Epilogue. “Those Days Are Over”? Inhabiting a Tradition

“Er ließ ihr sagen: O komm zu mir, 
Ich sehne mich so sehr nach dir, 
Ich rufe nach dir, ich schmachte—
Sie schüttelt’ das Haupt und lachte.”

(Heinrich Heine, “Ein Weib”)

“Women have been trained to speak softly, 
and carry a lipstick. 
Those days are over.”

(Bella Abzug)

What do Enite’s treacherous smile, Isolde’s fake virtue, or the medieval fetish for smiling red lips tell the modern reader? Why should it matter how these imaginary heroines laugh, they who did not even exist except in the minds of their authors?

Laughter and smiling are basic human responses that despite continuous study remain elusive, always raising new questions about their origins, meanings, functions, and universality. One way we can explore these issues is by studying textual laughter. As Sebastian Coxon points out, fictional texts serve as a window—albeit an indirect one—onto social reality. They contribute to a critical discussion of the culture that engendered them and do so “through the imaginative realization of certain values and principles of behavior recognizable and comprehensible to a contemporary audience.”

The red-lipped smiles of medieval literary beauties uncover a society that walks a tightrope between the patristic rejection of laughter and its Aristotelian acceptance as an inherently human expression; between the ecclesiastical removal of joy to the afterlife and the courtly ethos that treats it as an indicator of harmonious existence on earth; and between the threat of social intercourse to female chastity and the need for affability and seduction to guarantee smooth interactions between the sexes. The very variety and sheer number of texts discussed in this book and collected in Table 1 in the appendix bespeaks the impressive discursive heterogeneity of this period. Laughter is examined from starkly different angles: theological, clerical-didactic, natural-philosophical, secular courtly, and obscene carnivalesque.

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1 “He sent her a word: ‘Oh, come to me. I long for you so greatly, you see. I languish for you and pine.’ She shook her head and smiled [lit. ‘laughed’].” (My translation.)
2 See, for example, Albrecht Classen’s introduction to Classen, *Laughter*, 1 – 140.
Depending on their approach and ideological position, multiple, even competing views co-exist throughout the Middle Ages, recycling and expanding upon a rich body of discursive material inherited from their predecessors. As the table visually shows, while the foundations of the theological debates about the value of laughter are set before the high-medieval era, the thirteenth-century resurgence of interest in this topic conspicuously coincides with the burgeoning secular aristocratic society and vernacular literary discourses. The sacred and profane spheres clearly interact and respond to one another, sometimes adopting, sometimes rejecting the other’s values, yet influenced by them nevertheless.

The disputatiousness of this period can be partially explained by the fact that there is no precise vocabulary to refer to the various forms and gradations of laughter, thus making its codification ever more difficult. The pre-modern texts demonstrate how the modern understanding of laughter and smiling as two qualitatively different phenomena both facilitates and impedes their interpretation. The medieval distinction between the two expressions proves to be more of degree than of essence, leading to sometimes confusing attempts to define what kind of lachen, rire, or risus can be acceptable.

Literary evidence also points to a performative culture where laughter could bespeak one’s social status, age, gender, and virtue; to a reality in which the enduring prejudice against women’s laughter symbiotically co-existed with its commonplace instrumentalization. All the medieval discourses prove to be markedly gendered in their approach to this essential human expression, whose relationship to the sexual body was perceived to be more threatening to women than to men. Whether attacking or defending women, discourses on femininity always interpret virtue in terms of sexual modesty and place laughter in direct relation to both. Medieval medical and literary (particularly obscene) literature illustrates that the laughing woman’s body is treated as open at both ends. An unrestrained, boisterous expression is therefore categorically rejected as incompatible with virtuous behavior. At the same time, even the highly controlled, delicate, and sometimes almost imperceptible laughter—which today would be called a smile and is so frequently featured on Gothic portals, high-medieval tombstones, and in vernacular courtly literature—is gendered as well. While men can smile, it is most commonly women who are described doing so. The tomb statues of Otto of Botenlouben-Hennenberg or Henry the Lion alongside their wives present the royal couples unequally: the man’s demeanor is stern and militant, but the lady is depicted with a delicate smile on her face. As Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s conduct text Das Frauenbuch reveals, smiling plays a crucial role

4 See chapter 1 for discussion of fabliaux.
5 See Fig. 33–34 in Bumke, Courtly Culture, 289–290.
in the construction of courtly femininity and the overall functioning of the courtly world. The sculptures and literary works glorify men’s qualities as rulers and warriors; but appeasing those men and facilitating homosocial ties through beauty and demeanor is the responsibility of their wives and mistresses, or the idealized lofty ladies of the lyric—in short, of aristocratic women. This connection between smiling, courtliness, and eroticism is also successfully exploited in contemporaneous religious sculpture to criticize the secular nobility through the portrayals of the Lady World and the wise and foolish virgins.

The function of women’s laughter and the image of the attractive red mouth that frequently accompanies it are representative of the overall medieval use and appreciation of symbolic representation, be it visual, as in sculpture or pictorial art, or literary, in a form of indirect discourse such as metaphor, alliteration, and euphemism. In his study on beauty, Umberto Eco traces the beginnings of this love of indirection to medieval monasticism, which developed bodies of symbols that the people in the Middle Ages were much more adept at reading than are we, their modern counterparts.⁶ Women’s laughter and smiling are definitely part of this repertoire of symbols, this shared cultural imaginary that spoke to its audience through both literary and artistic means about the fantasies of beauty, virtue, power, and ideology.

Yet can we really say, with Bella Abzug, that the days when “women [were] trained to speak softly, and carry a lipstick […] are truly over”? Can the fantasy of femininity that combines virtuous perfection and sexual availability be safely relegated to the dark medieval past? It is the evidence again that speaks to the contrary. The story that medieval texts tell transcends the historical boundaries of their time period; they are both firmly anchored in the past and remain relevant to this day. Modern anthropological research proves that stereotypes about women’s laughter are not unique to the Middle Ages, but are consistently found in societies where ideal femininity is presented as modest, passive, and polite.⁷ A cross-cultural and cross-temporal examination of art reveals a curious trend associating laughter with transgression, otherness, and immorality: “Most teeth and open mouths in art belonged to dirty old men, misers, drunks, whores, gypsies, […] dwarves, lunatics, monsters, ghosts, the possessed, the damned…”⁸ Seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century didactic English treatises for women consistently present laughter as an “Offence against Christian Modesty,” “a Symptom of a loose impotent Soul,” which “begins in Frolick [sic] only, but too often ends in Shame.”⁹ Yet the very same strict books also recognize

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⁶ Eco, Art and Beauty, 53.
⁸ Trumble, A Brief History, xxiii.
⁹ The Ladies Library, 150, 119, 36 (respectively).
the erotic power of the smile, endowing the ideal of “perfect beauty” with “a Little Mouth, the upper-Lip resembling a Heart in shape, and the under some what larger, but both of a vermillion colour, as well in Winter as Summer, and on each side two small dimples easily to be discern’d in their moving upwards, which look like a kind of constant smile.” Finally, Heinrich Heine’s nineteenth-century poem “Ein Weib” quoted in the epigraph is purposefully structured to revolve around the heroine’s laughter—erotic, misleading, and cruel. Used as a slightly modified refrain (“she did X and laughed”), it paints the woman as a merciless, cold-hearted, and sexualized femme fatale and the man as a lovesmitten victim, deserving the audience’s compassion, even though both characters are initially presented in very dubious terms.

Our own emancipated postmodern culture may look infinitely unlike the one that required women to be completely stiff, hide their hands under their cloaks, and keep their body concealed at all times; yet under the surface the old stereotypes, clichés, and metaphors remain very much alive. Modern prescriptive literature proves strikingly akin to its predecessors. Until not long ago, Emily Post’s etiquette manuals consistently discouraged young women from talking or laughing “loud enough to attract attention” and from “forc[ing] [one]self to laugh.” Laughter was also said to be symptomatic of a young daughter’s rebellion against parental authority. As Post advises, “Exclaim, ‘How shocking!’ and a modern girl laughs. Tell her she is outrageous, and she is delighted.” It is the pervasiveness of the patriarchal prejudice against women’s laughter that allowed Hélène Cixous to appropriate and simultaneously subvert the old motifs in her seminal 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” in order to topple the male-created myths that continue to dominate modern culture. Using the notorious Freudian image of Medusa’s head with its sexualized gaping mouth to celebrate feminine writing, body, and sexuality, Cixous proclaimed it to be not horrible, but beautiful and laughing. However, as the American humorist and feminist writer Regina Barreca shows, the connection between sexuality and laughter continues to operate in American culture, relying on the familiar assumptions

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12 “Spitzbubin war sie, er war ein Dieb” (“She was a tramp, he was a thief,” v. 2). In yet another poem by Heine, a suffering knight is seduced by a water nymph who “kissed him with a laughing mouth”: “Der König stöhnt und schluchzt und weint / Alsdann aus Herzensgrunde. / Schnell beugt sich hinab die Wasserfee / Und küßt ihn mit lachendem Munde.” Heinrich Heine, “König Harald Harfagar,” in Heine, Gesammelte Werke, 1:478.
13 Post, Etiquette, 147.
14 Post, Etiquette, 170. Even in men’s case, Post’s advice sounds strikingly familiar: “Exhibitions of anger, fear, hatred, embarrassment, ardor or hilarity are all bad form in public.” Post, Etiquette, 588.
about gender, sexual modesty, and social class: “Bad girls tell jokes, laugh loudly, and don’t cross their legs. Good girls smile appreciatively at the jokes of their boyfriends or husbands. […] They keep their mouths—and their legs—discreetly closed.” The late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture is keenly aware of the erotic potential of laughter and smiling. A smile is still used as a gift or bait, a negotiating technique, the first step towards communication, and a promise of reciprocity. The rhetoric may have changed, yet the premise remains the same. Charlotte Ford’s 21st-Century Etiquette claims that women who smile “have better marriages,” are “more likely to be more mentally focused and achieve an overall sense of joy throughout their lives.” The same cliché hides behind the cold, inaccessible, and permanently frowning looks of today’s supermodels; the style of makeup that draws attention away from their mouths by accentuating their eyes, and the frown itself as the exact opposite of a welcoming and seductive smile, make their abnormally thin, androgynous bodies appear even more surreal and alien. The eroticism of laughter and smiling also informs expert advice that offers practical tips on how to fake a smile:

What’s in a smile? For one thing, a smile is the backbone of the advertising industry. […] A good many women whose radiant smiles have won them success as models have had to learn how to smile convincingly to be attractive and heart warming.

There’s a time for fake smiles, too, like on the phone with a new flame. It’s an old salesman’s trick. When the face is smiling, the voice sounds more relaxed. In any circumstance, smiling is easier if you use the beauty pageant ploy of applying Vaseline to the teeth.

However remote and unrelated medieval heroines may appear to twenty-first-century concerns, the symbolism and stereotypes they rely upon and, consequently, the questions they raise about gender, sexuality, and power endure. The pre-modern texts analyzed in this book are part of a far larger cultural

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16 See Barreca: “The slightly corrupt ‘vocational school’ girls did joke with the boys, however, and came to a bad end. Their ability to joke was seen as evidence of both their sexual awareness and their lack of femininity. […] The girls with scary hairdos, black leather jackets, heavy eye makeup, and spiked heels (or low, pointed leather boots) chewed gum and laughed with their heads thrown back.” Barreca, They Used to Call Me Snow White, 6.

17 Perfetti, Women and Laughter, 10. A similar sentiment is expressed by Susan Jane Gilman in her subversive 2001 advice manual. Speaking of the liberated women she interviewed, whom she calls “progressive prima donnas,” Gilman points out their one shared characteristic: “They each had a big, fresh mouth and a laugh that could peel paint off the wall.” Gilman, Kiss My Tiara, xiv.

18 Ford and De Montravel, 21st-Century Etiquette, 31.

19 Stark, Beautysmarts, 159.

20 Rowley and Rosenzweig, Swell, 109. Also see Peggy Borgmann’s observation that laughter “should not simply occur by chance and windfall; [but] can and should occur by design.” Borgman, Four Seasons, 127.
debate on emotions, femininity, and virtue. They do not merely tell us about their world, but also have the ability to bring to light contradictions within our own modern culture. They reveal that we share the same intellectual tradition that goes back to the time of early Christianity, classical antiquity, and the Old Testament and is based on the connection between laughter, society, and the physical body.