephen Knight, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power Through the Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009).

to and ate them up, complaining that there were so few"). As Merlin realizes, a former mistress had placed these poisoned apples there in the hope to get her revenge from her past lover who had ultimately repulsed her. But this proves to be not a laughing matter, since it amounted to an assassination plot which he escaped just by chance due to his great generosity.

Earlier, however, and that's the scene that will find its parallel in the *Roman de Silence*, among many others, Merlin laughs when he espies the Queen and recognizes, as his laughter indicates, her true nature hidden from King Rodarch view, that is, her having committed adultery: "Iccirco risi quoniam Rodarche fuisti / facto cupandus simul et laudandus eodem, / dum traheres folium modo quod regina capillis / nescia gestabat fieresque fidelio illi / quam fuit illa tibi quando virgulta subivit / quo suus occurrit secumque coivit adulter, dumque supina foret sparsis in crinibus hesit / forte jacens folium quod nescius eripuisti." (286–93; 'The reason I laughed, Rodarch, was that in one and the same act you earned both approval and disapproval. When just now you pulled out the leaf the queen unknowingly had in her hair, you were more faithful to her than she had been to you when she crept into the undergrowth, where her lover met her and lay with her. As she lay there, a leaf fallen by chance caught in her loosened hair. You plucked it out, unknowing.').

Later he is tested by means of a boy dressed up as a girl, and Merlin predicts a threefold death that the young person will suffer, which makes King Rodarch, however, laugh at the improbability (339–40), though the prophecy ultimately comes to be true. Each situation, hence, requires a new approach, and laughter could indicate profound wisdom or utter foolishness.

Interestingly, in Wace's later *Roman de Brut* (1155), only King Aurelius laughs, and he does so out of disbelief regarding Merlin's recommendation to erect Stonehenge with stones which actually no normal man would be able to lift. These he should transport from Ireland, where they had been brought to originally by giants who had carried them from Africa. As Merlin later explains, if people take a bath in water that has washed down the stones, they would quickly recover their health. But the king finds this all rather absurd:

"Merlin," said the kind with laughter,
 "Granting the stones do weigh so much
 that they cannot be moved by man,
 Who will be able to bring them here?—

As if we didn't in this kingdom
 Have stones with quality enough!"

(8051–56)¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Wace, *Le Roman de Brut: The French Book of Brutus*, trans. Arthur Wayne Glowka. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 279 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance

Merlin rejects this criticism and mockery, and alerts the king “That cleverness defeats brute strength [] / Strength is good, but cleverness better. / Cleverness works where brute strength fails” (8058–60). Remarkably, in this context Merlin does not laugh; he is so self-assured and knows that his prophecy is right; hence he does not need and does not want to laugh.

We observe significant, almost dialectic moments of laughter also in the famous but mysterious *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century, anonymous). Lord Bercilak, who actually turns out to be the Green Knight himself, challenges Gawain, or, more specifically, King Arthur and his court by offering to submit voluntarily to decapitation, if the one bold enough to accept this ‘game’ then reciprocates a year later. In a subsequent scene, and a year later, when Gawain has already arrived at his castle, not knowing that his host and the Green Knight are one and the same person, Bercilak proposes a wager with his guest Gawain, suggesting that each of them should go on a hunt. He himself would chase and kill animals in the real forest, whereas Gawain should stay home and see what kind of prey he might be able to capture, which certainly means Bercilak’s own wife who will indeed enter Gawain’s bedroom for three days and try to seduce him sexually. In fact, metaphorically and literally she chases her victim in close parallel to her husband who each day pursues a different kind of animal, each one representing, in a way, one of Gawain’s character traits and strengths.¹⁶⁵ As part of the wager, the lord of the castle also promises Gawain to designate someone to take him to the Green Chapel in good time to meet that ominous monster, which triggers hearty, communal laughter on the part of our protagonist, obviously as a sign of deep relief and renewed hope: “Penne wat, Gawan ful glad, and gomenly he laȝed: / ‘Now I þonk yow þryuandely þurȝ alle oþer þynge, / Now acheued is my chaunce, I schal at your wyll / Dowelle and elleȝ do quat ȝe demen” (1079–82; “Gawain was very glad then, and gleefully he laughed. / ‘Now I thank you thoroughly above all other things. / Since my quest will be accomplished, as you clearly said, / I shall dwell here and do whatever you deem”).

In other words, Gawain feels a heavy burden lifted from his shoulders that had been determined by a sense of insecurity and helplessness in his search for that

Studies, 2005). See also Knight, *Merlin*, 43–46.

¹⁶⁵ Here I quote from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Dual-Language Version*, ed. and trans. by William Vantuono. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1265 (New York and London: Garland, 1991). The research literature on this text is legion; see, for instance, Nick Davis, *Stories of Chaos: Reason and Its Displacement in Early Modern English Narrative* (Aldershot, Brookfield, VT, et al.: Ashgate, 1999), 39–73; Francis Ingledew, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Order of the Garter* (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). See also the contributions to *Gawain: a Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby. Arthurian Characters and Themes, 8 (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

ominous green knight whose head he had cut off a year ago. Now, by contrast, he is faced with the mirror reality and suddenly perceives himself as terribly mortal and yet safe for the moment because he has accomplished the first part of the contract. Simultaneously the lord expresses his great joy about the planned game with one of the most outstanding knights in the world, by leaping around and making much noise: “*Þe lorde let for luf lote₃ so myry, / As wy₃ þat wolde of his wyte, ne wyst quat he my₃t*” (1086–87; “As the lord joked merrily, uttering many jests, / Like a man out of his mind to maintain a happy mood).

At a later point, after Gawain has finally met the Green Knight and actually survived the pretend beheading game, if we can call it that, he faces an opponent who simply delights in observing his courage and fearlessness, giving him all the respect that is due to him (2334–40). But Bercilak then reveals the secret operation behind the wager, with his own wife functioning as Gawain’s seductress. In fact, the husband knows everything about the bedroom scenes, including the famous, allegedly life-saving green belt which the knight had kept for himself as the lady’s gift, without handing it over to Bercilak as part of their agreement to exchange everything they would hunt during the day. The Green Knight heaps praise on Gawain for his strong resolve in resisting his wife’s efforts to seduce him, but he also criticizes him for having failed the last test with the green belt. Nevertheless, he forgives him this little infraction because he did not accept the belt due to its material value or as an expression of the lady’s love for him. Instead, Gawain simply loved his own life and did not want to die, a very natural instinct in man: “‘. . . Bot for_{3e} lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame’” (2368; “‘. . . But because you loved your life; thus the less I blame you’”).

Shocked about this revelation, realizing how much he actually clings to life, and embarrassed about his human weakness, Gawain unbuckles the belt and tosses it to Bercilak, admitting his own weakness, unworthy of a knight, blaming himself for having committed a sin, and expressing his deep humility. But his opponent only breaks out in laughter: “*Thenn lo_{3e} þat oþer leude and luflyly sayde: ‘I halde hit hardily hole, þe harme þat I hade. / Pou art confessed so clene, beknownen of þy mysses’*” (2389–91; “Then the proud lord smiled and politely said: / ‘The harm that I had I hold firmly amended; / You have confessed so cleanly, proclaiming your faults, . . .’”).

Gawain then leaves, taking the green belt with him as a gift and as a memento of his shortcoming, which he later openly and explicitly exposes to King Arthur and his court. As he emphasizes, the belt serves him as a symbol of his “harme” (2511; failure), which one might be able to hide, but which one could never make disappear. Of course, everyone energetically denies that Gawain actually demonstrated cowardice, considering the monstrous situation. Once the king has consoled him, they all reintegrate Gawain most respectfully into the community

by way of loud, certainly sympathetic laughter: “Þe kyng comferte₃ þe kny₃t, and alle þe court als / La₃en loude þerat and luflyly acorden / Þat lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table” (2513–15; “The king and all the court comfort the knight, / Laugh loudly at that, and lovingly agree— / Those lords who belonged to the Round Table, and their ladies—”).

The Green Knight had demonstrated great respect for Gawain, heartily laughing about the wonderful and impressive display of the knight’s sense of honor and shame over such a small infraction. The members of King Arthur’s court laugh because they are relieved to know that Gawain has returned safely and that his public admission of a shortcoming amounted to nothing else but having kept the belt a secret because it seemed to be the long sought after safeguard to survive the deadly beheading. After all, life is most valuable, and Gawain has returned from almost certain death, so the belt, which now becomes a symbol of courtliness and chivalry for every member of the Round Table, represents the intricate nature of human life, of people’s ardent desire to survive, and yet also the need to preserve one’s honor.

Consistently, laughter connects people, establishes community, and expresses respect and happiness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; but it also reflects, on a deeper level, the relief that the horrible challenge by the Green Knight was nothing but a challenge, a challenge which even the best among them, Gawain, barely could meet and which could always lead to catastrophe. But that laughter also signals that courtly society has deeply comprehended how much life and death are intertwined, and that the one basically conditions the other, which is shocking enough. In a way, the entire court had been traumatized by the events with the Green Knight, and their final laughter eases all tensions and returns things to normal. Finally, both Bercilak’s laughter and that of the court indicate that the threat of death can be coped with constructively, since honor is more important than a life lived in shame. This laughter also extricates Gawain and the Arthurian court from the web of intrigue and manipulation woven by the old lady at castle Hautdesert (Bercilak), Morgan le Fay. As Nick Davis comments: “Perhaps this move in the narrative implies, among other things, a generic assessment of romance as inherently *involving* voluntary or unwitting male self-subordination to Woman, which is also the typical logic of romance narrative as the lady of the castle has explained it to Gawain a couple of days earlier”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Nick Davis, *Stories of Chaos*, 59. Cf. also Insung Lee, “The Comic Element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Laughter,” *Medieval English Studies* 7 (1999): 199–221 (in Korean, with English summary); Robert Longworth, “Interpretive Laughter in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Philological Quarterly* 70.2 (1994): 141–17; Martin Stevens, “Laughter and Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Speculum* 47.1 (1972): 65–78.

In this context one cannot avoid mentioning the great work of Geoffrey Chaucer as well where many of his characters laugh out loudly, chuckle, grimace, or express their mirth, joy, or contempt through a wide range of laughter. Since the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400) introduces a whole company of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, he also has them talk to each other and react to specific words, gestures, or ideas, creating a rich fabric of human relations and communication, which naturally also includes numerous moments of jokes and laughter. The famous Wife of Bath, for instance, stands out as a person of strong and unabashed character: "In felaweship wel koude she laughe and carpe / Of remedies of love she knew perchaunce / For she koude of that art the olde daunce" ("Prologue," 474–76).¹⁶⁷ In the "Knight's Tale," by contrast, nature is said to laugh for joy about the rise of the sun: "And firy Phebus riseth up so brighte, / That al the orient laugheth of the lighte / And with hise stremes dryeth in the greves" (1493–95).¹⁶⁸ But then we encounter a very different discussion of laughter, insofar

¹⁶⁷ Here I quote from the new edition, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, and Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press, 2008) because it is based on the Ellesmere and, where gaps occur, on the Hengwrt manuscript, without trying to be historical-critical, following an artificial stemma.

¹⁶⁸ We find a remarkable parallel to this description of nature laughing in the late thirteenth-century German verse narrative "Der Borte" by Dietrich von der Gletze where a knight bribes a young lady to sleep with him. For a long time she refuses all his material offers, but when he also adds a belt (hence the title) which guarantees the one who wears it public honor, eternal happiness, security from being slain, and safety against burning in fire and drowning in water, she remembers her absent husband who seems to be lacking in self-confidence and hence in social esteem. So she agrees to grant the knight his sexual desire, and nature then responds most joyfully, laughing about the successful development in the knight's wooing: "When the lady lay down, followed by the knight, the trees rustled, the roses laughed heartily, and the birds sang loudly about it Once the game was over, both flowers and grass laughed happily." Quoted from: *Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany*. Selected and trans. by Albrecht Classen, with a contribution by Maurice Sprague. And with an edition of Froben Christoph von Zimmern's "Der enttäuschte Liebhaber." *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 328 (2007; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009), 23. We still do not have a good explanation for nature's joyful response to this love making because it really hurts the lady insofar as they have been observed by a servant who reports it to his lord. The latter feels so distraught that he does not return home from a tournament. The lady waits for two years, then follows her husband, but disguised as a knight, and at the end can demonstrate to him that she did not really intend to cheat on him. Moreover, when he is ready to do anything the other knight might demand in return for one of the magical objects/animals (the belt remains hidden), which the anonymous knight once had given to the lady in return for her love, he is told that the only price for one of them would be sexual gratification, i.e., a homosexual relationship. Surprisingly, the husband is immediately ready to do so, without showing any signs of being homosexually oriented. This then allows the lady to reveal her true identity and to lambaste her husband for his moral and ethical lapse, whereas her own transgression had only served to increase his honor. Perhaps nature had laughed during the garden scene because the anonymous knight got his sexual wish fulfilled, irrespective of all social consequences, which would be of no relevance for nature anyway. For somewhat fruitful discussions of public vs. private laughter, as we encounter it in the genre of the

as even the phenomenon of madness comes forward in an irrational laughter: "Yet saugh I Woodnesse laughyng in his rage, / Armed Complaint, Outhees, and fiers Outrage" (2011–12). Once the knight has completed his tale, which everyone applauds because it proved to be "a noble storie, / And worthy for to be drawn to memorie" ("The Miller's Prologue," 3111–12), the Host "lough and swoor, 'So moot I gon, / This gooth aright! Unbokeled is the male" (3114–15). He is delighted about the success of his idea to entertain the entire company of pilgrims and looks forward to a continued series of tales. His laughter reflects his happy mood, and does not carry any negative sentiments.

Soon enough, we then come across a passage where 'to laugh' serves both as a temporal expression and as an indication of how evil-minded a plan might be to hurt a failed lover. This example is contained in "The Miller's Tale." While Alison has her lover Nicholas with her, the competitor Absolon is outside and receives her cold shoulder. Upon his pleading to grant him at least a kiss, she concocts a devilish strategy to hurt the poor fellow even further, whispering to Nicholas: "'Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille'" (3722). She extends her naked rear out of the window, which Absolon, not being able to see anything in the dark night, mistakes for her lips, realizing only too quickly, however, the extent to which he has been grossly duped because he feels her pubic hair. The two persons inside do not seem to laugh out loud,¹⁶⁹ but we can imagine how much they must have chuckled over their cunning and fooling the poor man who could only kiss his beloved nether 'lips' — certainly an obscene allusion. However, Absolon quickly gets his revenge, finding a red-hot iron in a blacksmith's forge; and when he asks for a second kiss in return for a ring, Nicholas takes Alison's place, first farting into Absolon's face (3806), but then getting the terrible iron rammed into his rear, which could almost be read as a form of masculine rape.¹⁷⁰

Screaming in pain, yelling for water to quench the 'fire,' Alison's husband hears the word 'water' only, mistakes it for the announcement that the deluge is coming, and cuts the rope of his boat in which he had been awaiting that moment to be prepared, but instead crashes to the floor and gets badly hurt, making himself an utter fool about whom everyone laughs sarcastically: "The folk gan laughen at his fantasye. / Into the roof they kiken and they cape / And turned all his harm unto a jape" (3840–42). As if this were not enough, the audience of the story-telling by the Canterbury pilgrims also break out in laughter: "Whan folk had laughen at this

Middle High German *mære*, see Klaus Grubmüller, "Wer lacht im Märe – und wozu?" *Lachgemeinschaften*, 111–24.

¹⁶⁹ However, there is some indication of her own laughter, or rather a giggle: "'Tehee,' quod she and clapte the wyndow to" (3740).

¹⁷⁰ Kathleen A. Bishop, "Queer Punishments: Tragic and Comic Sodomy in the Death of Edward II and in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," *The Canterbury Tales Revisited-21st Century Interpretations*, ed. eadem and David Matthews (Newcastle-upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 16–24.

nyce cas / Of Absolon and hende Nicholas, / Diverse folk diversly they seyde, / But for the moore part they lough and pleyde" ("The Reeve's Prologue," 3885–88). Finally, considering the entire set up and the condition for their laughter, we as the modern audience are also invited, as voyeurs, to laugh as well, which can also be inferred from the medieval audience. In other words, Chaucer builds intricate chains of communication via laughter from the intradiegetic to the extradiegetic level, transforming his text into an amazingly transparent interplay of actions, sentiments, and reactions in which everyone finds him/herself mirrored, whether as a person laughing about that scene or, indirectly, as the next butt of the joke, to stay in the image.

Telling good stories creates happiness and harmony even among the narrative audience, as the Cook's reaction to the Reeve's tale indicates: "For ioye him thoughte he clawed him on the bak. / 'Ha, ha,' quod he, 'for Cristes passioun, / This miller hadde a sharpe conclusioun / Upon his argument of herberage!" ("The Cook's Prologue," 4326–29). Laughter can also hurt and stab another person, as the exchange between the Host and the Cook indicates, whereas the former ridicules the latter for his evil practices in his profession, but immediately seeks cover behind the defense in which he said everything in jest ("... 'But yet I pray thee be nat wroth for game; / A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley'," 4354–55). The Cook, however, not short of wit, simply replays him with a satirical tale concerning a "hostileer" (4360), whereupon he breaks out in laughter: "And therewithal he lough and made cheere, / And seyde his tale, as ye shul after heere" (4363–64).

Then again, we hear from the Wife of Bath that her last husband used to read in his book filled with accounts about evil women and about the dangers of marriage. This was originally expounded by "Valerie and Theofraste," that is, in the tract of Walter Map (ca. 1140–ca. 1208), directed against marriage (*Epistola Valerii ad Rufinum*), and in Theophrastus's *Liber Aureolus Theophrast de Nuptiis*, which has survived only in Jerome's *Against Jovinian*.¹⁷¹ Chuckling away about the nasty attacks, this husband arouses his wife's serious anger: "At which book he lough alwey ful faste" ("The Wife of Bath's Prologue," 672). She reminds her audience that if any woman had written anything similar, she would have poured her hatred and contempt over men with the same full force: "They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse / The children of Mercurie and Venus" (695–97). Nevertheless, it behooves us to return and to remember that the Wife of Bath's husband laughs about these nasty comments, obviously both in full agreement and determined by misogyny, just as

¹⁷¹ For the relevant collection of these types of texts, see *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

would be the case today with men telling dirty jokes about women. His laughter, then, reveals a rather ambivalent attitude, partly determined by his agreement with the hostile statements about the other sex, partly influenced by his fear of his own wife since he finds himself in the very situation these ancient authors are warning their audience about. Since he cannot easily find a way out of this dialectical condition, he laughs, both in agreement and in self-abjection, if we can really identify this laughter in this manner, considering the brevity of the text. We know for sure, however, that his laughter irritates her to no end, which ultimately leads to a serious fight between them from which she rises triumphantly, beating him into obedience.

As much as he tries to make fun of women at large, the Friar laughs about the Wife of Bath after she has completed her introductory remarks, ridiculing her for her presumed incompetence in coming to the point of telling her story, constantly deviating from the main target because of her reflections upon her own life: "The Frere lough whan he hadde heard all this. / 'Now Dame,' quod he, 'so have I joye or blis, / This is a long preamble of a tale!'" (829–31). Significantly, however, he laughs out of contempt because of her poor narrative skills, and also because he finds women contemptible altogether (which might not be so surprising considering his status as a clerk). His reaction, however, both his laughter and his sneering, provoke the other members of the company to intervene, which thus intensifies the complex interplay of the group of pilgrims and story tellers.

Taking all the evidence together, as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* clearly demonstrate, people, as social, political beings, tend to break out into laughter particularly when they find themselves in a group setting where different people interact and provoke irritation, and frustration, but then also mockery and ridicule. Laughter in this Middle English text carries a plethora of meanings and functions on numerous functional levels, as Chaucer signals in ever changing approaches, having his protagonists laugh as much about each other or about statements spoken by someone or written down in a book as about a situation or an embarrassment. Each time the audience is invited to join, and yet also to distance itself, and we also perceive most clearly how much laughter carries an infinitude of meaning and intentions, challenging traditional power structures and hierarchies, expressing consent, disapproval, scorn, contempt, hatred, frustration, embarrassment, and the like.¹⁷²

¹⁷² Harry Levin, *Veins of Humor*. Harvard English Studies, 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Frances McNeely Leonard, *Laughter in the Courts of Love: Comedy in Allegory, from Chaucer to Spenser* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1981); Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Andrew James Johnston, "The Exegetics of Laughter: Religious Parody in Chaucer's Miller's Tale," *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, ed. Manfred Pfister. Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 2002 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002),

Significantly, by the late Middle Ages, and particularly since the second half of the fourteenth century, laughter seems to have gained an increasingly stronger foothold in all artistic and literary manifestations, since Chaucer's examples are not the only ones at all. The highly unique, yet also typical peasant satire by the Constance notary public Heinrich Wittenwiler, *Der Ring* (ca. 1400), offers extraordinarily good examples of the wide range of topics, images, ideas, or concepts people deemed funny or worthy of being satirized. Stephanie Hagen discovers, for instance, multiple examples of the comic focused on figures, situations, and language, but she goes one step further and associates these considerably more intensive expressions of laughter with social-economic conflicts between the guilds and the patriciate class.

For her, Wittenwiler has his audience/reading public laugh about the peasants because they represent the riotous members of the guilds who tried to usurp the administrative and financial power within the city.¹⁷³

We might not have available a broad definition of humor or laughter that would embrace all those examples discussed above and those that the contributors to this volume will examine. Only a very intensive interdisciplinary approach involving psychologists and linguists, for instance, seems to promise a solution in the future.¹⁷⁴ Of course, the literary evidence normally provides many opportunities to probe the issue intensively and from a set of most complex perspectives. But art history, perhaps even music history, not to speak of historical documents (chronicles perhaps), might add their weight to the topic of our book. Let us try to work with some visual material, at least, and question to what extent medieval and early-modern artists were interested in depicting happy, if not laughing, individuals. There would be no need to refer to the plethora of images portraying the five wise and five foolish virgins, often seen carved in stone and depicted on stained glass windows at famous buildings in France, such as the Amiens Cathedral, the Cathédrale Saint-Étienne d'Auxerre, in Bourges, at Notre-Dame of Laon, Notre Dame de Paris, Notre-Dame de Reims, in Sens and at Notre-Dame de Strasbourg, in Germany, such as in Freiburg, Lübeck and at the Erfurt Cathedral,

17–33; Timothy D. Arner, "No Joke: Transcendent Laughter in the Teseida and the Miller's Tale," *Studies in Philology* 102.2 (2005): 143–58.

¹⁷³ Stephanie Hagen, *Heinrich Wittenwilers 'Ring' – ein ästhetisches Vexierbild: Studien zur Struktur des Komischen. Literatur – Imagination – Realität. Anglistische, germanistische, romanistische Studien*, 45 (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008), 118–22. For her, Wittenwiler's *Ring* offers extraordinary examples of burlesque comic (123–28).

¹⁷⁴ Dieter Hörhammer, "Humor," 84. He criticizes, above all, those methods that are predicated on a diffuse terminology in order to absolutize their own concept of humor without a concrete basis in a solid philological analysis. Hörhammer challenges especially the study by Franck Evrard, *L'Humour*. Collection Contours Littéraires (Paris: Hachette Livre, 1996), and indirectly also André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Edition du Sagittaire, 1940).

and the Cathedral of Magdeburg, and in Switzerland, such as at the cathedrals of Basel and Bern.¹⁷⁵ Then we could investigate the wide range of marginal drawings and miniatures in late-medieval books of hours or related genres.

One most dramatic example of a truly smiling person can be found among the group of donor sculptures in the western choir of the Naumburg cathedral, in the vicinity of Halle/Saale, today in the state of Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany. The early-Romanesque cathedral was first built between 1028 and 1050. Later the cathedral was rebuilt in the Gothic style, sometime before 1215; and the western choir (or chancel) around 1250. This choir with its gargoyles, the founder figures, the rood screen, and perhaps even the architectural frame were created by the so-called Naumburger master and his workshop. These twelve donor figures prove to be most exceptional because they were lay aristocrats, whereas we normally find sculptures of saints, apostles, and martyrs. They are identified, which is highly unusual for the Middle Ages, by name, and they impress us through their realistic appearance: Gerburg, Konrad, Hermann and his wife Reglindis (a Polish princess), Dietmar, Syzzo, Wilhelm, Thimo, Eckehard II and his wife Uta, Gepa or Berchta, otherwise known as Adelheid, and Dietrich. They belonged to the highest echelon of society and held the rank of margrave/margravine, count/countess.¹⁷⁶

Originally they had been buried in or around the church building, and Eckehard and Uta even within the choir; but when the new cathedral was erected, the graves were removed and replaced by these life-like tombstones. The sculptor could not create true portraits since these donors had all died a hundred or two hundred years before. Some of them form antithetical pairs, such as Eckehard and Hermann (for the men), or Reglindis and Uta (for the women), but otherwise they are mostly arranged as couples, with Herrmann and Reglindis in the center of the ensemble because they had been the last owners of the Naumburg castle. As far as we can tell, the artist had received his training in France and had created a number of significant sculptures in Amiens, Noyon, Metz, and Strasbourg. Since 1239 he had worked in Mainz, and he began with his sculptures in Naumburg around 1250, ending up in Meißen after 1260.¹⁷⁷

Uta, as seems typical of many Gothic sculptures, looks indeterminably into the distance with a very stern face, almost spiritualized. Reglindis, on the other hand,

¹⁷⁵ Max Hasse, *Die törichten und die klugen Jungfrauen*. Lübecker Museumshefte, 3 (Lübeck: Museen für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der Hansestadt Lübeck, 1961).

¹⁷⁶ Wolfgang Ulrich, *Uta von Naumburg: eine deutsche Ikone*. Kleine kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek, 59 (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1998); Helga Scurie and Friedrich Möbius, *Der Naumburger Westchor*. Werners Kunstgeschichte (Worms: Werners Verlagsgesellschaft, 1989).

¹⁷⁷ Beate Becker, Horst Büttner, et al., *Der Bezirk Halle*. 2nd ed. Georg Dehio, *Handbuch der deutschen Kunstdenkmäler* (1974; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1978), 304–14; Ernst Schubert, with Bettina Georgi and Ernst Ullmann, "Naumburg," *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner. Vol. 22 (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1996), 691–93.

our major witness written into stone for laughter in the Middle Ages, heartily smiles, or might be about to laugh, displaying full cheeks and very cheerful eyes.¹⁷⁸ It would be difficult to identify any other major medieval sculpture determined by such a happy face as Reglindis's.¹⁷⁹ Of course, this does not mean that we would not be able to identify many further examples,¹⁸⁰ though Reglindis seems to be one of the most famous figures in medieval art history, perhaps only matched by the even better known masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci, "Mona Lisa," or *La Gioconda* (1503–1505, perhaps slightly earlier).¹⁸¹ Any visitor of a Gothic cathedral or of a medieval castle, not to speak of the countless museums holding medieval and early-modern paintings and sculptures, can suddenly come across a laughing or smiling face. However, there has never been a systematic search, probably because 'laughter' seems to be an inappropriate, perhaps even unwelcome feature of premodern life according to modern readers or spectators. Moreover, laughter in the Middle Ages can represent so many different intentions or motifs which would considerably complicate our understanding of that world. Not surprisingly, often the blessed souls, martyrs, and saints appear as laughing, and there is even a heartily smiling Archangel Michael in the crypt of the Constance cathedral delivering the annunciation to the Virgin Mary. But then we also encounter laughing souls condemned to Hell, fools, and sinners, and then a whole gamut of ordinary people presented with smiling faces.

¹⁷⁸ See, for instance, Herbert Küas, *Die Naumburger Werkstatt*. Forschungen zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte, XXVI (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1937); Walter Schlesinger, *Meissner Dom und Naumburger Westchor: Ihre Bildwerke in geschichtlicher Betrachtung* (Münster and Cologne: Böhlau, 1952); Ernst Schubert, *Der Westchor des Naumburger Doms: Ein Beitrag zur Datierung und zum Verständnis der Standbilder*, 2nd ed. (1964; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1965); id. "Der Westchor des Naumburger Doms, der Chor der Klosterkirche in Schulpforta und der Meißner Domchor," *Dies diem docet: ausgewählte Aufsätze zur mittelalterlichen Kunst und Geschichte in Mitteldeutschland. Festgabe zum 75. Geburtstag von Ernst Schubert*, ed. Hans-Joachim Krause. Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Sachsen-Anhalts, 3 (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2003), 228–47; Holger Kunde, "Der Westchor des Naumburger Doms und die Marienstiftskirche: Kritische Überlegungen zur Forschung," *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Matthias Werner zum 65. Geburtstag* (Cologne: 2007), 213–38 tries to develop a different explanation, which does not concern us here; Gerhard Straehle, "Der Naumburger Meister in der deutschen Kunstgeschichte: Einhundert Jahre deutsche Kunstgeschichtsschreibung 1886–989" (Ph.D. Diss. Munich 2008), now also in print (Heidelberg: Universitäts-Bibliothek, 2008: <http://achriv.ub.un-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2009/747> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁷⁹ For an image, see: <http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Datei:Reglindis.JPG&filetimestamp=20080916205842> last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁸⁰ *Risus mediaevalis: Laughter in Medieval Literature and Art*, ed. Herman Braet, Guido Latré, and Werner Verbeke. Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, 1.30 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003).

¹⁸¹ http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Mona_Lisa.jpeg (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).



Figure 1: Reglindis, sculpture in the Naumburg Cathedral, Germany (photo by Linsengericht, Wikipedia, public domain)

But with this portrait we have already entered the Renaissance and the early-modern world in which the evidence for laughter, humor, jest, or merriment grows exponentially. Before we proceed, let us, however, consider one more major Gothic sculpture with a noticeable smile on her face, the one of Queen Adelheid, consort of Emperor Otto I, the sculptures of both created around 1270, hence representing projections of idealized figures from the past, now serving as patron saints. Adelheid of Burgundy was born ca. 931 and died on December 16 or 17, 999 in Selz, Alsace. Both she and her husband are portrayed in remarkable sculptures in the Cathedral of Meissen near Halle, Germany. But whereas Otto looks rather stern, holding the imperial insignia in both of his hands (lance and imperial orb, or globus cruciger¹⁸²), the sculptor took the liberty to create a truly smiling face for Adelheid.¹⁸³

Although she does not look into her husband's face, and even bends her head slightly down, there is no shyness or embarrassment to be observed. Instead, Adelheid smilingly beams into the world, humbly, for sure, but certainly unhesitatingly, self-assured and happy, whereas her husband seems distraught, weighed down, perhaps, by his office as emperor or meditating on the meaning of the afterlife. Significantly, while Otto stares somehow into the distance, though his body is turning a little to his wife, altogether maybe questioning himself as a lay person and his powerful rank as emperor, Adelheid looks at him from the side, with her head slightly bent, her whole body turned somewhat toward him.¹⁸⁴

But both had served as founders of the cathedral, and scholars have suggested that the imperial couple is depicted in the idealized image of loyal Christians who are already anticipating the glory of God, Otto voicing spiritual words, Adelheid happily listening to them.¹⁸⁵ At any rate, the artist delighted in having the Empress

¹⁸² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Globus_cruciger (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁸³ http://www.wga.hu/art/zgothic/gothic/3/12g_1300.jpg (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁸⁴ For an extensive biography, see Eduard Hlawitschka, "Kaiserin Adelheid," *Frauen des Mittelalters in Lebensbildern*, ed. Karl Rudolf Schnith (Graz, Vienna, and Cologne: Verlag Styria, 1997), 27–48.

For another good image, see:

http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/03/Meissner-dom-stifter.jpg&imgrefurl=http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meissner-dom-stifter.jpg&usq=__24-hYZGiu-jLcNeB2gIhU9jo960=&h=856&w=1340&sz=247&hl=en&start=2&tbnid=yMsu5MLuooeHRM:&tbnh=96&tbnw=150&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dmeissener%2Bdom%26gbv%3D1%26hl%3Den (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁸⁵ Ernst Schubert, *Stätten sächsischer Kaiser*. Photos by Klaus G. Beyer (Leipzig, Jena, and Berlin: Urania-Verlag, 1990), 257–60; see also the contributions to *Architektur und Skulptur des Meissner Domes im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert*, ed. Heinrich Magirius. *Forschungen zur Bau- und Kunstgeschichte des Meissner Domes*, 2 (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 2001); see also Helga Wäß, *Form und Wahrnehmung mitteldeutscher Gedächtnisskulptur im 14. Jahrhundert*. Vol. 1: *Ein Beitrag zu mittelalterlichen Grabmonumenten, Epitaphen und Kuriosa: Ein Beitrag zu mittelalterlichen Grabmonumenten, Epitaphen und Kuriosa in Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Thüringen, Nord-Hessen, Ost-Westfalen und Südniedersachsen*. Vol. 2: *Katalog ausgewählter Objekte vom Hohen Mittelalter bis zum*

expressing her deep joy; here certainly determined by her Christian devotion. Altogether, both Reglindis and Adelheid thus serve as outstanding examples of laughter, or rather strong happiness and merriment, written into Gothic sculptures. Their laughter is not that of foolishness or sarcasm; instead they are presented as happy, delightful, and simply cheerful women, very much in contrast to the other male figures.

Anfang des 15. Jahrhunderts (Bristol and Berlin: TENE, 2006): "Meißen - Die Grabmomumente des Mittelalters," catalogue nos. 568–637; here 403–42. See also the certainly excellent article, with great colored photographs and a solid and up-to-date bibliography, in *Wikipedia* at: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mei%C3%9Fner_Dom (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).



Figure 2: Adelheid of Burgundy, Cathedral of Meissen, Germany (photo by Kolossos, Wikipedia, public domain)

For examples of laughing, giggling, chuckling, or mocking individuals in the early modern period, we only have to think of several major texts, such as the anonymous collection of tales about and with the famous protagonist Till Eulenspiegel (perhaps by Herman Bote in Brunswick, Germany, first printed in 1510), François Rabelais's *Les Horribles et épouvantables faits et prouesses du très renommé Pantagruel, Roi des Dipsodes, fils du grand gént Gargantua* (1532), and his *La Vie très horrible du grand Gargantua, père de Pantagruel* (1534).¹⁸⁶ Rabelais drew, of course, from many older sources, and curiously especially from late-medieval sermons.

Erich Auerbach, in his famous monograph *Mimesis*, comments on the rich interweaving of many different styles: "sie [the style] gestattete ihm das den reaktionären Gewalten der Zeit Anstöße in einem Zwiellicht zwischen Spaß und Ernst vorzubringen, was ihm im Notfall erleichterte, sich der vollen Verantwortung zu entziehen" (268; it permitted him to present those aspects that were regarded as inappropriate by the reactionary forces of the time in a twilight between facetious and earnest, which facilitated him, in an emergency to withdraw from the full responsibility).¹⁸⁷ Auerbach recognized further the specific intention pursued by Rabelais: "eine[] produktive [] Ironie, die die gewohnten Aspekte und Proportionen verwirrt, die das Wirkliche im Überwirklichen, das Weise im Nürrischen, die Empörung in der behaglich-würzigen Lebensfreude erscheinen und im Spiel der Möglichkeiten die Möglichkeit der Freiheit aufleuchten läßt" (268; a productive irony which confuses the customary aspects and proportions, and which makes the real appear in the light of the unreal, the wise in the foolish, the protest in the self-content pleasant reality of life, and in the range of possibilities the possibility of freedom). Although, if we continue this stream of thought, Rabelais did not operate with explicit or drastic laughter, the entire work proves to be predicated on it, which also exposes the actual performance of laughter by the reading audience.

But there were also severe critics of laughter, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, who warned his audience, primarily young boys whom he wanted to educate and help to grow into courtly society with the proper behavioral norms, using the following words:

To laugh at every word or deed is the sign of a fool; to laugh at none the sign of a blockhead. It is quite wrong to laugh at improper words or actions. Loud laughter and the immoderate mirth that shakes the whole body and is for that reason called . . .

¹⁸⁶ Bernd Renner, *Difficile est saturam non scribere: L'Herméneutique de la satire rabelaisienne. Études rabelaisiennes*, 45 (Geneva: Droz, 2007).

¹⁸⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*. 10th ed. (1946; Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2001), 268. See also the English translation by Willard R. Trask: *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

‘discord’ by the Greeks, are unbecoming to any age but much more so to youth. The neighing sound that some people make when they laugh is also unseemly. And the person who opens his mouth wide in a rictus, with wrinkled cheeks and exposed teeth, is also impolite. This is a canine habit and is called a sardonic smile. The face should express mirth in such a way that it neither distorts the appearance of the mouth nor evinces a dissolute mind.¹⁸⁸

Contemporaneously, more and more other authors and artists delved into the world of laughter and humor, adding tremendously to the global discourse on the transgressive and absurd.¹⁸⁹ Satirical art works and literature have gained increasingly in public appeal, whether they combined didacticism or theological messages with the facetious and entertaining.¹⁹⁰ As Christa Grössinger emphasizes, the interest is increasingly focused, and this also in visual documents, on humor and folly.¹⁹¹ One of the oddest, yet also highly illuminating objects reflecting the new sense of satire, sarcasm, and wit was the chastity belt, which, allegedly an invention of the Middle Ages, which did not really emerge as a topic and motif both in literature and the arts until the early fifteenth century (Conrad Kyeser, 1410) and then, because of its mythical character, quickly gained a strong foothold in Italian and German satirical prose narratives, and then in woodcuts, broadsheets, and even on scabbards and coats of arms.¹⁹² These references allow us to grasp how much the broad field of laughter and the comic—one elucidating the other—sheds light on fundamental aspects of cultural history. Consequently we should also include comparable expressions of the bizarre and grotesque, the silly and the foolish, all serving to create laughter, a timeless approach to communication and interaction within the human community.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Here quoted from Sebastian Coxon, “Laughter and the Process of Civilization,” 17; see also Erasmus of Rotterdam, *On Good Manners for Boys: ‘De civilitate morum puerilium’*, trans. and annotated by Brian McGregor. *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings*, 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 269–89; here 275.

¹⁸⁹ Ryan D. Giles, *The Laughter of the Saints: Parodies of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

¹⁹⁰ Barbara Könniker, *Satire im 16. Jahrhundert: Epoche – Werk – Wirkung*. Arbeitsbücher zur Literaturgeschichte (Munich: Beck, 1991); Paul Aron, *Histoire du pastiche: le Pastiche littéraire français, de la Renaissance à nos jours* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008); Albrecht Classen, *Deutsche Schwankliteratur des 16. Jahrhunderts*.

¹⁹¹ Christa Grössinger, *Humor and Folly in Secular and Profane Prints of Northern Europe, 1430–1540* (London and Turnhout: Harvey Miller, 2002). See also the contribution to the present volume by Martha Moffitt Peacock.

¹⁹² Albrecht Classen, *The Medieval Chastity Belt: A Myth-Making Process*. *The New Middle Ages* (New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁹³ *Semiotik, Rhetorik und Soziologie des Lachens: vergleichende Studien zum Funktionswandel des Lachens vom Mittelalter zur Gegenwart. Die Ergebnisse des Dreizehnten Blaubeurer Symposions . . . , das vom 23. bis 26. Februar 1995 im Heinrich-Fabri-Institut der Universität Tübingen . . . stattfand*, ed. Lothar Fietz, Joerg O. Fichte, and Hans-Werner Ludwig (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996); Friedemann Richert with Günter Vogel, *Kleine Geistesgeschichte des Lachens* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft,

Many important examples for this kind of laughter, aiming at ridiculing the foolish ignoramuses in this world, can be found in sixteenth-century jest narratives (Schwänke), some of which I have referred to above already (see also Sebastian Brant's famous *Ship of Fools*, 1494). To illustrate the specific conditions, however, let us take a closer look at one of them composed by the Hessian writer Hans-Wilhelm Kirchhof in his *Wendunmuth* (first edition in 1563, reprinted until 1603).¹⁹⁴ A boorish and stupid farmer one day arrives at a physician's office with his wife's urine. She suffers from some mysterious sickness, as he believes, and he would like to help her regain her health, not realizing that she is nothing but obese and overly lazy, the one aspect conditioning the other. The farmer regards the medical doctor with great respect and believes that he would know everything there is to know here in this world. But when he realizes that the doctor does not even know his name, he voices great astonishment: "ich meinet ir wüßt alle ding und wisset solchs nicht im harm zuo ersehen?"¹⁹⁵ (I thought you knew everything, but now you cannot figure it out [the farmer's name] by looking at the urine?). The doctor only responds with laughter, quickly realizing what kind of ignoramus he is facing.

Nevertheless, it gets worse, or rather better. Upon the doctor's inquiry regarding his wife's stool (here in the meaning of her excrement), the farmer mistakes it as a question concerning a piece of furniture, a three-legged stool. Finally, having learned what the doctor really means, the farmer comments that she had not had a big stool the other day, indicating with his hands that it must have actually weighed more than four and a half pounds (139). For the physician this exchange proves to be too much, and he can no longer hold on and bursts out in loud laughter: "Auß diser erzelung deß villani ward er heftiger zuo lachen getrieben, sprach derhalben zuo im . . ." (139; The peasant's account made him laugh out loud, and therefore he said to him . . .).

Finally, taking pity on the lad's sad situation with the lazy wife, he does not even take a payment for his medical advice; instead he gives the fool a coin and sends him home with a not too subtle message that his wife would really need a good beating to get out of her laziness, which then would reconstitute her health. Although then no further laughter can be heard, the subsequent events are

2009); for the role of laughter in later periods, see Eckart Schörle, *Die Verhöflichung des Lachens: Lachgeschichte im 18. Jahrhundert*. Kulturen des Komischen, 4 (Bielefeld: Aisthesis-Verlag, 2007).

¹⁹⁴ Bodo Gotzkowsky, "Volksbücher": *Prosaromane, Renaissance-novellen, Versdichtungen und Schwankbücher. Bibliographie der deutschen Drucke*. Part I: *Drucke des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*. Bibliotheca Bibliographica Aureliana, CXXV (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1991), 513–16. See also the VD 17 online at:

<http://gso.gbv.de/xslt/DB=1.28/SET=1/TTL=1/SHW?FRST=2> (last accessed on Jan. 30, 2010).

¹⁹⁵ Hans Wilhelm Kirchhof, *Wendunmuth*, ed. Hermann Oesterley. Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, XCV (1869; Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1980), 138.